Male Audience Reception of 'Female Objectivity' and 'Female Passivity' Portrayed in the Hindi Film 'Kabir Singh': A Quantitative Study

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Abstract

Popular Culture artifacts are academically important due to their social and cultural significance along with the latent and polysemic meanings they posses. One such product of Indian popular culture is film Kabir Singh. Film Kabir Singh is a remake of the original Telugu film Arjun Reddy. Apart from Hindi and Telugu, the film is remade in Tamil language and the remake rights for the Malayalam, Kannada and Nepali language are already sold. Thus, the content of the film has become a nationwide phenomenon. The film is highly polysemic in nature and depicts number of social concepts like 'toxic masculinity', 'female objectification' and 'female passivity'. Taking cues from Stuart Hall's audience studies work, the paper tries to decode the young male audience's reception of female objectification and female Passivity portrayed in the film. With reference to the 'Nationwide' study of David Morley, the paper tries to quantitatively look at the impact of various socio-demographic factors like age, education and locality on the young men's reception of the film. The collected data for the study comprises of responses of 130 young male participants through an online survey. The respondents were divided into three age categories *viz.* 18–22, 23–26 and 27–35. Apart from age, the respondents are classified based on the urban or rural background as well as their educational qualification. The study intents to understand the impact of these socio-demographic factors on the meaning making process of the audiences.

Introduction

The Hindi film industry is arguably one of the biggest, if not the biggest, film industry in the world. Commonly known as 'Bollywood'. the Hindi filmmakers tend to appeal to a mass audience rather than focusing on any particular audience niche. The industry is regarded as the main source of popular culture in India with a nationwide appeal. As a mainstream industry, Bollywood attracts the filmmakers from comparatively smaller regional industries to try their hand at making a Bollywood film that offers them a bigger canvas. It is evident that a number of regional filmmakers still consider a film in Bollywood as the pinnacle of their filmography. With the postmodernity kicking in, recycling and

reproduction of content have become a frequent practice in recent times. Be it the deconstruction and reproduction of classic songs into remixes or the remake of tried and tested films across a number of different languages, the consumerism in the popular culture is more evident than ever. Remakes of regional language films into mainstream Hindi films have seen an exponential growth in recent times. The Hindi remake not only dissipates the content across a wider audience, but it also provides a sense of legitimacy considering the authoritarian and the tenacious characteristics of the Hindi film industry. One such remake of the Telugu film Arjun Reddy is the 2019 Hindi film Kabir Singh. Helmed by the same director as of the original Telugu counterpart Sandip Reddy Vanga, the film has been a hot site for academic inquiry as well as criticism since its theatrical release. The film became a topic of discussion due to the portrayal of problematic constructs like toxic masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, female objectification, female passivity, substance abuse and medical ethics (Kharat & Gadge, 2020). The film was a commercial success at the box-office and became the third highest grosser of the year 2019. Although the content of the film has been studied by a number of scholars and the directorial perspective being in the mainstream in the form of interviews and blogs, an audience reception study of the film was of great significance. (Kim, 2004) while studying David Morley's work on the 'Nationwide' audience suggests that the female respondents in the study produced oppositional reading more often to the programs in question compared to the male respondents. Thus, asserting that the male audience is more susceptible to provide a dominant response to a text. As the dominant or the hegemonic response to the film is problematic in nature, this study particularly tries to look at the reception of young male audiences with respect to the problematic constructs like 'female objectification' and 'female passivity'.

Theoretical Framework

As the current study is a reception study, the area of audience analysis forms the theoretical foundation for the same. Dennis McQuail's views on the audience research provides a pathway for audience analysis while the work of Stuart Hall provides a framework on which the audience reception study can be based upon. To delineate the theoretical framework, one would need to situate the audience analysis and then the audience reception studies.

Situating Audience Analysis

Traditionally, audiences were perceived as mere receivers in the process of mass communication. With the technological advancements and the changing dynamics of mass communication, the audiences have become increasingly dynamic, while defining them has become more complicated. According to (McQuail, 1997), the term audience is indeed abstract and has a debatable character where the reality to which it refers to is diverse and constantly changing. Thus, he defines the audience in different and overlapping ways i.e. by place; people; medium or channel involved; content of the message; and time. Both the social context and a response to a particular pattern of media provision results in 'Audiences' (McQuail, 1997). Therefore, audiences can be only observed in fragmented and indirect ways.

Impacts and effects of mass media have been the primary area of interest for the researchers since the emergence of communication studies. As the primary site of impact and effect for media is the audience, audience research has been widely practiced in order to make sense of the overall communicative processes. Audience research has been the central research interest for the scholars leaning towards the empirical school of thought (Jensen, 1987). According to (Allor, 1988), research helps to 'construct', 'locate' or 'identify' an otherwise amorphous, unknowable or shifting social entity. Audience research serves the same purpose with help of the three traditions of research viz. 'Structural', 'Behavioral' and 'Socio-Cultural'. These three traditions of audience research being derived by (McQuail, 1997) from the originally proposed five traditions of audience research (effects; uses and gratification; literary criticism; cultural studies; and reception analysis) by (Jensen & Rosengren, 1990). While the structural and behavioral traditions are concerned with audience measurement and media effect (use) respectively, the socio-cultural tradition emphasizes on the reception of the media.

Audience Reception Studies and Encoding-Decoding Model

"The essence of the 'reception approach' is to locate the attribution and construction of meaning (derived from media) with the receiver. Media messages are always open and 'polysemic' (having multiple meanings) and are interpreted according to the context and the culture of receivers" (McQuail, 1983, p. 66)

Amongst the three traditions of audience research viz. 'Structural', 'Behavioral' and 'Socio-cultural', the audience reception research falls under the Socio-Cultural tradition. Audience reception emerges as an amalgamation of social sciences and humanities (McQuail, 1997). It considers the socio-cultural context as a function of meaning making of various cultural products, experiences, and media usage. 'Popular Culture' plays a vital role in the formation of cultural experiences within the society. Therefore, popular culture artifacts and products are generally the primary sites for audience reception studies.

The Frankfurt School and the Marxist scholars conducted extensive research within popular culture to make sense of the mass culture. The Marxists perspective looked at the mass audience as helpless victims of manipulation and exploitation by capitalist media which according to them infused 'false consciousnesses' into the masses. The Frankfurt school's approach towards the audience research was political in nature whereas the main area of focus being the class struggle. However, the Birmingham School played a vital role in the inclusion of the cultural aspect into the audience studies. In the 1970s, Stuart Hall at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) proposed the Encoding-Decoding model of communication incorporating the pre-existing communication theories with socio-cultural perspective. According to Hall, in audience reception research, one must take into consideration the social and political context in which the content is produced (encoding) and the everyday life context in which it is consumed(decoding) (Baran & Davis, 2009). He argued that the meaning of the text intended during the production does not ensure the consumption of the same meaning as

media texts can be interpreted by different people differently due to its polysemic nature (Baker, 2007). According to Hall, meanings are encoded within the media messages and the audience determines its interpretation. This interpretation or decoding of the messages depends on the socio-cultural aspects of the audience. Thus, the same message can be interpreted differently by different audiences depending upon the socio-cultural background and the position of the decoder in the class structure. However, every media message has its own preferred meaning which is intended by the producer during the encoding of the message. The decoders can interpret the preferred meaning which Hall regarded as 'Hegemonic' or 'Dominant' reading. The decoder can also accept the preferred reading to a certain extent but make own adaptations to the interpretation under the given particular situations which he termed as 'Negotiated' readings. Lastly, the decoder can reject the preferred reading and interpret the media message differently which according to Hall is the 'Counter-Hegemonic' or 'Oppositional' reading.

One of the widely regarded empirical studies of Hall's Encoding-Decoding model was conducted by David Morley. He studied the audience reception of the television show 'Nationwide'. (Morley, 1999) argued that the social class has a primary influence on the reception of media messages to a certain extent but the demographic and sociological factors like age, gender, locality, race etc, also needs to be considered.

LITERATURE REVIEW: ACADEMIC DISCOURSE ON THE FILM 'KABIR SINGH'

As a number of problematic concepts like Hegemonic Masculinity, Toxic Masculinity, Female Objectification, Substance Abuse etc. are embedded into the text of the film, it is a significant site for research not just in the field of Media and Communication studies but also in humanities, social sciences and gender studies. Scholars like (Mallam, 2019; Joshi, 2020; Garg & Garg, 2020; Benjamin, 2020; Viswamohan & Chaudhuri, 2020; Ganguly & Singh, 2021) have extensively studied the content of the film.

According to (Viswamohan & Chaudhuri, 2020), the film glorifies toxic masculinity as an inherent male trait contributing to the tirade against feminism. (Joshi, 2020) identifies numerous instances in the narrative of the film where the masculinity portrayed in the film describes the 'traditional man' as the one driven by sex, self-reliant, emotionally repressed, and objectifying women. This observation of (Joshi, 2020) is evident in the scene (*Figure 1*) where the protagonist shows knife to a female character and tells her to undress to have sex.

(Ganguly & Singh, 2021) argues that some scenes in the film perpetuate the notion that women are passive in nature. (*Figure 2*) shows the scene where the male lead of the film kisses the female counterpart directly without asking for prior consent. The female lead is shown to have no resistance to the said action of the protagonist suggesting her passive nature as asserted by (Ganguly & Singh, 2021).

While the film's gender portrayals are criticized, the portrayal of the medical profession too finds the heat. (Garg & Garg, 2020) finds the representation of medical college and hostel exaggerated while the portrayal of the protagonist as a doctor is over the top unprofessional and unethical. (Benjamin, 2020) asserts that Kabir's portrayal dominates the

relationship categorizing the female counterpart as submissive and demonstrates the type of masculinity which not only demands the control of the woman of romantic interest but also the control of the situations around her life. In one of the scenes, Kabir Singh calls the female counterpart as his 'Bandi' and warns her fellow colleagues to stay away from her as she is his property. (*Figure 3*) The film tries to glorify toxic and hegemonic masculinity in the narrative with a number of scenes which depicts physical violence and gore language. One such instance is when the female lead Preeti gets slapped by Kabir Singh as she tries to convince him about her love towards him (*Figure 4 & 5*).

Female Objectification

According to (Bartky, 1990), "Sexual Objectification occurs when a woman's sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from her person,
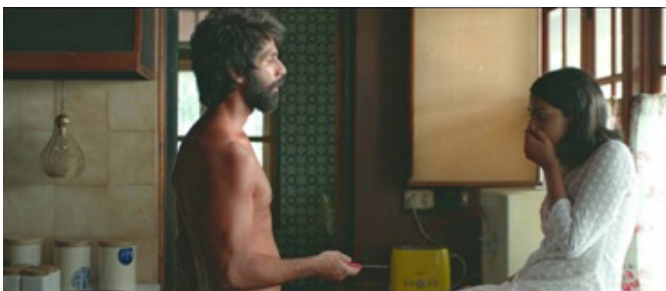

Figure 3: Screenshot from the film Kabir Singh, where Kabir Singh is threatening his juniors

Figure 1:. Screenshot from the film Kabir Singh, where Kabir singh is showing knife to a female character in the film)
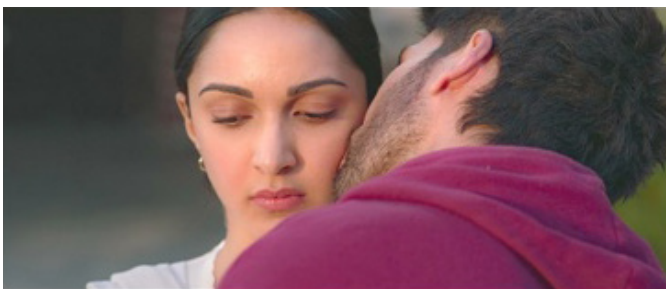

Figure 2: Screenshot from the film Kabir Singh, where Kabir Singh is kissing Priti on cheek

Figure 4 & 5: Screenshot from the film Kabir Singh, where Kabir Singh is slapping Priti and her reaction

reduced to the status of mere instruments, or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her '' (p. 35). As (Moradi & Huang, 2008; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) suggests, the sexual objectification experiences of women promote self-objectification and body surveillance. This results in promotion of body shaming and anxiety, contributing to women's risk of developing depression, sexual dysfunction and eating disorders. Objectification of women occurs at different levels. (Chaudhuri, 2006) while commenting on Laura Mulvey's work on Male Gaze states that women are defined only on the terms of sexuality, as an object of desire for men when they are represented as a spectacle to be looked at in the visual culture. (Berberick, 2010) observes the same and calls the media representation of women as exploitative. The objectification theory proposed by (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) argues that the objectifying gaze is played out in three of the related areas viz. i) within the actual interpersonal and social encounters; ii) visual media that depicts interpersonal and social encounters; iii) visual media that spotlight bodies and body parts with seamlessly aligning the viewers with an implicit sexual gaze. (Wood, 1994) calls out the stereotypical portrayal of women in media where the women are represented as the inferior gender with their dependence on the counterpart for their livelihood. Apart from that, the women are also portrayed as the primary caregivers and incompetent while the men are the breadwinners and holds the authoritarian powers. (Viswamohan & Chaudhuri, 2020) identifies similar portrayal of the female lead in the film Kabir Singh, where the 'male gaze' of the protagonist is fixed on the female counterpart and other supporting female characters in numerous occasions while the women resist to retaliate suggesting the modesty and traditional values. With such portrayals, the film not only reinforces the 'controlling male gaze' (Viswamohan & Chaudhuri, 2020) but also establishes the passive character of the female lead as 'the ideal'.

Female Passivity

(Bradwick, 1971) defines 'passive' as "the expectation of getting what one wants where the manifestation of the ego is very weak in capturing, weak in integrative

capacity, has very few alternatives for controlling the disappointment or trauma that strikes, and fails to control the degree of childishness that is inherent in every individual"' (Radzi, 2014). (Bradwick, 1971) also suggests three levels of passivity viz. i) very passive (incapable or no desire to voice feelings); ii) overtly passive (subtly aggressive); iii) healthy passive (intelligent reactions to disappointments). Among these levels, he further identifies a number of types of passivity which includes i) passive meaning agreeing or openness and ii) passive meaning willingness to get dominated by an individual out of love (Radzi, 2014). These types of passivity are explicitly portrayed by the female lead in the film. (Radzi, 2014) shreds light on numerous instances of female passivity of such type in the traditional Malaysian literature and asserts the role of patriarchal domination in the Malayan culture as the cause. (Chaudhuri, 2006) argues that the females have a passive role in the narrative structures, their roles are mere spectacles of passive erotic objects where the male lead primarily drives the story forward. Similar observations by (Viswamohan & Chaudhuri, 2020) make the film in question an important site of reception for the audience as such problematic representations and portrayals of females not only legitimize but reinforce the patriarchal domination and skewed gender norms.

Summary of Literature Review and Locating Knowledge Gap

Patton (2013) in his work has defined three primary functions of the literature review, he mentioned that thorough review of literature should provide knowledge of the *problem area* but identifying relevant theoretical frameworks. Secondly review of literature should clearly identify the need for the proposed study and, third and final, it must identify gaps and strengths in previous scholarly studies.

After conducting a thorough review of literature researchers realized the scholars like (Mallam, 2019; Joshi, 2020; Garg & Garg, 2020; Benjamin, 2020; Viswamohan & Chaudhuri, 2020; Ganguly & Singh, 2021) have extensively studied the content of the film. The directorial stance or the sender's perspective is also available in mainstream culture in the form of interviews and blogs. It is also evident that academic

inquiry into the audience reception of the film is not present in the current knowledge body. After identifying the knowledge gap researcher identified a suitable theoretical framework that offers a context for the interpretation of empirical data. MaQuail's three traditions of audience research, Stuart Hall's work on 'Encoding/Decoding' and Morley's audience reception of the television show 'Nationwide'. (Morley, 1999) helped researchers identify a pertinent theoretical framework.

Taking the dearth of audience reception study into consideration, this particular study sets out to understand the audience reception of the problematic constructs portrayed in the film by young male audiences. In order to serve this purpose, three research objectives were taken into consideration

Research Questions/Objectives:

- To understand young male audience's perception of the construct of female objectification as portrayed in the film Kabir Singh
- To understand young male audience's perception of the construct of female passivity as portrayed in the film Kabir Singh
- To study the influence of age and locality on the reception of the constructs under study i.e., female objectification and female passivity

Methodology

The present paper seeks to understand how social constructs like 'female objectification' and 'female passivity' portrayed in the film 'Kabir Singh' were perceived by young male audiences and if the perception was influenced by demographic referents like 'age' and 'locality'. The audience attitudes were measured using a quantitative protocol. A survey that had eight standardized likert-scale was designed to gauge the respondent's attitudes towards the constructs under study. Volunteer sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, was used as a sampling method because of the huge geographical spread of the population. Data was collected from 139 young male participants through an online survey. The respondents were

re-classified using two demographic referents i.e., 'age' and 'locality'. Taking cues from the works of (Gould, 1972; Hyman, 1988) on the stages of adulthood and personality development the respondents were trifurcated in three categories i.e., the age group 18–22 (emerging adults), 23-27 (developing adults) and the group 28–35 (stabilizing adults). Film 'Kabir Singh' is certified for "Adult" viewership only by the Indian Censor Board (Central Board of Film Certification) hence respondents above the age of 18 were considered. For locality, the National Sample Survey Organization's (NSSO) definition was used to reclassify respondents as 'rural' and 'urban'. The respondents were provided a series of statements with five-point likert scale responses ranging from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree' with a 'Neutral' point at the middle. As the statements were regarding the problematic portrayal of female characters in the film along with the objectification of female characters, an attitudinal score of the respondent's best suited the purpose of analysis. The data was analyzed using data visualization methods for the purpose of simplification of the analytical data.

Analysis

Eight statements were tested for the reception of female objectification and female objectivity for the attitudinal responses on a five-point likert scale. Statements related to both constructs were placed in random order to eliminate any prolonged attitudinal shift. Each of the statements was individually analyzed using data visualization techniques.

Statement 1: Kabir kissed Preeti at first conversation without her consent because he understands unsaid language of love

The 'preferred meaning' of the scene where Kabir kisses Preeti tries to portray that the action of the protagonist is normal and out of an urge to express his attraction towards her. This directorial stance here demands agreement with the statement in order to say that the audience responded hegemonically. The general attitudinal trend for the question leans towards the disagreement with the statement implying that the scene in the
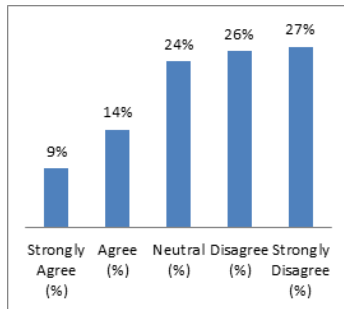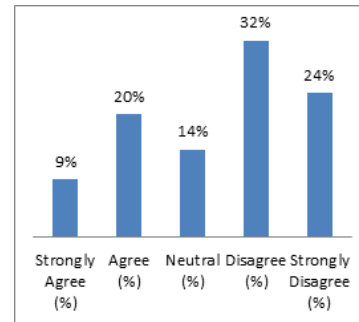
Chart 1.1: Overall Population
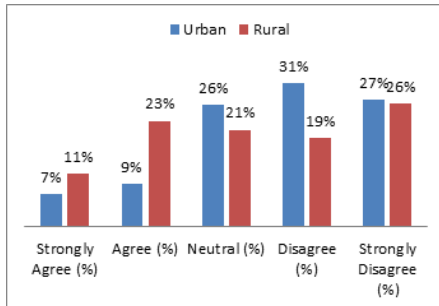

Chart 2.1: Overall Population

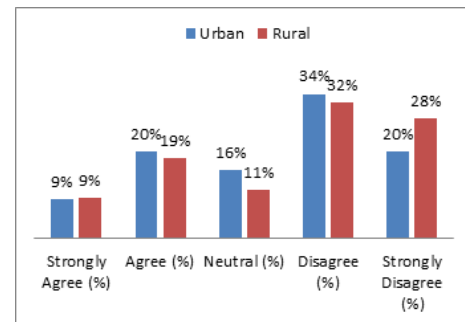**Chart 1.2:** Locality wise

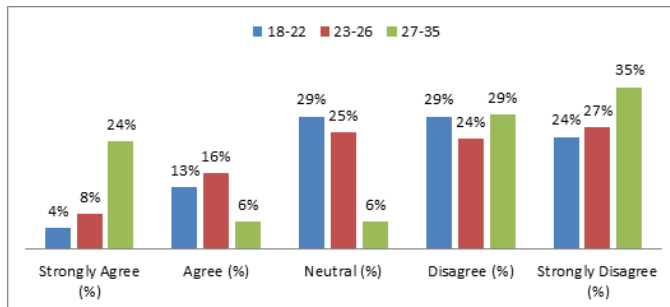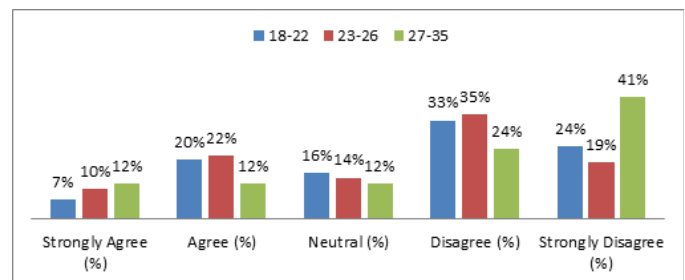**Chart 2.2:** Locality wise

Chart 1.3: Agewise

Chart 2.3: Agewise

film was received counter hegemonically by the overall population. However, with respect to the comparative reception based on locality, it is evident that around 23% of males from a rural background agree with the statement providing a hegemonic or a dominant response. This trend is not evident in the urban population as only 9% and 7% of the urban population 'agree' and 'strongly agree' respectively.

Statement 2: Kabir Singh barges into freshman class to claim Preeti as his property and calls her his 'Bandi'. This bold behavior of Kabir is normal.

While the directorial stance indicates that the objectification of females is normal and a socially acceptable behavior, the otherwise is read by most of the overall population. The general trend of the overall population leans towards disagreement producing oppositional reading to the instance and

discarding the directorial stance or the preferred meaning. No influence of any socio-demographic factor is evident in the responses.

Statement 3: Kabir Singh showing knife to a woman for having sex, is just his way of asking consent and not a threat of rape

Sensitive topics like sexual violence and rape are generally approached by the audiences carefully. With respect to the statement where the respondents are checked for their attitudinal inclination regarding an act of sexual objectification of a female character, a clear counter-hegemonic response is evident. The overall population tends to discard the notion that such an act of showing a knife to get sexual benefits is normal. Interestingly, one of the unexpected observations is that the urban population have responded with 'negotiated reading'

comparatively more than that of the rural population where the opposite can be expected. While the urban population is exposed to more sexually explicit content compared to the rural population, indecisiveness is seen whereas the rural population have responded with strong opinions. Patriarchal dominance in the rural settings of India is still evident while the urban spaces are more open with respect to social relationships and interactions. The 'blurring of lines' due to the modern and postmodern characteristics of the urban spaces could be one of the contributing factors to the indecisiveness of the urban youths. The developing and the stabilizing adults have stronger disagreement attitudinal shift compared to the emerging adults.

Statement 4: Kabir slaps Preeti, while giving her the ultimatum. This slap is not a big deal as it is common in relationships/ between two lovers.

While the preferred reading for the scene where Kabir Singh slaps Preeti is that physical violence is common between two romantic entities, the overall population tends to interpret the otherwise with the attitudinal trend leaning towards disagreement. The directorial stance also indicates that the male is the authority in the relationship and has the liberty to use violence for his good while the female counterpart is portrayed as submissive towards the male in the scene. Around 24% of the urban youth agree with the notion that physical violence towards women is socially acceptable and is a common thing between
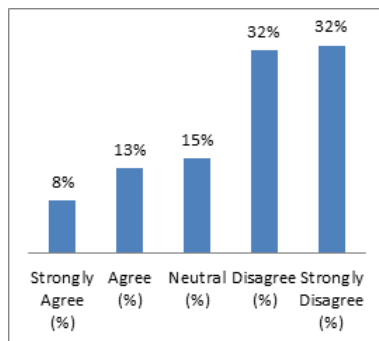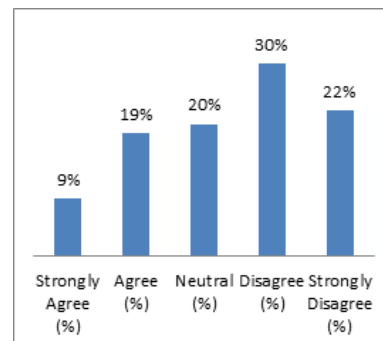

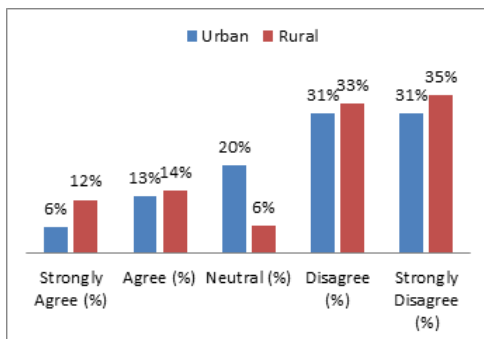**Chart 3.1:** Overall Population

Chart 4.1: Overall Population
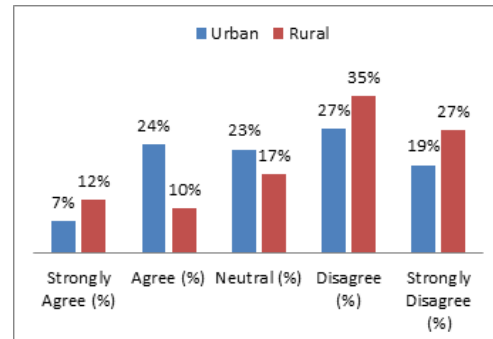

Chart 3.2: Locality wise
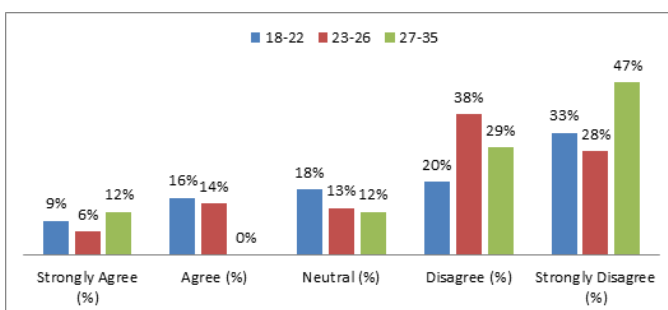

Chart 4.2: Locality wise
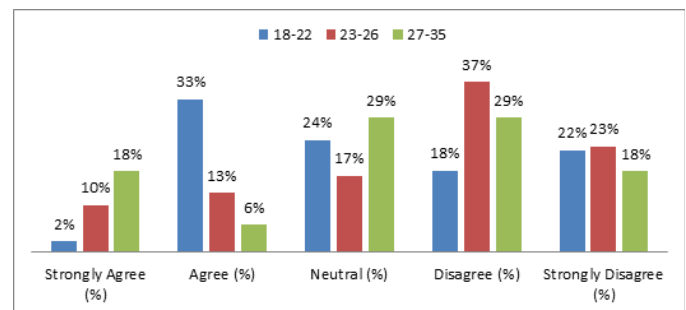

Chart 3.3: Agewise

Chart 4.3: Agewise

two entities sharing a romantic relationship. While 33% emerging adults agree with such behavior of the protagonist yielding a hegemonic response, 37% of the developing adults resist the message responding with oppositional disagreement.

Statement 5: Kabir commands Shruti to be friends with Preeti just because she is healthy. Kabir says only healthy girls can be good friends with pretty girls. This is a normal practice and not body shaming.

The attitudinal responses of the entire population with respect to the instance of bodily objectification and body shaming of one of the female characters in the film tend towards disagreement. Here too, no significant influence of socio-demographic factors was evident with respect to the reception.

Statement 6: Preeti is a true representation of an Indian Girl.

The portrayal of the female lead in the film is criticised for being overly passive. While a patriarchal mindset would identify such portrayal as an 'ideal woman', one can never attach the same characteristics with the notion of being 'true Indian woman'. With respect to the same portrayal of the female lead in the film, the responses of the entire population are scattered with agreements and disagreements. The characteristics of the 'true Indian woman' remains ambiguous, the responses too are equally distributed amongst the scale to a certain extent. However, interestingly the 'Neutral' attitude dominates the entire population response in a first where the developing adults dominate the
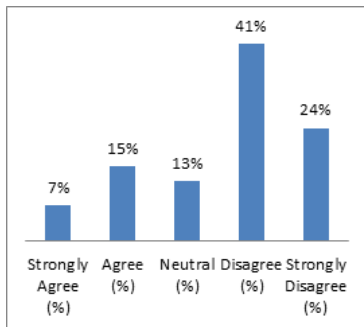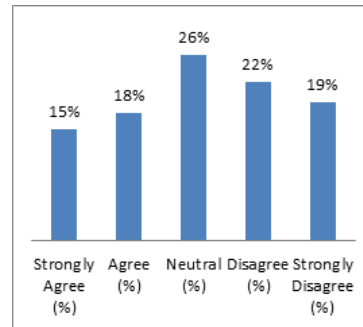

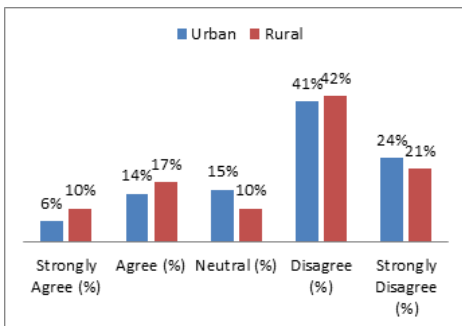**Chart 5.1:** Overall Population

Chart 6.1: Overall Population
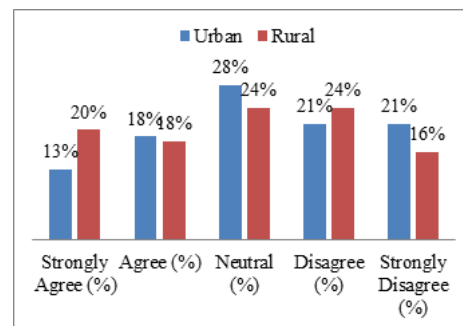

Chart 5.2: Locality wise
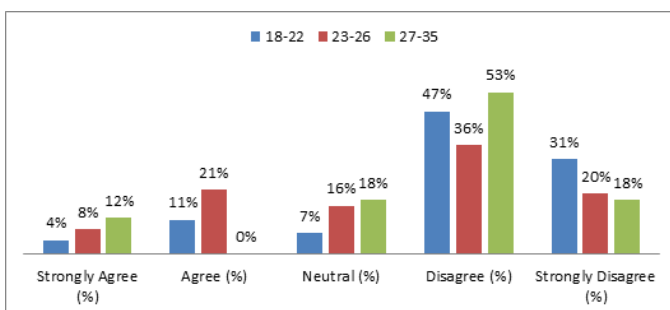

Chart 6.2: Locality wise
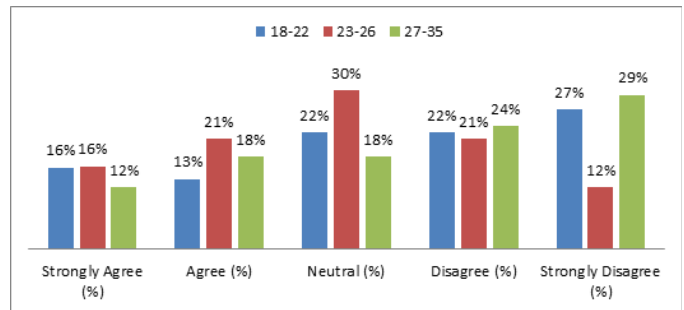

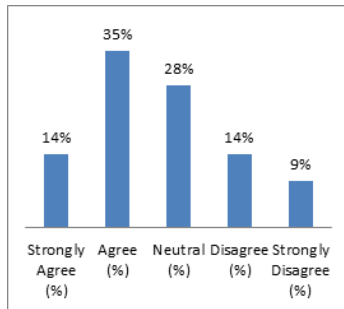**Chart 5.3:** Agewise

Chart 6.3: Agewise

Chart 7.1: Overall Population

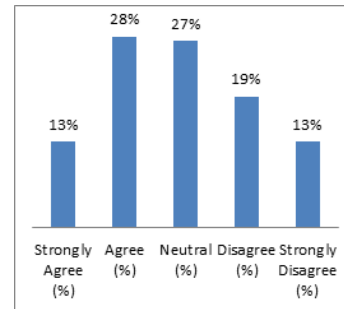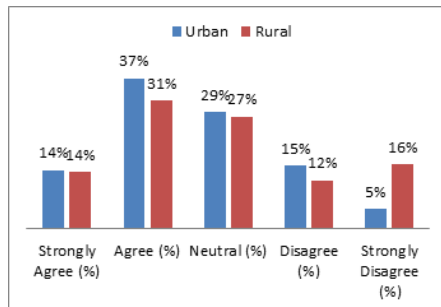**Chart 8.1:** Overall Population

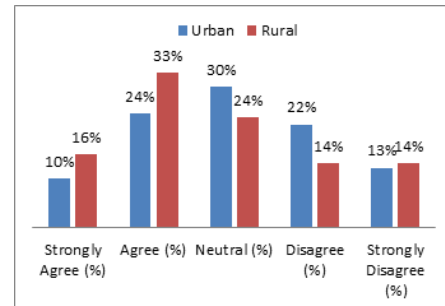**Chart 7.2:** Locality wise

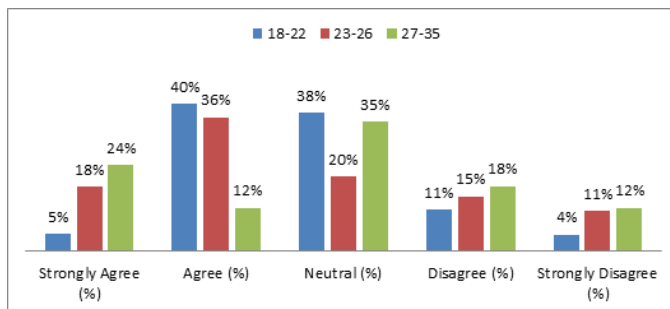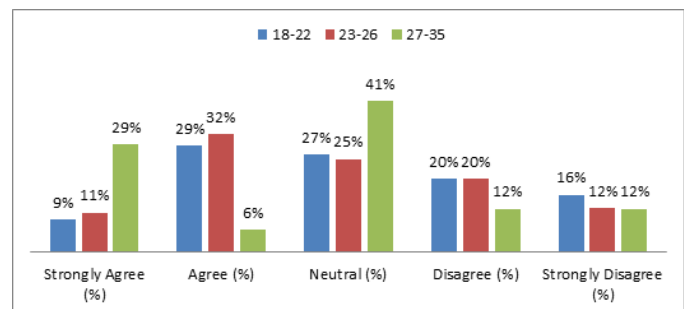**Chart 8.2:** Locality wise

Chart 7.3: Agewise

Chart 8.3: Agewise

'negotiated reading' response amongst all the age groups showing indecisiveness.

Statement 7: Kabir Singh calling Preeti his 'Bandi' is not objectification of women but Kabir's way of expressing his attraction towards her.

While it is evident that the young males have a counter-hegemonic reception towards the film protagonist calling the female counterpart as 'Bandi', an unexpected agreemental attitudinal response is evident when asked if the action is a way of expressing attraction towards the female lead. Again, the emerging adults from urban locality dominate the charts indicating their agreement with this notion that objectification of women is normal as long as it is out of the urge to convey romantic interest. However, the overall trend suggests that irrespective of the

socio-demographic factors, the young males have a hegemonic response to the said instance.

Statement 8: Slapping each other, using cuss words are just a part of emotional connection in a relationship. There are no intentions of abusing women or showing power of masculinity here

The film shows a number of instances where the lead pair of the film slaps each other. While the overall population produces an oppositional reading while asked about Kabir slapping Preeti, a dominant reading is produced by the population when asked if slapping each other in a romantic relationship is normal and part of emotional connection. Interestingly where the rural population 'disagrees' the most with the action of Kabir slapping preeti, 33% of the rural young males 'agrees' that slapping each other is normal.

The stabilizing adults tops the chart with respect to 'negotiated reading' to the said instance.

Conclusion

This paper sets to primarily answer three questions i) how did the young male audience receive the construct of female objectification portrayed in the film? ii) what the reception of the construct of female passivity is portrayed in the film iii) does the socio-demographic factors like age and locality influence the reception of above concepts. The research questions demanded quantitative data in order to create a picture of overall reception of these constructs. A likert scale enabled survey was conducted where the attitudinal responses of the young male audiences were recorded. While statements 2, 3, 5, and 7 deal with the construct of female objectification, statements 1, 4, 6, and 8 deal with the construct of female passivity. The statistical data yielded some interesting findings. With respect to female objectification, the overall reception of the young male audience is counter-hegemonic with oppositional readings to the directorial stance. Apart from some indecisiveness of urban population to a certain extent, the socio-demographic factors have no influence on the reception. Contrary to the expected outcome that males generally produce dominant readings (Kim, 2004), oppositional reading dominated the attitudinal responses. However, when the idea of expressing romantic attraction or affection is linked with the construct of female objectification, dominant readings are evident. Overall, the developing and stabilizing adults have firm responses with respect to female objectification, the emerging adults are more indecisive and produce more negotiated reading compared to other categories.

Some ambiguity is evident with respect to the reception of female passivity. While the overall trend shows that the population produced counter-hegemonic reading towards the portrayal of female passivity, the same phenomenon is evident where the association of the concept of love with female passivity is taken into consideration, the oppositional reading changes to dominant readings. With respect to age and locality, no particular trend is evident as a whole.

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