



Representation of Women in Female-Directed Bollywood Films

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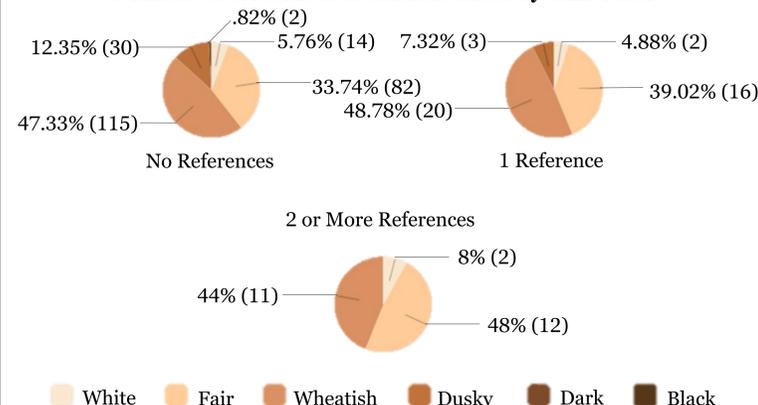
Introduction/Purpose

- This study focuses on how women directed films portray female characters.
- Bollywood, the Hindi-language version of Hollywood, is India's largest film industry.
- Bollywood films rarely show kissing, explicit sexual behavior, or excessively sexualized clothing. In addition, Bollywood films often portray men and women according to strict gender roles.
- Between 2003-2014, a separate study found no change in the depiction of submissive women, their sexual appeal, or beautification, though there has been reduced violence against women shown on screens (Khan 2018). This implies that Bollywood has remained stagnant in progressive depictions of what a woman is.
- This study looks at what role women directors may have in helping to change that depiction.

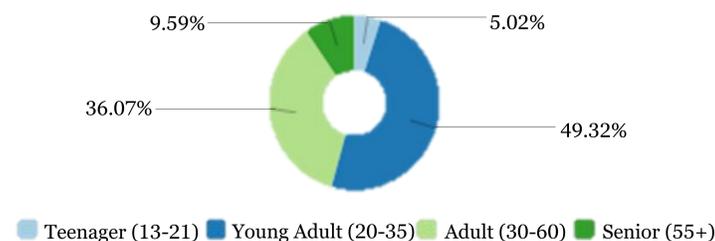
Abstract

Movies are a form of cultural production that not only represent the environments they come from, but also influence cultural conceptions and understandings themselves. Therefore, the way in which female characters are represented reflects on both Indian society at large as well as the changing dynamics of the film industry. Compared to their male peers, female directors are underrepresented in Bollywood, and as a result, there may be differences in how female directors portray gender on screen. This study explores whether women directors influence how female characters are portrayed in film by analyzing the representation, presentation, and presence of female characters in Bollywood films directed by women. However, investigating a subject of such scope needs to be broken down in order to draw more concrete quantitative data. Using a method known as "coding", this project went through each speaking female character in selected Bollywood films, noting things such as their demographic makeup, clothing, gendered behavior, and the way they interact with other women. The coding process was done multiple times per character to ensure the reliability of the results. Although the study is still ongoing, the investigation of films completed so far has resulted in notable preliminary results.

Number of references to attractiveness by Skin Color



Percentage of women with no gendered behavior throughout the film by Age Group



References

- Darlings.*, Jasmeet K. Reen, director. Performances by Alia Bhatt and Shifali Shah, Red Chillies Entertainment, 2022.
- Dolly Kitty aur Woh Chamakte Sitare.* Alankrita Shrivastava, director. Performances by Konkona Sen Sharma and Bhumi Pednekar, Balaji Motion Pictures, 2019.
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- Om Shanti Om*, Farah Khan, director. Performances by Shar Rukh Khan, Deepika Padukone, Red Chillies Entertainment, 2007.
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*Pictures of official film posters published by distributors.

Methods

Viewing and analyzing Bollywood films directed by women.

- We view and analyze films with Qualtrics surveys, coding specific criteria that relate to the portrayal of each speaking female character.
- All coders go through and make notes on whether a particular criterion is present, absent, or ambiguous for each character at any point for the duration of the film.

A few sample questions include:

- Questions relating to her relationships with other women
- Behavioral questions
- Her outward appearance

- Throughout the course of our research, we have updated and improved this coding technique using Qualtrics.
- To verify that accurate data is recorded, multiple participants code each film and character.
- Meetings were held regularly to clarify said criteria for each of the female characters and fix survey errors.
- Final reviews and edits of the completed surveys are looked over for accuracy.

Results/Discussion

Though only 21 films have been coded, there are some preliminary findings that can be discussed. Particularly, they come from examining gendered behaviors by age and attractiveness by skin color. For example, of those characters who did not engage in any gendered behavior, the majority were young adults and adults (49.32% and 36.07% respectively). This could either be depicting a real-life generational gap in gender ideals, subliminal advocacy for women to not be as gendered, or a combination of the two. Unfortunately, representation of skin color and attractiveness follows cultural status quo (Peters 2021). Fair-skinned women were more often referenced as attractive. While wheatish women do have representation among those who are referred to as attractive, very few darker-skinned women are ever referenced as attractive. This is an area in representation that Bollywood could improve upon. These are preliminary results, and more films are needed to complete the study. There were also anecdotal evidence we discovered in our surveys. For examples, in *Darlings*, Badru suffers much abuse from her husband Hamza. The fact that her neighbor heard the abuse but didn't report it shows cultural concepts surrounding domestic abuse. However, the film criticizes both the abuse and the lack of reporting by demonstrating the negative outcomes that can result.