

Audience Reception: Exploring Collective Spectatorship in the Film 'Dunki'

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Abstract

This study aimed to analyze the effect of collective spectatorship when it comes to watching films in the cinema halls. For this purpose, the film 'Dunki' with star cast Shahrukh Khan, directed by Rajkumar Hirani was selected. The study has also taken into account the theory of social ontology and effect of stardom to form a premise as other factors involved in the total experience of film viewing. This study has incorporated a mixed method approach involving, quantitative analysis through survey questionnaire using snowball sampling technique, and qualitative analysis through observation method and content analysis. The findings of the study reveal that, in case of the success of the film 'Dunki', collective spectatorship did not play much role, rather it was the stardom and social ontological factors that contributed majorly to the success of the film. The outcome of the study suggests that collective spectatorship may not always be solely responsible towards the success of a film, rather at times, just like in case of the film 'Dunki', factors dependent on social ontology and stardom can play a lead role towards the success of a film.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of "we-intentionality" is central to the theory of collective spectatorship, as it signifies the common goal and shared purpose that viewers have when watching a film together. By choosing a specific film, attending a screening, and sitting in the audience, viewers signal their intention and commitment to watching the film jointly, thus creating a sense of collective engagement and participation. This study focuses on the film 'Dunki' to measure its success based on the analysis of audience turn up and measuring their experience of collectively watching it in cinema halls.

The importance of investigating collective spectatorship resides in its capacity to throw light on the relationship of social and psychological dimensions of film consumption. As audiences collect in film theaters, they partake in a collective act of interpretation, wherein their individual perceptions may be influenced and shaped by the presence of others. Understanding the dynamics of collective spectatorship can help in the analysis of factors that could be influencing the audiences' affinity towards their likes and behind

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the success of a film. Of course other factors also need to be taken into consideration in analyzing the success of a film, like stardom and social ontology, and comparing it with collective spectatorship.

While existing scholarship has delved into various aspects of audience reception and cinematic engagement, there remains a notable gap in the understanding the effect of collective spectatorship in context to the success of the film 'Dunki'. This study attempts to analyze other factors also like fandom, effect of previous hits of the superstar and recommendations to come to a conclusion for the reason behind the success of the film 'Dunki'.

Research Question

RQ1: Is it only the effect of collective spectatorship behind the success of the film 'Dunki'?

RQ2: Did collective spectatorship in anyway contribute in the success of the film 'Dunki'?

RQ3: What could have been the other factors that could have contributed in the success of the film 'Dunki'?

Objectives

- To find out the crowd turn up at the cinema halls screening the film 'Dunki'.
- To find out whether crowd turn up at 'Dunki' screening was as significant as 'Pathaan' and 'Jawan' since this was Shahrukh Khan's comeback year.
- To do an audience analysis for the success of the film 'Dunki'.
- To examine whether the success of the film 'Dunki' depended on collective watching experience at the cinema hall.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed method approach has been used in this study. Survey questionnaire using snowball sampling method was used to collect data for quantitative analysis with a sample size of 87 respondents from pan India. Observing method was used for qualitative analysis to get a better understanding of the audience reaction during the screening of 'Dunki' by visiting three cinema halls

in Kolkata and watching the film along with the audience. Also content analysis of critic reviews was done. The first five websites with critic reviews that came up in Google search engine result using the search keyword 'Dunki movie review' were taken into consideration in the study to get a clearer understanding the film's reception. The findings were triangulated to infer the final outcome of the study.

Conceptual Framework

Collective Spectatorship: The study combines and interprets findings based on a conceptual framework consisting of these theories of collective spectatorship mentioned by Hanich (2014)

Film Star System: On the basis of a study by Richard Dyer (2020) which proposes an intervention in film studies specifying the importance of and providing a framework for analyzing film stars (Polley, 2020), stardom of Shahrukh Khan and its concept in general helps understand and derive an outcome relating it to the effect of collective spectatorship in cinema halls of watching the film 'Dunki'.

Social Ontology: Social ontology ensures that films capture collective experiences, leaving a lasting impact (Paalman, 2021). Social ontology informs how audiences perceive and interpret films, this could mean involvement of different factors as influences (Boardman, 2019). A well-crafted film resonates with audiences because it reflects their own experiences, emotions, and social dynamics. In the context of cinematic experiences (Hanich, 2014) suggests that it can have productive ramifications for film theory and historiography based on the analytic philosophy and phenomenology about collective intentionality and shared feelings.

Limitations of the Study

Stratified sampling could not be performed. Geographical location of the respondents remains unclear, if known could have helped in better analysis of the quantitative data. Also gender distribution of the respondents of the survey questionnaire is not balanced. The study is limited to the knowledge framework of the researcher.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

What this study aims to bring into light is the effect of collective spectatorship in film screenings, that is, whether watching a film with a crowd in theatres impact the experience or the perception of the audience in anyway, or there could be other factors too influencing the audiences' liking the film. The study has considered the film 'Dunki' for the analysis.

Collective Spectatorship

Hanich (2014) explores the shared experience of watching a movie with others by utilizing the ideas of "we-intention," joint attention, and joint action. He explains this theory by saying that if the spectators are all active, sitting in the same theatre and viewing the same film in a quiet, attentive manner then all of this comes into play with the collective objective watching a film silently with the crowd. This suggests that even when a crowd watches a movie "in its entirety," each individual viewer has not "forgotten" about the other co-present viewers.

Crowd Psychology

Film critics seldom discuss audiences or responses while analyzing films, despite their importance in the movie-going experience. The prevailing theory of crowd psychology, Freud's, regards members of a crowd as individuals, which is why critics have neglected how movies induce crowd responses. According to Freud's Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, each participant in a crowd is immersed in a secret, unconscious fantasy of loving the leader. In other words, psychoanalysis transforms the audience back into a group of watchers, making it an invaluable resource for cinema theory (Tratner, 2003).

Social Ontology

At the heart of successful film lies the intricate interplay between social ontology and cinematic creation. This intersection underscores the influence of social entities such as institutions, norms and cultural practices on the portrayal of human interaction and behaviour within films (Paalman, 2021). Understanding these dynamics is essential since it enables to understand characters

and narratives that resonate with audiences. Social ontology helps to understand the diverse perspectives represented for a genuine engagement and emotional connection with viewers. Contextual relevance further enhances a film's impact by accurately depicting social norms, values and historical events, thereby deepening the audience's connection to the story (Boardman, 2019). This reciprocal relationship forms the basis of the importance of evoking emotions, provoking thought and sparking conversations for a film's success.

Stardom

Film stars are glorified in the movies, as well as in the news, gossip, fashion, and lifestyle magazines, and are frequently regarded as gods. The effect of stardom is recognizable to everyone since stars draws people to movies and could at times also be the topic of much discussion or debate outside of the viewing experience. It is conceptually investigated in cinema studies as a means of discovering meaning in films by connecting production and audience stimulus. Stardom is more closely related to the work life of actors, as the star must be a successful performer. But the star is more than just a performer, he could be a projected image, taught, molded and groomed as a commodity that sells films (Dwyer & Sengupta, 2021). Elberse (2007) stated the star's presence in the film affecting the financial performance of it is still undecided in various other findings.

For the Indian diaspora and within Indian territory audience, Shah Rukh Khan is seen as a gentle, sensitive and "in touch with emotions," yet he is also self-assured, extraordinarily successful and a natural at winning women over. This in a way is the dichotomy of his stardom. He is a kind of hero with star masculinity, a triumphant and effective emotional persona, loaded with passion. The success of his films show he has revolutionized what it means to be an 'Indian' guy on-screen and a male Bollywood celebrity. He is a consumable item, a national brand, an emotive person and a star who would steal away audience compassion. He embodies feeling and has the ability to elicit reciprocal feelings (Gopinath, 2017). According to an academic conference held at the University



of Vienna that expanded upon Shahrukh Khan's success trajectory, stated him as a bridge between "Indian identity and cosmopolitanism, tradition and modernity or contradictory differences between religions or between projections of male and female" Kapoor (2020).

Findings

The findings of this study have been stated on the basis of the quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Analysis of quantitative data is represented in the forms of graphs and qualitative data which comprises of content analysis and researcher's personal observations have been correlated and interpreted for the findings of the factors considered in the study.

The respondents comprised of 72% male and 28 % female of age groups from 10 years onwards(Figure 1)

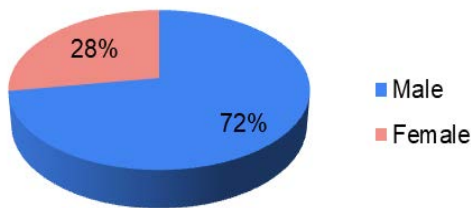


Figure 1: Gender

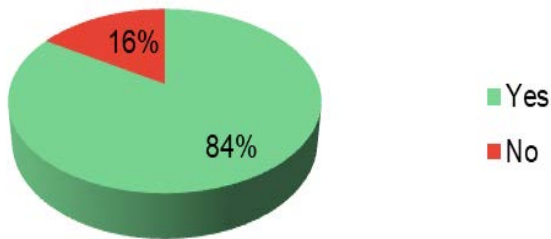


Figure 2: Have watched the film 'dunki'

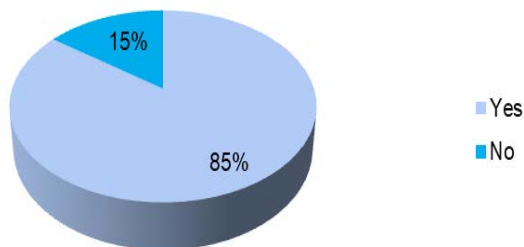


Figure 3: Have watched pathaan and jawan

84% of the respondents agreed to have watched the film 'Dunki' (Figure 2). Also as per observation at three theatres at Kolkata the cinema theatres were going house full.

Taken into account in the study is the viewership of the films 'Pathaan' and 'Jawan' also in theatres because of the same star cast of Shahrukh Khan. 85% agreed to have watched both of them also, which is a significant number (Figure 3). As observed and discussed with film goers, all agreed to have gone to watch these three movies because of being Shahrukh Khan fans.

The findings of the survey revealed that there was a good turn up in the theatres with 77% of the respondents agreeing to have witnessed a huge crowd in the theatres(Figure 4). Also as observed by visiting three cinema theatres in Kolkata, the crowd turn up was significantly large. When surveyed online, the bookings showed pretty much all full.

As per the findings from the survey, 83% of the respondents liked the film 'Dunki' (Figure 5). As per the reviews and ratings observed on Book my Show and IMDB, the ratings were 7.4/10 and 6.7/10 respectively.

The above factors were considered on the basis of social ontology. The findings, as seen in the graphs, suggest that majority of the respondents rated the acting on the positive side showing considerable liking (Figure 6). As per observation,

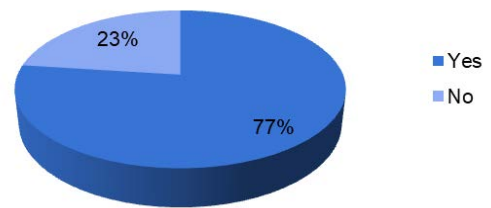


Figure 4: There was a huge crowd in theatres

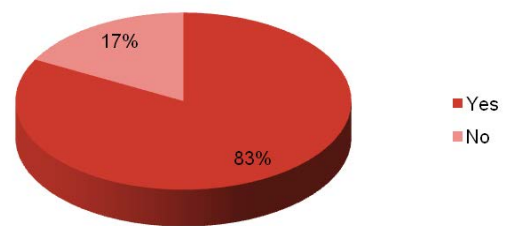


Figure 5: Did you like the movie?

the film hugely benefitted from the performances of the ensemble cast. Anil Grover was cast very well in the film. Tapsee Pannu's character motivation hindered her performance, but two men who made a clear impression were Vicky Kaushal in his brief appearance and Shahrukh Khan of course as the main lead actor.

The direction was pretty much positive from

medium to high as per the findings of the surveyed, indicating more or less liking towards it (Figure 7). Through observation, it seemed that this might be Rajkumar Hirani's least impressive film from a directorial and screenplay point-of-view.

As per the findings, respondents showed a considerable liking for the dialogues (Figure 8). As mentioned, through observation, Rajkumar Hirani's dialogues don't hit the right note when it comes to dialogues in this film of his. They seem to be all over the place and are rather inconsistent when it comes

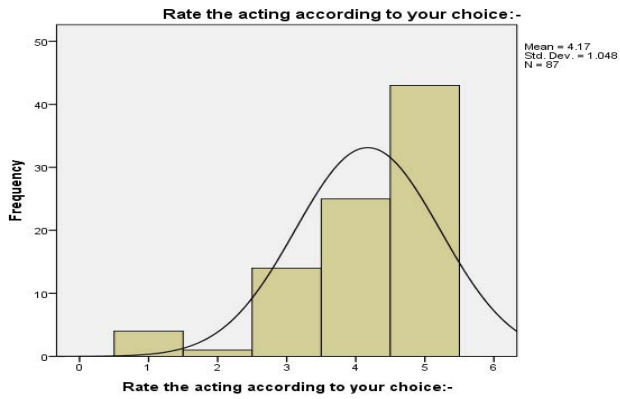


Figure 6: Acting ratings

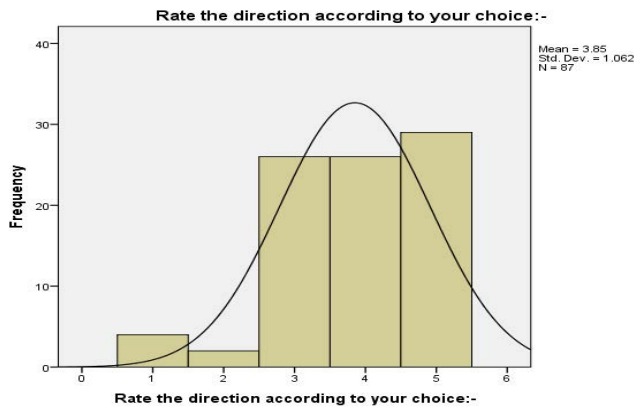


Figure 7: Direction ratings

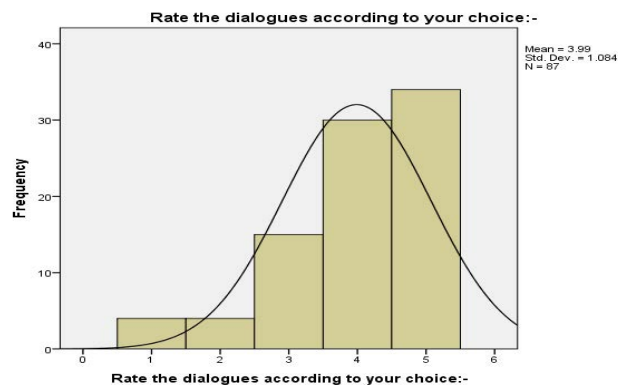


Figure 8: Dialogue ratings

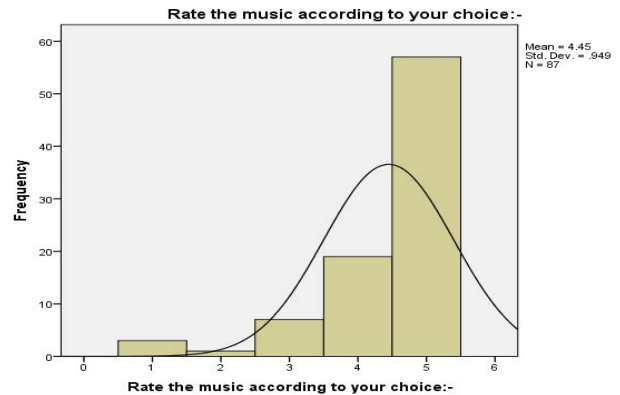


Figure 9: Music ratings

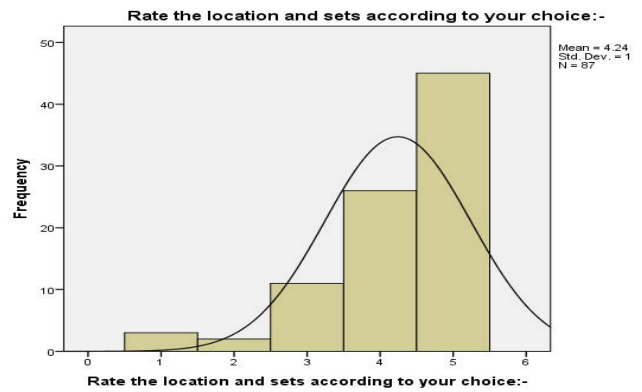


Figure 10: Location and sets ratings

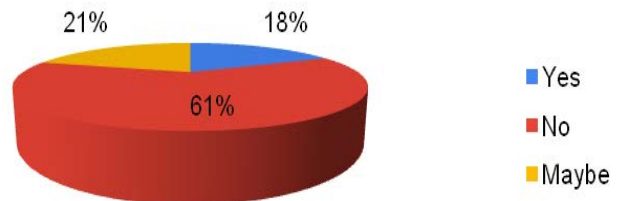


Figure 11: Was the overall impact of watching 'dunki' dependent on whether the theatre was crowded or not?

to his formula of making the audience laugh and cry in his movies.

The music was received quite well as per the survey, indicating a significant liking for it by the respondents (Figure 9). The observation was that the biggest winner of *Dunki* is undoubtedly the music by Pritam. It is by far one of the best music albums of a Rajkumar Hirani movie where the songs do a great job in pushing the narrative forward.

The treatment was perceived to be quite good as per the findings from the survey (Figure 10). Although by observation, the sets and locations did not seem that authentic for some reason due to many elements seeming superficial even from a distance.

Based on the survey finding, 61% of the respondents claimed that their overall impact of watching the film '*Dunki*' in theatres was not dependent on the crowd being present in the theatre (Figure 11). Through observation, only experiencing the comedic moments of the film was enhanced by the presence of the crowd. Otherwise, the overall impact was not dependent on the presence of the crowd at all.

Content Analysis

To get a clearer understanding of the audience perception and reaction, content analysis of online critic reviews was conducted of five top ranking websites in the Google search engine page. The top search engine result site being IMDb (Internet Movie Database), the movie rating reflecting on it is based on the user rating system, which is given as 6.7/10 for '*Dunki*' (IMDb, 2024).

According to *The Hindu*, the film has enough to make you giggle and Rajkumar Hirani uses his same template of preferring emotional logic over rational thinking, but outcome fails to be as captivating and endearing like his previous films (Kumar, 2023).

According to the *The Times of India* review, the story of "*Dunki*" is a poignant one that infuses romance, friendship, heartbreaking, and heartwarming moments in one cohesive narrative, despite the humour being occasionally shaky and the matter being oversimplified (Sengupta, 2023).

According to Sucharita Tyagi writing for the *The Medium*, '*Dunki*' suffered from the lack of

exploration of the characters on a deeper level was a demerit and is left entirely for the audience to imagine for themselves in the film.

Based on the critics consensus in Rotten Tomatoes, the film has been given a 48% rating saying that "*Dunki*'s got good intentions and no shortage of heart, but its uneven tonal blend and shallow treatment of serious themes undermines the intended effect." (Rotten Tomatoes, 2023)

According to the review by *Hindustan Times*, the execution of the otherwise good plot by writers Rajkumar Hirani and Abhijat Joshi could have been much better and the humour mostly misses in making you laugh. However, the performance of Shahrukh Khan and Tapsee Pannu were praised (Kukreja, 2023).

The common thing told in all the reviews mentioned above is that it was Rajkumar Hirani's weakest film in terms of humour and execution. They also mentioned that it was disappointing when compared to his previous films. Despite the mixed critical reception, *Dunki* proved itself to be a hat trick for Shahrukh Khan as the film opened to 30 to 35 crores on its first day and ultimately grossed 423 crores worldwide in the box office (Pratap, 2024).

OUTCOME AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that the crowd turn up at '*Dunki*' screening was significant. Based on the comparison of the crowd for the films '*Pathaan*' and '*Jawan*' in the earlier part of 2023, the data shows that the crowd turn for the film '*Dunki*' was less than that of the previous two films of Shahrukh Khan mentioned here. This implies that the audience preferred to see Shahrukh Khan more in the action genre than in understated roles.

Based on the audience analysis, review sites and researcher's observation, the outcome suggests that the audience rating the success of the film largely depended on personal liking and opinion of the different aspects of the film, and the success was not primarily dependent on collective spectatorship. The success of the film '*Dunki*', however, could be associated with the fact that it had Shahrukh Khan as the lead hero in a Rajkumar Hirani movie. This was a collaboration involving two big names in the Hindi

film industry, as claimed by the reviewers. People who watched all the three Shahrukh Khan films, agreed that it was their Shahrukh Khan fandom spirit that drew them to watch the three films, per say 'Dunki' also.

Thus based on the findings and their triangulation, it can be inferred that the success of the film 'Dunki' was majorly based on the respondents' individual liking and opinion about the other different aspects of the film, rather than only the collective spectatorship effect. The crowd experience in this case did not affect much on their overall perception regarding the film and its success.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the theory of collective spectatorship as proposed by Hanich (2014) did not hold so strong for the success in this case. Here the effect of stardom and social ontology was more in domination. The stardom effect of Shahrukh Khan spoke loud in context to viewership and crowd turn-up. The opening day collection of the film was huge as per the findings from the study. Other than that, the attributes of the film that impacted the audience were dependent on the social ontology like the plot which revolved around illegal immigration for a better life, sentiments like home sickness and other emotions that added to the success of the film. Thus it can be inferred that collective spectatorship solely may not always hold effective in the success of a film, rather factors dependent on social ontology and stardom at times can certainly overpower the impact of collective spectatorship and lead a film to its success.

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