

Research Paper

Portrayal of Women in Bollywood Adult Comedies: Understanding Stereotypes

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ABSTRACT

Media has the power to influence the popular perceptions held by the public, they can either uplift and strengthen the image of a group or devalue it. The present study aims to examine and understand the impact of adult Bollywood comedy movies on the perceived social reality by the consumers of such content with a special emphasis on gender differences. A qualitative study was conducted with a cross-sectional research design, employing close-ended interviews on a sample of 30 participants to explore the impact of cinema on perception of women in society in everyday life. It was observed that respondents were able to discern the existing strong gender stereotypes in the female character portrayals with female participants being more sensitive and observant towards discrepancies in the real-life and reel depiction of female roles. These prevalent stereotypes put unrealistic expectations for women to uphold in their relationships as well as personal conduct

Keywords: *Women representation, Bollywood, Gender stereotypes, Perception of women, Feminist Film Theory, Social Constructivism.*

Women throughout history have played important and diverse roles which have led to great development across different domains and even countries as a whole (Section, 2014c). However, at the same time, women have had to fight for these roles in order to gain acceptance. To get their rights, they had to fight against the society and the neglectful attitude of many men (Stanley, 2008). So is the case with the representation of women in cinema where it's high time for women to demand a rightful representation.

Despite women taking a variety of roles across various domains ranging from leaders of the government to corporate houses, if such women characters were to be represented in movies, they would be shown as spinsters unable to have a stable family life, while the home-makers would be depicted as gullible and unintelligent with an undistinguished personality. Such depictions couldn't be farther than the truth and show the restrictive and retrogressive notions that still exist in the society about women. Studies substantiate these observations and note that women appear to be shown less in leadership roles, dressed in a suggestive

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manner with an emphasis on sexual exploitation and submissive attitudes (Andsager & Roe, 1999; Arnett, 2002; Ward, 1995).

In most movies we see women as playing side roles and never being given a centre stage. Within the narrative, women exist in relation to men and rarely independent. Their characters are shown in a narrow sense with restricted roles and shown as not having “the slightest importance” (Mulvey 1975). The female character counts only for what she provokes and not for what she represents. Such sexist content in cinema is associated with a higher acceptance of gender-role stereotypical attitudes in society (Lanis and Covell, 1995). Such attitudes are based on gender stereotypes which refer to rigid beliefs people hold pertaining to the characteristics of males and females (Martin & Dinella, 2001). These stereotypes are learnt at a very young age and become rigid as people grow older. Ruble and Martin (1998) in their research found that boys hold on to gender stereotypes in a rigid manner whereas girls seem to be more flexible and adaptable to the gender roles associated with each gender. These stereotypes are propagated in various ways, including motion pictures.

The ontological viewpoint of Social Constructivism implies in the same direction, suggesting that gender as a social construct is heavily influenced by the ideas of masculinity and femininity propagated through media, especially movies, defining gender roles and gender stereotypes and affecting the perception of common public of what a man or a woman is supposed to be like. Put in Indian context, these portrayals of women and men in Bollywood films speak volumes about their position and power (or the lack of it) in Indian society.

Feminists often challenge such portrayals of women in cinema as they feel it propagates myths about women and their femininity. They may use ‘Feminist film theory’ to criticize classical cinema for its stereotyped representation of women and demand an adequate representation of female subjectivity and female desire on the silver screen. It is based on the ‘Film theory’, which aims to understand how different kinds of media, including motion pictures, relates to the various components such as narrative, emotions, cognition and understanding to provide a larger framework and insight into the impact these movies have on individuals and a larger population.

While cinema in India is in itself a diverse strand of expression incorporating mainstream cinema which holds popular appeal, the explorations in this paper are limited to Bollywood adult comedies, a little less explored section of movies in reference to its impact on society. In this paper, we try to understand the perception of female character portrayal, the presented stereotypes and the larger impact of such portrayals and movie content on society at large.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since birth, individuals are assigned their gender roles which the society expects us to abide by. These roles are reinforced time and again by various agents of film and print. The representation of women in film media is shown in major motion films and have been widely researched and explored the portrayal of gender roles and stereotypes associated with them. These images may have a direct or indirect impact on the individual roles and identities. These studies provide a background on how women are depicted in popular media, the roles and stereotypes associated with them.

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Ottosson and Cheng (2012) conducted a study which aimed to understand how cinema influenced society and gender portrayal across major motion pictures. Results indicate that the gender roles shown in these movies influence the common perception of the roles of men and women. Additionally, it found that the gender roles in major pictures abide to the patriarchal norms with rare attempts to challenge the position of women.

Kapur (2019) studied the various roles women play in society and the factors which influence these roles. Results found that common women implement a variety of roles in India ranging from healthcare practices, educational industries, alleviation of crime among many other things. There is a range of factors such as education, socio-economic status and skills which make each woman different. Therefore, it is important not to see them from the same lens but understand different colours associated with them.

Samien Kidwai and Ahmad (2016) examined the portrayal of women across major world cinemas. It was found that there is a change in the portrayal of women in cinema has been improving over the last few years and women are being shown in more positive and leadership roles.

Vatika Sibal (2018) conducted a study to understand the stereotyping of women in Indian cinema with focusing upon the representation of characters. The results were examined in the light of feminist film criticism and spoke of how women were represented in a narrow manner and restricting itself to sketches of womanhood. It further mentioned that most cinema is created via a male point of view.

In light of the above discussion, following research questions were proposed for the present study.

- To examine the impact of portrayal of women characters in Bollywood Adult comedy movies.
- To understand the gender differences in stereotypes associated with women in reel vs real life.
- To understand the perceptions about the larger social implications of Bollywood Adult comedy movies

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Using purposive and convenience sampling, 30 participants (15 males and 15 females) were chosen with an age distribution of 18-24 (10 participants, 5 males and 5 females), 24-30 (10 participants, 5 males and 5 females) and 30+ (10 participants, 5 males and 5 females). Participants were chosen from different age brackets so as to eliminate any age-based bias that may have been there. The participants were mainly from urban areas of Delhi-NCR, well-educated with a good command over English.

Tools

A close ended interview was conducted with pre-decided questions which helped build a better understanding of the research questions. There were 17 questions asked to each participant apart from noting their basic demographic details. The questions had been validated by a subject matter expert before being used for the study.

Research Design

A qualitative study was conducted with a cross-sectional research design, employing close-ended interviews to explore the impact of cinema on perception of women in society in everyday life.

Procedure

The participants were contacted and were briefed about the interview wherein they were asked predetermined questions. Date and time for the interview was fixed and consent was taken to record the interview. Once conducted, the interview was transcribed and a thematic analysis of the data was administered.

RESULTS

Table 1. Themes emerging from the interview.

Theme	Sub-Theme	Response
Female Character Portrayal	Role of “wife” character	I wish I had the same behavioural characteristics as the female characters shown in films I hope my partner would dress more like these women characters shown and display more obedience like them. I would not want any changes in myself following these characters. I feel role of women is much more dynamic as compared to what is just shown in these films.
	Role of “Other woman”	The way “other women” are shown is completely off from what women are in real life. The portrayal of mistress or the other women shown is not accurate. These other women tend to have extra characteristics in many ways like Attributes, Attire, Mannerisms and Excessive sexual appeal, so I am not able to relate to them.
Impact on Society	Expectation to uphold in life	Sometimes my expectations from relationships in real life are inspired from movies. I get ideas of what to expect in a relationship from movies. Movies do not create any expectations for my relationships.
	Progressive nature of society	I think the acceptance of an increasing number of adult comedies is indicative of progressive nature of society. Adult comedies do not have much to do with the Progressive nature of society.
	Increased extramarital affair	Since adult comedies glorify extra-marital affairs, I think it paves way to more extra-marital affairs in

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Theme	Sub-Theme	Response
Stereotype Propagation		society. As mature viewers, the audience is not easily influenced by such promiscuous content and hence there is hardly any relationship between extramarital affairs
	Similarity with real life	I feel very little is common in terms of how women are showed as compared to real life. I am not able to relate or feel women are so restricted in their roles and play many other roles in real life. I see these movies as influencing some aspects in my life I want to change, like my obedience levels.
	Differences from portrayed wife character	In real life I feel wife's play a much more dynamic role as compared to these movies. Wife character is different from the way shown in these films in many ways e.g. Attributes, Attire and their Mannerisms. I don't relate much but I feel I wish I had more behavioural characteristics like these characters.
	Accuracy of "other woman's" character	No, the portrayal of the character is not accurate. "other woman" in these films is not portrayed accurately Yes, I feel some aspects may be same for the other woman.

DISCUSSION

The present research aims to examine and understand the impact of adult Bollywood comedy movies on the perception of women in real life and of the perceived social reality at large by the consumers of such content with special emphasis on gender differences.

There is no denying to the fact that cinema is a reflection of society and its cultural practices. With its mass reach and influence, it can be understood as a "cultural and ideological force" which "does not merely reflect social reality but also constructs it" (Banaji, 2006). Subject to gender lens, it makes sense to view cinema as a cultural practice, which represents myths about both women and femininity, and men and masculinity. Grazing through the content of any mainstream Bollywood movie, it is easy to spot the "fixed and endlessly repeated images of women" (Smelik 2007: 491) or gender stereotypes. Through the storyline, item song numbers, and the cinematic action and direction, the portrayal of female characters reflects the prevalent gender stereotypes and further create gender roles determining how women and men should carry themselves, how they should act, think, dress and speak. Trying to explore more on these themes of "Female Character Portrayal", "Stereotype Propagation" and "Impact on society"; the study analyses the responses of the participants on questions pertaining to these three themes.

Beginning with the analysis of Female Character Portrayal in adult Bollywood comedy movies, the present study tried to understand the perceived portrayal of the female characters in these movies which are restricted to either the traditional, docile and homely 'wife character' or the overly-western, modern, bold and brazen 'other woman'. When asked about the accuracy of these female characters, it was interesting to note that while all of the female participants found these depictions, for both the 'wife character' as well as 'other woman' to be highly inaccurate, such was not the case for males, where a few of the male respondents found the representations to be fairly accurate. For instance, 1M said "yes, I feel that the portrayal of the wife character in bollywood adult comedies is quite accurate." Further, among those males who found the portrayal to be inaccurate, the reasons for inaccuracy were very different from those of the female participants. For the male participants, the 'mannerism' of these characters was the primary reason for the inaccuracy (such as, 5 M said that he inaccuracy of the character is dependant upon the "mannerisms of the characters shown in adult comedies") while females found 'excessive sexual appeal' of these characters to be unrealistic and hence inaccurate. (point in case 14 F responded that "I feel that the Excessive sexual appeal portrayed by the women characters in these movies makes the representation not accurate"). On the same note, when asked to compare the role of wife character with the real life wife role, all females agreed that the real-life wife role is much more dynamic than what is depicted on screen. On the other hand, while most men found some discrepancy in the on-screen depiction and off-screen wife role, there were some male participants who did not find any discrepancy between the two. Considering that the narratives of Hindi cinema have been male-centric and male-dominated; women's perspectives, desires, grievances, ambitions, feelings and other character complexities are completely missing from the scene as per the director's (usually a male) discretion (Kunsey, 2018). This inapt female representation is then internalised by males to be the social reality while for females there are obvious and stark differences between the real life roles they play and the reel-life role portrayals.

Additionally, to judge the degree of internalisation of these stereotypes, respondents were asked if they wanted some of these presented female character's characteristics for themselves or their partners. It was interesting to note that both males and females wanted changes inspired by such female character portrayals, however, gender differences were conspicuous in the characteristic they wanted. While most males focussed on dressing sense, females focussed on behavioural changes and surprisingly 'obedience', for instance 14M said that "I wish that my partner had the same kind of obedience characteristics as the female characters shows in these films." Such desires to have characteristics similar to that of the female leads is manifested in the form of 'expectations to have similar characteristics. Thus, we further enquired about expectations attached regarding the most evident characteristic feature of the depictions, i.e., the clothing. The respondents were asked whether they expected their partners to wear similar clothing in the likes of those shown on screen (for males) or whether they felt expected to wear such clothes (for females). The responses highlight the gender differences in expectations as few males answered along the lines of having some expectations from their wives and girlfriends to wear the 'sexy' clothes shown in movies while all women denied wanting to wear or feeling any expectations to wear such skimpy clothing. Such excessive emphasis of male participants on dressing sense and clothing choices of women is explained by other studies that found that men tend to observe and get easily influenced by female choice of dressing (Anku et al., 2018). For instance, the figure hugging dresses, short clothes shown in films are perceived to be associated with women of desire and hence, they expect their real-life partners to emulate such clothing in everyday life as well.

Such questions to understand the extent of stereotypes in the audience of adult comedy movies formed the crux of the second theme, i.e., ‘stereotype propagation’. To probe into how these stereotypes are discerned, respondents were asked what prominent similarities/differences do these people observe in the female character portrayal. Although no gender differences were present between the observed traits, the observed traits themselves show the presence of gender-based stereotypes, where both male and female respondents mentioned discerning female characteristics shown in movies to have specific attributes like mannerism, sexual appeal and dressing style. Thus, we can see that both men and women hold gender stereotypes through the restrictive gender portrayals in the cinema. Studies such as Koenig (2018) substantiate these results that males and females hold stereotypes pertaining to gender roles and suggest that males tend to have more rigid ideals about gender roles than females who show more flexibility of universal gender stereotypes.

Lastly, the study explored the impact of these stereotypes propagated through such adult comedies as well as the overall content of such movies on society at large under the theme of ‘Impact on Society’. Research has found that cinema and society have a two way street where both exert influence on each other. While cinema takes inspiration from real life to make the characters more relatable to the audience (Indian Cinema and Its Impact on Society Film Studies Essay, 2018), it inspires the audience in equal measure. Kubrak (2020) exerts that cinema is a powerful tool which has the power to bring about radical changes in the society. This impact on larger society can begin influence and expectations in the relationship. For instance, when asked ‘if films create expectations to be upheld in real-life relationships’, both male and female respondents answered along the same lines of having a positive and affirmative response, for instance respondent 1F said that “yes she feels films create expectations to be upheld in real-life relationships”. 1M also responded along similar lines where he said that “cinema sometimes influences his relationships in terms of the expectation he needs to uphold”. Further, the extent of dispersion of these stereotypes into real life can be elucidated from the responses to whether these people knew people in everyday life that had a similar lifestyle. An overwhelming number of respondents from both genders gave an affirmative response albeit no one commented whether they themselves lead such lifestyle and claimed to have known someone living such a lifestyle as depicted in bollywood adult comedies. Familiarity with such lifestyles is indicative of the influence of such cinema on real life, although direction of influence is to be determined yet.

Considering that the “lifestyle” shown in the movie may consist of various components like socio-economic status, personality characteristics, personal preferences along with the main plotline of promiscuity, to be more specific, we nudged the respondents to answer whether they felt such movies gave space to more extra-marital affairs in society. It was interesting to note that only 2 male respondents outrightly denied having any such possibility while the rest, both males and females answered on the lines of yes, with some doubtful and the rest assured about the possibility of an increased extra-marital affairs in society. Regardless of whether it actually does give way to extra-marital affairs or not, we cannot deny the fact that such movies justify and idolize promiscuity and extra-marital affairs leaving a mark on the impressionable minds of its audience (Johnson, 2020). Although no direct relationship has been established to determine whether it is cinema that gives rise to affairs or the real life that inspires cinema to portray more affairs on screen, what is assured is the fact that people do register what is depicted and can't deny that there is a slight possibility that it may influence one's stance of monogamy in relationships.

Thus, through the paper, we gain an insight about how gender representation influences the perception of gender roles to strengthen specific images of what a woman should be like. Since the gender representation across the chosen movie genre is repetitive with little variation in female character portrayal, we see presence of strong gender stereotypes and rigid prescriptive gender roles such as an ideal wife adhering to traditional values, must wear conservative clothing and be docile and obedient while a modern woman would be bold, brazen and be wearing revealing clothes highlighting her sexual appeal. We find that the female population is unable to relate to either of the characters and find such characterization highly flawed. They would want to see more elaborate and deeper characters who are independent and do not exist in relation to other men.

The impact of these popular media representations is such that it governs and sways the public opinion in the direction it wants to. According to social psychologists, these images often alter the way people perceive the social realities (Manatu, 2003). Thus, through subdued representation of females, society systematically leads to cultural devaluation of women (Ottosson & Cheng, n.d.). Women, subjected to such social tyranny may thus, internalise such rigid gender stereotypes and regressive gender roles. With the increased level of education and social empowerment, women today are breaking the existing gender stereotypes and would want the popular media to mirror such progress in their content.

CONCLUSION

The present study aims to explore and examine the impact of portrayal of women characters in Bollywood adult comedies and their larger social implications with special emphasis on gender. We observed that the respondents were able to discern the existing strong gender stereotypes in the female character portrayals with female participants being more sensitive and observant towards discrepancies in the real-life and reel depiction of female roles. These prevalent stereotypes put unrealistic expectations for women to uphold in their relationships as well as personal conduct.

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Conflict of Interest

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