Portrayal Of Indian Actors In Western Media

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Abstract

Indians are portrayed in different ways in movies and shows of western countries. Some movies and shows represent Indians as exotic and spiritual, whereas others depict them as poor and in need of help. Some movies and shows also represent Indians as highly educated and successful professionals. However, it's important to note that these representations are not necessarily accurate or representative of the entire Indian population, and should be seen with a critical lens. Additionally, some movies may perpetuate harmful stereotypes or inaccuracies about Indian culture and history. These patterns of stereotypical portrayals of Indians across western media need to be discussed in the context of social identity theory, and cultural colonization. This study throws light on the representation of Indian actors in western shows and movies. An observation based content analysis has been done to get the answers for defined objectives.

Keywords: western media , Indian actors, stereotypes, Indian culture

Introduction:

Western media has had a significant impact on the world in many different ways, making it an important cultural force worldwide. However, Western media has also been criticized for its tendency to promote Western cultural dominance and to perpetuate negative stereotypes and harmful narratives about certain cultures and people. Western media has the power to promote understanding and empathy across cultures by representing cultures and people in an authentic and respectful way, by collaborating with creators and artists from different backgrounds, by providing education and information, by humanizing the "other," and by promoting dialogue and exchange between different cultures and people.

The representation of India in Western media has been a topic of discussion and debate for many years. While there have been some positive depictions of Indian culture and people in Western media, there have also been instances of stereotypes and shallow portrayals that perpetuate harmful narratives.

Over time, Through repeated exposure to the same or similar stereotypical depictions across films and narratives in different media sites, we unintentionally and often unconsciously begin accumulating these bits and pieces of information about the social group in such a way that we develop a "schema" or a quick short-cut reference

for the social group (Ramasubramanian, 2005). Unsurprisingly, when asked to recollect the characteristics of a social group, people may recall scenes, characters, lines, settings, and performers from numerous films in an attempt to gather whatever little knowledge we can in order to make hasty judgements in interpersonal situations. As a result, it is critical to investigate how various marginalised groups are portrayed in western media.

Research Question

Given that the broad objective of this study was to analyse how India and Indian characters are portrayed within films and shows produced in the foreign countries.

Literature review

Early studies on the social-psychological effects of media exposure on racial ethnic attitudes looked at film content (Peterson, Thurstone, Shuttlesworth, & May, 1933), more recent research on racial stereotypical content has been conducted on a variety of other media sources such as news stories, television programmes, music videos, and magazine advertisements (Brown & Campbell, 1986; Coltrane & Messineo, 2000; Entman, 1992, 1994a)

Depictions of India in the West can be analysed within the context of portrayals of so-called third-world countries in Western media. To beginwith, it is necessary to investigate how the historical and political settings of power relations between first and third-world countries influence media content. (Gallagher,1989) observed that third-world countries are disproportionately affected by information flow marginalisation. The flow of information from the first to third world countries is larger, but there is little representation of the third world in the first (Mowlana & Wilson, 1990). This information flow imbalance, a lack of reliable and diversified information sources, and the absence of racial India minorities are portrayed in the film (Kumar & Singh, 2022).

Westerners are usually at the centre of the plot, whereas third-world people, particularly women, are given minor, inconsequential positions (Kaplan, 1997). Even when third-world characters appear in media, they are frequently presented in condescending, derogatory, and stereotypical ways. For example, previous study on depictions of African people in Western films reveals that they are frequently portrayed as savage cannibals or naive primitive people (Cameron, 1990; Ukadike, 1990). Whereas the roles of Western characters in these stories are complicated, those of third-world characters are straightforward and virtually predictable. The latter are usually only included as embellishments to assist establish the heroic aspect of the Western figures.

The history of stereotypical representations of India can be traced back to colonial rule in India, when missionaries, anthropologists, and government officials used narrative accounts and photographic illustrations to portray Indians as savage and uncivil simple folk (Merchant, 1998; Narayan, 1997). In such portrayals, Europeans have historically portrayed themselves as representing liberty, equality, development, change, and dynamism. In contrast, India was seen as unhistorical, caught up in traditions—static, inactive, or in decline. Indian nationalists did not reject such stereotypes, but instead embraced them to support their fight for independence from European authority. That is, they contended that Western invaders constituted a disruption to the wonderful ancient Indian past's traditions and values.

On the one hand, depictions that focused on depicting India in condescending ways dealt with "clashes of civilizations" in which Western characters "saved" India from ancient religious practises such as voodoo and sorcery, natural disasters such as floods and epidemics, and social injustices such as sati and poverty (Mitra, 1999; Shome, 1996). On the other hand, several films produced in the West have a propensity to describe India in a dream-like, utopian fashion, where India is often represented as the country of milk and honey, where overindulgences, excesses, and vices are an inherent part of the culture (Narayan, 1997).

Methodology

The method of content analysis was employed to review ten randomly selected series and movies produced and extensively watched in Western countries.

The population comprised of films and television shows made in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia that involved India or had Indians as main characters in their plots. A database of such films was created using secondary sources of information such as previous literature India Portrayals on Indian films, extensive film reviews in The Internet Movie Database archives, and filmographies about third-world films such as namesake (1999) and Netflix shows such as never have I ever (2007). Seven films and three programmes were chosen from a total population of around 50 films and shows found from these sources. Movies and shows released from **1930 to 2022** have been included for analysis.

Unit of Analysis: The scene analysis compared portrayals of India and Western countries. A scene was defined as a division of the movie and show that presented continuous action in one place or a single unit of dialogue taking place in India or/ and within which Indians appear in the narrative. Dialogue-speaking characters were observed for the entire movies and show.

Common Stereotypes

Representation of Indian actors and Indians in foreign series and movies can vary widely depending on the specific production and the cultural and social context in which it was created. That being said, there are a few common themes and stereotypes that have historically been associated with Indian characters in Western media. One common stereotype is the portrayal of Indians as exotic or otherworldly, often emphasizing their spiritual or mystical beliefs. This can be seen in movies like "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom" or "The Darjeeling Limited," where Indian characters are portrayed as mysterious and mystical figures.

Another common stereotype is the portrayal of Indians as nerdy or socially awkward, often emphasizing their academic or technical skills. This can be seen in TV shows like "The Big Bang Theory," where the character Raj Koothrappali is portrayed as socially inept and overly reliant on technology.

However, in recent years, there has been a push for more diverse and accurate representations of Indians and Indian culture in Western media. This has led to more nuanced portrayals of Indian characters, as well as an increase in the number of Indian actors and creators working in the industry. One trend that has emerged in recent years is the portrayal of Indian characters as complex and multifaceted individuals, rather than relying on stereotypes or caricatures. For example, the Netflix series "Never Have I Ever" features an Indian-American protagonist who is smart, funny, and relatable, with a family and social life that reflects the experiences of many Indian-Americans.

Another trend has been the exploration of issues and themes that are important to the Indian community, such as family dynamics, cultural identity, and social justice. For example, the movie "The White Tiger" examines the impact of class and corruption on a poor Indian driver, while the series "Indian Matchmaker" explores the challenges and opportunities of arranged marriages in modern-day India.

In addition to these trends, there have also been efforts to increase the visibility of Indian characters and culture in Western media. For example, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has introduced several Indian characters, such as Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel) and Priyanka Chopra's role in "Quantico," and the Bollywood musical "Slumdog Millionaire" won several Academy Awards, bringing Indian culture and filmmaking to a global audience.

"Never Have I Ever" (2020) - A Netflix original series created by Mindy Kaling, "Never Have I Ever" follows the life of an Indian-American teenager as she navigates high school, family, and romance. The portrayal of Indian actor and India in "Never Have I Ever" has been largely positive, with the show receiving praise for its authentic and nuanced portrayal of Indian culture and the Indian-American experience.

The show centers around a first-generation Indian-American teenager named Devi Vishwakumar, who is struggling to navigate the challenges of high school while grappling with her Indian heritage. Through Devi's experiences, the show explores themes of identity, family, relationships, and cultural differences in a nuanced and thoughtful way.

The Indian characters in "Never Have I Ever" are portrayed as complex and multi-dimensional, with their cultural heritage being an important part of their identity but not defining them entirely. The show also features authentic portrayals of Indian customs and traditions, such as the celebration of Diwali and the importance of arranged marriages in Indian culture.

"The Big Bang Theory" 2007 - The show has been praised for its positive representation of Indian culture and people, with many Indian-American viewers seeing themselves and their experiences reflected in the show. The show has also been praised for its diverse and inclusive cast, featuring actors from different ethnic backgrounds and sexual orientations.

The portrayal of Indian actor and India in "The Big Bang Theory" has been criticized by some for perpetuating negative stereotypes and caricatures of Indian culture and people. While the show has been praised for its positive depiction of Indian character Raj Koothrappali, it has also been criticized for relying on harmful stereotypes and tropes.

Raj Koothrappali is portrayed as a nerdy and socially awkward astrophysicist who struggles to talk to women, often relying on alcohol to overcome his shyness. While the character is well-liked by fans of the show, however the character perpetuates the stereotype of the "nerdy Indian IT guy" and reinforces the idea that Indian men are socially awkward and have difficulty interacting with women.

The show has also been criticized for its portrayal of Indian culture and customs, with some arguing that the show relies on exoticism and cultural appropriation. For example, in one episode, the characters attend an Indian wedding and engage in cultural appropriation by dressing up in stereotypical Indian clothing and participating in Bollywood-style dance routines.

Overall, the portrayal of Indian actor and India in "The Big Bang Theory" has been a mixed bag, with the show's positive depiction of Raj Koothrappali being offset by negative stereotypes and caricatures of Indian culture and people. While the show has helped to promote greater representation and visibility for Indian actors in Western media, it has also highlighted the need for more authentic and nuanced depictions of Indian culture and people in mainstream media

"Lion" (2016) - The portrayal of Indian actor and India in "Lion" (2016) has been largely positive, with the film receiving critical acclaim for its authentic and nuanced portrayal of Indian culture and the Indian experience.

The film is based on the true story of Saroo Brierley, an Indian boy who becomes separated from his family and is adopted by an Australian couple. The film follows Saroo's journey to find his birth family using Google Earth, and explores themes of identity, family, and cultural differences.

Indian actor Dev Patel plays the adult Saroo Brierley, and his performance has been praised for its sensitivity and depth. The film also features an almost all-Indian cast, with Indian actors playing the members of Saroo's birth family and other characters.

The film's portrayal of Indian culture and customs is authentic and respectful, with the film showcasing the vibrancy and diversity of Indian society. The film also explores the challenges and struggles faced by many Indian children who grow up in poverty and face difficult living conditions.

Overall, the portrayal of Indian actor and India in "Lion" (2016) has been positive, promoting understanding and empathy across cultures and providing a platform for the expression of different perspectives and voices. The film has helped to promote greater representation and diversity in Western media and has contributed to a more nuanced and authentic portrayal of Indian culture and people.

"Slumdog Millionaire" (2008) - A multiple Academy Award-winning film, "Slumdog Millionaire" tells the story of a young Indian man who becomes a contestant on the Indian version of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" and uses his life experiences to answer the questions.

The portrayal of Indian actor and India in "Slumdog Millionaire" has been a topic of controversy and criticism. While the film has been praised for its compelling story and cinematography, it has also been criticized for perpetuating negative stereotypes and caricatures of India and its people.

The film follows the story of Jamal Malik, a young man from the slums of Mumbai who appears on the Indian version of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" in an attempt to find his lost love. Through flashbacks, the film explores Jamal's life growing up in poverty in Mumbai and the challenges he faced along the way.

Indian actors Dev Patel and Freida Pinto play the lead roles in the film, and their performances have been praised for their authenticity and depth. However, the film has been criticized for relying on harmful stereotypes and tropes, such as the portrayal of India as a dirty and chaotic place, and the depiction of Indians as violent and criminal. The film has also been criticized for its title, which some argue perpetuates the idea that Indian people are only valued for their ability to serve Western interests.

Overall, the portrayal of Indian actor and India in "Slumdog Millionaire" has been a mixed bag, with the film's positive aspects being offset by negative stereotypes and caricatures. While the film has helped to bring attention to the issue of poverty in India and has provided a platform for Indian actors in Western media, it has also highlighted the need for more authentic and nuanced depictions of Indian culture and people in mainstream media.

In recent years, there has been a growing push for more diverse and authentic representations of Indian characters in Western media. This has led to an increase in the number of Indian actors and creators working in the industry, as well as more nuanced and accurate portrayals of Indian culture and experiences.

Negative depiction

Unfortunately, there have been many negative depictions of Indian characters in Western media throughout history. Indian characters in foreign movies and TV shows were often portrayed using harmful stereotypes that perpetuated negative and inaccurate narratives about Indian people and culture. Here are some examples of negative depictions of Indian characters in Western media:

Apu from "The Simpsons": has been criticized for perpetuating harmful stereotypes of Indian people. This popular animated TV show features the character Apu Nahasapeemapetilon, a convenience store owner who speaks with a heavy Indian accent and is portrayed as a caricature of Indian culture and people.

"Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom": This movie, set in India, portrays Indian culture as exotic and mystical, and features harmful stereotypes such as the "evil Indian cult" and the "savage Indian tribe."

"The Darjeeling Limited": This movie, directed by Wes Anderson, features a group of white American brothers who travel to India and engage in cultural appropriation and disrespect, perpetuating negative narratives about Indian culture and people.

"Outsourced": This TV show, which aired briefly on NBC, portrayed Indian call center workers as incompetent and bumbling, relying on negative stereotypes and caricatures.

"The Big Bang Theory": While the show has been praised for its positive depiction of Indian character Raj, it has also been criticized for perpetuating harmful stereotypes of Indian culture and people, such as the "arranged marriage" trope and the "nerdy IT guy" stereotype.

Overall, these examples demonstrate the harmful impact of negative depictions of Indian characters in Western media. By perpetuating stereotypes and caricatures, Western media can contribute to negative narratives about Indian culture and people, promoting misunderstanding and prejudice. It is important for Western media to move away from harmful stereotypes and to promote more authentic and nuanced depictions of Indian culture

and people. These stereotypes are harmful because they create negative perceptions of Indian people and culture, reinforce prejudice and discrimination, and limit opportunities for Indian actors and creators in the entertainment industry. While there is still work to be done to ensure that Indian characters and culture are represented accurately and respectfully in Western media, there have been positive steps taken in recent years towards more diverse and inclusive representation.

Positive depiction

While there is still work to be done to ensure that Indian characters and culture are portrayed accurately and respectfully in Western media, there have been positive steps taken in recent years towards more diverse and inclusive representation. These depictions portray Indian culture and people as complex and multi-dimensional, rather than relying on stereotypes and caricatures. Here are some examples of positive depictions of Indian characters in western media:

"The Namesake": This movie, based on the novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, explores the experiences of an Indian-American family and their struggles with identity and belonging. The characters are portrayed with depth and nuance, and their experiences are relatable to audiences of all backgrounds.

"Lion": This movie tells the true story of a young Indian boy who becomes separated from his family and is adopted by an Australian couple. The movie explores themes of identity, family, and belonging, and portrays the Indian characters with empathy and respect.

"The Big Bang Theory": This popular TV sitcom features an Indian character named Raj, who is portrayed as a multi-dimensional and complex individual, rather than a stereotypical caricature. The show often explores themes of cultural differences and misunderstandings in a humorous and lighthearted way.

"The Good Place": This TV series features an Indian character named Chidi, who is portrayed as a thoughtful and intelligent philosopher, rather than a stereotype. The show often explores themes of ethics and morality, and Chidi's character provides a nuanced perspective on these issues.

"Never Have I Ever": This Netflix series created by Mindy Kaling features an Indian-American protagonist named Devi, who navigates the challenges of high school while grappling with her Indian heritage. The show portrays Indian culture in a positive light, and provides an authentic and relatable portrayal of the Indian-American experience.

Overall, these examples demonstrate that positive depictions of Indian characters in foreign movies and shows are possible, and can help to break down stereotypes and promote greater understanding and empathy across cultures.

Role of depictions of Indian characters in foreign media

The role of depictions of Indian characters in Western media is important, as it can shape the perceptions and attitudes of Western audiences towards Indian culture and people. Positive depictions of Indian characters can help to promote greater understanding and empathy across cultures, while negative depictions can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and contribute to prejudice and misunderstanding.

Positive depictions of Indian characters in Western media can help to break down stereotypes and challenge preconceived notions about Indian culture and people. By portraying Indian characters in a nuanced and authentic way, Western media can help to humanize the "other," making it easier for Western audiences to relate to and empathize with Indian culture and people. Positive depictions can also promote cross-cultural exchange and can encourage diversity and inclusion in the entertainment industry.

Negative depictions of Indian characters in Western media can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and caricatures that contribute to negative narratives about Indian culture and people. This can lead to misunderstanding and prejudice, and can contribute to the marginalization of Indian communities in Western societies. Negative depictions can also perpetuate power imbalances between different cultures and can reinforce Western cultural dominance.

Conclusion

The representation of India in Western shows and movies is a complex issue that requires ongoing attention and discussion. While there have been some positive depictions of Indian culture and people, there is still much work to be done to ensure that Indian stories are told with sensitivity, accuracy, and respect.

Positive depictions of Indian characters in foreign media can help to promote greater understanding and empathy across cultures, and can help to build bridges between different communities. By breaking down stereotypes, humanizing the "other," promoting cross-cultural dialogue, and encouraging diversity and inclusion, positive depictions of Indian characters can help to create a more interconnected and empathetic world.

The portrayal of Indians in foreign movies has been complex and varied, with both positive and negative examples throughout the history of Western media. Therefore, It is important for Western media to be mindful of its impact on the world and to promote understanding and empathy across cultures, while also respecting the diversity and complexity of different societies and perspectives.

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