PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN FEMALE-DIRECTED BOLLYWOOD FILMS

Stacy Alcin and Dayjah Cesar and Rebecca Peters

FSU | FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

FSU UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM
CENTER FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH & ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

Background Information

• Bollywood, Indias largest film industry, has traditionally portrayed men and women according to strict gender roles, often reinforcing societal norms rather than challenging them. While explicit sexualization is rare, women in Bollywood films are frequently depicted through the lens of beauty, submissiveness, and conventional femininity.

• This study explores whether female directors influence the representation of women by analyzing their portrayal in women-directed films. Through systematic coding of speaking female characters, factors such as gendered behavior, relationships, and physical appearance were examined.

• Preliminary findings suggest that while some progress is visible, particularly in the portrayal of young adult and adult women, fair-skinned women continue to be more frequently associated with attractiveness, reflecting ingrained cultural preferences. These insights highlight both the potential impact of female directors and the ongoing need for more diverse and progressive representations of women in Bollywood cinema.

Abstract

• Films both reflect and shape cultural perceptions, making their portrayal of female characters a lens through which Indian society and the Bollywood industry's evolution can be examined.

• With relatively few female directors in Bollywood, their approach to storytelling may differ, particularly in how women are represented on screen. This study investigates whether films directed by women depict female characters differently by analyzing their presence, portrayal, and interactions within these narratives.

• To generate measurable data, the study utilizes a method called "coding," which involves systematically documenting key aspects of each speaking female character in selected films. This includes details such as demographics, attire, gendered behavior, and interactions with other women.

• Each character was coded multiple times to ensure accuracy and reliability. While the research is still in progress, initial findings from the analyzed films have already highlighted significant patterns.

Resources
• Peters, A. (2021). *Cultural Aesthetics in Bollywood: Representation and Perception of Beauty*. Oxford University Press.
• Gopal, S. & Moorti, S. (2008). *Global Bollywood: Travels of Hindi Song and Dance*. University of Minnesota Press.
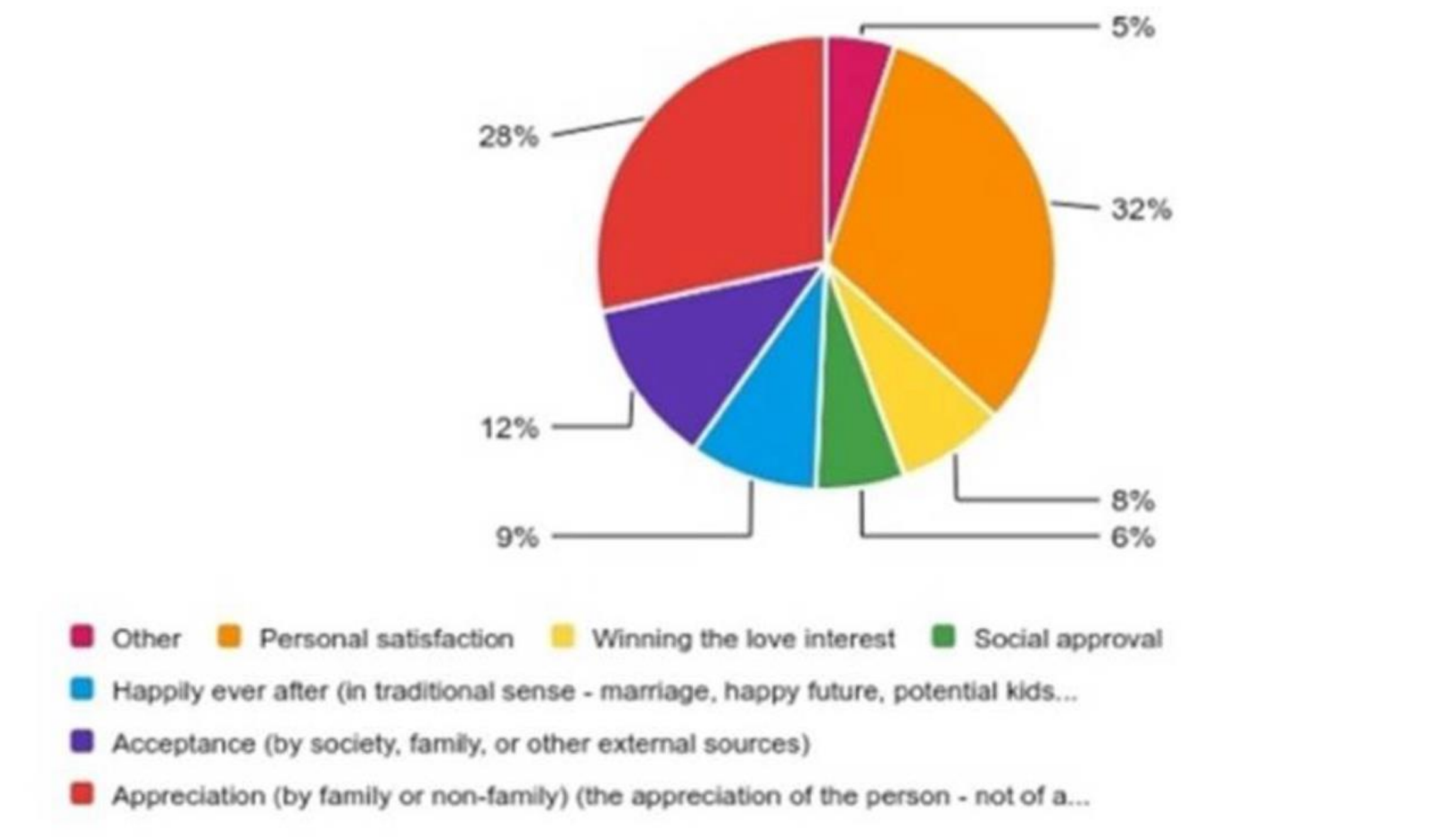• Dudrah, R. (2012). *Bollywood: Sociology Goes to the Movies*. SAGE Publications.

Figure 1
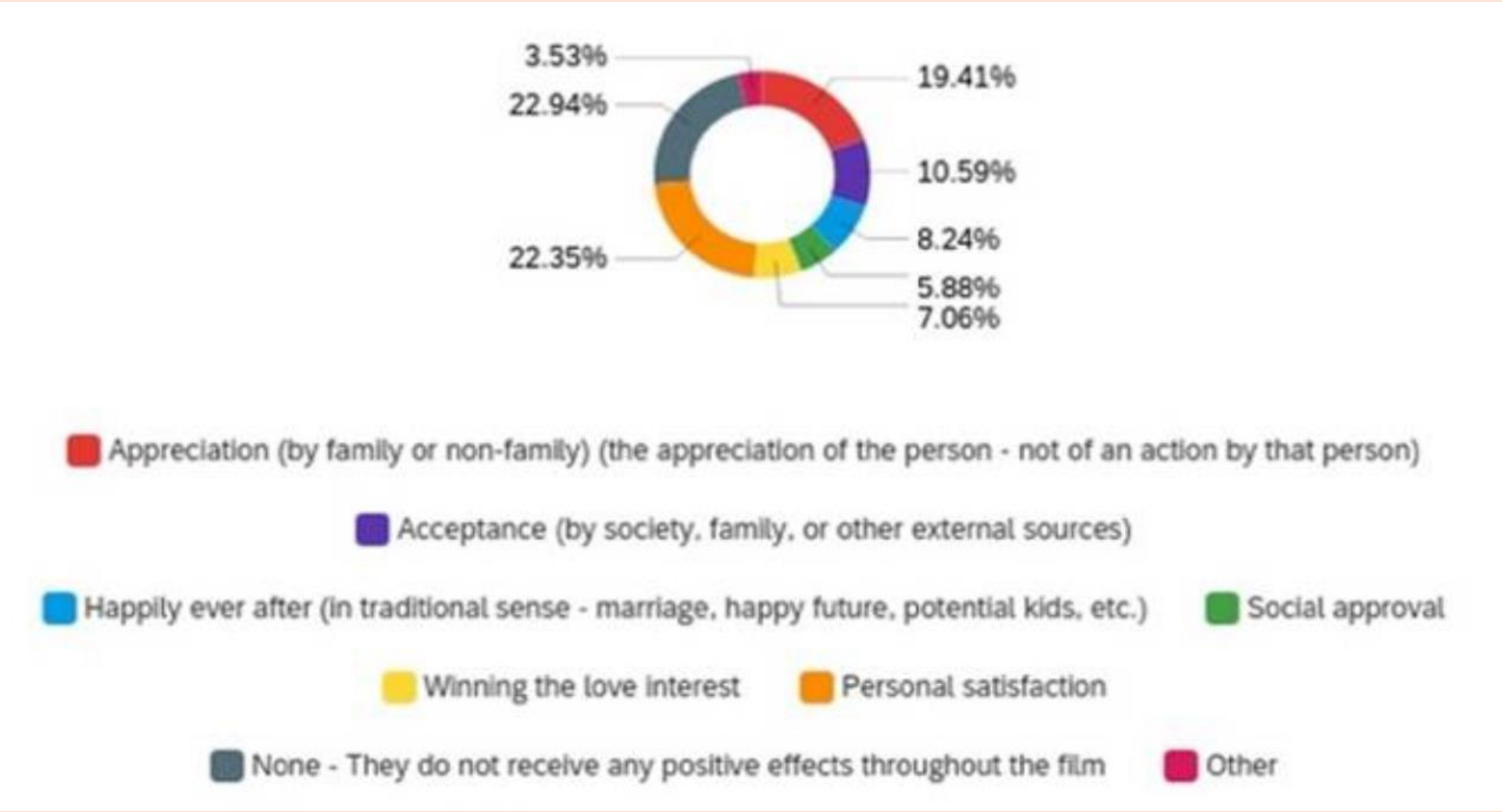Positive effects of characters who represent anything beyond their role

Figure 3
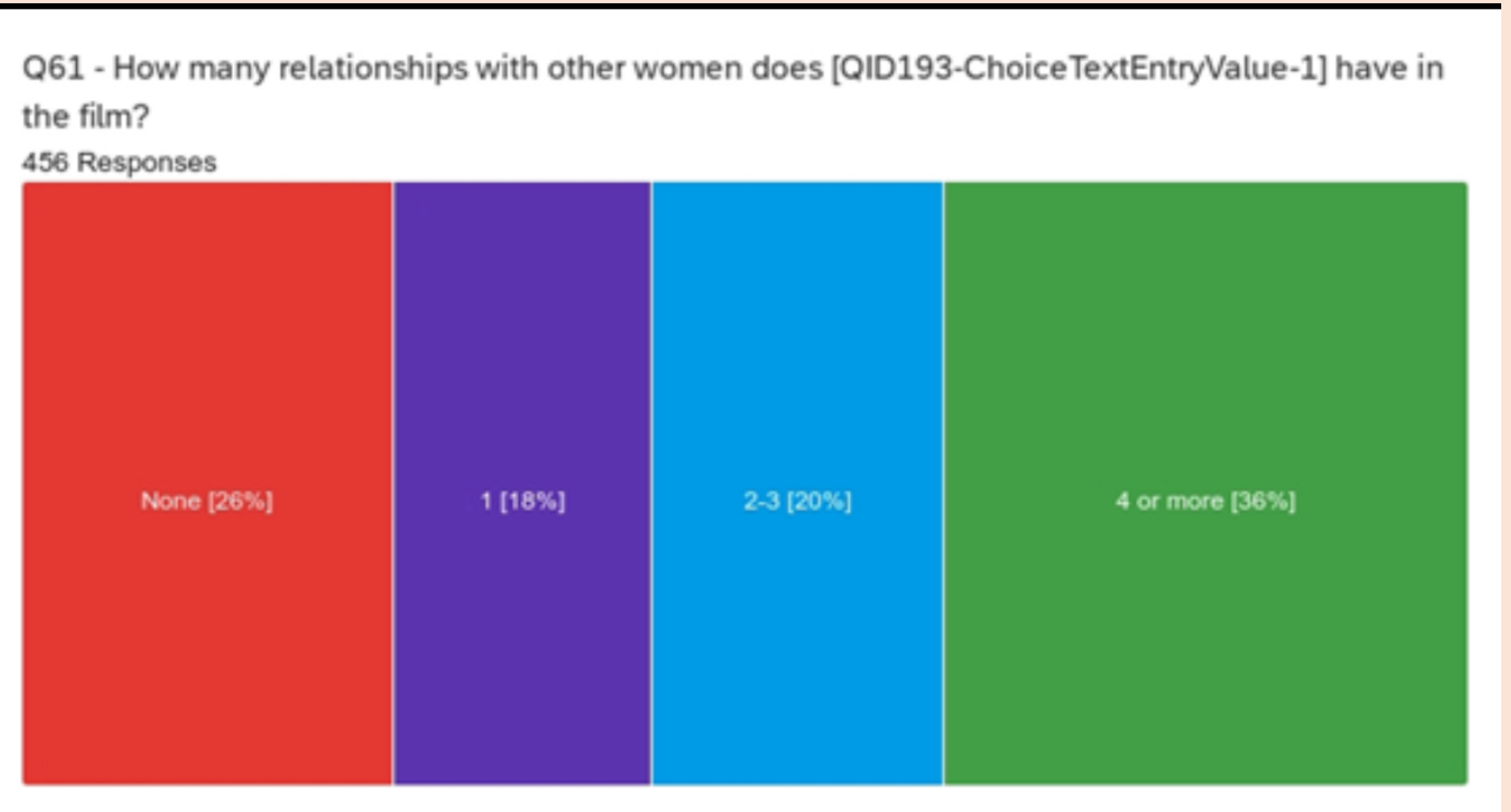Positive effects of characters for all Characters

Figure 2
Percentage of number of relationships formed with other women

Methods
• We analyze films using Qualtrics surveys, coding specific criteria related to the portrayal of each speaking female character.

• Coders assess whether each criterion is present, absent, or ambiguous for every character throughout the film. They also document details about a characters demographics (such as skin color, religion, and caste), relationships with other women, gendered behavior, physical appearance, and more.

• Over time, we have refined and improved this coding method within Qualtrics. To ensure data accuracy, multiple coders evaluate each film and character. Regular meetings are held to clarify coding criteria and address survey errors. Finally, completed surveys undergo a thorough review to confirm accuracy

Results
• The positive effects of female-directed films, particularly in terms of characters who transcend traditional roles, challenge cultural norms and reinforce the idea that female directors significantly impact how women are portrayed on screen. One of the most notable findings is the emphasis on personal satisfaction in female-driven narratives, which contrasts with the traditional portrayal of women primarily fulfilling familial roles.

• Additionally, our surveys provide anecdotal evidence supporting this shift. For instance, in *Lapatta Ladies*, one of the central characters, Jaya, breaks away from the typical female roles. Instead of being confined to societal expectations, she is portrayed as a woman gaining an education and surpassing the boundaries set by her community.

• Figures 1 and 2 highlight a key trend: in films directed by women, a substantial percentage (32% and 22.35%) of women characters experience personal satisfaction. Furthermore, Figure 3 reveals that these films are more likely to depict women forming personal relationships with other women (36%). These findings confirm the hypothesis that Bollywood movies directed by women tend to break free from rigid societal gender roles, offering a more liberated and empowering portrayal of women.