

***Disability or a Personal Lifestyle?
Examining Indian and Foreign Depictions of Obesity in “Double XL” and “The Whale”***

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Abstract

Growing obesity rates are a serious problem among Indigenous populations in several nations throughout the world. Numerous media studies have been done on various elements of obesity, but there hasn't been much research done on how obesity is portrayed in the media, particularly in films. Recent films released from both industries with the underlying theme of obesity are taken as primary sources. *The Whale*, directed by Darren Aronofsky and *Double XL* by Satram Ramani which both came out in 2022, are compared using quantitative content analysis. The paper analyses how obesity is portrayed in Indian and foreign films through a comparative study of contemporary Hollywood(American) and Bollywood(Indian) cinema. The themes explored in this paper are, firstly the framing of obesity in both films, secondly, the social problems faced by obese characters in the film and lastly, how gender roles are defined in the film. Goffman's theory of social stigma which mentally classifies an individual as undesirable based on attributes like physical appearance and deformations is applied in analysing the content of both films through their screenplay and script.

Keywords: Obesity, Film Studies, Content Analysis, Gender Roles

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Introduction

Obesity is a common and complex health issue that has attracted a great deal of attention and concern in today's society. Obesity, defined as the excessive accumulation of body fat, has profound implications for individuals, communities, and healthcare systems. This article will examine the portrayal of obesity in Hollywood and Bollywood, shedding light on how these influential film studios contribute to the discourse on this issue. Obesity is an increasingly important issue considering its multidimensional impact on societal aspects such as physical health, psychological well-being, social mobility and the public. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), obesity has reached epidemic proportions globally, with over 2 billion adults considered overweight, and more than 650 million of them classified as obese, as of 2022 (source: WHO Obesity Fact Sheet). Obesity is not simply a matter of personal identity or behaviour but is closely related to socioeconomic factors, cultural norms, and environmental influences. In today's society, its importance extends beyond personal health, including physical characteristics, self-esteem, and social factors. Understanding how obesity is portrayed in media such as Hollywood and Bollywood is important because it shapes and reinforces public perceptions and attitudes. In this context, portrayals of obesity in popular cinema reflect social attitudes, often reflecting and influencing stereotypes and prejudices. This article will go further into the cinema of portrayals of obesity in Hollywood and Bollywood, including how these portrayals affect public understanding. It will examine how they contribute.

The way in which Hollywood portrays obesity in movies has been influenced by complex cultural and social factors that interact. These factors determine how the industry portrays obesity and can lead to both positive and negative representations. Here are some of the major cultural and social influences on Hollywood's approach to this issue. Cultural beauty standards in Hollywood have long been influenced by Western beauty standards, which tend to prioritize thin and lean bodies. This cultural norm has historically led to the under-casting of obese actors in leading roles. Because of the emphasis on thinness, overweight or obese people can be portrayed as outsiders or comic regressors. Hollywood is a for-profit industry and tends to cater to the wants of the audience. There has been a tendency to present people with traditional norms of attractiveness, which can exclude obese individuals from mainstream roles. This focus on gains can stifle bodies that are portrayed in the movies. Cultural stereotypes surrounding obesity, such as the "happy fat man" or "lazy food" attitude, have influenced Hollywood's portrayal of overweight people. These stereotypes provide misconceptions that persist and can reinforce social biases, making a grandiose tribute more complex and realistically real. Hollywood is careful not to cause controversy or offend audiences. This could cause the film to move away from a truly solid portrayal of obesity, opting for a safe, one-dimensional portrayal that avoids scrutinizing the issue.

Changing Perceptions

Over time, changing social attitudes and the advocacy of body positivity have influenced Hollywood to rethink the way obesity is portrayed. The industry is beginning to reflect attitudes and values revealing changing body image and inclusiveness. Socio-political movements such as body positivity and fat acceptance have led to a rethinking of social attitudes towards obesity. These movements have led Hollywood to include more diverse body types and challenge stereotypes. The increased demand for representation and diversity in the media, spurred by discussions about inclusive representation in the film industry, has changed the image of obesity by way of affecting people all around and calling voices on the

front and back of the camera. There has been a noticeable shift in the way Hollywood portrays obesity in recent years, with some films focusing on the emotional and social challenges faced by obese individuals, painting a sympathetic picture and more true to the industry. This constant change reflects the importance of media in both the expression and formation of cultural norms and values.

Theory

Erving Goffman's theory of social stigma provides a framework for understanding how certain characteristics, including physical appearance, can cause people to be viewed as undesirable in society. In the context of obese characters in the media, especially in movies, Goffman's theory helps analyse the public perception and treatment of obese people.

Goffman's Theory of Social Stigma

Goffman's seminal work, "Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity" (1963), examines how individuals with stigmatized traits navigate social interaction. He defines stigma as an attitude that disqualifies a person from full acceptance in life, resulting in a "tainted personality." He identifies three types of stigma; Physical disgust which involves the body and includes traits such as obesity, character stigma which involves a perceived character flaw or moral failing and racial stigma which involves a person's own race, nationality or religion.

Goffman distinguishes between a person's public identity (as seen by others) and their private identity (as they see themselves). In cinema, obese characters are often swallowed up in society's perception of their bodies, which can affect their self-esteem and perceptions. He discusses how marginalized individuals can experience social isolation and discrimination. In movies, overweight people can face discrimination, ridicule, or discrimination from other people, reflecting social biases and attitudes toward obesity. His theory corresponds to the emotional and psychological struggles of individuals with stigmatized characteristics. Fat characters in movies can internalize social judgment, leading to issues such as low self-esteem, anxiety, desire for social acceptance, etc. Goffman also emphasises how marginalized individuals may struggle to meet social role expectations. Overweight characters in movies may have difficulty playing certain roles (e.g. a romantic hero or heroine), affecting their self-esteem and social acceptance.

Goffman argues that stigma can be a metaphor for deeper issues. In movies, obesity can be used metaphorically to represent emotional struggle, personal growth, or social criticism (Goffman, 1963).

The Whale

"The Whale" is a drama film directed by Darren Aronofsky and released in 2022. The film talks about an obese man named Charlie, portrayed by Brendan Fraser, who tries to reconnect with his daughter while struggling with his health and image issues by seeing himself as a monster (both physically and mentally). As the two try to repair their relationship, the film explores themes of redemption, forgiveness and the intimacy of human relationships. It dives into the protagonist's emotional and physical struggles as he seeks an opportunity to reconcile and understand his loved ones. Obesity is a defining feature of Charlie. His morbid obesity is not only a physical condition but also a metaphor for his emotional and

psychological struggles. His overweight symbolizes his emotional weight and the gravity of his past mistakes.

The film explores the physical challenges of obesity, emphasizing how it limits Charlie's mobility and overall health. It also delves into the social stigma and judgment that often accompanies obesity, as Charlie faces discrimination and prejudice from others. Charlie's obesity is a source of tension in his relationships, especially with his teenage daughter as it reveals his inability to be a good father figure. Charlie struggles with issues of self-esteem, guilt, and a desire to atone for past actions. The main themes also, highlight the complex physical, emotional and social aspects of this situation in the protagonist's life.

Erving Goffman's theory of social stigma can be applied to the character of Charlie in the movie "The Whale" to understand how society perceives and treats obese individuals. Goffman's theory suggests that stigma arises when society labels certain traits or behaviours as socially unacceptable. Being marked and often marginalized, Charlie's obesity gives him a "tainted identity" in the eyes of society. It is mainly recognized by its extra weight, which is its defining characteristic. This stigma affects how he interacts with others, challenging people to see his true self beyond physical appearance. He tries to deal with his stigma by hiding his obesity within his clothes. As the film progresses, however, this strategy becomes more complicated. He also tries to deal with the stigma through interactions with his daughter and tries to be a "good" father despite his physical condition and past actions.

Goffman's theory emphasizes the social isolation and discrimination experienced by marginalized individuals. In the film, Charlie faces prejudice and discrimination because of his obesity. It is often met with hurtful, disapproving and judgmental comments from others, reinforcing the idea that obesity can lead to social isolation and abuse. His theory also resonates with the emotional and cognitive challenges that obese individuals may face. Charlie's weight is a symbol of his emotional burden and past mistakes, and his struggles with self-esteem issues and guilt are evident throughout the film. This is Goffman's idea that individuals who are stigmatized often internalize negative social thoughts, resulting in emotional distress. Goffman's theory describes how individuals with stigmatized traits may struggle to meet social role expectations and maintain self-esteem. In the film, Charlie's obesity affects his ability to be a father and strains his relationship with his daughter. He deals with feelings of inadequacy, reinforcing the effects of stigma on self-esteem and social activities. More importantly, "The Whale" uses Charlie's obesity as a metaphor for his emotional and psychological struggles, including Goffman's idea of stigma as a metaphor for deeper issues, and shows how obesity represents not only his physical condition but the burden of his past actions and regrets.

Double XL

Directed by Satram Ramani, "Double XL" narrates the complex story of two obese women, Saira (played by Sonakshi Sinha) and Rajashree (played by Huma Qureshi), navigating the difficult terrain of social expectations and body criteria. In a society that often refuses to be seen beyond their size, Saira and Rajashree bravely confront widespread beauty standards. Their overlapping stories revolve around pursuing career ambitions from distant life decisions to the hustle and bustle of the city of London. Shedding light on the struggles faced by aspiring sports major Rajashree whose dream is crushed by her mere outward appearance and the weight of life's prejudices. When this resilient couple meet by accident, they find strength and unity in each other's company. Their journey becomes a powerful statement that

challenges conventional notions of beauty and affirms that dreams and aspirations transcend physical appearance. As Saira and Rajashree embark on this empowering journey, "Double XL" explores themes of breaking beauty standards, defying societal expectations, and the sustainable strength that comes from embracing your own identity.

Comparative Analysis

While "Double XL" and "The Whale" both address themes related to body image and societal expectations, they differ significantly in their narratives, characters, and approaches.

1. Genre and Tone

"Double XL" is categorized as a drama and a comedy, meaning a mixture of comedy and serious subject matter. The inclusion of humour suggests that a lighter approach to the topic can be taken and that humour can be used to address social norms. "The Whale" was directed by Darren Aronofsky, which may lean more towards dramatic and psychological elements given Aronofsky's tendency to explore complex and intense themes in his films.

2. Setting and Cultural Context

"Double XL" includes a trip to London, meant to explore different cultures and possibly add elements of globalization. Changes in the environment can affect the expression of social expectations and beauty standards.

3. Characters and Relationships

The main characters in "Double XL" are Saira and Rajashree, plus-sized women who find each other's support as they pursue their dreams. They seem to emphasize the strength of friendship and mutual power. "The Whale" stars him as Charlie, played by Brendan Fraser, whose morbid obesity is the primary metaphor for his emotional and mental struggles. It's about Charlie's inner journey and the impact his weight can have on his relationships.

4. Themes and Message

"Double XL" seems to emphasize the challenges faced by plus-sized individuals in achieving career ambitions and challenging societal norms of beauty. The film may carry a message of empowerment and self-acceptance.

"The Whale" appears to use obesity as a metaphor for emotional burdens and past mistakes. The themes may revolve around redemption, guilt, and the complexities of human relationships.

5. Directorial Style

Satram Ramani, known for his work in the Indian film industry, may bring a distinct Bollywood style to "Double XL," potentially incorporating song and dance sequences and vibrant visuals.

Darren Aronofsky, a renowned Hollywood director, often employs intense and thought-provoking visuals in his films. His directorial style tends to be more dramatic and psychological.

In summary, while both films touch upon themes related to body image and societal expectations, they diverge in terms of genre, setting, characters, and directorial style. "Double XL" seems to blend comedy and drama, highlighting the strength of friendship, empowerment, and cross-cultural experiences, while "The Whale" may delve into the psychological aspects of its protagonist's journey, using obesity as a metaphor for deeper emotional struggles.

Theoretical Framework

Applying Erving Goffman's theory of social stigma to the analysis of "The Whale" and "Double XL" provides insight into how societal perceptions, judgments, and stigmas impact the characters in these films. Goffman's theory focuses on how individuals with stigmatized attributes navigate social interactions, manage their identities, and cope with societal expectations.

1. Visual and Script Analysis

a. "The Whale"

- *Charlie's Reluctance to Face the Public:* Charlie's reluctance to face the public and turning off his webcam during online teaching reflects his internalization of societal stigma. Goffman would argue that Charlie feels the need to manage his spoiled identity by avoiding public scrutiny due to his obesity.
- *Daughter's Fat-Shaming:* Charlie's daughter's fat-shaming can be seen as an externalization of societal attitudes toward obesity. Goffman's theory suggests that individuals with stigmatized attributes may face discrimination not only from society but also within their close relationships, impacting their self-esteem.
- *Self-Sacrifice for Daughter:* Charlie's decision to prioritize saving money for his daughter's future over seeking treatment for himself aligns with Goffman's concept of sacrificing personal well-being to fulfil societal roles. It reflects the internalization of societal expectations and the belief that he deserves to suffer.

b. "Double XL"

- *Parental Pressure on Rajshri:* Rajshri's parents pressuring her to get married quickly due to concerns about her size illustrates the external imposition of societal norms on an individual's life choices. Goffman's theory emphasizes how societal expectations can influence personal decisions and aspirations.
- *Sports Channel Interview Rejection:* Rajshri being denied a sports channel interview based on her size reflects the externalization of societal judgments. Goffman would argue that the rejection is a manifestation of societal norms regarding appearance affecting opportunities, reinforcing the stigma associated with obesity.
- *Saira's Relationship Struggles:* Saira's decision to tolerate her model boyfriend's infidelity due to societal beauty standards aligns with Goffman's concept of managing one's identity to fit societal expectations. Saira's belief that she can't find a more attractive boyfriend highlights the internalization of societal beauty ideals.

2. Goffman's Key Concepts

- **Public and Private Identities:** Both films depict characters grappling with the contrast between their public and private identities. Charlie and Rajshri experience challenges in presenting themselves publicly due to societal stigmas, leading to the need to manage their identities.
- **Stigma as a Metaphor:** In "The Whale," Charlie's obesity becomes a metaphor for deeper emotional struggles, with societal stigma contributing to his reluctance to face the public. In "Double XL," Rajshri's rejection from the sports channel interview reflects how societal stigmas limit opportunities based on appearance.
- **Role Expectations:** Charlie's self-sacrifice for his daughter's future and Rajshri's pressure to get married quickly illustrate the impact of societal role expectations on individual decisions, aligning with Goffman's concept of role expectations affecting behaviour.

In conclusion, analysing "The Whale" and "Double XL" using Goffman's theory shows how the social stigma of obesity influences the characters' behaviours, choices, and interpersonal relationships. The theory provides a framework for understanding the complex development of one's identity managed in the face of social expectations and decisions.

Conclusion

The movies "Double XL" and "The Whale" present different approaches to obesity, reflecting individual reactions to social stigma. "Double XL" discusses self-acceptance, trust and dignity as a way to overcome the associated social judgment which is strong. In contrast, "The Whale" shows a character who has internalized social cynicism. He sees himself as a "sick monster" unworthy of happiness because of his obesity. The application of Erving Goffman's theory of social stigma to these narratives reveals that the profound impact of social perceptions on individual experiences. In the "Double XL". People like Saira and Rajashree are examples of disregard for social norms. They are opposed There are standards of beauty that emphasize the importance of self-confidence, for example, Goffman's concept of monitoring one's identity in the face of external measures. On the other hand, "The Whale" shows a character, Charlie, who internalizes life The stigma of seeing herself as unworthy of happiness because of obesity. Goffman's theory helps Explore how social norms can profoundly affect an individual's emotions, and have consequences. Feelings of inadequacy and sacrifice.

The importance of social exclusion is a recurring theme in both films, mirroring Goffman's theme They emphasized the impact of stigma on an individual's interactions in society. In "double". XL," the characters face social rejection but find strength in self-acceptance and each other support. The social discrimination Charlie faces in "The Whale" isn't just outside though. internalized, emphasizing the pervasive impact of social stigma on Individual well-being. It should be noted that unlike Hollywood, Bollywood is not a single entity, it is an image Obesity and understatement can vary greatly from film to film. While some movies. perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices, others challenge these values and seek to promote the body's Positive and self-acceptance. In conclusion, the films offer small perspectives on how individuals navigate through life Stigma associated with obesity. "Double XL" promotes empowerment storytelling Through self-acknowledgement, while "The Whale" explores the

negative effects of being an addict Social Decisions. Goffman's theory provides an in-depth analysis of the same. The complexity and depth of managing one's identity in the face of social expectations The impact of social discrimination on personal experiences. Ultimately, these films contribute to. An ongoing conversation about body image, social norms and the importance of kissing Stories that challenge conventional beauty standards.

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