

Modesty By Age and Class in Bollywood Films

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Introduction

- Bollywood cinema operates within a carefully constructed moral architecture. Its narratives are not random displays of spectacle, but structured worlds shaped by recurring conventions that dictate how stories unfold and how characters function.
- At the center of this architecture is a moral universe influenced by Hindu philosophy—one that emphasizes fate, divine order, and the cyclical rhythm of life, death, and rebirth. This worldview establishes a clear ethical polarity: good stands against evil, the hero against the villain.
- Within this system, narrative tension emerges when that moral balance is disturbed. The protagonist's suffering or moral trial signals a disruption in the cosmic order, and the story progresses toward restoring equilibrium.
- Resolution is therefore not merely personal but metaphysical—it reaffirms the larger moral structure governing the film's world. Overseeing this structure is the director, who functions as the ultimate authority within the cinematic universe. Through decisions about characterization, agency, and narrative focus, the director determines which characters are empowered to shape events and which are confined to supporting roles. In doing so, the director does more than tell a story; they define whose struggles matter and whose voices remain marginal.

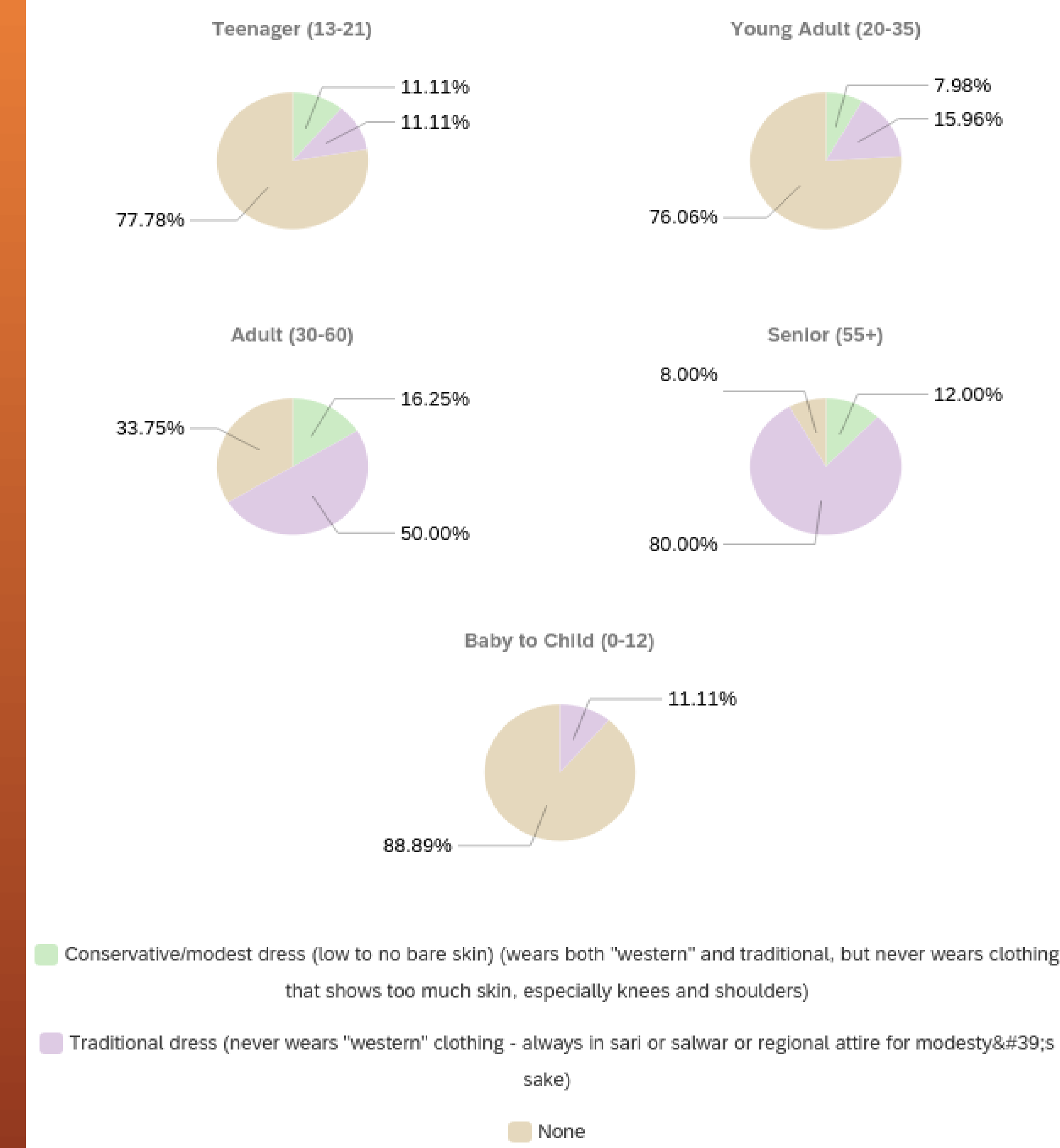
Methodology

This study involved viewing and analyzing Bollywood films directed by women. Research assistants analyzed each film using a structured coding survey designed to assess the portrayal of female and female-presenting characters. This survey included criteria related to character centrality (e.g., protagonist status), physical appearance, behavior, relationships with other women, and overarching narrative role. All coders received training on both the coding instrument and relevant cultural contexts prior to analysis. The coding method was refined and updated throughout the research process to improve clarity and consistency. Coders recorded whether each criterion was present or absent at any point in the film for each character. To ensure reliability and accuracy, each film and character was coded by multiple participants. The research team met regularly to discuss coding criteria and resolve ambiguities. Completed surveys were edited and reviewed to verify correctness and consistency across coders.

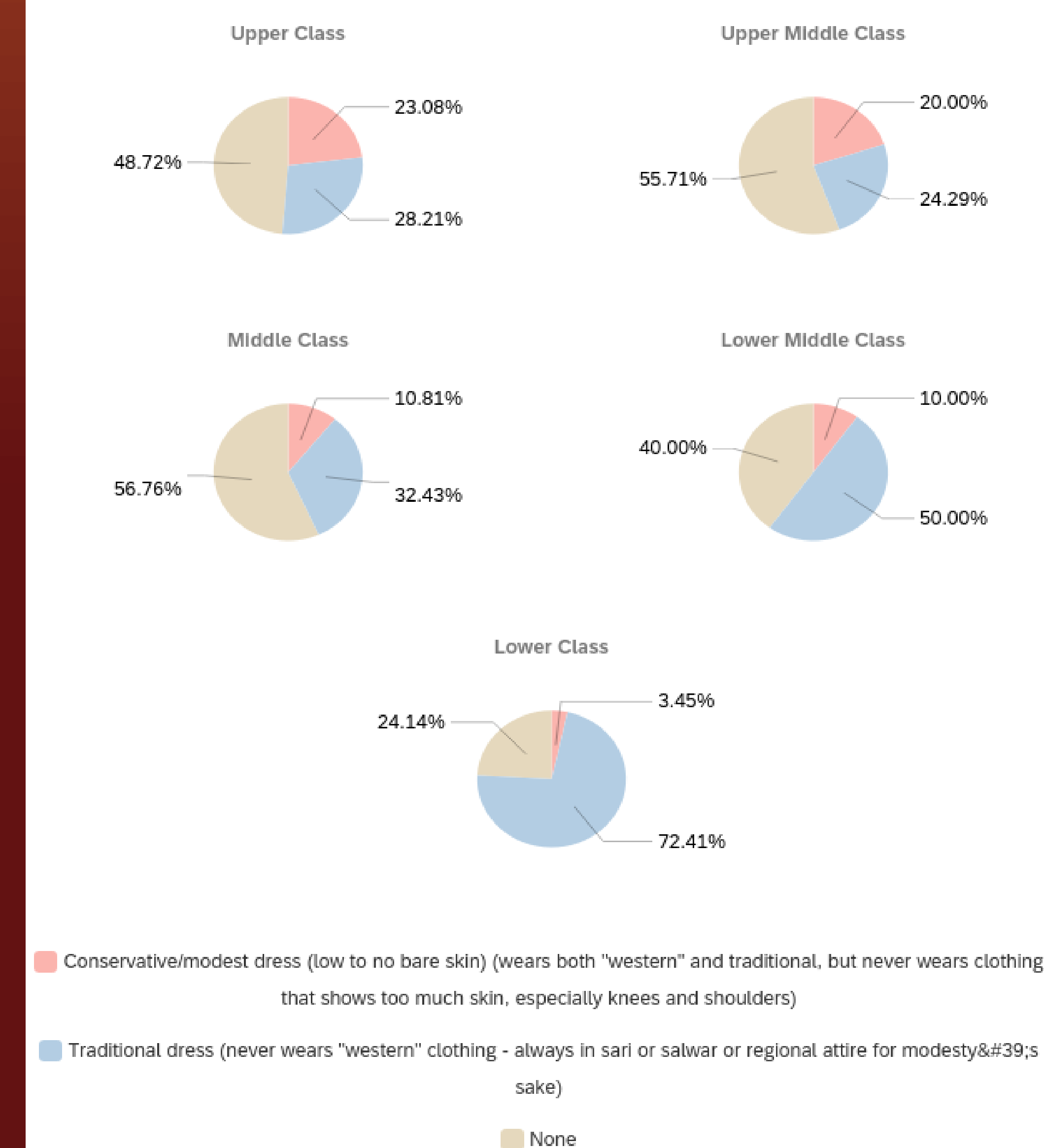
Resources

- *Women Filmmakers in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: Looking Through Their Gaze*. Edited by Aysha Iqbal Vishwamohan. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023
- Anjaria, Ulka. *Understanding Bollywood: The Grammar of Hindi Cinema*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/fsu/detail.action?docID=6451435>
- Khan, Subuhi, and Laramie D Taylor. "Gender Policing in Mainstream Hindi Cinema: A Decade of Central Female Characters in Top-Grossing Bollywood Movies." *International Journal of Communication (Online)* (2018): 3641–3662. Print

Modesty Attire By Age



Modesty Attire By Class



Research Question

How do age and social class influence the portrayal of women's modesty in Bollywood films, and what do these portrayals suggest about social control and gender expectations?



Results

Age:

- Children, teenagers, and young adults most frequently appear without strict modest or traditional dress expectation
- Teenagers (77.78%) and young adult (76.06%) show the highest proportion of non-traditional or unrestricted clothing
- Traditional clothing becomes more common with increasing age
- Adults (30-60) show a shift toward traditional dress, with 50% wearing traditional clothing
- Seniors (55+) overwhelmingly wear traditional clothing (80%), indicating stronger cultural expectations of modesty and tradition in older age groups
- The trend is that clothing expectations become more conservative and traditional as age increases

Class:

- Upper and middle classes showed the highest proportion of nontraditional clothing indicating greater flexibility in dress norms
- The middle class has the highest percentage of non-traditional attire (56.76%)
- Upper and upper middle classes also show high levels of non-traditional clothing
- Traditional clothing becomes more common moving towards lower socioeconomic groups
- Overall, traditional attire appears more frequently in lower socioeconomic groups, while upper and middle classes show greater variation in dress styles

★ The expectation that women of various ages and classes dress exclusively in traditional Indian clothing reflects not just concerns about modesty, but broader systems of social regulation and control