

Lived Experience of Breast Cancer Survivors: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Background- Breasts are an integral part of female identity. But, Breast cancer diagnosis can alter the identity and self-image both psychologically and physically. When the public figures experience breast cancer it becomes a matter of discussion due to their visibility and their narratives become a source of awareness, inspiration and resilience. Their popularity shapes their narratives into powerful testimony that can challenge existing stigma and normalise vulnerability, helping in reshaping societal attitudes towards illness, femininity and emotional strength. **Objective -** To understand the lived psychological experiences and identify the major protective factors that contribute to emotional resilience in Indian women who have successfully fought breast cancer. **Method -** A qualitative research design is employed using narrative analysis to understand the psychological experiences of three Bollywood actresses who were loud about their successful treatment journey through podcasts, monologues and interviews. Thus, their narratives were considered as data which were transcribed, systematically coded and themes were identified. **Results-** The findings were analysed from the themes including initial reaction and psychological burden, mindset and coping mechanisms, role of support systems, relationships with medical professionals, navigation of fear and stigma, use of alternative practices, impact of work and public image and the development of new perspectives that inspire others. **Conclusion -** Narratives have the power to challenge stigma and inspire a culture of openness and healing. If adapted by people, it would greatly reduce stigma around breast cancer.

Keywords: *Bollywood Luminaries, Breast Cancer Stigma, Lived Experiences, Narrative Analysis, Psychological Burden, Qualitative Research*

Breast cancer constitutes the most prominent cancer among 157 out of 185 countries among women globally (WHO, 2024). As per records, India had the highest female breast cancer-related mortalities in 2022 (98,337), which underlines a significant epidemiological burden (Global Cancer Observatory, IARC-WHO, 2024). Although a small proportion of cases (0.5 to 1%) occur in males, breast cancer overwhelmingly affects women, where 2.3 million of new cases have been diagnosed worldwide and approximately 670,000 deaths in the year 2022 (WHO, 2024). Breast cancer is characterised as a malignant condition with abnormal growth of breast tissues leading to the formation of tumours, which

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can spread to the surrounding parts, making it life-threatening. Several factors can elevate the risk, including age, family history of breast cancer, obesity, use of alcohol, etc. Notably, nearly 50% of breast cancer cases occur in women who present no identifiable risk factors beyond being female and over the age of 40. High-penetrance genetic mutations such as BRCA1, BRCA2, and PALB2 contribute to hereditary breast cancer susceptibility, where risk factors can be reduced often with surgical removal of lumpectomy (cancerous tissues) or mastectomy (whole breast) or chemoprevention strategies. Beyond its biomedical dimensions, breast cancer imposes profound psychological distress. Research highlights the prevalence of disrupted body image (Przedziecki et al., 2016), altered self-perception (Fobair et al., 2006) and pervasive emotional distress (Dinapoli et al., 2021) among survivors. These intrapsychic disruptions are intensified by sociocultural dynamics, including stigma, discrimination and social exclusion (Wu et al., 2023; (Maggi, Johnson, & Agrawal, 2022), which mediate access to care and impact survivorship courses. The healing process is thus conceptualised not merely as physical remission but as a dynamic, psychosocially embedded journey wherein intrapersonal resources (resilience, coping strategies, self-concept) and interpersonal supports (familial, community and institutional) come together to foster post-treatment well-being.

Thus, based on psychosocial and feminist health frameworks, this study interrogates the lived experiences of Indian women, particularly public figures, diagnosed with breast cancer. It highlights how survivors find their own strength, challenge societal taboos and redefine what it means to live and heal on their own terms. In doing so, the inquiry underscores not only the rising epidemiological prevalence of breast cancer in India but also the affective, symbolic and psychological dimensions that shape the survivorship course.

Background

Breast cancer constitutes a pressing public health issue globally, with India exhibiting pronounced disparities in awareness, early detection and treatment outcomes. Banerjee et al. (2025), in a systematic review of cross-sectional and prevalence-based studies within Indian healthcare settings, identified pervasive deficits in breast cancer awareness, compounded by restricted access to screening services. These structural and informational gaps contribute to delayed diagnoses and elevated mortality. Cultural stigma surrounding breast health further impedes early detection, particularly in rural regions where infrastructural inadequacies and financial barriers restrict timely intervention. The authors advocate a holistic strategy encompassing community-centred awareness initiatives, infrastructural improvements, increased screening access and stigma reduction through stakeholder engagement. Mehrotra and Yadav (2022) documented the epidemiological shift wherein breast cancer, ranked the fourth most common cancer in India in 1990, has become the leading malignancy among Indian women. Their analysis underscored contributory factors including earlier age of onset, late-stage presentation, and delays in treatment initiation. Systemic constraints - such as delayed diagnoses, shortages of skilled personnel and under-resourced facilities - were highlighted. They emphasised the potential of early detection, advances in therapeutic modalities and holistic care models to mitigate disease burden.

Longitudinal epidemiological assessments in India, such as that by Sathishkumar et al. (2021), employing Age - Period - Cohort models on data from five Population-Based Cancer Registries (1985–2014), revealed a sustained rise in breast cancer incidence (Estimated Annual Percent Change: 1.2%–2.7%) alongside a decline in cervical cancer incidence. These trends were attributed to generational shifts in risk profiles and the interplay of cohort and period effects. Clinical heterogeneity presents further complexities. Thakur et al. (2018)

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examined triple-negative breast cancer (TNBC), disproportionately affecting younger women, and reported India's highest global proportion of TNBC cases (6.7%–27.9%), exceeding rates in Indonesia, Algeria, and Pakistan. Associations were identified with lifestyle factors, deprivation status, obesity, familial predisposition, elevated mitotic indexes and BRCA1 mutations. The absence of targeted TNBC therapies affects the imperative for research into preventive strategies and effective interventions.

While the existing research and academic knowledge has substantially addressed epidemiological patterns, awareness gaps, healthcare system limitations and biological subtypes, the psychological dimensions - particularly the lived experiences of Indian women in the public sphere - remain underexplored. Narratives of public figures provide a unique viewpoint into psychological affects, resilience building, identity reconstruction and the influence of social visibility on survivorship trajectories. This gap forms the foundation of the present inquiry into the survivorship journeys of Indian women celebrities with breast cancer.

METHOD

The audio-visual material analysed in this study consisted of publicly available interviews, podcasts, talk shows and other digital media disclosures shared by three selected celebrities between 2018 and 2025, in which they discussed their diagnoses, treatments, recoveries and returns to normal life. Inclusion criteria focused on Indian female public figures who voluntarily disclosed their breast cancer experiences across the phases of diagnosis, treatment, survivorship and personal renewal. The study utilised only secondary data from these media interactions, which are accessible to the general public and did not include medical records, clinical details or comprehensive autobiographical illness narratives. All selected audio-visual content was reviewed multiple times and manually transcribed to ensure accuracy and to preserve the contextual and emotional nuances present in the celebrities' accounts. Narrative analysis, grounded in the constructivist paradigm, was used to interpret life stories and to examine how individuals construct meaning from their experiences. This method facilitated the exploration of both explicit and implicit narratives, considering key elements such as context, structure, chronology, characters and pivotal moments (Atkinson, 1998).

Participant Selection

A purposive sampling was employed to identify Indian celebrities who openly documented their breast cancer journeys across multiple media platforms, ensuring their accounts were accessible in the public domain. Three female celebrities - *Sonali Bendre*, *Tahira Kashyap* and *Hina Khan* were included based on confirmed survivorship; disclosure of experiences spanning diagnosis, treatment and recovery; and active participation in awareness and destigmatisation initiatives. Their cases were selected for their high professional visibility at the time of disclosure and advocacy-driven accounts, which increased public engagement with their narratives.

Data Source and Collection

The study utilised secondary data sources which were in the form of audio-visuals, documented publicly as they offer rich, unfiltered content that captures both the personal and socio-cultural dimensions of the illness trajectory and also maintain ethical feasibility ensuring no private or undisclosed information. The reason for selecting these data sources stems from the study's focus on public figures whose personal, lived experiences have been voluntarily shared in open forums with the explicit intent of raising awareness, reducing

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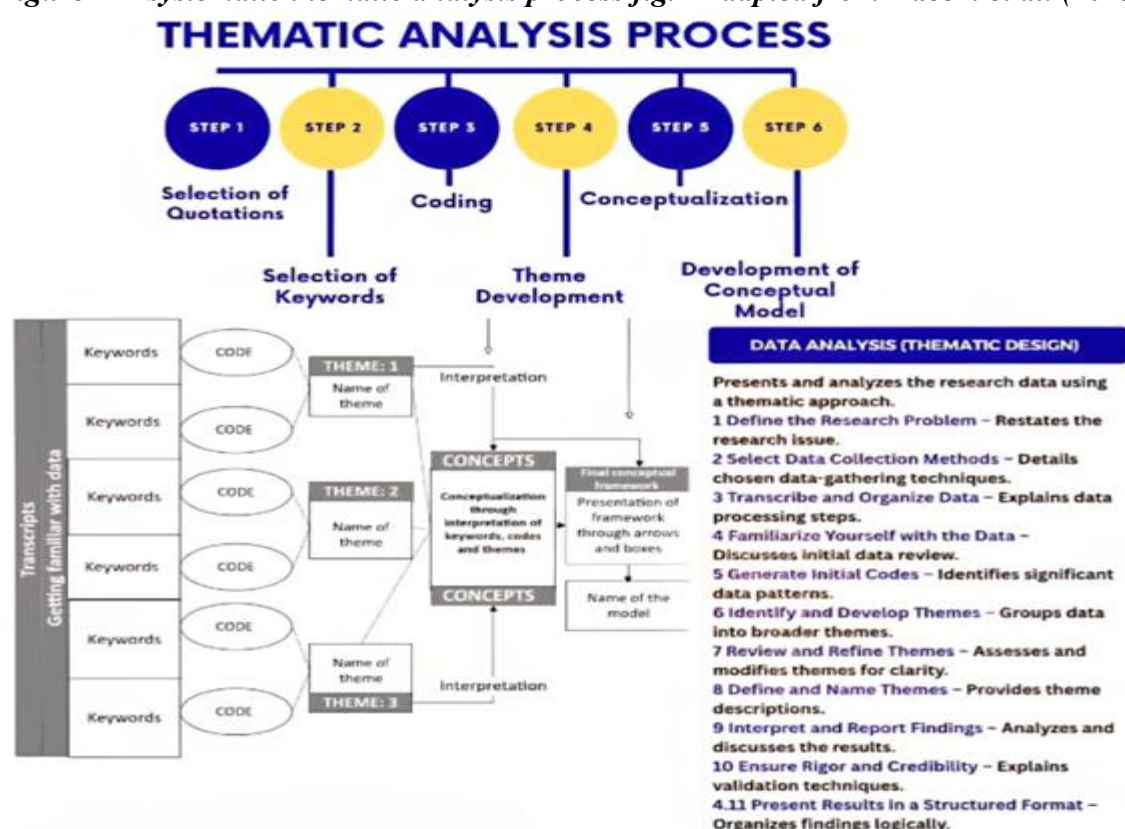
stigma and providing hope to others affected by breast cancer. The sources include YouTube-based talk show appearances, podcasts, social media posts, public speeches and awareness campaign recordings.

Ethical considerations

This study analysed information already available in the public domain, voluntarily disclosed by the celebrities through media thereby eliminating the need for direct participant involvement. Care was taken to make sure that all the sources were appropriately credited and interpreted and no private or unverified material was used. The study adhered to the principles of respect, integrity and responsible scholarship as outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (2013) and the ICMR National Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical and Health Research Involving Human Participants (2017).

Procedure

Figure 1 A systematic thematic analysis process fig.1 Adapted from Naeem et al. (2023).



RESULTS

Table 1 Coding tree (Braun & Clarke, 2006) six phase frameworks)

Key words /Verbatim	Secondary Codes	Primary Codes	Themes
"It's okay"/ "I am okay"	Surface reassurance / Emotional masking	Positive approach during the bad time	Initial Reaction and Psychological Burden
"Hard" / "Difficult" / "Tough"	Acknowledging struggle	To signify challenges in journey of treatment and recovery	
"Fear"/" Fearless" /" Scared"	Emotional turbulence	Struggle with fear and journey to become fearless	
"I want to live" / "Let me live"	Survival instinct	Expression of a strong desire to live long and healthy	
"Clarity"	Life Re-evaluation	A better understanding of life and priorities after diagnosis	
"Acceptance" / "Accept"	Coming to terms with illness	A crucial aspect of coping mechanism to move from denial and accept reality	
"Strength" / "Strong" / "Brave"	Resilience	Signs of courage and resilience in the face of illness.	
"Love" / "Positive" / "Positivity"	Optimism as strategy	The love and support that helped maintain a positive mindset	
"One Day at a Time"	Present-moment coping	Personal mantra and hashtag, signifying overcoming overwhelming situations by focusing on present	
"Switch On the Sunshine"	Symbolic positivity practices	Another personal hashtag and strategy to find positivity during difficult times.	
"Opportunity"	Reframing adversity	Reframed cancer as an opportunity to learn, introspect and become a 2.0 version of herself.	
"Learning" / "Lesson"	Growth mindset	Highlights illness as something to learn from	
"Happiness"	Intentional joy-seeking	Strives to maintain happiness by working on passion projects and motivating others	
"Self-love"	Prioritizing self-worth	Encouragement to love oneself and prioritise one's well-being	
"My mother" / "Mom" / "Mummy"	Maternal caregiving strength	Mother's strength and emotional support in diagnosis and treatment	Role of Support Systems
"Goldie" / "Husband"	Spousal support	Husband provided a pivotal support	
"Son" / "Child" / "Children"	Parenting as motivation	Highlights the support from son and challenges and joys of parenting during illness.	
"Family" / "Support System"	Collective care network	Crucial role of family and friends in the journey	
"Love" / "Loved"	Emotional holding environment	The immense love which helped in going forward with positive mindset throughout treatment	
"My doctors" / "Doctors"	Trust in medical expertise	Credit to the medical team for care and expertise	Relationships with Medical Professionals
"Treatment" / "Chemotherapy" / "Surgery"	Central medical interventions	The various stages of medical treatment underwent and timely guidance and support of doctors	
"Chemo" /	Difficult	Mention of this as the most	

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Key words /Verbatim	Secondary Codes	Primary Codes	Themes
“Chemotherapy”	procedure	challenging part of treatment	
“Early Detection”	Preventive medical advocacy	A significant message she actively advocates for to save lives.	
“Stigma” / “Taboo”	Social silencing	Actively addresses the "stigma and taboo" surrounding breast cancer, especially in societies where discussing such health issues can be difficult	
“Normalise” / “Normal”	De-stigmatisation efforts	Setting of a goal to normalise discussions around cancer and to feel normal in her daily life despite ongoing treatment	
“Looks” / “Hair” / “Scar” / “Beauty” / “Imperfection” / “Aging”	Embodied stigma & redefined beauty	Discussion over her public image, the physical changes due to treatment and her redefined perception of beauty	Navigation of fear and stigma
“Truth” / “Honesty”	Countering pity narratives	A commitment to sharing her experience truthfully without seeking pity	
“Fear”/” Fearless”	Breaking silence through courage	A goal to break silence around cancer and become fearless	
“Faith” / “Practice”	Spiritual grounding	Following practice of Nichiren Buddhism	use of alternative practices
“Upar wale” / “All mighty” / “God bless”	Religious anchoring	References to a higher power and blessings are common in her expressions of gratitude and hope	
“Mental well-being” / “Perspective”	Mind-body connection	emphasises on the connection between "mental well-being and your physical well-being," stating they are "not two separate entities"	
“Practice of Buddhism”	Structured spiritual coping	Foster mental resilience through mindfulness and compassion	
“Work” / “Shoot” / “Project” / “Character”	Work continuity	Frequent discussions about professional commitments, upcoming show 'Grihalakshmi' and desire to return to acting	
“Work” / “Industry” / “Roles” / “Acting”	Negotiating professional identity	Signifies discussion over professional life, career choices and perception of herself within Bollywood.	impact of work and public image
“Social Media” / “Book Club”	Public narrative building	Indicative of platform used to share her stories and build community	
“Looks” / “Hair” / “Scar” / “Beauty”	Negotiating public gaze	Discussion over her public image, the physical changes due to treatment and her redefined perception of beauty	
“Journey”	Life as narrative arc	Central to narrative, referring to entire life's path, career and most significantly, ongoing battle with cancer	
“Second Chance”	Rebirth metaphor	Referral to post-cancer life, as a new opportunity	
“Awareness”	Social responsibility	Indicative of the mission in life to spread awareness about early breast cancer detection and self-	Development of new perspectives that inspire others.

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Key words /Verbatim	Secondary Codes	Primary Codes	Themes
“Normalise”	Inspiring cultural openness	love A goal to normalise discussion and create openness and acceptance around breast cancer	
“Opportunity”	Inspirational perspective	An inspiration upon how life gives second chances to improvise and prioritise things	
“Switch on the Sunshine”	Motivation to others	A personal hashtag inspiring to see optimistically and find positivity during difficult times	

Through the data filtration of a rigorous process nine themes were identified and they are as follows.

Table 2 Themes identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006) six phase frameworks)

Theme Number	Theme Name
Theme 1	Initial Reaction and Psychological Burden
Theme 2	Mindset and Coping Mechanisms
Theme 4	Role of support systems
Theme 5	Relationships with medical professionals
Theme 6	Navigation of fear and Stigma
Theme 7	Usage of alternative practices.
Theme 8	Impact of work and Public Image
Theme 9	Development of new perspectives that inspire others.

Thematic Analysis

The findings presented are in the form of common themes to all 3 women, namely Sonali Bendre, Tahira Kashya and Hina Khan that were identified during the analysis. Sonali was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer with stage 4 in July 2018, Tahira in 2018 with stage 0 which resurfaced in 2025 and Hina in June 2024 with stage 3.

Initial Reaction and Psychological Burden

To Sonali Bendre, the diagnosis of cancer came out to be a “*Shock*.” This is because it was “*out of the blue and so unexpected*,” making her feel “*Taken by surprise*.” She initially experienced “*disbelief*”, finding it hard to accept that the reports were hers. She thought that the results must have been mixed up. Her body started giving her signals but she did not pay attention as she was thinking that “*this can't happen to me*” as she was a healthy person living a healthy life. The physical sickness took a heavy “*mental toll*” on her. She described moments of deep despair where she felt that she did not want to get up and would think, “*let it be over*”. There were many days when she felt like just letting life end because she could not bear the pain anymore. This period included instances of crying and feeling like she was “*sinking*”. She also had the fear of “*not coming back*” particularly for her son and family as her treatment was taking place in the USA. This brought her profound pain which was way more than the physical pain which she endured.

She also struggled with the question of “*why me?*” Despite having a seemingly perfect lifestyle and not believing that she did anything wrong, she questioned herself if she had somehow caused the illness. This led her to “*flog*” herself and feeling that she had done something wrong. Furthermore, her profession heavily relied on her physical appearance. Hair and looks were her “*bread butter jam*”. So, losing her hair and undergoing surgery that left her a 20-inch scar on her midriff was psychologically challenging. She became “*hyper*”

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about this scar" and found it difficult to embrace the changes initially. This loss of her defining professional features led to a dilemma of choosing between hiding or accepting her new reality.

To Tahira Kashyap, the diagnosis came out as a “*shocker*” and the “*biggest shock*” of her life. It was unexpected especially because her chances of contracting the disease increased dramatically through successive medical tests. Despite her education and privileged background, she initially ignored symptoms (*And so I started having symptoms and I ignored it*) for two months and she attributed a heavy breast to wanting bigger breasts (*I was actually celebrating.... I've always wanted big breasts in life*). This indicates how denial or overlooking symptoms can occur even with awareness. Later, she described this period of sitting on symptoms as “*crazy and obnoxious*”. The diagnosis brought with it a “*huge spectrum of emotions*” which included “*denial, anger, pain, and trauma.*” When she was informed that she needed a mastectomy, her first thought was if it would “*diminish my femininity.*” There were a common fear and anxiety associated with the word “*cancer.*” It often evokes an immediate feeling of fear and is perceived “*almost as if a death sentence has been passed*”.

To Hina Khan, the diagnosis brought a significant shock. She received the news from her partner Rocky (to whom the doctor called) while having dinner. Her first reaction was “*Seriously, mujhe yeh ho gaya?*” literal meaning seriously, this happened to me? indicating that the news was difficult to believe. It took her some time to process and believe what was happening. Immediately after the shock, her mind went into problem-solving mode and she started thinking about what to do next, where to get treated (India or abroad), consulting about costs and planning for the upcoming nine months when she would not be able to work.

Shortly after receiving the news, a “*turning point*” occurred. Just as the news was about to consume her, the doorbell rang. It was the delivery of “*faluuda*” which she ordered earlier. When she looked at the dessert, a realization occurred “*That's your life... This is just a hiccup, we'll deal with it, it's okay... We'll deal with this hiccup and we'll go back to that life.*” She decided to have the *faluuda* with her brother and Rocky and told them that they would talk tomorrow and figure things out. This moment marked a conscious decision to not let the diagnosis consume her but view it as a temporary obstacle.

Mindset and Coping Mechanisms

In the journey of Sonali Bendre, a crucial moment was “*acceptance.*” According to her, it's the most crucial element, more important than terms like “*survivor*” or “*toughness.*” She realised that “*until you keep fighting something until you don't accept it, you're never going to be able to move on.*” Her journey towards acceptance was aided by seeking professional help. She went to a psychiatrist in New York to understand why this was happening. The psychiatrist's explanation that cancer is caused by genetics or viruses and that thoughts cannot cause or cure it, lifted a significant weight off her shoulders. She realised she had not done anything wrong to cause it. This acceptance led to a shift in perspective. She decided to see the illness as a “*lesson that life was teaching her.*” Instead of dwelling on “*why me?*” which she identifies as a form of negative and wasteful self-pity, she chose to focus on learning the lesson.

She adopted two key mantras from this shift: “*one day at a time*” and “*switch on the sunshine.*” The former approach was initially suggested by her husband Goldie when she was being overwhelmed. This then became her strategy to cope by focusing only on getting

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through the present day, rather than being overwhelmed by the entire treatment duration. This helped her to live in the present moment. "Switch on the sunshine" was her own effort to look at the positive side of things whenever she felt pulled down. These mantras have become something she lives by now. She also realised that the experience gave her *clarity and perspective*. It made her understand the value of living in the moment and not constantly worrying about what's next. Given a second chance at life, she questioned its purpose and realised that although she might not be able to change the world, she could focus on doing what she can for the people around her, even if it's just one or two. She does not want to shout about issues but "*whisper*" to those who can hear believing that even a "*spec full of work*" can make a difference.

A significant aspect of Tahira's narrative is her *mindset and approach to the challenge*. She described not taking the "*prettyboy root*" of questioning or doubting "*why did it happen to me*". Rather, she viewed the detection of cancer as a "*challenge*" that she would use as a "*springboard*". She was determined to "*bounce on it*" and "*do all that I didn't do before*." A central theme is *acceptance*. She stated that she "*accepted it right when I was told*". She strongly believed that acceptance is "*very, very important*" because "*as soon as you accept healing starts*" including physical and emotional healing. Acceptance puts you "*on the right road with the right direction*." She consciously decided to "*deal with this problem, let's get out of the situation and get out of this situation the most joyous way*". She felt that having a "*high light state*" or "*joyous life State*" makes the journey "*zip past*" despite the inherent suffering, pain and physical transformation.

Tahira also discusses dealing with the physical side effects, particularly losing her hair due to chemotherapy. Although she was prepared, seeing hair come out in chunks was emotionally very down for a few days. However, she shared that she "*really enjoyed even the period of baldness*" and "*took it very positively*". She mostly roamed around bald or with a scarf and was not comfortable with wigs. She felt "*more comfortable*" being "*just without anything*". She addressed the concept of *scars* by writing a poem where they symbolize fight, resilience, invincible power and acceptance. Her message is to "*accept the imperfect you and celebrate that*" and look at scars positively.

Hina Kahn consciously chooses to focus on *strength and positivity*. She believes that if she cries or becomes sad, it would not solve her problems. So, the only way is to maintain strength. She actively chooses love over bitterness in her journey. She states that she does not show the difficult side to people and instead chooses to display only strength, love and smiles. This is a conscious decision that she feels has worked for her, attributing it partly to the love and positivity around her. An important aspect of her coping is adopting the "*Why not me?*" perspective instead of "*Why me?*". She reasons that when she was experiencing immense success and receiving love and fame, she never questioned "*Why me?*". Therefore, when faced with adversity, she asks, "*Why not me?*". This perspective helps her approach the challenge positively, determined to fight through it.

Hina also finds strength in continuing to live her life and work, viewing the cancer as just a "*hiccup*" in her life. She wanted to "*feel normal*" and "*normalise*" the experience by being visible and continuing her professional activities as much as her body allowed. She acknowledges that taking a pause in the entertainment industry can lead to being forgotten. But she never forgot to not ignore her health in the process. It was her priority. Faith is an important supportive factor for Hina. She mentions that her mother's unwavering faith even after the passing of her husband taught Hina not to lose faith during adversity. Hina states

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that her faith in God is 200% and believes that whatever has happened is okay. She also mentions meeting BK Shivani Ji from Brahmakumaris in the initial days of her diagnosis. She helped her with affirmations and positive thinking and connected her to healers and counsellors.

Role of Support Systems

Support systems played a vital role in the journey of Sonali Bendre. Her *husband*, Goldie, was a critical source of strength. He was very clear about getting the best treatment and insisted on going to Memorial Sloan Kettering in New York. He refused to take any chances. When she felt like giving up, he refused to do so. He was the "*pivotal point*" and the "*fulcrum*" who handled everything. He also provided the "*one day at a time*" mantra that became crucial for her coping. The journey with Goldie made them "*fearless*". Her *son* was also a major motivation for her will to survive. The fear of not being able to be there for him was deeply painful. After telling him about her illness, her son handled it with maturity. She made him a promise that she would make it through and it solidified her resolve to live.

Her *team* was also extremely supportive when she shared her diagnosis. They told her, "*We're in it with you.*" The *community* that she built through her book club on social media saw her through her illness and kept her going. She also found humanity and kindness in unexpected places like a hairstylist in New York who saw helping her get well as the fulfilment of her craft and a grocery clerk who offered to make her soup. She realised that the most natural state for human beings is giving and loving.

Tahira Kashyap had a strong support system throughout. She described that she attended chemotherapy with her family which felt like a "*picnic.*" She has pointed that how some women are tragically abandoned in the Indian context and that family can be a "*greatest strength,*" providing "*so much of love and care*". Her friends also provided her support with a best friend accompanying her to the chemotherapy.

Hina Khan also had good social support with her family, partner, peer and friend and medical professionals. Her family, especially her mother, brother, and the memory of her late father, provided immense support. Remembering her father's compassionate and kind nature who always urged her to be kind to others, including fans, influenced her personality. Her mother instilled strength and resilience in her. She is exceptionally vocal about the support which is provided by her partner Rocky. She describes him as the one who applies balm to her scars and looks at them more closely than she can. He experiences the pain and difficulty of her journey with her, sometimes going to the bathroom to cry, but always returning to show her more love than before. She states that he does not feel he is doing anything extraordinary, viewing his actions as what any partner should do.

Her friends like Sanjay Dutt, who was a cancer survivor himself, reached out to Hina after she disclosed about her battle telling her that she never had cancer and would not have it, offering immense positivity. Tahira Kashyap and Mahima Chaudhry understood her pain deeply as they have also gone through similar experiences and supported her with positivity, grace and honesty. Samantha, another strong woman dealing with health issues, is someone Hina looks up to for strength. Her friend Shaheer Sheikh motivated her during her hair loss journey by sharing a picture of himself with a shaved head, showing her how similar they looked and that there was nothing to worry about. Friends like Nayan from Galatta India also prayed for her, which she found special.

Relationships with Medical Professionals

Sonali Bendre actively sought professional help when she realised that her illness was taking a toll on her mental health. She explicitly stated, "*I took help*". She went to an *onco-psychiatrist* and attended sessions through which she understood that she could not deal with "*all of this by myself*". She stresses that there is "*no shame in asking for help*" and that identifying this need and accepting it is a "*very big thing*". For some, she notes that even knowing the path is not enough, they might need someone to hold their hand due to being "*mentally lazy, reluctant or whatever*". Therapy was described as the "*best thing*" she did and she would not have been able to deal with it without it.

Tahira has highlighted the importance of your relationship with the *medical team*, particularly the oncologist. She speaks highly of her oncologist Dr. Mandar Nadkarni. Doctors like Dr. Rajappa and Dr. Nag emphasise the importance of patients having "*faith in your oncologist*" and the science. Dr. Nag advised her to use Vedanta philosophy to help patients cope. Dr. Rajappa highlights how the family accompanying the patient can make the doctor's job "*easier*" by providing support.

Hina's open communication with her *gynaecologist* taught her the crucial practice of self-examination decades ago, which eventually led to the detection of her cancer. She practised it religiously every 15-20 days. This practice, not symptoms or pain, is what led her to discover the lump and get diagnosed. She interacts with doctors for her regular tests and treatment. She mentions being counselled by *healers and counsellors* connected through BK Shivani Ji.

Navigation of fear and stigma

One of Sonali's strong psychological stances was her explicit rejection of *pity and sympathy*. She found these emotions negative, wasteful and non-constructive. She made a conscious effort to tell people offering her sympathy to leave her space during treatment. She also addressed the societal *taboo and stigma* surrounding cancer. She was shocked to learn how rampant cancer was after sharing her story and receiving messages from people across all strata of society, ages and locations. She believed that when people hide their illness, they are losing out on the love and support they could receive. Her decision to share publicly was also driven by a desire to control the narrative and avoid gossip or speculation after she suddenly had to leave a talent show. Facing the loss of her hair and changes to her body was difficult, especially in a profession that focused on looks. She did not pretend it was easy but chose *acceptance* over hiding.

Tahira and her doctors highlighted the *stigma and taboo* surrounding breast cancer in Indian society. The conservative mindset and hesitation even among educated families can lead to delayed treatment and higher mortality rates. She found out that many people she knew had cancer. But it was not openly discussed, likening it to "*getting cancelled out of the closet*." Her own family initially did not want her to talk about it publicly. Her decision to be "*very honest about it*" and "*open myself up to the world*," including posting about it the day she was discharged, was a conscious effort to fight this stigma and encourage others. She stresses the importance of saying the words "*breast*" and "*breast cancer*" and treating it like any other curable disease to "*downplay it and make it easy for the patient and the caregiver*".

Hina has also talked about her diagnosis in spite of the stigma. However, she has mentioned that she has only shared a fraction of what she had gone through. The reason is not that the

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stigma surrounding it is stopping her, but the pain and difficulty that comes with chemotherapy makes her feel that she would never be able to discuss it in detail. The diagnosis and treatment involve significant pain and physical changes. She mentions having scars and being treated surgically. Hair loss is a common and feared side effect of chemotherapy and she speaks about the difficulty of wearing a wig and applying false eyelashes without natural lashes for support. Physical side effects like coldness requiring multiple layers of clothing and migraines also add to the burden. The emotional toll is real. While she strives to maintain a strong front, she admits that there are hard days as well. It was particularly hard for her during her first public address about her journey, as it felt like revisiting the experience. She acknowledges that she feels pain and that her test results fluctuate, which is also difficult to handle.

Use of alternative practice

Beyond professional therapy and mindset shifts, Sonali adopted specific practices that she credits with aiding her recovery. *Meditation* was important and she genuinely believes it helped heal her body. She also focused on her *gut health*, sleep protocol and read extensively about healing. A specific, almost counter-intuitive practice that she developed was to *force herself to smile* when she woke up, even when she did not feel like it. She found that moving the facial muscles eventually led to genuine smiles. She continues this practice today. These deliberate efforts towards healing seemed to have a tangible impact. Doctors were amazed by her recovery speed and the way her internal organs and veins healed, asking her what she was doing differently. She attributes this unprecedented recovery partly to these practices. She also found that being a *reader* helped her navigate the difficult situations. This is because, in some way, she had read about similar challenges before, which provided her with knowledge and perspective. The power of books was even evident in her son's understanding of her illness which was based on a book they had read together.

Tahira explicitly stated that her *faith played a "very key role"* in her battle with breast cancer. She attributed her perspective and ability to not question "*why me*" to her *practice of Nichiren Buddhism*. In her practice, obstacles and impediments are seen as opportunities to "*defeat it,*" "*come out of it,*" and "*come out victorious*". This process is related to overcoming one's "*fundamental darkness,*" such as depression, anxiety, stress, anger or envy. This aligns with the concept of "*human revolution*". She is a spiritual person and believes that if something "*this big*" happens, there must be "*some learning out of it*". Her perspective was always towards finding learning. She also believes in the goodness of "*something which is beyond us*". Tahira feels that spirituality helped her heal. Dr. Shona Nag, too, speaks about the importance of spirituality, higher power and positive affirmations in providing hope, strength, and courage to patients.

Hina Khan has also maintained a positive outlook by. She tells herself "*You are healing*" and does affirmations every day. She believes this positivity somehow reaches her good cells and helps them do a better job. Hina has strong faith. She talks about her 200% faith in God and believed that whatever has happened is okay. She mentioned going for Umrah, stating it was necessary for her "*emotional release*" and that her "*heart said*" she should go despite potential risks. She relies on prayers, mentioning that the prayers of many people help immensely. Hina mentioned that BK Shivani Ji from Brahmakumari reached out to her. She met her and spent hours talking, and BK Shivani Ji's "*magical words*" and positivity stayed with her. She referred to one healer as "*Sadhana Ji*" who is "*fabulous*." She did things that

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made her feel good, such as traveling and doing small shoots when her body and doctors allowed. She also found happiness in getting dressed up for interviews.

Impact on Work and Public Image

To Sonali, her illness brought an immense clarity. It made her realise that she could not think of any other profession she'd rather be in. She accepted that she had, perhaps accidentally, fallen in love with acting. This realisation was a "*wakeup call*" that she had given up what she truly loved for years. This newfound clarity had defined her current approach to work. She now wants to *enjoy the journey and the process* of acting. She is now open to doing *fiction and acting in front of the camera*, wanting to enjoy this journey. Her illness also influenced the types of roles she sought. She made a *conscious choice to select scripts where she could play her age*. She wanted to find roles that allowed her to *go beyond just looks*, while still being happy to be glamorous. She believes good roles are not only for those not looking glamorous. The quality and relevance of what a character says is more important to her than the length of the role. Her decision to do her new show, *The Broken News*, was based on the parameters including playing her age, going beyond looks, being glamorous yet having brains and portraying a character (Amina Qureshi) who was relevant, aged, career-oriented and had a "grey area" in her personal life. She took this role even though it was not headlining. She is excited to work with *new writers, directors, and technicians*, finding their rhythm and approach to dialogue delivery fun and real. Her return to work was also facilitated by her presence on *social media*, where people saw her recovery and appearance and called her to offer work.

Tahira Kashyap's breast cancer diagnosis significantly impacted both her work and public image, leading to both challenges and new opportunities. The diagnosis occurred as Tahira was entering an exciting phase of her career, having written her first film that she intended to direct. She structured her chemotherapy schedule around her work. The cancer journey also led to a profound shift in her work focus, giving her a "*bigger purpose in life*". This purpose manifested in the form of her NGO, Yes to Life. This new direction involved leaving her previous career. While acknowledging that it was not an easy decision to leave a working life with a designation and earning, she finds "*immense*" satisfaction and gratification in this new work. Despite this new focus, Tahira also continued with her creative pursuits. She has written films and intends to direct them, seeing this as a redirection of her intent. She also launched a podcast titled "My Ex-Breast" which details various aspects of her experience. Tahira openly discussed her hair falling in "*chunks*," how it was emotionally difficult for a few days. But she took the period of baldness "*very positively*" and "*really enjoyed*" it. She mostly wore a scarf or went without a wig, finding wigs uncomfortable. She attended a close friend's wedding bald, wearing traditional clothes with sport shoes and stating that it's about "*how you feel*" and how your environment supports you. An emotional moment related to hair loss was when she wore a wig to pick up her son from school to protect him from unwanted attention, but was not recognised by the guard who told her she did not look like the boy's mother. Tahira also embraced her mastectomy scars by writing a poem about them symbolising the fight, resilience and "*invincible power*" and promoting acceptance of the "*imperfect you*". She encourages others to look at scars positively.

The diagnosis and treatment had a significant impact on Hina's professional life. She had to give up several projects because the production could not wait for her long treatment and recovery process which led to her replacement. This was initially sad but she accepted it as health was the priority. Despite this, she chose to remain visible during her treatment,

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participating in campaigns and events when her body allowed. Her motivation was not to avoid being forgotten in the industry's harsh reality, but to *normalize the experience* of dealing with cancer while continuing to live and work. She wanted to show that it was possible to continue doing things while undergoing treatment. Now, having crossed the difficult phase of treatment, she is actively making herself available for work again.

Development of new perspectives that inspire others.

The experience of diagnosis altered Sonali's perspective. She moved from identifying as a "Survivor" to a "Thrivers". She viewed the illness as a "*second chance*" at life and feels a responsibility to make the most of it. Key lessons learned include the importance of *living in the moment*. She no longer feels the need to constantly plan ahead but appreciates the present. She also realised the commonality of cancer, which was hidden from her previously. This highlighted the importance of speaking out to create awareness. She learned the importance for *early detection* and regular health checkups which she had procrastinated before. The genetic nature of her cancer also underscored the importance of *genetic testing* not just for herself but also for her family, to enable early detection and less harsh treatments for future generations. The financial burden of treatment also taught her the vital importance of *insurance*. Her experience also revealed the *beauty of humanity* and the inherent capacity for love and giving. This was evident in the kindness received by strangers and medical professionals.

Tahira believes that perhaps there was a reason why cancer happened to her, which was so she could "*spread knowledge about it*". Her experience led her to find a "*bigger purpose*" in life. This purpose manifested in her starting an NGO called 'Yes to Life,' which works towards breast cancer awareness and patient support (financial, rehabilitation, emotional). She finds "*immense satisfaction and gratification*" from this work. Starting the NGO involved a transition from being a working woman with a designation and earning, which was not easy. But being clear about her goal and happiness supported her mental well-being. She decided to "*exploit every medium available*" to her to spread the message of early breast cancer detection and awareness, leading to her podcast 'My Ex-Breast'. Sharing her story became a conscious decision to help ensure "nobody else should suffer".

A major driving force for Hina Khan in sharing her story, even partially, is the desire to *inspire others*. She saw her problem like God chose her to go through this so she could use her platform to help and inspire as many people as possible. While she admits she has not shared the full, difficult reality yet, she wants to share her journey at the right time to help people, encourage them to take precautions, get screened and understand how she found strength and fought. She wants to normalise conversations about cancer and its treatment so people are less fearful. Seeing how her initial social media posts, like the one about cutting her hair, inspired others and helped them feel less alone in time of difficulty reinforced her positive motive to share more in the future. She believes that love has the power to heal and wants to contribute to spreading awareness and positivity.

DISCUSSION

The narratives of the celebrities underscores that the breast cancer survival journey is not only a biomedical trajectory but it is socially embedded and deeply psychological as well. Despite their trauma and stigma surrounding the journey, these survivors spoke openly regarding the steps of their diagnosis and recovery during the required intervals which highlights where each narrative becomes a testimony that reflects a distinct emotional journey which is shared by personal resilience and support.

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Sonali Bendre's narrative regarding cancer diagnosis and treatment illustrated an interplay between fear and fortitude. Her approach towards acceptance of the diagnosis said a lot about her resilience. She not only followed a scientific approach to her treatment, but also embraced alternative practices like meditation. She has spoken highly of her strength and resilience that made her fight against it.

Tahira Kashyap has also remained very brave throughout her journey. Just like Sonali, she also adopted alternative practices like practicing *Nichiren Buddhism*. The role of faith has played an important role in her journey. She also spoke highly of her relationship with the medical team, especially the Oncologist. She never gave faith upon her work and took her bald phase very confidently. Her use of humour and authenticity in confronting her illness showed how her creative expression (through writing and filmmaking) became both a coping mechanism and a medium for awareness. All this highlights her positive approach towards her diagnosis. Even after fighting once, she is ready to fight again in 2025 when her cancer resurfaces after 7 years. It is evident from her words "*Round 2 for me... I still got this.*"

Hina Khan's journey is as inspiring as the others. She was and is still fighting her illness. Her strong support system and an immense faith in God will make her pass her hard time. She had also been very optimistic throughout and never lost the strength of working. She is actively working in the middle of her battle against her illness. She has maintained a positive outlook to life where she is travelling across the world when her doctors and body allows. Her journey also made her realise how commonly faced the condition of breast cancer is. But due to the stigma surrounding it, it is not commonly talked about. Hence, she wants to share as much as she can. The major lesson learned from her story is to regularly self-examine one's body.

Summary

Exploring the journeys of Sonali Bendre, Tahira Kashyap and Hina Khan highlights how breast cancer, despite the stigma it carries in India, can be confronted with resilience, authenticity and hope. Each actress, while navigating unique emotional landscapes, demonstrated remarkable strength by sharing their struggles publicly. Sonali balanced fear with acceptance, embracing both medical and alternative practices alongside the unwavering support of loved ones. Tahira infused her fight with humour, faith and creative expression, showing how authenticity and positivity can transform adversity into awareness. Hina continues to inspire with her optimism, faith and determination to keep working and living fully while in treatment. Together, their narratives underscore the power of resilience, support systems, faith and openness in not only to cope with illness, but also in breaking the silence around breast cancer.

CONCLUSION

The narrative of Tahira Kashyap, Sonali Bendre and Hina Khan collectively underscores how public figures are increasingly using personal storytelling as a means of psychological resilience, advocacy and identity negotiation. Their experiences reveal that behind the perfectly crafted appearances lies a complex interplay of grief, strength and transformation. This analysis portrays that narratives are powerful tools for not only healing but also for reshaping societal attitudes toward mental health, illness and emotional vulnerability. Their stories encourage others to speak up, seek help and embrace authenticity even in the face of fear, stigma and public gaze.

Limitations

The study was limited to three women who were identified and studied as they are in the spotlight and have openly talked about their diagnosis, treatment and recovery through publicly available mediums. Audio-visual documents were made use of for collecting data. Hence, it may not completely explore the phenomenology of the recovery process and journey and life of the samples.

Suggestions for further research

A more diverse section of a group of women could be studied including women from different financial backgrounds and cultures. An in-person, open-ended interview could be made use of for a more comprehensive data collection. The results or interpretation can be checked by the participants themselves to avoid any biasness. Further research can examine how public disclosures impact the emotional well-being of followers and contribute to shifting norms in emotional expression within Indian society.

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