

Acceptance of Homosexual Movies: Analysis of Audience Perception

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Abstract

Cinema is one of the most influential artistic tools that reflects society and simultaneously impacts it. Indian cinema, one of the largest cinema industries in the world, has been varied, creative and largely heterosexual. However, the past decade has witnessed the legalisation of homosexuality in India and increased representation of homosexual characters in the cinema, creating a positive social change and greatly contrasting the long existing social prejudices towards homosexuality.

This research focuses on how homosexual movies have been received by audience of various age groups. The study was conducted on a sample of 100 respondents belonging to various age groups, through an online survey. A positive variation in the reception of homosexual movies was noted among the respondents. The findings showed that representation in cinema and legalisation of homosexuality was one of the most credited factors for variation in the audience reception of homosexual movies.

Keywords: *Cinema, Heterosexual, Homosexual, Audience, Perception*

Introduction

Nowadays films occupy a significant portion of the media products consumed by people. In India, cinema is considered as a means of individual and social transformation, which contributes to the formation of the audience's outlook, including their attitudes towards topical social issues like homosexuality and its acceptance. Indian cinema has largely been heterosexual till date with

comparatively lesser number of gay-centered storylines. This disparity in representation has led to a significant impact in the social acceptance of homosexuality. However, an increase in the number of homosexual movies produced in Bollywood in recent years is quite obvious.

Homosexuality is a sexual orientation enduring to romantic, sexual or emotional attraction towards someone from the same sex. It is referred to as a sense of identity that is centered on such attractions or sexual behaviour. People who have romantic or sexual feelings for someone of the same sex identify themselves as homosexuals. Movies with same-sex relationship plot lines are termed as homosexual movies. Homosexual movies need not strictly revolve around a love affair between characters of the same sex but need to have a protagonist who identifies him/herself as a homosexual. Till today, cinema has been largely heterosexual with a very small number of homosexual story lines. With a greater acceptance given to heterosexual story lines, homosexual movies are still marginalised; trying to make a significant space for themselves in India.

Gopinath (2008) in “Queering Bollywood - Alternative sexualities in popular Indian cinema”, demonstrates the use of queer themes in four identifiable Hindi film sub-genres. These themes in their native Indian context are non-transgressive but acquire subversive value and function as queer points of identification when viewed without a non-nationalist bias. Watching particular films with this “queer diasporic viewing practice,” (Gopinath, 2008, para 1) sex/gender play which is normative (yet still coded) within the land of the film production are often reclaimed as queer through the differently subjective lens of transnational spectatorship, a lens faraway from patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia. This particularly becomes apparent in the Bollywood dance sequences —the frequent site of Hindi sex/gender play— where coded queer desires are much easier to de-code (or re-code) when within the diaspora.

The advent of homosexual movies in Bollywood can be traced back to 90's. If, on one hand, India has seen cinematic brilliance with films like *Fire* (1996) to *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), it has also seen shameless generalisation and biases when depicting a queer character. Nevertheless, cinema and its audience has come a long way where there are public discussions on queer acceptance. Earlier, homosexual characters were depicted as effeminate characters that

added no meaning to the story and were kept there to add insensitive humour to the plot. However, now there has been a great change in how homosexual characters are viewed by the audience. Their importance to the story is now considered and appreciated.

The movie that sparked homosexual conversation in Bollywood was the Deepa Mehta film *Fire* (Sabharwal, S.K. & Sen, R., 2012, pp.8-9). The movie released in 1996 but it was undoubtedly way ahead of its time. Centered on a lesbian relationship between two women who were unhappy in their arranged marriages, the movie tried to break through all shackles of the society. If movies, that discussed homosexuality explicitly in the mainstream, emerged in the 1990s, the 2000s saw the release of the movie *My Brother Nikhil* (Sabharwal, S.K., & Sen, R., 2012, pp. 8-9). It released at a time when homosexuality and AIDS were considered taboos, the film handled these two delicate topics with care and created sheer poetry on the silver screen. Released in 2010, *Memories in March*, created magic on screen as this movie carefully told the story of a mother who comes to collect her son's body and finds out that he was gay.

Margarita with a Straw (2014) was a movie that talked about two topics that are not popular in Bollywood, disability and bisexuality. This raw and brilliantly executed movie is about the protagonist realizing that she is bisexual and then eventually finding love. *Aligarh* (2016) explored many dimensions and asked questions like what it is to be a homosexual in India and the ill-treatment meted out to the LGBTQ community in the name of morality and sanctity of the society. *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019) released at a time when homosexuality was newly legalised in India. The story line is centered around a lesbian relationship, how the protagonist finds the courage to accept herself and step out of the closet.

Homosexuality was legalised in India in 2018, making it too early for the Indian society to completely accept homosexuality as something normal. It has been a taboo concept in India as it is considered to be against the traditional norms by most sections of the society. The existing ideologies have made the acceptance of homosexuality difficult, but this is not the only factor responsible. Cinema reflects the society but it has a great ability to impact social attitudes and for years due to its misrepresentation of gender minorities it has failed to aid the normalisation of homosexuality.

Cinema reflects the society it portrays and in turn impacts social behaviour. It undeniably is a major influential factor in the society and has a great impact on social behaviour. There are also numerous ways in which movies affect society and the modern world we live in: some of them negative, some of them positive.

Bhugra, Ventriglio, Kalra (2015) discuss social attitudes to homosexuality – both male and female – in the context of portrayal in Hindi cinema. These portrayals have been largely negative and have had an impact on the audience to great extents (p.20). Michelle, Mazur, Emmers-Sommer (2003) in their paper, “The effect of movie portrayals on audience attitudes about nontraditional families and sexual orientation”, identified gender differences on homosexual movies. Men were less tolerant of homosexuals and held fewer nontraditional beliefs about the family than women (Michelle, Mazur, Emmers-Sommer, 2003, p.173).

In this paper, the researcher aims to study the variation in audience reception of homosexual Bollywood movies in the past decade, and will focus on various age groups of the society for the analysis. The last decade witnessed the legalisation of homosexuality by the Supreme Court - these changes lead to changes in social attitude. The research aims to also discuss the possible impact of revocation of section 377 and portrayal of homosexual characters by popular actors on audience reception.

Objective of the study

- To study and identify the reasons of change in perception of homosexual Bollywood movies.

Methods

Participants

The researcher has chosen random sampling for the study. The sample for this research were the residents of Delhi who are of age 21 and above. The sample size taken for the research was 100. Delhi has a large population thus, 100 as a minimum sample size was considered appropriate to get meaningful results.

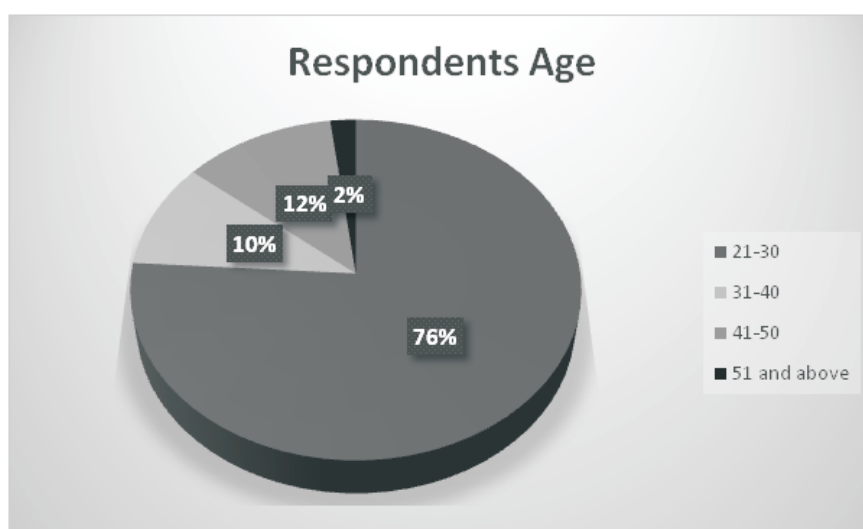
Data Collection: Survey

In this research, the researcher has collected the data through an online survey with the help of Google Forms. The researcher framed questions for the survey

keeping in mind the objectives of the research. A Google Form was generated and was circulated to people on their email ids for responses, who were living in Delhi and were above the age of 21. The survey was filled by 100 people belonging to various age groups, of which 52 were male, 47 were female and one was found in the category of others. However, sexual orientation was identified for almost all the respondents (91.6% heterosexual, 5.3% homosexual and others did not prefer to answer). Simple percentage method is used to describe and analyze the collected data. The survey was conducted in the month of February, 2020.

Data Analysis

Figure 1. Respondents Age

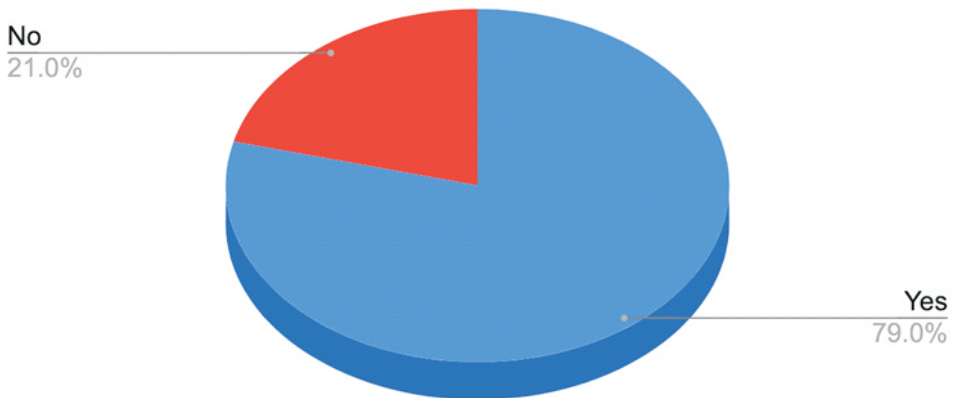


In fig.1 respondents age is measured. Respondents age group categories are categorised as 21-30 years, 31-40 years, 41-50 years, 51 & above. The data reveals that three-fourth (76%) of the respondents are from the age group 21-30 years. Ten percent are from the 31-40 years age group and twelve percent are from the 41-50 years age group. However, only 2 percent of the respondents from the age group 51 years and above participated in the survey.

Q1. Have you ever watched a homosexual movie?

Fig. 2. Have you watched homosexual movies

Have you watched homosexual movies

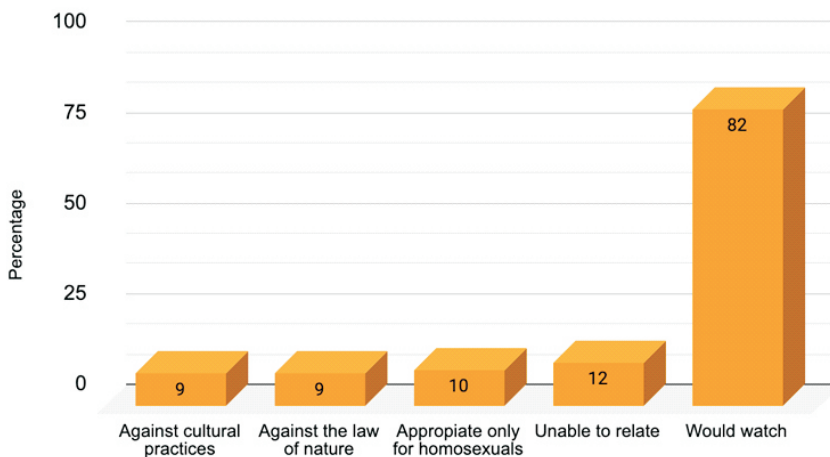


In fig.2. Respondents were asked if they had watched a homosexual movie ever. The graph depicts that a little more than three-fourth (79%) of the respondents have watched homosexual movies. While, twenty one percent of the respondents have never seen a homosexual movie.

Q2. Why would you not watch a homosexual movie?

Figure 3. Reasons for not watching homosexual movies

Reasons for not watching Homosexual movies

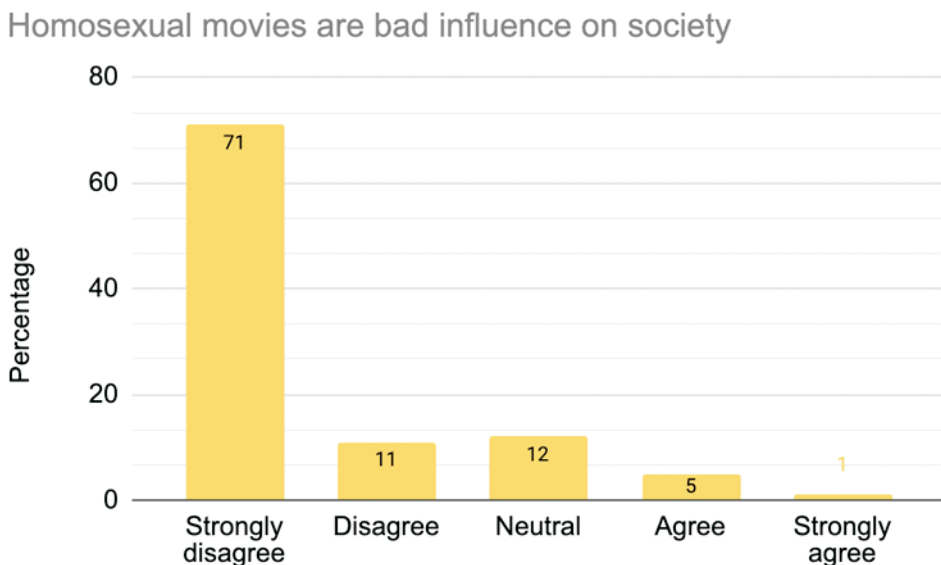


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In fig.3. Respondents' reasons for not watching homosexual movies are measured. The reasons are categorised as against cultural practices, against the law of nature, appropriate only for homosexuals, unable to relate and would watch anyway. Although the category of others was also given, no respondent opted for that. Respondents were allowed to opt for multiple choices of reasons. The data reveals that a little more than three-fourth (82%) of the respondents would watch the homosexual movies anyway. However, few of the respondents identified reasons for not watching the homosexual movies. Almost ten percent of the respondents identified the three main reasons for not watching homosexual movies as being against cultural practices (9%), against the law of the nature (9%) and it is appropriate only for the homosexuals(10%). However, twelve percent are of the opinion that they are unable to relate to the content of homosexual movies.

Q3. Do you think homosexual movies are a bad influence on the society?

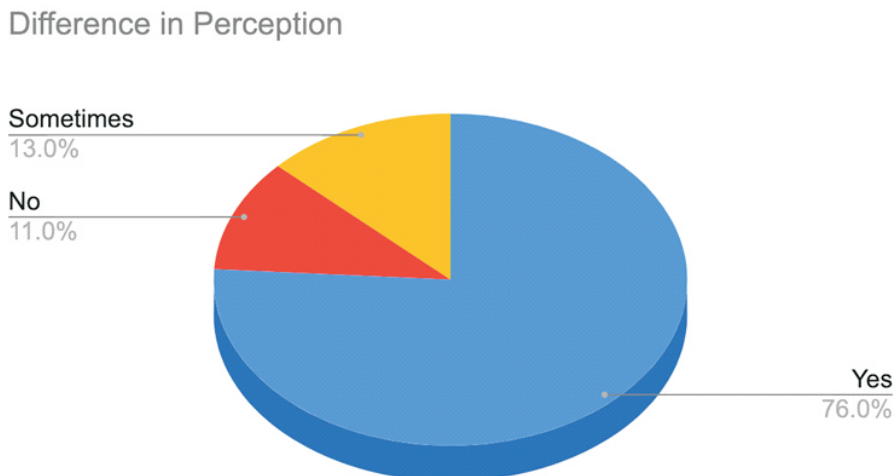
Figure 4. Homosexual movies are a bad influence on the society



In Fig.4. Respondents' opinion on the bad influence of homosexual movies on society is measured. Five-point Likert scale method is used to analyse the ratings if they strongly disagree, disagree, are neutral, agree or strongly agree with the statement. Respondents were asked to rate the statement on the scale of 1 to 5, where 5 represents strongly agree, 4 represents agree, 3 represents neutral, 2 represents disagree and 1 represents strongly disagree. The graph depicts that a little less than three-fourth (71%) of the respondents are of the opinion that they strongly disagree with the statement. However, almost the same percentage of the respondents disagree (11%) and are neutral (12%) about the statement. It is interesting to note that only one percent strongly agree with the statement and five percent agree with it.

Q4. Does your perception of the movie remain same regardless of it being a heterosexual or homosexual movie?

Figure 5. Depicts the difference in perception of homosexual movies

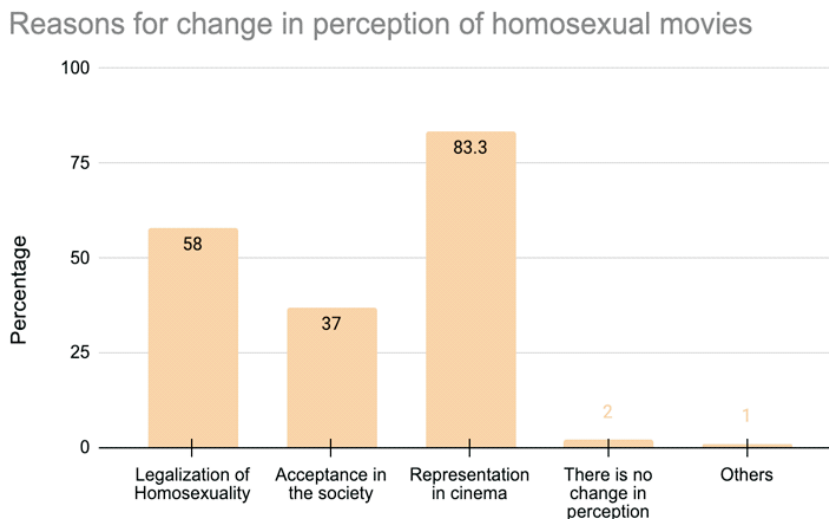


In fig.5. Respondents' differences in perception of heterosexual and homosexual movies is measured. They were asked if their perception remains same regardless of the content of the movie being heterosexual or homosexual. Almost three-fourth (76%) of the respondents said that their perception remains the same regardless of the content of the movie being heterosexual or homosexual. However, eleven percent said that their perception changes with

the content of the movie.

Q5. What are the reasons for change in perception of homosexual movies?

Figure 6. Reasons for change in perception of homosexual movies



In fig.6. Respondents reasons for change in perception of homosexual movies were measured. The reasons are characterised as legalization of homosexual movies, acceptance in the society, representation in cinema, there is no change in perception and the category of others. Respondents were allowed to opt for multiple choices of reasons. The graph depicts that majority i.e. eighty three percent of the respondents identified representation of homosexual content in movies as one of the important reasons for change in perception of homosexual cinema. Although, more than half (58%) of them said legalization of the homosexuality in the country is another important reason. However, acceptance in the society has also increased, said thirty seven percent of the respondents. A very negligible (2%) response, that there is no change in perception, was also identified.

Conclusion

In the course of the study, changes in the viewers' attitude after watching the homosexual films were identified. The results depict that eighty three percent of the respondents identified representation of homosexual content in movies as

one of the important reasons for change in perception of homosexual cinema. Media representation of LGBT community and its issues in cinema, television and even on social media platforms made a glaring difference in the perception and acceptance of homosexual movies in the Indian society, especially in urban areas. Although more than half (58%) of them said legalization of the homosexuality in the country is another important reason. However, acceptance in the society has also increased, according to thirty seven percent of the respondents. Also, it is important to note that legalization and changes in the homosexual laws in the country with the widespread coverage of the non-fiction media led to the acceptance and recognition of the issues related to the queer community. Most of the changes in the viewers' attitude are detected majorly after the scraping of Article 377 of IPC.

The differences in the perception of homosexual movies can probably be related to the impact and effectiveness of films also, which can be further studied in extended research. The basis of further research raises a few areas to clarify the contribution of individual differences and the impact of movies, to analyze the acceptance in the areas other than metropolitan cities and forecasting the positive influence of movies on different groups of people. Also, the increased representation of homosexual content and issues through different platforms of media like cinema, TV and social media is imperative and need to be continued. Media is going to play a positive role in the acceptance and recognition of the queer community.

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