

# **Cinema Audiences and Reception in Lahore: A Retrospective Study**

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## **Abstract**

When the history of Pakistani cinema is discussed, studies largely focus on narrating and justifying its instability. Reasons cited for this instability often pertain to changes in political climate, availability of new technologies and a tabooed view of cinema by the bourgeois (Rizvi 2008). However, such studies often overlook the audience. To date, there have been no studies specific to Pakistan that present a longitudinal view of audience reception of cinema. This study looks at how audiences perceived the cinema in Pakistan, particularly in the 1960s to 1980s, and how socio-demographic factors, such as gender and class, shaped their film-viewing practices. The study also focuses on defining what “obscenity” and “family films” mean within the Pakistani context, and how these definitions have possibly changed over time. Field research at the famous Lakshmi Chowk, once a focal point of entertainment in Lahore, also brings to light how time and shifts in the social climate changed the crowds that inhabited these spaces. This study finds, for example, that watching films in a cinema has always been a communal experience for men. In the 1960s, 1970s and well into the 1980s, film acted as a form of escapism for many. At the same time, during the Bhutto and Zia eras, Punjabi film came to be associated with vulgarity, while a massive shift in film content during the 1980s, disengaged the existing audience and created new expectations of Urdu film. This study examines audiences from different eras and attempts to outline the reasons for these shifts in audience perception.

Keywords: Audience Reception of Cinema; Film-viewing Practices; Pakistani Cinema; Family Films; Cinema in Lahore; Lollywood

## **Introduction**

Pakistani cinema, also referred to as Lollywood, peaked in terms of film production during the 1960s and 1970s. With 124 films and around 1300 operational cinemas, the year 1970 is referred to as the height of the golden age of Pakistani cinema (Bilal 2015). Stars such as Waheed Murad, Mohammad Ali and Sabiha Khanoum were at its forefront. In 1971, the Bangladesh Liberation War led to secession of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, from the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. This was itself a substantial blow to the film industry, as Pakistani Bengal was home to talented technicians, musicians, actors, directors as well as a major market for the film industry (Noorani 2016). Following General Zia’s claim to power in 1978, the entertainment industry regressed

further with strict censorship laws suddenly in-place. The end of Zia's dictatorship in 1988, however, did not drastically improve the rate of production of the Pakistani film industry. In 2005, for example the film industry only released 20 films. While the ups and downs of Pakistani cinema have been well-documented, there is not much literature on how the cinema as a body of entertainment was perceived by the public, and how that perception has changed over time.

Studies have attributed a number of reasons as to why Pakistani cinema is perceived to have "declined" in the eyes of cinemagoers. These reasons include, but are not limited to, Islamisation, introduction of the VCR and pirated films, and the taboo associated with viewing Pakistani cinema (Rizvi 2010). However, there is no formal study on how the audience has received film texts over time, and how this reception has affected what film they can comfortably watch in a cinema. By conducting a reception study on the public perception of cinema, one can identify patterns in how people define what is "appropriate" to watch and what is "obscene", as well as what a viewer would be comfortable seeing with their families.

Reception studies in cinema have been defined as identifying "complex ways in which media viewing is inextricably embedded in a whole range of everyday practices and is itself partly constitutive of those practices" (Silverstone et al. 1991). A reception study provides a way of understanding media texts by seeing how they have been understood by their audiences. In the context of Pakistani film, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the class and gender dynamics of people who frequent cinemas have fluctuated with time. No studies have been found which look at the audience to see how sociopolitical factors such as class and gender have shaped the cinematic experience for Pakistanis and developed the persona of an average Pakistani film viewer.

By conducting this study, I aim to understand film viewing practices and link them to the sociological contexts of different time periods. Moreover, I aim to identify underlying socioeconomic/gender hierarchies, which further help define the expectations of cinemagoers based on their demographics. Given this, there are certain aspects of film reception that I would like to address. To begin with, I would like to work towards providing some structured definition of what a "family film" is in Pakistan. This would entail decoding what is classified as vulgar or obscene, and how this definition varies by the film consumer's social demographics. Furthermore, I study how factors, including class and gender, shaped film-viewing practices. Studying the family film and notions of vulgarity help in understanding the expectations of viewers, based on their social demographics, and enable people working within the film industry to tailor their content according to the expectations of their target audience. This study also adds dimension to existing literature on the history of the Pakistani film and cinema industry and highlights the audience's perspective of how history and film interacted with one another.

This study engages with three major bodies of existing literature. Firstly, it aims to highlight existing research on Pakistani cinema's rocky economics, and what factors played into it. The economic state of the cinema is important to discuss, as reviewed literature views the decline in film production as a general decline of the cinema industry. Secondly, the study refers to existing media studies to bring light to comparable social ideas about the cinema. Lastly, as the notion of vulgarity is central to this paper's research, it will see how "decency" and vulgarity are defined in South Asia. This will act as a point of comparison to how vulgarity is defined within Pakistan's specific social context.

## The Ages and Stages of Pakistani Cinema

While there is existing research on Pakistani cinema, Pakistani audiences and reception has not been studied in-depth. Studies have traced the changing nature of Pakistani cinema and the film industry, as well as the factors that went behind it. In one study, the reasons for the alleged decline of Pakistani cinema were analyzed quantitatively. Questionnaires were sent to people living in the major cities of Pakistan. The study found that most people watch Indian movies on a regular basis. In contrast, the participants in the study claimed that Pakistani films were “subpar” due to a multitude of reported factors, including obsolete technology, uninspired direction, poor acting, poor writing, lack of relatability and political instability (Khan et al. 2015).

A number of film researchers have traced the history of Pakistani cinema and divided it into time periods (Gazdar 1997; Mandviwalla 2005; Khan & Ahmad 2016). In general, these studies have commonly identified four to five main eras of Pakistani cinema. The first era included the “monopoly years” for cinema from 1947 to 1966 and signified steady growth of film production. During General Ayub’s regime (1958-1969), film was a growing industry with production rates rising from 11 to 48 per annum. This was followed by what is often referred to as “the golden era” for the Pakistani film industry (1967-1977). During Yahya Khan’s dictatorship (1969-1971), 100 films were being produced per year. During Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s regime (1971-1977), a rate of 114 films per year was maintained despite the strained political climate because of the prisoners of war (POW) crisis due to the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971.

Following this, the years 1977 to 1988 were seen as the “era of decline” as the number of Urdu films per annum dropped significantly due to Zia-ul-Haq’s Islamization policies (Rizvi 2010). Moreover, taxation, religious and political policing and censorship led to minimal investment in filmmaking and a cap on creativity (Bilal). As a result, a significant number of production houses and cinemas were shut down. Media piracy and the introduction of the VCR exacerbated the situation with pirated Indian and other foreign films becoming easily accessible to the masses. The era of deregulation and privatization took place between 1988 to 2001. Satellite television was introduced in 1990, further facilitating piracy of foreign films as television channels entered a race for broadcasting pirated versions and camera prints of new Indian releases. Adding to this was the proliferation of pirated films on CDs and DVDs. During his regime, General Pervez Musharraf (1999-2008), began to introduce favorable film policies in an attempt to open up the market. In 2007, Shoaib Mansoor’s *Khuda Kay Liye* was released; the film is used as a reference point for the beginning of a New Pakistani Cinema (Hamid 2017).

## Culturally Relevant Media Studies

This research engages with two studies to add dimension to its findings. The first study was an audience reception study conducted in India, the largest producer of feature films in the world (Srinivas 2001). Srinivas’ particular study, with a focus on film reception in the public sphere, has many similarities with the findings of this paper, and by relating the shared ideas between these studies, we can understand the South Asian mindset on a transnational scale. Some of the major ideas identified by Srinivas include the creation of habituated audiences for large-scale commercial films, the need for *masala* (spice) in film texts, the importance of physical beauty, the communal

experience at the cinema, and the audience's idea of what is decent and appropriate to watch within the cinema. This study will engage with these ideas further into the paper.

The second study is regarding Parsi theatre in South Asia, and issues of visibility faced by women within this industry (Hansen 1999). Within Parsi theatre, cross-dressing men and Jewish women dominated portrayals of local women, as it was believed that local women themselves were not allowed to partake in theatre. Hansen's research is important to this paper due to its discussion of social performances, and the need to keep women away from public view as a matter of "respectability." This will be explored by the paper as part of understanding why cinema was seen as a gendered space, and how there are gendered narratives regarding the visibility of women within these spaces.

Similarly, as a central focus of this study is to define how Pakistanis classify film and its text as family friendly, it is important to understand how obscenity may be defined in other countries within South Asia, where similar cultural norms are followed. Hoek presents a structured definition of *oshlil* (Bengali word for obscenity), which is "the representation of sexuality in ways that are considered socially and morally unacceptable" (Hoek 2013). Interestingly, Hoek explains that, in essence, *oshlil* relies on lack of availability and temporality to incite controversy. Moreover, cut-pieces (films that rely on obscenity to entice viewers) are considered disrespectful and markers of "low social class" and a "[lack of] sophistication" (Hoek 2013).

Studies of obscenity in Bengal found that this notion came from social transformations to gender, class and race, brought by colonial rule (Leah 2003). The ideas that came under obscenity shifted from merely displays of sexuality and visibly notable boundaries, towards more of an internal feeling of "decency" and "grace," which was crucial to "women of respectable class" (Hoek). Moreover, religious scholars were not relying on defined values within religion, rather on culturally defined notions of decency (Huq 1999). Combined, this painted a picture of the upper class, respectable woman whose body was covered and gaze downcast. In contrast, nudity depicted poverty, lack of morality and desperation. What can be derived from this information is that there exists a classist dialectic, where family films not only depend on what socio-economic class of people view the film, but that there exists an intersectional idea of class and gender which the viewer decodes from the film. This structure plays a substantial role in the acceptability of a film's ideas, and how appropriate a film is to watch, and by which gender.

Athique looks at the dynamic shift from conventional cinemas to modern multiplexes. Athique's work traces how cinema crowds were formed over the decades in India. Initially, the cinema was a space reserved for the elite, as they existed only in privileged areas. With time, more cinemas sprung up and were made accessible to all. However, the pre-existing culture of class-based exclusion within India led to class-based segregation within cinemas. Gender-based segregation soon followed (Athique 2011). "Respectable women" meeting "unrespectable men" at cinemas was an anxiety of the middle-class audience. In the 1970s in India, families and women were no longer frequenting cinemas. Instead, the cinema became a space for young men from lower social classes, which in turn led to a shift in film content. The advent of multiplexes meant that the middle class and upper middle class finally had spaces that excluded the "cheap crowd." Ethnographic research in a multiplex in Baroda found that the presence of a "decent crowd" was a significant reason for many to watch movies there (Athique 2011).

The existence of classist structures within Pakistani society has also been studied. Kirk discusses an existing hierarchy of linguistic hegemony, where English was dominantly perceived as the language of the upper classes, followed by Urdu. Punjabi is the regional language of Punjab, as well as the most widely spoken language in Pakistan. Despite this, it is considered crude and associated with the lower class. This perception was reflected in the audience consumption, as local Punjabi films mostly played in working-class areas. Cineplexes were associated with the bourgeois and predominantly foreign films. It was also noted that these bourgeois spaces employed informal ways of policing what kind of people co-existed within these spaces (Kirk 2018). Similar hierarchies may have existed in cinema-going practices over time.

## **Methodology and Findings**

This study employs a qualitative framework for the reception study and data analysis. Theoretically, this study uses the encoding and decoding model of communication, which can be used to explain how socio-demographic factors influence how media texts are decoded by an audience. The encoding and decoding model of communication was an approach developed by Stuart Hall. This theory empowers the audience, as it claims that media presents encoded messages to its audience that will be decoded by the media's audience based on the audience member's social context (Hall 1980). Using this theory, we can speculate that reception of any film is largely dependent on the dominant political, social and religious beliefs of that era, as well as the socio-economic class of the viewer.

The methodology to understand how cinema was received has multiple layers that need to be addressed. Interviews are conducted to trace back the changes in attitude towards cinema. For this purpose, people were interviewed regarding their experiences with film and cinema from the 1960s to the 1980s. A degree of diversity was necessary to obtain different reference points, hence people of different classes and genders were selected. A total of 21 people was interviewed. Of these 21 people, eleven were men and ten were women. The age of the men ranged from 44 to approximately 80 years. The age of the women ranged from 45 years to 70 years. This age group allowed the study to obtain varying perspectives from different time periods. Out of the eleven men, seven belonged to the middle class at the time of their narrated memories, one belonged to the upper-middle class and three belonged to the lower middle class. Similarly, five of the women belonged to the middle class, four of the women were upper-middle class and one woman was lower-middle class. The informants' socioeconomic classes were self-reported.

Lakshmi Chowk in Lahore was once the heart of the Pakistani entertainment industry, with many production houses and historical cinemas still located there (Bilal 2015). Some of these age-old cinemas are still in operation, playing mostly Punjabi films. Reception studies within film can be aided by contextual inquiries to better understand the construction and dynamics of the spaces being studied. Therefore, to add a holistic view of public attitudes towards the cinema, workers at these sites were interviewed. Most of the workers in these cinemas are veterans in their field. People who have worked at cinemas for a long time can act as sources of valuable information regarding how the crowds in cinemas have changed. The interview data is then analyzed qualitatively, and the research questions presented by this paper are answered with the information collected.

Some limitations of this study included getting a reasonable diversity of people from different socioeconomic backgrounds with different mindsets. Most people interviewed belonged to the middle class. Women were not generally hesitant to discuss their cinema experience, however a few of them were not comfortable discussing incidents that occurred at the cinema. Moreover, most of the men were not comfortable with discussing the meaning of vulgarity and obscenity candidly. They seemed to moderate the information they were providing. Workers at the cinemas refused to share their identities or allow their interviews to be recorded. One worker disclosed that he feared repercussions from his employer, who had strictly warned him not to let people take pictures of the inside. It was important to take note of any ethical concerns and to keep all information transparent to the study participants to ensure their informed consent. No names are disclosed of the cinema workers, to ensure anonymity. As data is qualitative, there can also be instances of interviewer bias.

The interviews were semi-structured. They were centered around generic questions, relying on the informant's response to steer the conversation. The person being interviewed was asked about their personal experience with the cinema growing up. They were also asked to identify the time period which they were referring to; whether they remembered how cinema changed; what kind of people visited the cinema, and whether they still visit cinemas today. In a majority of the interviews conducted, these questions were sufficient in sparking a detailed conversation regarding how cinema and films had changed. This study engages with the main ideas that have been extracted from the information provided by the informants.

## Lakshmi Chowk

My visit to Lakshmi Chowk began with the Pakistan Television (PTV) Studios, where I had the pleasure of interviewing PTV producer Qaiser Sharif. Being aware of his 15 years of experience working with PTV, and large degree of exposure to the Pakistani entertainment industry, I was able to ask him in-depth about the changes in audience trends within cinemas. Mr. Sharif was kind enough to guide me through Lakshmi Chowk, where we visited four major cinemas: Mubarak Cinema, Mehfil Cinema, Shabistan and Prince Cinema. At all these locations, there were workers present who had been working there fifteen to 35 years. At Mubarak Cinema, now Mubarak Wedding Hall, I had the opportunity to interview the manager, who had been working at the hall



Figure 1: (Left) Mubarak Cinema. (Right) Mehfil Cinema.

for fifteen years, and the sweeper, who had been working there for 25 years. At Mehfil Cinema, I had to persuade the two men behind the ticket booth to let me interview them. Mehfil Cinema is now a theatre, which has Punjabi stage dramas being performed daily. The aforementioned cinemas (pictured here) no longer serve their original purpose. Moreover, at the time of my visit, they were poorly maintained, and their infrastructure showed wear and tear, despite the fact that they were still functioning in some capacity.



Figure 2: Shabistan Cinema: Posters of contemporary Pakistani films can be seen, with a handwritten schedule.

Shabistan and Prince Cinemas were different. The two buildings were adjacent to one another, which initially misled me into believing that they were a single cinema. They have both been remodeled and fitted with updated technology to support digital film projection. From afar, I could see posters for upcoming Pakistani film releases, such as *Project Ghazi* (dir. Nadir Shah, 2019) and *Laal Kabootar* (dir. Kamal Khan, 2019). There was also a slightly worn out poster for *Punjab Nahi Jaungi* (dir. Nadeem Baig, 2017) adorning the front of Prince Cinema. When I walked into the Shabistan cinema, I saw a group of men socializing outside in the winter sun. One of the men had a rifle angled against his chair, which indicated that he was potentially a security guard for the cinema. I was correct in my assumption, and these men informed me that they were workers for both Shabistan and Prince cinemas. Due to the close proximity of both cinemas, they mingled often. Among them, two middle-aged men were security guards, while two older men oversaw the functioning of their respective cinemas. Since there had been no serious incidents that needed security to be on guard, they would sit in peace and observe people coming and going. The middle-aged men had been working at the cinema since the 1990s, or as they joked since their *jawanis* (youth). The older men had been overseeing operations since the 1970s. They had multiple jobs, including but not limited to, cleaning, selling tickets and ensuring peace amongst cinemagoers.

I interviewed every individual in a semi-structured manner, to ensure that conversation was natural and comfortable. I felt that most of the people I interviewed kept a distance from me, not only physically, but in how they chose to speak to me. As I was accompanied by Qaiser Sharif, I noted a stark difference in how these men conversed with him versus how they conversed with me. This could be, in part, due to my gender, and accompanying reservations these men may have had. It could also be due to perceived language barriers, as I was conversing with them in Urdu and they were responding to me in a mixture of Urdu and Punjabi. This made the speech seem more thought out and slower in comparison to their free-flowing conversations in Punjabi with Mr. Sharif. I acknowledge that this can lead to a possible discrepancy in the communication of ideas and information between me, the interviewer, and the individuals being interviewed. Furthermore, none of the people working at the cinemas were comfortable with their interviews being recorded. In fact, only the men at Shabistan and Prince were comfortable with me taking notes as they spoke.

However, there were a number of ideas that these individuals shared. My first question was about how the crowd occupying cinematic space used to be when the informant was “young.” Within this sample of men from Lakshmi Chowk, two main time periods pertaining to this question were identified. The informants narrated memories from the late 1960s to mid-1970s, and from the late 1970s to the 1980s. The memories would often conclude around the end of Zia’s regime. Every single person claimed that the 1960s and 1970s were the peak of Pakistani cinema. They attributed this to the actors of the time. Waheed Murad, Zeba and Sabiha were commonly mentioned names. The term *khidki torr rush* (window-breaking crowd) was commonly used when talking about the number of people that would fill the cinema. The use of the word *khidki torr* implies that the space was not sufficient for accommodating all the cinemagoers, a testament to the popularity of Pakistani films in the 1960s and 1970s. Another frequent claim was that the films were “just better.” Upon insisting for an elaboration, I was told that the narratives were better, the “romance” was “decent”, that the films could be watched with families and that film-viewing was a communal experience.

Regarding the communal experience, there was often mention of rickshaw drivers, truck drivers, and food vendors congregating at the cinema after a long, hard day of work. Back when television was a luxury unavailable to the common man, the cinema was regarded as the space where he would unwind. The cinema was also known as a space for young, college-going men who wanted to watch the hero romance the beautiful actresses. More often than not, the young men’s families were unaware of their presence at the cinema. Keeping this information in mind, it is important to note that the communal experience the informants spoke of was largely for men.

However, when I asked these men whether women visited the cinema, most of them claimed that women were a significant part of the crowd. Most of the women would have a “loosely tied dupatta” over their heads and be lugging two to three children alongside them. Their husbands would escort them to a separate area that was designated for families. However, one informant claimed that some women would sit among the men as well. When I asked if there had been any negative incident regarding women within the men’s space, he said that he could not recall any. It should be noted that, according to him, teasing and catcalling was inevitable, and the women could not really do anything about it. Hence, he did not categorize any such incidents as particularly negative. While conducting this fieldwork, I noticed a trend of women reportedly inhabiting cinema space largely with their families. At Shabistan Cinema, I inquired whether women would visit the cinema on their own, or within groups of other women. The security guard laughed and said:

*Aurtain toh bari shoqiin thiin aanay ki. Mujhe yaad hai jab Bakhtawar film lagi thi, sirf aurtain hi bhari thiin ek hall ke andar...kuch tou zameen par bhi bethi thiin. Unke uncha uncha ronay ki awazen bahir tak sunaiin de rahi thiin.* (Women loved coming [to the cinema]. I remember when the film *Bakhtawar* was playing, women had completely occupied the hall...some women were even sitting on the floor. You could hear them crying loudly all the way outside of the hall.)

Despite the informants’ belief that cinema was at its peak during the 60s and 70s, the “death” of Pakistani cinema was when Sultan Rahi was assassinated in 1996. This claim came as a natural part of the conversation, none of the informants were asked in particular about Sultan Rahi. This goes to show how there exists a shared set of beliefs within the workers at Lakshmi Chowk. While



they acknowledged that directors such as Shaan Shahid and Syed Noor had attempted to “revive” cinema, they could not fill the gaping hole that Sultan Rahi had left. The cinema workers claimed that Sultan Rahi was the only reason many people continued to visit cinemas even in the 1980s and early 1990s. According to most of the informants, the cinema was no longer a space for women after Zia’s Islamisation policies had bound them to their homes. The films themselves had become more violent, and the romance genre came to a halt.

When discussing the economic and quality issues in the Pakistani film industry, the informants spoke at length about the lack of government support for the cinema. While Bhutto and Yahya Khan were believed to provide subsidies to cinema owners, which would allow them to sell tickets at a reasonable cost, Zia had left film and cinema in ruins. Not only had he increased entertainment taxes, he also heavily censored the film content. This, according to many of the informants, disrupted the escapist fantasy of the cinemagoers. Suddenly, the hero and heroine could not “openly romance” on-screen. As one informant succinctly summarized, *Agar fantasy hi nai rahi, tou kia reh gia cinema mai?* (If the fantasy is no longer, what is left in the cinema?)

When the question of vulgarity came up during the interviews, most of the men were hesitant to describe what they would define as vulgar. In an attempt to extract answers from them, I asked them whether they would have been comfortable watching violence with their families. All of them said that they would have. I asked them if they would be comfortable watching romance films, to which some of them exclaimed that “back in the day” they sometimes took their wives to watch the latest love story. One informant said that the love stories in the past were better and could be watched in the cinema. Today’s love stories, in his opinion, are *fahash* (obscene) and inculcate ideas that he would not want his children to adopt. This belief applied to both Pakistani and foreign cinema, but he felt that Pakistani films should uphold certain standards of decency and not promote vulgarity. According to him, this is because they are representations of our culture, and if the current youth is exposed to the ideas that current Pakistani films are supposedly peddling, it would promote “indecent” behavior among them. I attempted to take multiple approaches in asking what indecent ideas were being promoted by Pakistani films, only to be steered away from the topic entirely. This could potentially be because the informant was not comfortable discussing specifics, or that he himself did not know anything in particular, and was reiterating what he had heard from others, among other possible reasons.

### **The Communal Experience**

The cinema was as a point of congregation for people of all classes. It was often mentioned that laborers, rickshaw drivers and shop owners would come together to watch a film in the evening. Ticket prices were relatively affordable to the common man. Men who took their families would inhabit a different, designated area for families within the cinema halls. These areas would be separate from the floor seats, i.e. seats available closer to the stage, which would often be occupied by groups of men. The social norm was that these men were not expected to speak to occupants of the family area. Moreover, it was looked down upon, and some men interviewed felt that the family area was necessary to “protect” their daughters and wives from strange men. Had that designated area not existed, at the time, these men claimed they would not be comfortable taking their families to the cinema. This division of space is very similar to how the cinema space was designed and

occupied in India, according to Srinivas' study (2001). Middle class men interacting with women of the "respectable" class was an anxiety of India's bourgeois, due to issues regarding the women's "honor" (Athique).

The cinema was such a popular point of entertainment for the masses, that many informants used the word *khidki torr rush* to describe the crowd. According to male informants, the crowd that inhabited cinemas changed when General Zia came into power. Suddenly, the cinema was associated with "cheap" men looking to loiter. The informants did not feel it was safe to take the women of their family to the cinema anymore. The women reported that they no longer had the option to go to the cinema anymore, not even with their brothers or fathers. There was anxiety among the informants and their families regarding harassment and eve-teasing.

### **The Escapist Fantasy**

The film content in the 1960s, according to one informant, had something for everyone to enjoy. Romance and intimacy are a polarizing subject among Pakistani film audiences, as will be discussed further into this paper. However, the depiction of romance in film of the 1960s was considered socially acceptable by the informants. Within the 1970s, ideas of vulgarity arose regarding some films, particularly Punjabi films, that were released during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's era. Punjabi films were no longer considered family films during his term. General Zia ul Haq's dictatorship implemented strict regulations and censorship laws on film.

One of the greatest contentions that audiences had with these newly implemented censorship laws, was the loss of the love story. The hero and heroine of a film could no longer display affection to one another on-screen. The audience was suddenly deprived of the great adventure or the love story it never had. Many informants threw around the word's "escape" and "fantasy." They claimed that they went to the cinema to relax and escape the hassles of their daily lives. They admired the actors for their charm and the actresses for their beauty. Many felt attracted to the unattainability of the characters and their lives within the films. As a result, they found themselves living a separate life through these characters. By taking this fantasy away, General Zia played a pivotal role in disengaging an entire audience from film and the cinema. Again, these findings share an element of escapism with Srinivas' study. Indian audiences required films to possess a certain amount of *masala*. This entailed the amalgamation of the genres of romance, comedy, action, melodrama and violence into a single film. Beauty, charisma and respectability of actors was important to the audiences, who projected their fantasies onto the performers.

### **Sultan Rahi**

Sultan Rahi was a renowned Pakistani actor and producer. During his 40 years of in the film industry, he acted in over 700 Punjabi films and 100 Urdu films (Awan 2019). His most known work is *Maula Jatt* (dir. Younis Malik, 1979), which became a part of Pakistan's popular culture landscape. Within the research, approximately half of the informants claimed that the film industry was never the same after Sultan Rahi's assassination in 1996. Many people, according to the informants, only went to the cinema to watch Rahi's latest film. The male informants insisted that

his star power was unprecedented, and his loss was the loss of the entire film industry. In contrast, many of the female informants did not mention Sultan Rahi. I asked a few female informants to provide their opinion of him, to which they said that while they had seen some of his films, they were not really interested in the kind of content he was associated with. In contrast, they were vocal about their admiration for Mohammad Ali and Waheed Murad as actors who often played the role of the romantic hero; one woman even mentioned that they were called “chocolate heroes” back in their time.

While discussing Rahi’s films with the informants, it was observed that many of his films had a formulaic structure. Rahi was always the hero, with an intimidating villain set against him, and a capricious Punjabi woman whose main purpose was to perform a “vulgar” dance. Despite the predictability of Rahi’s films, many claimed that each film had its glory. This may suggest the creation of habituated expectations on the part of the audience. Again, this finding shares a characteristic with Indian cinema: commercial films followed a set pattern and maintained large audiences who were completely aware of the formulaic film content.

## **The Government**

Many informants believed that government support affected how people viewed the cinema. General Yahya Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto were mentioned as more “progressive” and “liberal” leaders that allowed cinema to develop as an industry. A number of informants shared the belief that these particular governments provided subsidies and tax remissions to cinema owners. This, in turn, allowed cinemas to flourish during the 1960s and early 1970s. Subsequently, a majority believed that General Zia ul Haq had single handedly destroyed the film industry. While this paper has already discussed how General Zia’s Islamization policies took away the “fantasy” of the audience, many also believed that Zia imposed high taxes which lead to ticket prices skyrocketing during his era. After Zia’s demise, these inflated ticket prices did not recover. Many commented on how by the 1990s, VCR allowed them to watch “better” quality movies at home. To pay exorbitant prices for cinema tickets, was now an unnecessary expenditure for many people.

Not only did the government’s monetary support matter to the audiences, the leaders’ involvement with the cinema acted as affirmation. A particular anecdote was recalled by one informant, who wanted to assert how positively the cinema was seen as a space in the 1970s. This informant recalled that once Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then the Prime Minister of Pakistan, went to a cinema in Karachi dressed as a layman. He interacted with a large number of men, mostly belonging to the labor class. Once they recognized him, these men excitedly lifted him up on their shoulders. In contrast, another informant mentioned how hypocritical Zia ul Haq was as a leader. On one hand, he was preaching Islamic values and heavily censoring the media. On the other hand, he would watch “all kinds of movies” in his private time. This was presented as an ironic statement, where watching movies was juxtaposed as a complete opposite to Zia’s religious policing.

## Women at the Cinema

When interviewing both genders regarding their presence at the cinema, I noticed a difference in the perception of gender presence within cinemas. Specifically, a substantial number of the men interviewed believed that women frequented cinemas with their families often, particularly in the 1960s. However, women belonging to the middle class and lower-middle class did not recall visiting the cinema more than once or twice. One woman, 80 years old, said that visiting the cinema with children was a hassle. She was also not comfortable leaving them home alone. Her husband would not take responsibility for the children, so she would simply not go. Another woman, 55 years old, recalled attempting to enter the cinema with her cousins, only to be denied entry by the security guard. The guard claimed to know her father and threatened to tell him that she was trying to be in a place where “she did not belong.” Three of the women interviewed, all belonging to the middle-class, said that they never thought of going to the cinema as their fathers would claim it is no place for the members of respectable families. They mentioned that their brothers and male cousins somehow sneaked out into the cinema, and that this act of defiance was an inside joke among the men of the family. In the case of one informant, her brother had been caught loitering in the cinema, and was scolded by their father for bringing dishonor to their family.

The anecdotes present different types of limitations that women, and sometimes men, faced when going to cinemas. All these limitations involved some kind of interference by men concerned with cultural notions of respectability. The women interviewed belonging to the upper-middle classes had a different experience. While they did visit the cinema, usually with families or groups of female cousins, they reported feeling “stared at” and “uncomfortable.” Despite sitting in the areas designated for families, they were anxious about the process of entering and leaving the cinema. Two of the women reported being actively harassed but were forced to ignore the incidents. If they had reported these incidents of harassment to their families, they feared that they would not be allowed to visit the cinemas again. It should be established that the freedom of mobility of all the female informants was in the hands of their male guardians, be it their fathers, their husbands or their brothers. The men interviewed saw the cinema as a space for all.

For women, however, there were personal and domestic anxieties that came with visiting the cinema. These anxieties were associated more so with the cinema spaces than with the film content. Only a few of the female informants claimed that their male guardians moderated the film content they were allowed to consume. With the advent of the VCR and cable television, they were free to watch whatever was available within the comfort of their homes. As one informant explained, “*Film ke sath tou koi masla nai tha. Bas izzat ke naam pe humen ghar bithaya rakha*” (There was nothing wrong with the film itself. We were just kept inside our homes in the name of honor). In parallel, Parsi theatre in Bombay did not consider the stage a respectable place for women to be visible. While women were present as part of the audience at theatres, female impersonators were preferred on-stage and their bodies could be manipulated easily according to the expectations and desires of the theatre crowd (Hansen 1999).

## The Family Film, *Fahashi* and the Burden on Pakistani Film

One of the key interests of this research was to define the family film according to the film audience. Defining a family film is important because cultural notions of decency and morality define the kind of audiences that engage with certain films. A subset of the informants, especially male informants, took pride in their film consumption being family friendly. Director Syed Noor commented on how being family-friendly was a crucial feature of all his films, claiming that he would never direct a film he “could not watch with his own daughters.” While many women were not able to visit cinemas, they had access to film content. In the era before VCRs, women would ask their husbands and brothers to narrate film plots to them. They would also refer to magazines which had reviews of the latest films. Once the VCR became a common household appliance, many women gained access to the content they were not allowed to see at cinemas. Content policing, according to the interview data, was limited to the visibility of women within public spaces.

While no concrete definition can be derived from the interviews, a set of shared characteristics was seen in how audiences discussed their perception of what a family film was. Some of the male informants spoke about how films having women in tightly clad attire were not family friendly. There was mention of “B grade actors and actresses” and how the presence of certain performers predetermined whether a film would be suitable for family viewing. The informants showed visible discomfort when asked to elaborate on why certain actors and actresses had this effect. A common complaint that the older generation of informants had with modern Pakistani cinema was the introduction of *fahash* ideas. One elderly informant had gone to watch *Cake* (dir. Asim Abbasi, 2018) with his family and felt that the film was vulgar. According to the informant, it promoted women smoking, using obscene hand gestures and unrealistically portrayed what was acceptable for women in Pakistani society. He felt that it gave today’s girls “the wrong ideas.” The film *Verna* (dir. Shoaib Mansoor, 2017) had a similar negative image, largely due to its “negative portrayal of Pakistani society.” A female informant felt that topics such as rape and sexual violence should not be shown on screen. She did not elaborate why, but exclaimed that it is “bad” and that women should not be shown in such a capacity. This sentiment was shared by a number of other informants, both male and female.

A number of popular, mainstream Pakistani films, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, use rape as a plot device, as a form of moral policing, and a source of titillation (Ahmad). An irony exists in how audiences are uncomfortable with discussing topics of sexual violence openly, versus the sheer success of rape-driven films such as *Haseena Atom Bomb* (dir. Saeed Ali Khan, 1990) and *Society Girl* (dir. Syed Noor, 1976). In direct relation to this, I asked informants why watching such films was acceptable in their day and age, and how sexual violence in these films was different to modern portrayals of sexual violence in Pakistani cinema. A majority of the informants did not wish to discuss this. The men in particular were extremely uncomfortable and steered the conversation in a different direction. A female informant provided some insight into how she believed they differed. She felt that in the older films, sexual violence was not seen as a violation of the female body, rather as a display of male dominance. The physical and psychological pain inflicted by rape was not considered, as the film directors did not “think of what women went through.” The depiction of rape in *Verna*, contrarily, had a more “female voice”, showing the effects of rape on the woman, and subsequently demanding legal repercussions from the man.

This paper argues that the definitions of family film and *fahashi* go hand in hand and obscenity is a largely gendered concept, from what can be gathered by the interview data. Women dancing in tightly clad clothes, women expressing sexual desire, women having greater mobility and visibility in public, male-dominated spaces; these were some of the key ideas that came under the informants' views of obscenity. Explicit depictions of physical intimacy were also seen unfavorably by some of the female informants. They felt that they could not watch such films with male family members, including their spouses. Hence, any film that did not incorporate these "obscene" ideas, was a family film for the audience interviewed.

When some informants expressed their distaste of modern Pakistani cinema due to its "explicit" approach towards sensitive topics, I asked them about their consumption of foreign films. Many informants had watched English and Hindi films throughout their lives. I asked them about the explicit displays of romance and sexual desire in some of the films they had watched. The informants expressed that foreign films have always been like this, and that Pakistani films should not "adopt this [foreign] culture." These informants placed responsibility on Pakistani cinema for promoting not only Pakistani culture, but religious and moral values. To them, Pakistani films are a representation of Pakistan and should show Pakistan in a positive light. If local films adopt "foreign values," they will be largely responsible for "corrupting today's youth."

## Conclusion

When discussing Pakistani cinema and its audience, it is imperative to remember what the audience expects from their cinema experience. From the research conducted, it is clear that, in the past, the cinema has been a form of escape for many. The lower-middle class, consisting largely of laborers and drivers, looked upon cinema in the 1960s and 1970s as a source of relief from a hard day's work. For the middle-class audience, the cinema represented a fantasy. There was a degree of wishful identification of the audience with the film characters. The characters allowed the audience to live through them. They allowed the audience to have adventures and love affairs within the comfort of a communal space.

With this in mind, the family film was any movie, adhering particular values, an individual would be comfortable watching with their family. For the 1960s and 1970s, most Urdu films were seen as family films. Punjabi films were also viewed by family audiences, with the exception of Punjabi films during Bhutto's tenure. The "vulgar" aspect of these films was often the use of shots and dance sequences that emphasized the tightly clad female body, as well as the employment of free speech about one's sexual desires. When Zia ul Haq came into power in 1978, the censorship of romance disengaged the audience that took to film as an escapist fantasy. Zia also was believed to have increased entertainment taxes, leading to a significant rise in ticket costs. His demise did not result in the film industry's "revival," as the VCR was introduced soon after. Suddenly, audiences had access to foreign content at low cost within the comfort of their homes.

One of the main contributions of this paper is its identification of gendered narratives of cinema going audiences. The predominant narrative among male informants was that women have always gone to the cinema, though General Zia ul Haq's Islamization policies turned the cinema into an unsafe space for women. Women, on the other hand, claimed that they always faced difficulties

when it came to going to the cinema. Domestic responsibilities, moral policing and the requirement of a male chaperone, all acted as barriers between women and the cinema space. While women were enthusiastic about going to cinemas and having the opportunity to watch films, they faced social and domestic limitations, not necessarily related to the nature of the film itself, but rather to how the cinema was perceived as a public space. These barriers were mainly concerned with the visibility and mobility of these women, rather than the content of the films. Many of the women claimed they were able to consume all kinds of film content through the VCR.

Conclusively, this research exposes a binary in the narratives regarding Pakistani cinema. These binaries vary largely by gender. Socioeconomic class plays a role in how audiences occupied space within a cinema, as well as the anxieties that came with the interaction between the two genders. Political support of the cinema, and content censorship also led to a shift in the cinema audiences. Further research within this field could expand upon the major themes identified by this study, and work towards understanding the psychology behind the development of said themes.

As a final note, it is necessary to keep in mind the role that memory and the need for social performances plays in this study. Memory is relative, and one person's experience is only one perspective of a history as nuanced as that of Pakistani cinema. For example, the insistence that Sultan Rahi's demise as the end of Pakistani cinema was a male-dominated narrative. In contrast, most of the female informants did not have polarizing opinions on Sultan Rahi's effect on the film industry. Moreover, the ideas presented by this study should be considered within context. The existence of gendered narratives does not necessarily suggest that either narrative is false or distorted. The data presented may be altered by the informants' need to perform socially, as a result of possible social taboo associated with the cinematic space. Due to the limited number of participants, this study may not be generalizable to a wider audience. Nonetheless, it identifies a number of key ideas regarding film audiences in Lahore and the factors that played into shaping their experience with film and the cinema. In the dearth of studies that outline how and why Pakistan's film industry has changed, this particular study allows audiences to contribute to the narrative.

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## **Filmography**

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