

The Wishing Well: Harnessing Bollywood's Motivational Arc as a Framework for Participatory Design

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Abstract

In India, few mediums shape public imagination as profoundly as Bollywood. Producing over 1,000 films and billions of views annually, it generates social scripts influencing how people dream, love, resist, and succeed. This study explores the intersection of visual communication, participatory design, and motivation by adapting Bollywood's signature arc of triumph into an interactive public installation. A comparative analysis of ten iconic films was done to identify common narrative motivators such as self-discovery, activated desires, and visualised victories, that inspire protagonists to achieve goals. An attempt to induce these motivators in real-life scenarios was made through The Wishing Well, an interactive installation presented at the India Film Project, Mumbai. A six-foot cardboard well was erected, where participants wrote personal wishes on origami paper boats and released them into the well, symbolising an external motivator event. This was followed by a digital questionnaire designed to introduce remaining motivators through guided self-reflection, prompting participants to reframe their passive "Wish" as an active "Goal." To reinforce this transformation, a personalised Goal-book was sent to the participants. It consisted of psychological and behavioural frameworks, customised according to the participants' responses, using AI. The installation engaged 450+ participants, with 40 interviewed based on completion/engagement criteria. Thematic analysis showed that 95% reported increased belief in their ability to fulfil their wish, and 87.5% gained a more actionable perspective of their Goal. The study demonstrates strong replicable potential by underscoring how culturally rooted media narratives can be harnessed to influence mindset and design behaviour change frameworks.

Keywords: participatory art, art installation, Bollywood

Introduction

The Wishing Well is an installation was created for the India Film Project at Mehboob Studios, Mumbai, where the year's central theme was Bollywood. The conceptual foundation of the work drew from a narrative structure deeply embedded in mainstream Hindi cinema: the "hero's journey." While originally articulated through Joseph Campbell's (1949) monomyth, the structure has been widely adapted in Bollywood films, where protagonists frequently encounter adversity, experience pivotal turning points, and ultimately achieve their goals. These turning points—moments that redirect the hero, reignite motivation, or clarify purpose—formed the basis of this installation's conceptual focus. The intention was to examine whether such "motivators," commonly used in cinematic storytelling to propel fictional characters forward, could be translated into a real-life context through participatory art.

The installation, titled *The Wishing Well*, reimagined the familiar Indian superstition of tossing a coin into a well to make a wish. Rather than using a coin, participants were asked to fold an origami paper boat and write their wish on it before placing it into the installation. This twist served multiple purposes. First, handmaking the boat required time, attention, and a degree of personal investment, deepening the emotional connection to the act of wishing. Second, the process of writing the wish was intended to cognitively solidify the goal in the participant's mind, a phenomenon supported by research in goal-setting and self-regulation, where articulating a goal has been shown to enhance clarity, commitment, and perceived attainability (Gollwitzer, 1999; Locke & Latham, 2002). Ritualized actions, even simple ones, can also strengthen emotional grounding and perceived control, contributing to higher motivation (Norton & Gino, 2014).

The theoretical framing for the installation was grounded in established discussions on participatory art and relational engagement. Claire Bishop (2012) identifies participatory installations as artworks in which participants become co-creators of meaning, while Nicolas Bourriaud's (2002) notion of relational aesthetics positions these works as social encounters that can influence affect and interpersonal connection. These frameworks suggest that participatory installations have the capacity to generate emotional shifts, foster personal reflection, and potentially shape short-term psychological states. Building upon these ideas, *The Wishing Well* attempted to explore whether such artistic environments could evoke small but meaningful motivational effects.

The installation's design intentionally layered symbolic, narrative, and behavioral components: a Bollywood-inspired narrative arc; a culturally rooted ritual of wish-making; and a crafted object that functioned as a vessel for participants' goals. The combination of these elements aimed to simulate the kind of motivational "push" often portrayed in cinema, a moment where the hero regains clarity, hope, or determination. In this context, participants were positioned as the protagonists of their own micro-narratives, engaging in a symbolic gesture that mirrored the motivational beats found in films.

To understand the impact of the experience, participant responses were recorded during the event, and a subset of approximately 40 individuals (around 10% of total participants) were selected to complete a survey evaluating changes in their belief about achieving the wish they placed into the installation. This provided an opportunity to examine whether the participatory ritual generated a temporary increase in perceived self-efficacy or motivation. Follow-up conversations were conducted several months later to assess the longevity of the experience,

whether participants recalled the activity, whether it continued to hold meaning, and whether the motivational effect persisted beyond the immediate moment.

By integrating narrative theory, motivational psychology, and participatory art practice, this project sought to explore how artistic interventions might create brief but impactful motivational experiences. The installation also aimed to contribute toward early inquiry into how creative and symbolic actions, particularly those embedded in culturally familiar narratives may influence belief formation, emotional engagement, and small-scale behavioral intention.

Figure 1

The Wishing Well Art Installation



Research

We watched over 50 bollywood movies in different Genres and shortlisted ten, where the theme was similar. The protagonist wishing for something and eventually fulfilling their wish. We tracked the protagonist's storyline and identified motivators that pushed them to fulfilling their wish.

Table 1

List of Movies Included in Research

Movie	Summary	Genre/Year
Wake Up Sid	A directionless young man discovers responsibility and purpose through self-growth and new perspectives.	Coming-of-age, Drama (2009)
Bhaag Milkha Bhaag	An athlete transforms personal trauma into extraordinary discipline to become a national champion.	Biographical Sports Drama (2013)
Om Shanti Om	A reincarnated actor seeks justice and fulfills unfinished destiny through courage and persistence.	Musical Drama, Romantic Thriller (2007)

Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara	Three friends confront fears and rediscover themselves on a transformative road trip.	Adventure, Drama, Coming-of-age (2011)
Udaan	A teenager breaks free from an abusive environment to pursue his dreams and reclaim his identity.	Coming-of-age, Drama (2010)
Gully Boy	A young man from the slums rises through self-belief and expression to become a celebrated rapper.	Musical Drama (2019)
Rocket Singh	An honest salesman builds an ethical company from scratch by valuing trust over shortcuts.	Comedy-Drama (2009)
Mary Kom	A determined woman overcomes societal and personal obstacles to become a world boxing champion.	Biographical Sports Drama (2014)
Chandni Chowk to China	A humble cook discovers his hidden potential when he is mistaken for a legendary warrior and thrust into an unexpected hero's journey.	Action Comedy, Martial Arts (2009)
Chak De! India	A former hockey player redeems himself by uniting a diverse women's team and leading them to world championship victory.	Drama (2007)

The motivators identified in the movies were:

1. Future-State Visualization
Helps individuals articulate the personal significance of achieving their goal, strengthening intrinsic motivation.
2. Success Simulation
Guides individuals to imagine the exact moment their goal is fulfilled, creating a vivid emotional anchor that motivates action.
3. Time-Bound Goal Structuring
Encourages individuals to set a clear, time-bound target that converts an intention into a concrete, trackable goal.
4. Immediate Action Trigger
Prompts individuals to identify one small step they can take today to overcome inertia and begin moving forward.
5. Dedicated Time Allocation
Asks individuals to commit a specific amount of time each day, ensuring consistent progress and reinforcing discipline.
6. Barrier Mapping
Helps individuals identify their biggest barrier, enabling more realistic planning and proactive problem-solving.
7. Future-State Visualization
Helps individuals articulate the personal significance of achieving their goal, strengthening intrinsic motivation.

Installation Process

The Structure

The physical structure of the Wishing Well was designed as both a sculptural centrepiece and a functional surface for holding hundreds of participant wishes. To evoke the symbolic act of releasing a wish into water, the installation was built around a circular well form from which three dynamic waves emerged, rising to heights of approximately 3.5 feet, 3 feet, and 1.5 feet. Each wave was constructed using layered cardboard sheets, carefully cut and assembled to create flowing, upward-moving contours that suggested motion and buoyancy. For the body of the well, foam sheets were cut into precise half-inch triangular segments, allowing them to tessellate seamlessly and create a textured, stone-like surface. During early prototyping, brick-like modules were tested, but given the technical complexity of integrating them with the curved wave forms, the design shifted to a column-based internal support structure to stabilise the overall piece while keeping the construction process efficient. The origami boats, the central interactive element were designed using 5-inch square sheets, an ideal size for folding while remaining visually prominent on the installation. Based on surface measurements and placement tests, it was calculated that the completed structure could accommodate over 400 boats across the wave surfaces and the inner well walls. Together, the combination of dimensional waves, modular foam detailing, and structural columns created a visually striking, sturdy, and highly interactive installation that could withstand continuous public engagement throughout the event.

Figure 2

Making of the Well

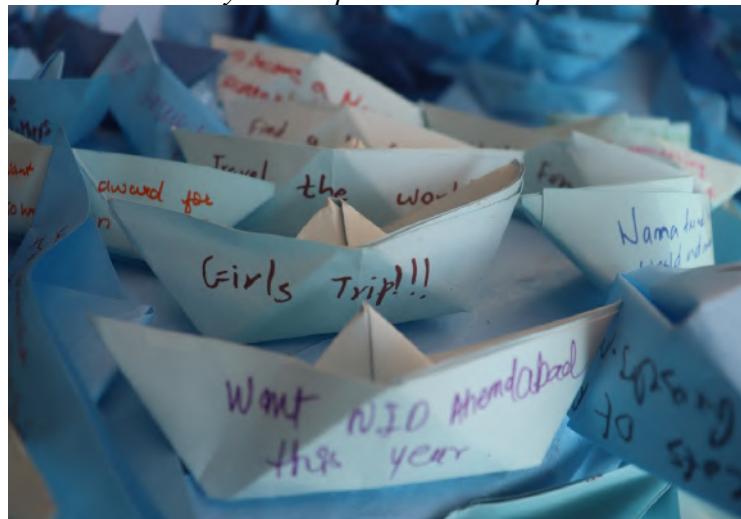


The Experience

The interaction began with participants folding a paper boat, encouraging them to engage physically and personally with the installation. They were then invited to write their wish on the boat following simple criteria, specifically, that the wish be achievable and personally meaningful.

Figure 3*Participants Making the Paper Boat*

Once written, the boats were placed inside the large sculptural “wishing well” using pre-cut double-sided tape, symbolising the externalisation of their intention. After this, participants scanned a QR code that informed them that by articulating their wish, they had already taken the first step toward converting it into a goal, and that the next stage would help them work toward fulfilling it.

Figure 4*Wishes Written by Participants on the Paper Boats*

The digital questionnaire that followed prompted them to rethink their wish through guided reflection; identifying actionable steps, setting a deadline, visualising the outcome, and selecting small tasks they could begin immediately. This moment of structured introspection represented the most critical mindset shift in the experience. Upon completing the digital journey, each participant received an “All the Best” card featuring an iconic movie quote about perseverance, offering a tangible reminder of their commitment. Finally, they were sent a personalised plan that outlined actionable tasks and strategies, drawn from psychological and behavioural frameworks to help them stay consistent and accountable in working toward their newly defined goal.

Figure 5*Participants Adding the Boat to the Well***Digital Survey**

After the boat was added to the installation by the participant, they were asked to scan a QR code near the installation, leading to a digital survey. Here the participant was guided to go through a deeper thought process regarding their wish. At the end of the survey, participants were given a printed card with a movie quote regarding fulfilling of wishes.

Table 2*Questions Asked in Survey, and Their Corresponding Motivators*

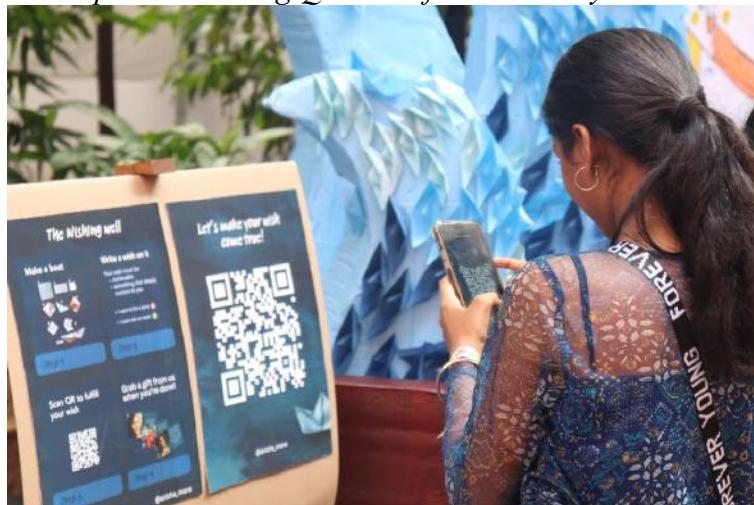
Question	Motivator	Description	Type
What will achieving this goal mean for you?	Future-State Visualization	Helps individuals articulate the personal significance of achieving their goal, strengthening intrinsic motivation.	Multiple Select
Take a minute and imagine the exact moment when your goal is fulfilled. What is the first thing you would do after that?	Success Simulation	Guides individuals to imagine the exact moment their goal is fulfilled, creating a vivid emotional anchor that motivates action.	Open Ended
Give yourself a deadline to reach this goal.	Time-Bound Goal Structuring	Encourages setting a clear, time-bound target to convert an intention into a concrete, trackable goal.	Date Format
What is one thing you can start today to take a step closer to your goal?	Immediate Action Trigger	Prompts individuals to identify one small step they can take today to overcome inertia and begin moving forward.	Open Ended

How much time can you give daily to active this goal?	Dedicated Time Allocation	Asks individuals to commit a specific amount of time each day, ensuring consistent progress and reinforcing discipline.	Multiple Choice
Where lies the biggest obstacle to this journey?	Barrier Mapping	Helps individuals identify their biggest barrier, enabling more realistic planning and proactive problem-solving.	Multiple Select

Figure 7
Digital Design of the Survey

The digital survey is titled "Welcome to the wishing well!" and features a paper boat icon throughout. It consists of eight screens:

- Screen 1:** Welcome message with "I'm Ready!" button.
- Screen 2:** Quotation: "When you write down a wish, it becomes a goal." Includes a note: "By writing your wish on the boat, you have solidified your intention towards it. It is no longer a wish. It is now a goal. A goal you have to fulfill for yourself!" with "Let's Do This!" button.
- Screen 3:** Question: "What will achieving this goal mean for you? *". Options (checkboxes): Increased confidence, Improved skills or knowledge, Better physical or mental well-being, A sense of accomplishment, A change in lifestyle, Recognition or validation from others, Other. The "Improved skills or knowledge" and "A change in lifestyle" options are checked.
- Screen 4:** Question: "What will achieving this goal mean for you? *". Options (checkboxes): Increased confidence, Improved skills or knowledge, Better physical or mental well-being, A sense of accomplishment, A change in lifestyle, Recognition or validation from others, Other. The "Improved skills or knowledge" and "A change in lifestyle" options are checked.
- Screen 5:** Question: "Take a minute and imagine the exact moment when your goal is fulfilled." Includes a note: "What is the first thing you would do after that?".
- Screen 6:** Question: "Give yourself a deadline to reach this goal. *". Includes a date input field (MM/DD/YYYY) and a note: "A goal is a dream with a deadline." - Napoleon Hill".
- Screen 7:** Question: "What is one thing you can start today to take a step closer to your goal? *". Includes a text input field and a note: "Those Who Set Actionable Tasks For Their Goals Tend To Achieve 40% More Than Those Who Did Not."
- Screen 8:** Question: "Where lies the biggest obstacle to this journey? *". Options (checkboxes): Inside Me (mental block), Outside Me (External reasons). The "Inside Me (mental block)" option is checked. Includes a note: "Recognising obstacles is the first step to solving them."

Figure 8*Participants Scanning QR Code for the Survey*

Goal Book

Based on their answers, we created a custom goalbook for every participant that aimed to rebuild the typical bollywood story, but put the participant as a protagonist. We included the participants answers, and also added Focus areas, Resources, Activites, Objectives and Key results for the participants to follow.

The Goalbook script was as follows:

Hey [Participant Name]! A paper boat with a wild dream reached us a few Months ago... We were amazed how a light paper could hold a dream so big. It was because the person making the boat was also the one dreaming it. [Participant Dream, as written on Boat.] We unfolded it with love, and we heard out your fears, celebrations and thoughts around it. You said that the biggest obstacle to your journey is [Participant Answer- Where lies the biggest obstacle to this journey?] Here's some ways we can overcome that: Build a Support System. Find Dreamers (to dream with you), Doers (to help you execute) and Realists (to give feedback). Identify and work on focus areas. [Custom Focus Areas, Activities and Resources generated using AI.] What sets you apart from other dreamers might be the Actions you do: Monthly Check-In Plan Every month, set one Objective and 3 Key Results: [Custom Objectives and 3 Key results.] Every big goal starts with a small step... [Participant Answer- What is one thing you can start today to take a step closer to your goal?] You gave us a date when your boat will grow wings and fly... [Participant Answer- Give yourself a deadline to reach this goal]. And then, a well earned celebration for an meaningful victory! [Participant Answer- Take a minute and imagine the exact moment when your goal is fulfilled. What is the first thing you would do after that?] Maybe you grow with the process, not the result! All the best on your journey! See you on the other side of your success! Your wish lives on with us, Forever!

Figure 9
Goalbook Pages



Results

The installation received an encouraging level of engagement, with 453 individuals interacting with the Wishing Well and 218 completing the digital reflection form that followed. Of these, 40 participants were further interviewed based on their level of engagement, providing richer qualitative insight. The quantitative findings indicate a strong impact: 87.5% of respondents reported that the experience helped them rethink their initial wish in a more practical and inspiring way, suggesting the effectiveness of the narrative reframing techniques embedded in the design. Moreover, 95% noted an increased belief in their ability to achieve the goal they articulated, highlighting the installation's ability to activate internal motivation through a culturally familiar narrative structure. Together, these results reinforce the potential of the Wishing Well as a scalable, behaviour-shaping intervention grounded in the emotional logic of Bollywood storytelling.

Some interviews were later conducted with the participants:

The activity of making boats reminded me of my childhood, and took me back to all the dreams I'd seen for myself back then. Then, solving the form and turning my wishes into reality made me want to do it for my childhood self.

I had written a wish to perform at this event next year. When attending an open mic event, they offered for anyone to come onstage and perform. because my goal was already in my mind due to the installation, I got the courage to come forward, and got my wish fulfilled within a day itself!

Conclusion

The qualitative and quantitative findings of the study collectively indicate that The Wishing Well was successful in generating measurable shifts in participants' motivational states. Survey responses revealed that a substantial majority of participants reported an increased belief in their ability to achieve the goals they articulated during the installation. This heightened sense of self-efficacy immediately following the experience suggests that symbolic, participatory actions such as crafting an origami boat, inscribing a wish, and engaging with a culturally resonant ritual can function as meaningful psychological triggers.

Importantly, the follow-up interviews conducted six months after the installation further affirmed the durability of this effect. Participants frequently described the experience as memorable and personally significant, noting that the process had provided clarity on their aspirations and accelerated their engagement with their goals. Many recalled the act of goal-setting within the installation as a pivotal moment that helped them organize their thoughts, confront barriers, and adopt a more proactive mindset. The personalized Goal-Book, designed using their initial responses, emerged as a particularly influential tool; participants described it as a practical guide that offered structure, consistency, and a renewed sense of direction in the months following the event.

Together, these findings highlight the unique capacity of participatory art to shape motivational experiences, especially when grounded in cultural narratives that hold deep emotional resonance. By drawing from Bollywood's symbolic language of triumph, struggle, and self-transformation, the installation created a narrative environment in which participants could momentarily cast themselves as protagonists in their own journeys. This interplay between cinema-inspired symbolism and ritualized artistic participation underscores the broader potential of visual art to influence belief formation, goal clarity, and behavioral intention. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that when thoughtfully designed, artistic interventions can serve not only as aesthetic experiences but as catalysts for meaningful psychological change.

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