

# Framing the Feminine: Exploring and Examining Female Characters in Bollywood

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RQ: Among Hindi-language commercial films released 2002–2026, does director gender affect the number of speaking female characters and the depth of their characterization after controlling for genre, budget, and release type?

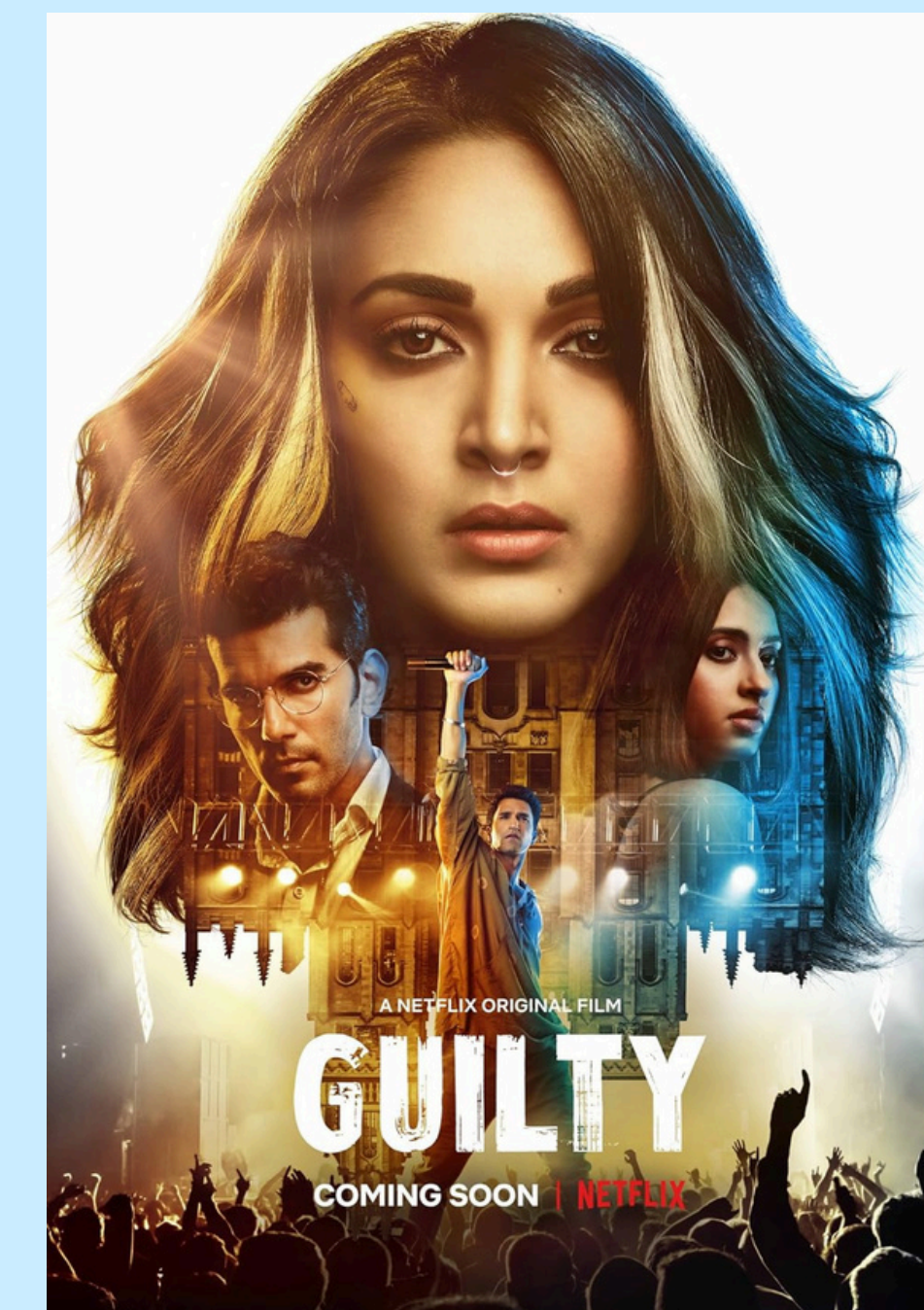
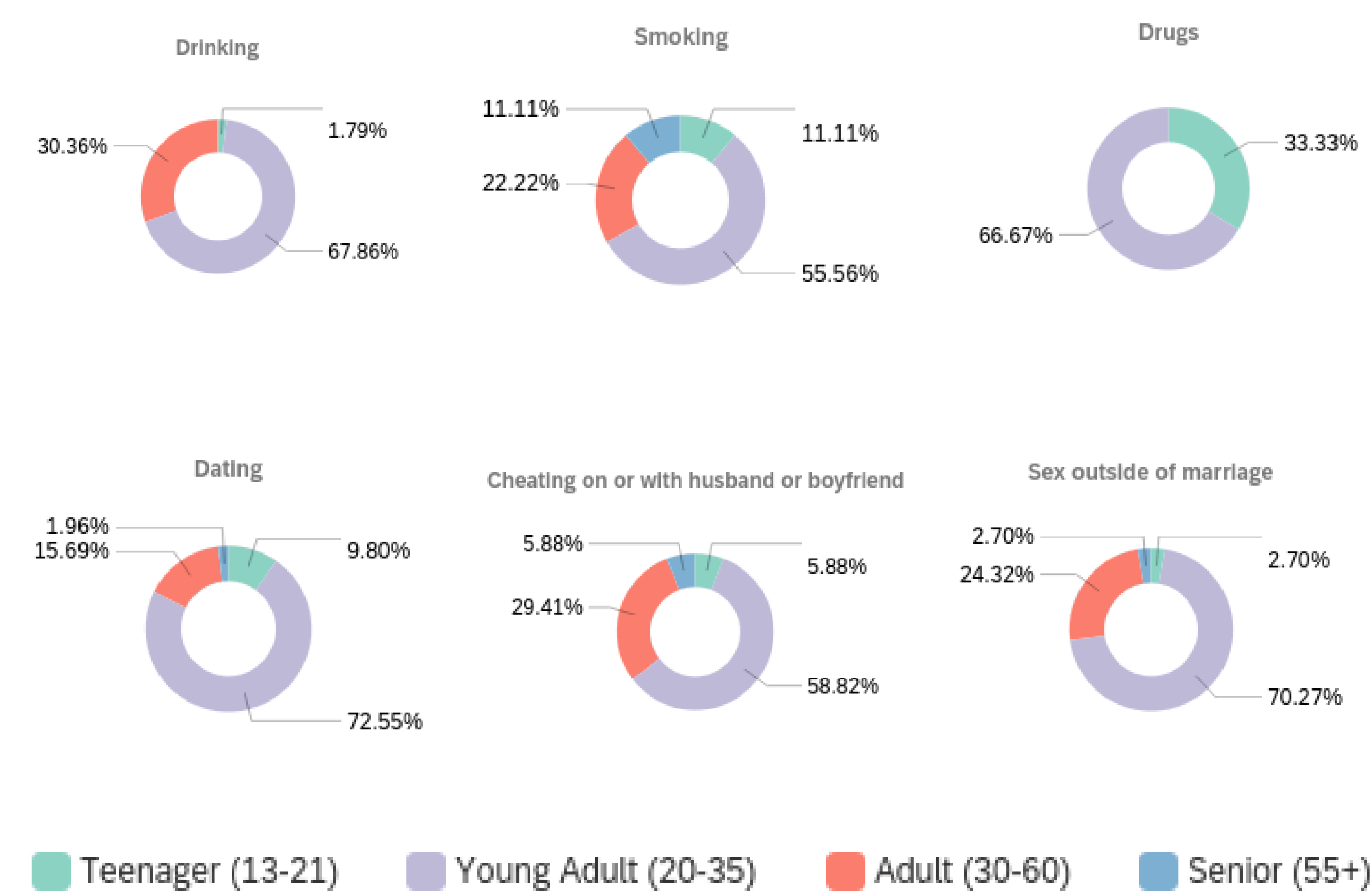
## Introduction

- This study focuses on female directed Bollywood films and how women are portrayed in them. Bollywood is the largest film industry in India and it adheres to a lot of traditional Indian norms. This includes a minimal display of affection, an avoidance to discuss sensitive topics or traditionally taboo behaviors.
- According to Manzar and Aravind, although changes have been made to the portrayal of women on Bollywood big screens, directors and writers have failed to truly delve into the struggles that women have faced in Indian society. They cite a “lack of complex structural narrative,” “repetitive theme[s],” and a “loose narrative structure” throughout these films (Manzar and Aravind, 2019).
- Through this study, we hope to highlight how female directors challenge traditional Bollywood narratives regarding women. We also explore how these attempts may fall short of expectations, despite intentions of making change.

## Findings

- Through our mentor’s research, we observed patterns in female directors’ changes in female characters’ participation in taboo behaviors. One prevalent finding shown in the pie charts is that adult women make up almost 30% of all characters surveyed that cheated on their partners or with someone else in a relationship (Peters, 2025). In addition, middle and upper-middle class women across all age groups exhibited more participation in all taboo behaviors recorded in her study (see bar graph).
- We can see ties from her overarching research into the two movies we focused on this year. In both *Neeyat* and *Guilty*, many of the women across age groups, but especially young adults, engaged in drinking and doing drugs, reflecting a common trend and also societal normalization of these behaviors. Most of these characters were also middle or upper-middle-class, reflecting the overarching research.
- Guilty* also touches on the topics of sexual assault and premarital sex, something that is traditionally disregarded and scorned. We saw male characters held accountable for their actions, and female characters defying gender norms and speaking up about these issues.
- In contrast to the data on social class and taboos, *Neeyat* portrays upper-class women engaging in five of six taboos highlighted in the pie charts. These behaviors concentrate on morally questionable characters, reinforcing the film’s critique of elitism.

## Taboo Behaviors By Age Group

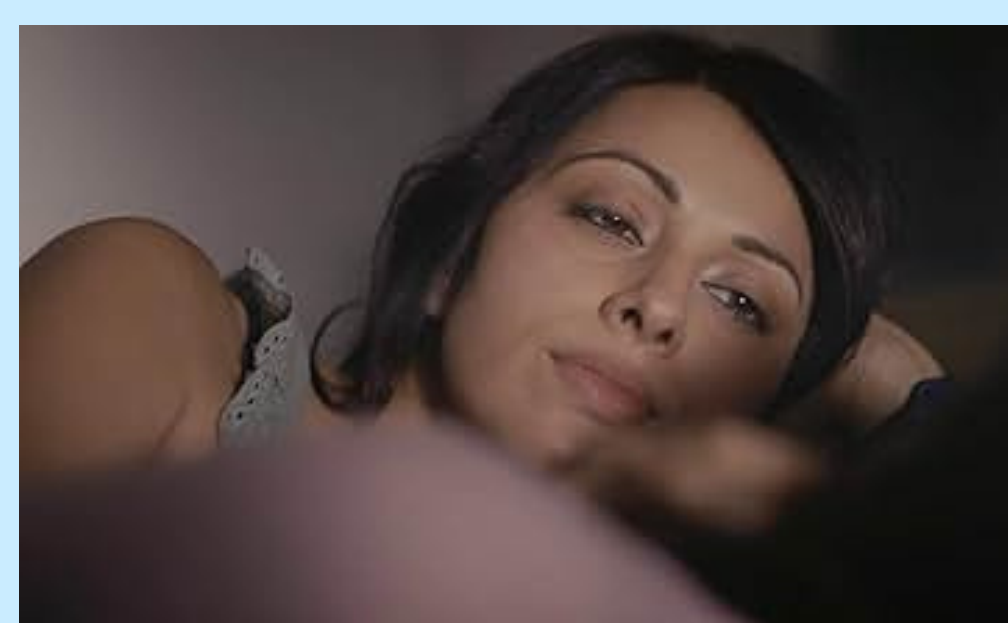


## Methods

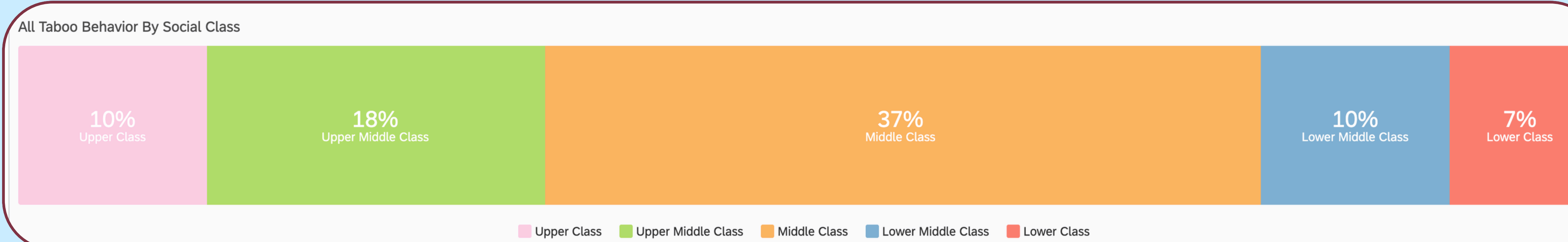
- Our main method of data collection is called “film coding.” This process includes:
- Selecting a Bollywood movie directed by a woman and watching it
  - Making a list of notable female characters based on importance of roles
  - Record behaviors/attributes through a systematic survey for each character, such as:
    - Appearance: skin color (important social construct), clothing, accessories (religious/culturally significant)
    - Behaviors: taboo behaviors, confrontation, conformity (modesty, obedience)
    - Demographics: class, caste, location, age, education, relationship status (and if it changes)
    - How female characters treat/are related to each other
  - Compare answers with each other and discuss findings with mentor, then revise
  - Discussion about the movie and final revisions
  - Apply process to other movies

## Conclusion

Throughout the research process, we noticed that even if female directors were not perfect in their execution of defying gender stereotypes, they still were able to show changes in their narratives of female characters. For example, with both *Neeyat* and *Guilty*, directors Menon and Narain portrayed women who spoke up about social taboos and engaged in them. They did not shy away from difficult topics, rather focusing on them in the movies. However, we understand that our research was very limited in terms of time, since the UROP mentorship only lasts for a year. If more time was allotted, we would like to code more movies and see what trends follow with a wider range of movies. However, we were able to combine our results with that of our mentor to draw further conclusions. With this research in mind, we hope that future Bollywood films can follow in the footsteps of these directors. Continuous challenges through film to existing social norms and standards for women in India will eventually lead to more social acceptance and freedom in films and in real life.



Ruchi Narain



Anu Menon

## Acknowledgements

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## Sources

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