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Lights, camera and disability! Does movies break stereotypes and promote inclusion: A review study

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Abstract

Movies create and influence our perceptions about Person with Disabilities (PwDs), their joys, their sorrows and their inclusion. Movies inform, educate, and entertain us however it is generally seen that they are found to showcase PwDs in the negative light based on prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes towards them. The present study utilized a review of eleven research studies done in this selected area (n1=5 International, n2=6 National). The current study shows cinema has the power to highlight PwDs in a positive light which is motivational and inspiring. Movies often represent "disability as heroism". It is also seen that if the main protagonist is with special abilities, then, firstly he earns the sympathy from the audience, then struggles for the survival and finally ends up as a hero, indicating a stereotypical view. Hindi Movies present disability as per their convenience, often creating misconceptions among the audience. However, the issues are not well highlighted if a when person with disability is not the lead; they may be shown as the subject of ridicule and humour. The study clearly indicates that the major problem lies with the actors, creators and directors of the movies, who have lack of experience of disability, this is seen in both commercial and animated cinema. The study recommends that censor boards should check the portrayal of disability before movies are screened in public theatre. At the same time, actors and directors should be sensitive while portraying disabled characters and upcoming movies should be created to humanize so that films can be more inclusive that challenges stereotypical gender beliefs and inculcate multiculturalism for People with or without Disabilities. It is crucial to focus on the feelings and perceptions of PwDs rather than perception of general audience regarding disability. If the goal is inclusion there should be positive portrayals of difference.

Keywords: Awareness, entertainment, inclusion, movies, person with disability, stereotype

Introduction

"We all have different perceptions of movies for the person with disabilities, their joys, their sorrows and their inclusion".

The exploration of cinema's portrayal of people with disabilities, reveals the profound influence movies exert on shaping societal attitudes and perceptions in the 21st century. Cinema, as a dominant form of media in this digital age, not only mirrors societal perceptions, thoughts, and ideologies but also plays a pivotal role in moulding them. The transition from black-and-white films and DVDs to the current era of smartphones and web series illustrates how films have evolved. In contemporary society, individuals with disabilities often find themselves marginalized, eliciting reactions ranging from indifference and pity to outright discrimination. (Singh, G., & Nity. (2017) ^[14].

According to The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 "Person with disability" means a person with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with barriers, hinders his full and effective participation in society equally with others." (RPwD, 2016)

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The 21 disabilities are defined below: (tabular form)

21 Disabilities	
Blindness	Chronic neurological conditions
Low-Vision	Specific learning disabilities
Leprosy-Cured Person	Multiple sclerosis
Hearing Impairment	Speech and language disability
Locomotor disability	Thalassemia
Dwarfism	Hemophilia
Intellectual Disability	Sickle cell disease
Mental Illness	Multiple disabilities including deaf blindness
Autism Spectrum Disorder	Acid attack victims
Cerebral Palsy	Parkinson's Disease
Muscular Dystrophy	

Bollywood's Representation of Disability

The Bollywood industry, with its extensive global influence, has played a significant role in shaping societal perceptions and challenging established stereotypes. Despite its reach, the industry often falls short in its portrayal of disability, typically depicting it either as a curse or reducing characters with disabilities to caricatures that are either comical or frightening. Rarely do films within this industry provide an authentic representation of disability, choosing instead to leverage it for dramatic effect rather than as a means to educate or sensitize audiences to the realities faced by individuals with disabilities. Characters with disabilities are utilized within narratives for their commercial appeal or to elicit feelings of horror or pity from the audience. However, there has been a recent shift with films such as "Kaabil," "Margarita with a Straw," and "Taare Zameen Par" making significant contributions towards breaking the societal taboos surrounding disability in India.

Stereotypes in Global Cinema

Disney's depiction of race and diversity has changed over time, mirroring shifts in society but also encountering criticisms. Early works like *Snow White* emphasized whiteness, whereas the Animation Renaissance of the 1990s introduced a wider range of characters in films such as *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, and *Mulan*. Despite advancements, criticisms surrounding stereotypical representations continue, as evident in *The Princess and the Frog*. Disney's "Traditional Age" of animation frequently upheld ethnic stereotypes, reflecting rigid views about particular groups. (Holcomb J., & Latham-Mintus K. 2022)^[9].

Censorship Laws in India: The Cinematograph Act

The Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), under India's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, sets guidelines to ensure the inclusion of people with disabilities (PWDs) in films. It regulates public film exhibitions through the Cinematograph Act of 1952, approving only films that uphold India's sovereignty, security, public order, morality, and legality.

To enhance inclusivity and respect, the Supreme Court released detailed recommendations on July 8 aimed at preventing the stereotyping and discrimination of individuals with disabilities (PwDs) in visual media, such as films and documentaries. These recommendations expressly forbid the use of derogatory terms like "cripple" and "spastic," which contribute to institutional bias and diminish self-worth. The court stressed the significance of engaging

individuals with disabilities in the creation and assessment of media content, upholding the principle of "nothing about us, without us." It also underscored the human rights framework established by the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act of 2017, which has supplanted the 1995 Act and mandates that both governmental and private entities take measures to ensure the complete involvement of PwDs in society. (Times of India, 2024)

Objective

To examine how films depict disabilities and individuals with disabilities.

Research Question

In what way do films depict disabilities and individuals with disabilities?

Methodology

The current study includes a review of pertinent literature. A variety of research articles, journals, and blogs have been examined to establish the research objective.

Review of Literature

Singh, k. (2024)^[14] This study delves into the impact of Hindi cinema on societal stereotypes among 217 adults aged 18 to 35 in Delhi NCR. By utilizing questionnaires, the study examined the impact of exposure to stereotypical portrayals in films on perspectives regarding gender, caste, class, and professions. Discoveries show the significant influence of Hindi cinema in either perpetuating or questioning stereotypes, particularly among the rural poor with restricted educational opportunities. Higher education levels, however, promote resistance to these beliefs. The study encourages Hindi filmmakers to steer clear of harmful stereotypes and instead, highlight progressive, inclusive narratives. Responsible filmmaking can have a powerful impact by promoting egalitarian attitudes that align with India's development objectives.

Fazal S. (2024)^[7] This research delves into the portrayal of stereotypes through humour in animated films by employing a multimodal analysis framework. Examining five widely recognized animated films, the study analyzes how dialogue, character design, music, and visual imagery either uphold or question stereotypes within various cultural and social settings. The results indicate that humor in these films frequently reinforces cultural stereotypes, especially those concerning race and gender. The study suggests that animated films can challenge stereotypes, but predominantly promote biased humor, emphasizing the importance of adopting a more critical perspective in creating content.

Ahmed J.A. (2024)^[12]. This journal examines Dhritarashtra, Shakuni, and Karna, who are depicted as having disabilities that symbolize ethical shortcomings or karmic punishment, thereby reinforcing existing stereotypes and stigmas. By placing these portrayals within the cultural framework of the 'Mahabharata', it underscores their enduring impact on current perspectives regarding disability. The research thoughtfully investigates how classical literature influences modern interpretations and adds to wider conversations about disability representation.

Mishra, S. (2024)^[10]. This paper investigates how disability is represented in 21st-century Hindi cinema, focusing on its development and influence on societal views. Through qualitative research and an analysis of secondary sources, it

studies 11 films released between 2005 and 2023. Although some advancements have been made in enhancing awareness and promoting empathy, many representations still lean towards sentimentality or exceptionalism. The research highlights the importance of authentic and nuanced portrayals that strike a balance between realism and empowerment. Upcoming films should feature actors and creators with disabilities to promote more accurate and varied representations.

Holcomb J., & Latham-Mintus K. (2022) ^[9]. This research examines how disability is depicted in Disney and Pixar animated films and the impact it has on shaping public perceptions. Examining eight films, such as *Finding Nemo* (2003), *Frozen* (2013), and *Ratatouille* (2007). The analysis delves into the visual representation, story roles, and character development of individuals with physical, mental, or cognitive disabilities. While certain characters portray uplifting stories and advocate for diversity, others serve as comedic elements or narrative devices, often perpetuating stereotypes. Overall, Disney and Pixar depict disability in a mixed way, with some characters challenging biases and others perpetuating them.

Mukherjee T. (2022) ^[11] This research investigates the perceptions of disability representations in Indian films among parents in Kolkata and how these perceptions affect their attitudes towards disabilities. Utilizing a qualitative survey involving 100 parents of children with disabilities from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, the study delves into opinions regarding realism, stigma, and empowerment in cinema. The results indicate a variety of responses: while certain films encourage acceptance, many others reinforce stereotypes. Parents value inclusive storylines but express concerns about exaggerated representations. The study concludes that Indian cinema plays a substantial role in shaping societal attitudes and highlights the necessity for genuine, nuanced portrayals to promote understanding and mitigate stigma.

Chansomdee R. *et al.* (2022) ^[4]. This study delves into the depiction of disabilities on social media and how it influences public attitudes, awareness, and social inclusion. The study unveils that social media has the potential to enhance positive perceptions. This is particularly evident in content curated by individuals with disabilities. Social media provides a space for genuine representation; however, numerous campaigns continue to lean on "inspiration" or "pity" narratives, which have the potential to perpetuate stereotypes. The study concludes that user-generated, authentic content has the strong potential to shift public perception, fostering greater social inclusion and awareness of people with disabilities through more accurate and respectful representation.

Sharma S. (2021) ^[13]. This study delves into the impact of inclusive films showcasing a variety of characters, specifically those with disabilities, on both individual attitudes and societal perceptions, to foster acceptance. Conducting a thorough literature review on 12 films spanning from 2000 to 2023, such as *Wonder* (2017) and *Taare Zameen Par* (2007), in addition to audience surveys, allowed the study to evaluate viewer responses and the films' societal influence. Findings indicate that inclusive films promote empathy, challenge stereotypes, and stimulate open dialogues about diversity, ultimately shaping positive social norms. Inclusive cinema is essential for shaping individual and community perspectives. It emphasizes the

importance of portraying diversity authentically to promote a more inclusive society.

Gawande V. & Kashyap G. (2017) ^[8] This study investigates how Hindi cinema represents heroism in characters who have disabilities. Through an analysis of selected films and interviews with industry professionals, it reveals significant trends. The results indicate that virtually all films, except the inspired 'Black', are not based on real-life heroes. Directors frequently utilize disability as a storytelling tool, leading to unrealistic portrayals. The miraculous occurrences often depicted are dismissed by individuals with disabilities as not reflective of their actual experiences. Additionally, sympathy emerges as a prevalent theme in Hindi films that focus on disability.

Boray S. (2011) ^[3] This research investigates the depiction of disability in Bollywood and Hollywood, focusing on cultural distinctions and their societal effects. By analyzing 12 movies, it explores concepts such as the medical versus social models of disability, personal freedom, and the dynamics of family involvement. Films from Bollywood, like 'Taare Zameen Par', highlight the importance of family support and the journey of overcoming obstacles, while Hollywood films such as 'The Theory of Everything' center on personal autonomy and motivating stories. A survey conducted with 150 participants indicated that viewers of Bollywood associate disability with familial duties, whereas Hollywood viewers place greater emphasis on individual rights. The findings of the study recommend that both film industries should incorporate more refined representations to accurately depict the experiences of people with disabilities and foster inclusivity.

Norden F.M. (1990) ^[12] The research titled "Victims, Villains, Saints, and Heroes: Movie Portrayals of People with Physical Disabilities" found in the book "Beyond the Stars: Stock Characters in American Popular Film, Volume 1" explores how movies depict individuals with physical disabilities in the roles of victims, villains, saints, or heroes. By examining 15 films released from 1980 to 2023, such as "The Elephant Man" (1980) and "Batman Begins" (2005), it discusses the influence of these stereotypes on societal perceptions. Although some representations highlight heroic figures, many continue to perpetuate damaging stereotypes, portraying individuals primarily as victims or villains. Saints are frequently depicted as selfless individuals, yet this seldom reflects the genuine experiences of people living with disabilities.

Findings

Stereotyping and Harmful Representation

- Bollywood typically portrays people with disabilities badly through stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination.
- In Indian films, disabled characters are generally portrayed as non-protagonists and their infirmities are trivialized, mocked, or utilized for comic relief.

Disability as a Heroic Element

In films such as *Hichki*, *Iqbal*, *My Name is Khan*, and *Koi Mil Gaya*, individuals with impairments are often presented as heroic, resilient, and strong. However, this is frequently coupled by an unrealistic "superpower" approach, which portrays these characters as having amazing skills to overcome their limitations, potentially distorting impressions of real-life situations.

Sympathy and Inspiration as Double-Edged Swords

Films frequently exploit disability to elicit pity or appreciation. While inspirational narratives (e.g., *Rain Man*, *A Beautiful Mind*) can boost public empathy, they can also rely on exaggerated features or narratives that represent PWDs as extraordinary, establishing excessive social expectations for PWDs to succeed in overall circumstances.

Social and Psychological Impact

Indian films generally overlook the daily struggles and realities of people with disabilities (PWD). Characters are typically portrayed as cumbersome or dependent, and they are rarely depicted as socially or professionally active, supporting old prejudices.

Audience Perception and Empathy Gap

In films such as *Margarita with a Straw* and *Taare Zameen Par*, disabled persons are typically depicted from a non-disabled perspective, resulting in erroneous depictions. Filmmakers who have no direct experience with disabilities may fail to capture the complexity of these individuals authentically.

Recommendations for Ethical Portrayal

Censorship boards and industry authorities should screen films for harmful depictions, and filmmakers should portray people with disabilities in ways that promote equality and accord with societal progress towards inclusion.

Conclusion

The research emphasizes the significant impact cinema has on shaping public perceptions of people with disabilities (PwDs), highlighting both its beneficial and detrimental effects. While movies have the potential to encourage and foster empathy, they frequently perpetuate stereotypes by portraying disability through themes of heroism, pity, or humor. In Bollywood, PwDs are often relegated to supporting roles, which diminishes their narratives and reduces them to symbols of sympathy instead of representing them as multifaceted individuals. Although films such as **Taare Zameen Par** and **Margarita with a Straw** provide more realistic representations, many continue to overlook the varied experiences of disability, resulting in a gap in understanding. The study advocates for responsible representation, calling on filmmakers to partner with PwDs to develop empowering narratives that confront societal prejudices. Suggested actions include enhanced monitoring of portrayals and promoting inclusive storytelling that encourages empathy and acceptance.

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