

Lights, Camera, Recovery: The Healing Power of Film

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ABSTRACT

Cinema, particularly in India, holds significant cultural influence and emerging therapeutic potential. This pilot study examines the perceptions of moviegoers, psychotherapists, and filmmakers regarding cinema's role in mental well-being. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through surveys of 61 moviegoers and interviews with two psychotherapists and two filmmakers (December 2023–January 2024). Findings indicate that moviegoers frequently use films for emotional coping, psychotherapists recognize cinema therapy but report limited formal training, and filmmakers show interest in therapeutic applications despite the absence of structured practices. The study underscores the need for interdisciplinary collaboration and capacity-building, providing a foundation for expanded research on cinema therapy in the Indian context.

Keywords: Cinema therapy, Indian cinema, mental well-being, moviegoers, psychotherapists, filmmakers, emotional coping, mixed-methods research

INTRODUCTION

Cinema is widely recognized as a powerful cultural medium that shapes identities, reflects social realities, and evokes deep emotional responses. In India, its influence is especially pronounced, given the scale of production, linguistic diversity, and mass viewership. Beyond entertainment, cinema increasingly functions as an informal psychological resource, enabling audiences to manage stress, experience emotional release, and engage in self-reflection.

The notion of *cinema therapy*, formally introduced by Gary Solomon in the 1990s, refers to the intentional use of films within therapeutic contexts. Through identification with characters and narratives, viewers can process emotions, reframe personal experiences, and develop coping mechanisms. Subsequent scholars, including Birgit Wolz, have expanded this framework by categorizing therapeutic engagement into distinct modes such as emotional release, self-exploration, and cathartic processing. These perspectives position cinema as both an expressive art form and a potential therapeutic tool.

Despite growing global interest, the application and study of cinema therapy in India remain underexplored. While international initiatives and digital platforms demonstrate increasing recognition of film-based therapeutic practices, Indian research has yet to systematically examine how cinema contributes to mental well-being. This gap is notable given the pervasive presence of films in everyday life and their accessibility across socio-cultural groups.

Addressing this gap, the present pilot study investigates the perceptions of three key stakeholders: moviegoers, psychotherapists, and filmmakers. Moviegoers provide insight into everyday, often unstructured therapeutic engagement with films. Psychotherapists offer professional perspectives on the feasibility and limitations of integrating cinema into clinical practice, while filmmakers contribute viewpoints on embedding therapeutic dimensions within content creation. A mixed-methods design enables the study to capture both behavioral patterns and interpretive insights.

By bridging media studies and psychological inquiry, this research contributes to an emerging interdisciplinary discourse on cinema therapy. It highlights cinema's potential as a culturally embedded coping mechanism while

identifying gaps in formal training and structured application. In doing so, the study lays a foundational framework for advancing research and practice in the Indian context.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE (EXPANDED & ANALYTICAL)

The growing body of research on cinema therapy positions film as a multidimensional tool for emotional engagement, cognitive restructuring, and psychosocial development. Existing literature can be broadly categorized into three domains: (1) clinical and therapeutic frameworks, (2) psychological effects of film consumption, and (3) intervention-based and applied studies.

Clinical and Therapeutic Frameworks

Early conceptual work by Schulenberg (2003) established the integration of films into psychotherapy through mechanisms such as observational learning, identification, and emotional accessibility. Building on this, Dermer and Hutchings (2016) emphasized the structured use of films as therapeutic adjuncts, particularly within counselling settings.

More recent contributions have attempted to formalize cinema therapy. Hamilton (2023) introduced the MOVIE model, a trauma-informed framework that guides emotional processing and empathy development. Similarly, Sacilotto et al. (2021), through a scoping review, validated cinema and video therapy as effective tools for enhancing therapeutic dialogue and psychological well-being.

Merit: These frameworks provide conceptual clarity and structured application. Limitation: They are largely developed in Western contexts and lack cultural adaptation.

Psychological Impact of Film Consumption

A second stream of research examines how films influence psychological states in everyday contexts. Xu (2022) demonstrated that comedy films significantly reduce chronic stress and improve mood, supporting the role of cinema in affective regulation. Popa et al. (2021) extended this perspective by linking cinema to positive psychology and intercultural competence, highlighting its role in empathy-building and cultural reflection.

Wirz et al. (2025) introduced the concept of psychological richness, arguing that entertainment experiences contribute to well-being not only through pleasure but also through meaning, novelty, and cognitive engagement.

Merit: Establishes cinema as a natural, accessible coping mechanism. Limitation: Focuses primarily on outcomes, with limited attention to processes of engagement (e.g., unconscious vs conscious use).

Intervention-Based and Applied Studies

Intervention studies provide empirical validation of cinema's therapeutic effectiveness. Goodwin et al. (2023), through the Intinn project, demonstrated improvements in mental health literacy among adolescents using film-based interventions. Hendayani et al. (2024) reported reductions in anxiety and depression in similar populations.

In the context of ageing, Tylikowska and Tucholska (2023) found that cinema therapy enhances quality of life and emotional well-being among elderly individuals. Additionally, Srinivasan (2024) highlighted cinema's role during the COVID-19 pandemic, where it functioned as a coping mechanism under conditions of social isolation.

Merit: Provides measurable, outcome-based evidence. Limitation: Heavily intervention-centric, overlooking everyday, unstructured engagement.

Synthesis and Critical Insight

Across these domains, literature consistently supports cinema's role in emotional processing, stress reduction, and psychological enrichment. However, three critical gaps emerge:

1. Contextual Gap – Most studies are Western-centric, with limited research in the Indian socio-cultural environment.
2. Engagement Gap – Insufficient focus on informal and unconscious therapeutic usage among general audiences.
3. Stakeholder Gap – Absence of integrated perspectives combining audiences, psychotherapists, and filmmakers.

Problem Identification

Despite strong theoretical and empirical support, cinema therapy remains fragmented across disciplines. Existing research fails to connect:

- Audience behavior (consumption)
- Clinical practice (application)
- Content creation (production)

This disconnect results in the absence of structured frameworks for implementation, particularly in India where cinema is deeply embedded in everyday life.

The present study addresses this gap by adopting a triangulated stakeholder approach and a mixed-methods design, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of cinema as both an informal coping mechanism and a potential therapeutic tool.

Research Gaps

- Limited empirical research on cinema therapy in India.
- Lack of formal training for psychotherapists in film-based interventions.
- Absence of structured collaboration frameworks between filmmakers and therapists.
- Insufficient exploration of unconscious therapeutic usage among audiences.

Research Objectives

- To explore perceptions of moviegoers, psychotherapists, and filmmakers regarding cinema's therapeutic potential.
- To assess the feasibility of mixed-methods research in this domain.
- To identify institutional and methodological gaps for future research.

Research Questions

1. How do moviegoers perceive and engage with cinema's therapeutic aspects?
2. What are psychotherapists' attitudes toward integrating cinema therapy into practice?
3. How do filmmakers conceptualize therapeutic elements in film production?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected via Google Form surveys from 61 moviegoers. Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with two psychotherapists and

two filmmakers. Purposive and snowball sampling ensured relevant stakeholder participation. Data collection occurred between December 2023 and January 2024.

Findings and Analysis

Moviegoers

The survey of 61 moviegoers revealed several notable demographic and behavioral patterns. The majority of respondents (90.16%) were aged between 17–35 years, reflecting the dominance of younger audiences in Indian cinema consumption. Gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 57.4% male and 41% female participants. Educational attainment was high, with 41% holding graduate degrees and another 41% postgraduate qualifications, suggesting that the sample comprised individuals with significant exposure to cultural and intellectual discourse. Occupationally, nearly half (49%) were employed full-time, while 29.5% were students, indicating a mix of working professionals and younger learners.

In terms of cinematic engagement, respondents reported diverse consumption habits. Comedy emerged as the most preferred genre (73.8%), followed by action (62.3%), drama (54.1%), science fiction (54.1%), and romance (49.2%). Language preferences highlighted Hindi (96.7%) and English (86.9%) as dominant, with regional languages such as Marathi, Tamil, and Malayalam also represented. Platforms of consumption leaned heavily toward personal screens (mobile/laptop), though multi-platform viewing was common (60.7%).

Crucially, therapeutic engagement with cinema was evident. A majority (59%) reported experiencing therapeutic benefits indirectly, often without consciously labeling films as healing tools. Respondents shared anecdotal accounts of films helping them cope with stress, grief, or personal challenges. Additionally, 54.1% consciously acknowledged using cinema for emotional relief, escapism, or self-reflection. Despite this, 98.4% reported no participation in film clubs, suggesting that therapeutic engagement occurs informally rather than through structured communities.

Psychotherapists

Interviews with two psychotherapists revealed awareness of cinema therapy as a concept, though neither had formally integrated it into practice. Both expressed positive attitudes toward its potential, emphasizing cinema's accessibility and emotional resonance. However, they highlighted a lack of formal training in cinema therapy during their academic preparation, underscoring institutional gaps. Importantly, both expressed willingness to collaborate with filmmakers to create therapeutic content, viewing such partnerships as mutually beneficial.

Filmmakers

The two filmmakers interviewed—one experienced and one emerging—acknowledged cinema's therapeutic potential but noted that systematic integration of therapeutic elements into film production remains rare in India. Their stance on challenges was largely neutral, reflecting limited direct engagement with therapeutic filmmaking. Both expressed openness to collaborating with psychotherapists but lacked concrete frameworks for operationalizing such partnerships. Scheduling difficulties during interviews further highlighted practical barriers to stakeholder engagement.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this pilot study underscore cinema's dual role as both entertainment and therapeutic resource. Among moviegoers, the high prevalence of both conscious and unconscious therapeutic engagement validates cinema's capacity to function as an informal coping mechanism. The preference for comedy and escapist genres suggests that audiences gravitate toward films that provide emotional relief and distraction from everyday stressors. The dominance of personal screens as viewing platforms reflects broader shifts in media consumption, with implications for how therapeutic cinema might be delivered in the future (e.g., via OTT platforms).

Psychotherapists' perspectives highlight both opportunities and challenges. Their positive attitudes toward cinema therapy suggest readiness for integration, but the absence of formal training points to systemic gaps in

psychology curricula. This aligns with international literature emphasizing the need for structured guidance in film-based interventions. Their willingness to collaborate with filmmakers indicates potential for interdisciplinary innovation, though institutional support will be critical to sustain such efforts.

Filmmakers' responses reveal an exploratory stage of engagement with therapeutic cinema. While they recognize its potential, the lack of structured practices or frameworks suggests that therapeutic filmmaking in India is still nascent. Their openness to collaboration, however, provides a promising foundation for future initiatives. Importantly, the neutral stance on challenges indicates that barriers may not be insurmountable but rather underexplored.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the feasibility of mixed-methods research in this domain. Surveys effectively captured audience behaviors and perceptions, while interviews elicited nuanced professional insights. However, limitations such as small sample sizes for psychotherapists and filmmakers, and scheduling difficulties, highlight the need for expanded recruitment strategies in future studies.

Overall, the findings suggest that cinema therapy in India holds significant promise but requires structured training, collaborative frameworks, and methodological refinement. By bridging the perspectives of audiences, therapists, and filmmakers, this study lays the groundwork for interdisciplinary exploration of cinema as a therapeutic tool.

Justification of Outcomes

The study's outcomes are supported by convergence across stakeholder groups and alignment with established psychological theories such as catharsis, observational learning, and narrative identification. Empirical evidence of both conscious and unconscious engagement strengthens the validity of findings.

The consistency between audience behavior and professional perspectives justifies the conclusion that cinema therapy is both feasible and underutilized in India.

Abbreviations

| Abbreviation | Full Form |
|--------------|------------------------------|
| OTT | Over-The-Top |
| U&G | Uses and Gratifications |
| CBT | Cognitive Behavioral Therapy |
| MH | Mental Health |
| FL | Film Literacy |

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Integrate cinema therapy into psychology curricula
- Develop interdisciplinary collaboration frameworks
- Utilize OTT platforms for therapeutic content delivery
- Establish standardized intervention protocols
- Conduct large-scale and longitudinal studies
- Promote film literacy for conscious engagement

CONCLUSION

Cinema holds substantial potential as a culturally embedded tool for emotional coping and psychological growth. While audiences already engage with films therapeutically, formal integration within psychotherapy and filmmaking remains limited. Addressing gaps in training, collaboration, and research will be essential for advancing cinema therapy as a structured discipline in India.

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