

# Stereotypes Know no Pandemic: A Facebook Study

Shiwangi

**Abstract**—Indian Cinema has always received attention across the globe. It is more of a trend in the contemporary world where the internet plays a vital role. And Latin America is yet another true fandom in every sense making it totally off the charts. In the domain of translation (dubbing and subtitling), representation, and reception of Indian movies both jointly and severally, studies have never targeted the Latin American audience. Au contraire, it is intriguing to note that Latin American Bollywood fan clubs on social media platforms, like Facebook, haven't just kept people entertained throughout but also managed not to break the demand and supply chain even during this pandemic. Ironically, the content has still successfully adhered to the already existing stereotypes associated with the Indian Cinema and culture despite loads of efforts of the page admins as well as the followers in looking for new relevant posts during the COVID-19 crisis where we see a significant paucity of latest cinema top-ups.

**Index Terms**—Indian cinema, Latin America, Facebook, fan clubs, stereotypes, COVID-19.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Indian cinema, often perceived as Bollywood, is in serious globe-trotting mode. In recent years, India's interaction with Latin America has also witnessed a growth, and a big share of that achievement goes to media, and particularly to cinema. Latin America is potentially one of the biggest international markets for Indian films. Not only do they telecast these films there but the demand for these movies is also seen on the internet. It is widely known that the internet has ushered in new avenues of communication, substantially changing the flow of information in comparison to conventional media. Through multimedia platforms, social media play a critical role in distributing this knowledge across national borders, across social, cultural, and political niches. They also give enormous landscape for both individuals and agencies to easily represent themselves and the 'other'. This, however, typically results in a visual depiction of the "others." These visual representations largely follow and solidify current dominant conceptions. This research investigates how movies, music, and clips depict India, as well as the reactions to them on Facebook pages (including fan-clubs administered by individuals or groups of people) dedicated to El Cine Hindú or the Indian Cinema (which to the Latin American audience is any Indian movie irrespective of the film industry, the language, the region, or the state that it is coming from). Purposive sampling is used to choose a few Facebook pages, and then Hermeneutics theory and Stuart Hall's

Representation theory [1] are used to evaluate the data. The

first is a netnographic technique, in which Facebook Messenger is used as the platform to communicate or interact with the subjects in order to gather relevant information. Second is the visual approach in which the posts on the selected pages are analyzed using two methods- participant observation and content analysis. The study reveals that despite the globe transitioning to virtual space during the epidemic, when people might have investigated "the Indian," all members and participants of the pages contribute to the perpetuation of prevailing cultural representations of India and "the Indian" through mainstream content.

## II. PRESENTING MEDIA REPRESENTATION

Scholars have studied and investigated the concept of representation within this cultural-critical paradigm of media studies. Scholars were able to transcend beyond just seeing media propagation of a certain image depicting it as the reality because to this approach. Rather, representations are ingrained in the never-ending media stream, establishing standards and prudence about persons, and organizations in modern society. As a fundamental signifying technique for establishing common meaning, the media creates representations [1]. It is representations that give us the sense of understanding of culture, meaning, and awareness about ourselves and the others. Beyond just reflecting reality, media representations such as cinema, television, photography, and print journalism help to build it and normalize various worldviews or ideologies. As created by cultural theorists, this perspective views ideology as a ascendance, normalizing force in present-day communities [2], [3]. A focus on the representations of Others (ethnic, racial, gender, or minorities) in critical-cultural media studies is seen post cultural shift in many humanistic fields and the impact of semiotic and post-structural theory. Cultural media experts have been particularly interested in representations as sculpted images with ideological connotations.

## III. THE INEVITABLE CONVENTIONAL REPRESENTATION

Modern media ends up constructing problematic representation due to various reasons (like to attract more audience) even in cases where it appears to be avoiding typecasting [4]. Clear attempts of overcoming stereotypes have been seen in some shows and also media by offering unconventional roles but alongside the conventional character [5]. There are three reasons for the persistence of conventional representation. The first reason being the pervasion, chroma, and echo of the mass media encouraging the preservation of these images. Secondly, the profit-oriented media trying to reach more audience and, in the process, adhering to the typical representations. And lastly,

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Shiwangi is with The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India-500007, India (e-mail: shiwangiphdspanish18@efluniversity.ac.in).

media has always been known to be controlled by the elites responsible for altering the status quo. There are scholars who consider the media a cultural forum [6] with the potential of bringing in ideas and thoughts for progressive change in the society but eventually, they found out that the media could pitch the boundaries of inclusiveness at times but only to create a new mainstream socio-political world. In the recent years, there have been discourses on if there the Internet and the digital media to help subvert the existing conventional representation and its ways. It is a relief, at the same time, that the audience is so widespread due to the increased number of channels that there is no one single understanding of any representation. Since representation refers to a consistent picture presented across all media channels and sources rather than to an individual one, it would not be surprising to see that the deep-rooted representations tarry across old and new platforms.

#### IV. MEDIA REPRESENTATION AND VIEWER'S RECEPTION

The appearance of one-dimensional media depictions is a reason for worry from a social-cognitive standpoint because viewers frequently incorporate such information into long-term memory. Studies suggest that stereotyped media gives way to generalized image of all those that are being (re)presented. Such information is developed as conceptions, that further serve as reference points (heuristics) for various social group [7]-[10]. Concisely, this delineative information has great potentials to influence recognition, perception, and even memory. Not just do these data get perpetuated and retrieved but these are also highly likely get engrained in the receivers' heads (like media exemplars that are vivid, spectacular, palpable, and emotionally charged. Be it a fiction or a non-fiction, this information is often recalled (consciously or unconsciously) by the audience while forming images of the ones being represented [11]-[14]

These repetitive structured depictions across various media tends to present it in a way that it seems too close to the real world or the real world itself which eventually has a power on viewers' sentiments towards the out-groups [15]-[18]. In other words, using both oral and visual modes the media, such as television and films-that we consider the most influential ones, provide such a realistic vicarious experience that the viewers perceive it as the social reality. Previous studies have suggested that continued exposure to television programs have shown clear results in changing audiences' racial perceptions [19]-[21]. Interethnic communication studies have also suggested that when there is mostly indirect communication between two or more ethnic groups the above-mentioned effect has a greater effect [18], [20]. It is obvious that when there is limited or no meaningful contact between ethnic group or groups, the media will have consequential impact on audience's way of looking at out groups and forming images. It is highly possible that most of the audience, since it's a globalized world that we have, do not have any previous direct interactions with the represented. The same is the case with Indian cinema and the audience abroad most of which did not have any real time interaction with individuals or groups living in India. Hence, the study of these potentially problematic portrayals is especially

important considering the media power in shaping people's perception of India around the globe.

Precisely, previous research has shown that the narratives about third world nations like disseminated worldwide have created images that have led to construction of in-groups and out-groups, and sometimes in generating a positive social identity for in-groups. These representations are especially important in shaping audiences' perception of the "other" when there's a lack of one-on-one interaction between the two groups. The current study contributes to this literature by systematically analyzing portrayals of India on Facebook by both Indians and Latin Americans.

#### V. INDIAN CINEMA'S RECEPTION

As the globalization of Indian cinema increased, researchers began to focus more on the role of the Indian diaspora in its worldwide reception. There is a substantial number of contributions in the field that offers a diasporic analysis of Indian films, focusing on either the reception of such films in a diasporic nation or the portrayal of the diaspora or the NRIs. However, based on Anderson's idea of an imagined community, these studies have treated the geographically fragmented Indian diaspora as a generic unitary entity. Thakur examines the perplexed image of India as a globalized entity through Lacanian psychoanalysis, considering the cultural and social surroundings [22].

A new turn in Indian cinema studies is the rejection of the globalization of Bollywood reception in favor of a more spatially focused and restricted study. This is essential given the large audiences and marketplaces for Bollywood films, as well as the distinct pattern of response that each of these diverse countries provides. Though not in a straight or chronological order, we can see that there is a rising number of scholarly publications that examine the reception of Bollywood in certain areas and nations. While these studies cross over into the preceding categories of this literature review (such as Bollywood form, content, style, globalization, and diaspora), they restrict the broader diasporic studies of Bollywood to a more particular local reception of a global film. Studies have been done on Bollywood in the following countries- USA [23], the Caribbean [24], Bangladesh [25], Scotland [26], Australia [27], [28], Canada [29], and Nepal [30]. Like Australian reception studies, two major publications by Ebrahim [31] and Hansen [32] investigate the reception of Bollywood in South Africa. Hirji [29] investigated Bollywood reception in Canada via the lens of South Asian identity development and meaning. Apart from a few studies, most research on Bollywood's reception identifies similar elements. While some of them examined diasporic reactions to these films, others emphasized the role of song and dance scenes in providing a shared platform of amusement. Most research focused on the Indian diaspora to determine the meaning-making process involved in watching Bollywood films. When seen from a global viewpoint, such an approach restricts the options for assessing a cultural entity that transcends boundaries to reach a whole new physical and cultural location. Aside from the diaspora, these films are enjoyed by a sizable non-Indian audience. Furthermore, in addition to the audience experience, there are many additional 'audiences' or 'receivers' who shape the framework for its

reception, such as politics, religious institutions, and cultural communities that define the worldwide cinema business. So basically, all the existing research in the field of media studies have rarely talked about the non-Western audiences. The intended audience was mostly made up of Indian diaspora in the West, or viewers from North America, Australia, and the United Kingdom, among other places. The way non-Western audiences interpret or respond to messages differs greatly from that of Western audiences; little research has been conducted to address these patterns of viewing globalized products.

## VI. I AM CINE HINDU

“Indian cinema is not all Bollywood and that’s a barrier that’s been hard to break...”<sup>1</sup>- Ali Fazal (Indian actor) [33]. To the audiences with little or no exposure to the number film industries in India, Bollywood is perceived as the Indian Cinema.

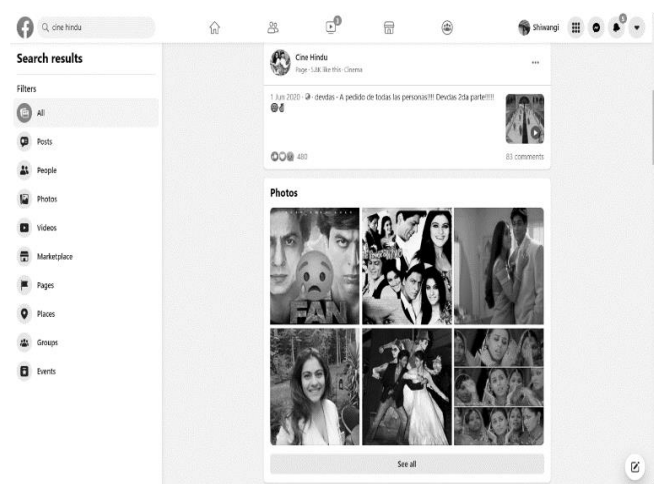


Fig. 1. Screenshot of the first result on searching 'Cine Hindu'(translation- Indian Cinema) on Facebook.

<https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=cine%20hindu>

In its uploads, the Cine Hindu Facebook page (Fig. 1) solely contains photos (Fig. 2) and videos (Fig. 3) promoting popular film and associated topics. The images in the uploads, which include a collage, film posters, movie scenes, and even personal life photographs, clearly demonstrate that all of the participants in the group have virtually identical exposure to Indian cinema in general.

Popular Bollywood stars such as Shahrukh Khan, Kajol, Rani Mukherjee, Kareena Kapoor, and Salman Khan appear to be the focus of attention. The page has 6 thousand people and 8 thousand following which is a huge number considering the popularity of other international film industries over Indian cinema.

In one of the conversations with the group admin it was confirmed that majority of the group members belong to Latin America including themselves who claimed to be a Peruvian residing in Chile. Further in the conversation it was discovered that these movies are associated with romance, beauty, dance, music, family, etc. (Table 1) not just by the

group admin but also by the other Latin Americans he had later collaborated with having common interests in the Indian cinema and the other group members, as evident from all the figures. Another thing that is important to note from the above conversation is that despite having an exposure to the Indian cinema and such a fan following for such a prolonged period. It is surprising that the administration was solely familiar with mainstream film and actors. It is worth noting that when the researcher attempted to provide other film contents (assuming unawareness), the admin showed little interest. In this case, it was clear that it was about more than just exposure; it was about what people were looking for in these huge Bollywood blockbusters.



Fig. 2. First few pictures from the gallery of the above-mentioned Facebook page.

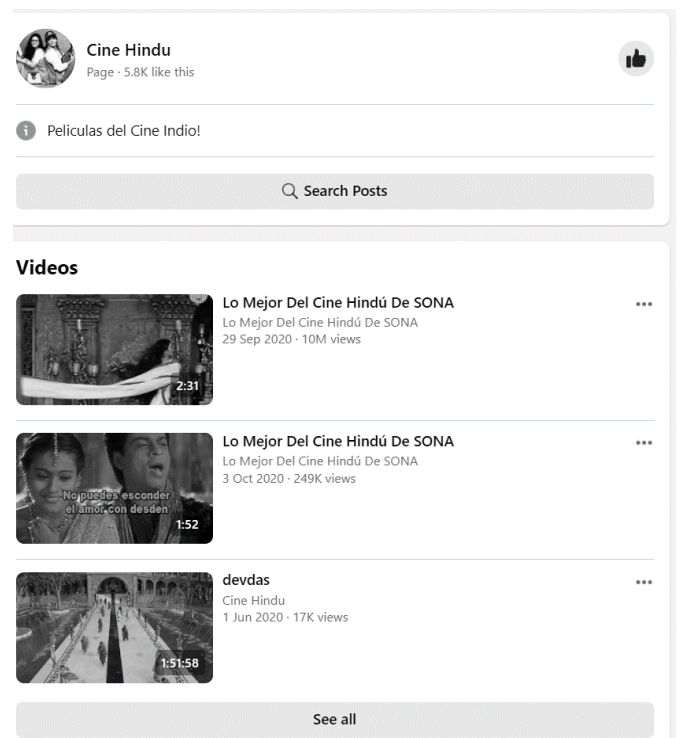


Fig. 3. Video uploads in the same Facebook page.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/bollywood/indian-cinema-is-not-all-bollywood-and-that-s-a-barrier-that-s-been-hard-to-break/story-hrPTlvvb11UBm3Bh9mZOE.html>

TABLE I: A PART OF THE CONVERSATION WITH THE GROUP ADMIN OF CINE HINDU

User [sent 7 June 2020] Uhmhhh desde q tengo como 13! 14 años q me volvi fan de estas hermosas películas! Uhmhhh fui a un mercado y siempre compraba películas (Translation- Uhmhhh when I was like 13 or 14, I became a fan of these beautiful movies! Uhmhhh I went to a market and always bought movies)
User [sent 7 June 2020] Y habia escuchado por ahí! Que eran bonitas las películas hindu (Translation- And I had heard it over there! That hindu movies were beautiful)
User [sent 7 June 2020] Y como siempre eh sido algo romántico 😊 compre un DVD que venian como 4 películas Escuchabamos! Hablabamos y bailabamos musica hindu 😊😊😊😊 (Translation- And since always I've been someone romantic, I bought a DVD that came with 4 movies 😊! We listened! We talked and danced Hindu music 😊😊😊😊)



Fig. 4. Invitation link for a movie.



Fig. 5. Comments on a video upload.

A similar content pattern is found in another group called Películas y musica Hind (Fans). Figure 4 and Figure 5 are an invitation link to watch Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham the comments on and uploaded movie called Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna respectively. Some of the few comments in the second image indicate that there is a movie that people have come to rewatch, and a few are interested in viewing it. This shows the type of films that people watch when they think of Indian cinema. There are other movie uploads, links, and music in the group that are of the same kind.

## VII. THE SOCIAL MEDIA STORY

What media does is represent the social world via images and depictions producing meanings that helps us understand “how the world is and why it works as it is said and shown to work” [34]. According to Kellner mass media play a very prominent role in fostering people’s ideology about other ethnicities [35]. “The process of learning about the physical and social realities of the world in which one lives is a social one, resulting from participating in “communication with others” [36]. Media has been the chief mode of communication since the past few decades and in the recent times, it is the social media that dominates all kinds of tools for flow of information.

In our case, Facebook has not only created a certain image of the “Hindu” but also flawlessly maintained it. Bollywood or the Indian Cinema is all about dance, music, and drama which the audience look forward to.

It is interesting to note that even during the pandemic when both the admin and the participants/members of the group had ample time to look for content, rather different content, they chose to stick to the previously established image.

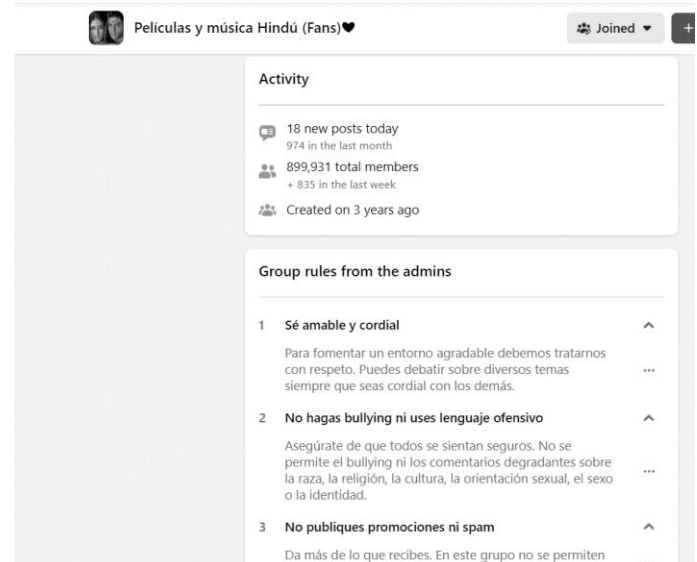


Fig. 6. Details of Película y musica Hindu(Fans).

The fact that despite having around 900,000 members and hundreds of posts every month (Fig. 6.), all we see in the page is just mainstream content that only conform to the image of India that has been constructed through the movies earlier supplied.



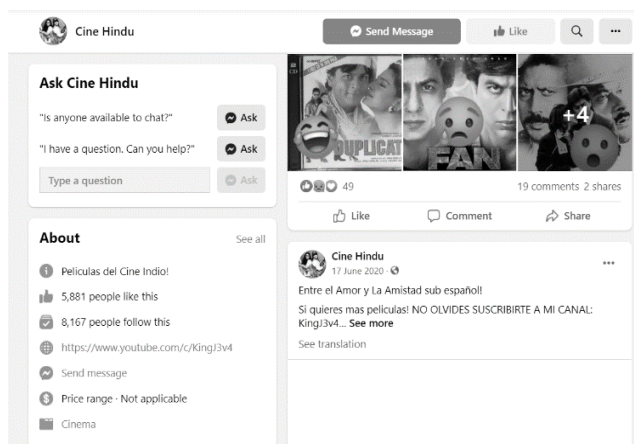


Fig. 7. Details of the page 'Cine Hindu'.



Fig. 8. An upload on June 1st 2020.

Both Fig. 7 and Fig. 8 are screenshots from a page called *Cine Hindu*. Looking at the first one, it is not hard to guess that the page is really popular as there are thousands of people following and liking the page. Taking that into consideration and looking at the uploads, it is clear that there is not a single attempt to breaking the stereotypes of Indian movies being all about dance, family and drama, and music. Fig 8 is a recent upload which is a movie called *Devdas*. It is one of the mainstream movies with a very stereotypical and outdated image of Indian families and culture.

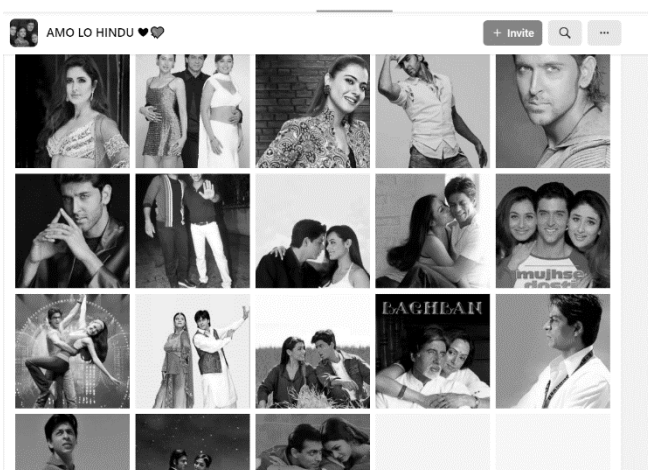


Fig. 9. Uploads on the page 'AMO LO HINDU'

Fig. 9 is a collage of recent uploads on the page *AMO LO HINDU*. None of the posts is off the mainstream charts. Contents like these that are made available to aware or unaware public do help create stereotypes as well as add to the existing ones.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Social media play an important role in representing the other. The sampled screenshots clearly demonstrate the inclination of public towards stereotypical contents and how

it has remained unchanged on purpose. From these findings, it is evident that social media uses devices such as stereotypes for popularity and likes. In the present study it is seen that all the members and participants of the pages contribute to the maintenance of existing cultural images of India and 'the Indian' through the mainstream content despite the world switching to just virtual space during the pandemic when people could have explored "the Indian". But we see that the demand and supply has remain unaltered.

The game is more complex that it appears and has many unexplored dimensions for future research works. This paper answers 'what' and is potentially the foundation of multiple hows and whys.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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**Shiwangi** is a research scholar in the Department of Hispanic and Italian Studies at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India. Culture and society have always been her field of interest and, thus, she chose to work on the representation and reception of the Indian cinema in Latin America for her Ph.D.