Showcasing of Indian Cinema:
Global Success of *Dhoom3*

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Introduction

Long considered one of India's biggest cultural exports, Hindi films have been able to penetrate global consciousness in ways that most tourism ministries could only dream of. They are one of the most popular forms of entertainment not only within South Asia but also in countries outside with large South Asian Diaspora populations such as the United Kingdom and the United States. Even in countries as diverse as Nigeria, Malaysia, Indonesia, Egypt and Iran, Hindi films have garnered strong following among local audiences through their unique brand of entertainment. However, the highly romantic depictions of love, ostentatious wedding sequences and melodramatic family feuds that such films are known and loved around the world for may become less and less visible in the future. Hindi film studios are beginning to create and market their films in an increasingly Hollywood-like way in the hope of building bigger international audiences and generating even greater revenue from overseas releases.

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Released in December 2013, the film *Dhoom3*, part of the hugely successful *Dhoom* film franchise, broke box-office records in India. What is particularly interesting is that it marks a historic moment in the story of *Bollywood*'s global influence – the film scored the highest opening gross receipts ever for an Indian movie worldwide. During the weekend of its release in North America, the film grossed an estimated US$ 3.305 million, "overtaking the previous record holder *Chennai Express* which grossed US$ 2.22 million"[2] when it was released in August 2013. In Australia *Dhoom3* broke the record for an opening-day show for a *Bollywood* film where it took in US$ 172,000, "more than doubling previous record holder *Jab Tak Hai Jaan's* $ 77k debut".[3] The United Kingdom saw *Dhoom3* marking "the highest non-festival/holiday opening for a *Bollywood* film with a US$ 1.45 million gross, according to production company Yash Raj Films".[4] The film's phenomenal success suggests that franchising may be the most obvious way of ensuring a global hit for an Indian film. However, the concept of sequels and trilogies is something relatively new to Indian cinema.

In Hollywood, film franchises have often been a sure way of guaranteeing success at the box office. This is because the popularity of a film ensures a captive audience that is likely to be interested in any films that follow on in the franchise. However, film franchises have generally been limited to certain genres such as action, adventure, horror or fantasy – all of which usually require a large budget due to the need for special effects and are therefore costly to produce. Popular examples of long-running Hollywood film franchises include *Harry Potter*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Lord of the Ring*s, *Spiderman*, *Batman*, *Twilight* and *Transformers*.

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[2] Tartaglione, Nancy. 2013. Dhoom 3 Sets New Worldwide Records For A Bollywood Film. *Deadline* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.deadline.com/2013/12/dhoom3-box-office-records-north-america/>.

[3] Box Office. 2013. 'Dhoom 3' Breaks Opening Day Records Around The World, Becomes First Bollywood Film To Post $1M Opening Day In North America. *Box Office* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.boxoffice.com/latest-news/2013-12-21-dhoom-3-breaks-opening-day-records-around-the-world-becomes-first-bollywood-film-to-post-1m-opening-day-in-north-america>.

[4] News. 2013. Dhoom 3 breaks Bollywood box office records. *3 News* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.3news.co.nz/Dhoom-3-breaks-Bollywood-box-office-records/tabid/418/articleID/326573/Default.aspx>.

The year 2013 alone was a testament to the growing power of Hollywood film franchises. The "five leading films [at] the global box office were all sequels",[5] including *Iron Man 3*. Taking in a "global total of more than US$ 1.2 billion", it was the best-selling movie of the year, followed by *Despicable Me 2* with "nearly US$ 920 million".[6] The trend of Hollywood movie studios introducing franchises shows no signs of stopping, with at least eight new sequel films being planned for release this year. The popularity of film franchises can also be attributed to the fact that most of them are adaptations of existing material. These include novels, comic books, toys and even theme park rides. Therefore, potential audiences may already be familiar with the content or concept of the film which in itself is a selling point.

Lack of Sequels in Hindi Cinema

The general lack of film franchises in Hindi cinema can be linked to several reasons. One, the genre-specific nature of films in Hollywood franchises is something of a rarity in Hindi cinema. It is difficult, though less so now, to find a Hindi film marketed solely as a 'fantasy', 'horror' or 'adventure' flick. This is because the success of Hindi films has traditionally rested on their ability to combine aspects of multiple genres such as comedy, action, romance, musicals and drama, all rolled into one. The popularity of the '*masala* film' lies in the way in which it provides an all-in-one package. This is especially important in India where many movie-watchers come from working class backgrounds and therefore have a limited income. Value for money is a key factor in the mind of the consumer as the purchase of a single movie ticket allows him or her to laugh, dance, cry, sing and be seduced all in a matter of a few hours – something that cannot be achieved by a genre film.

Another reason that could explain the lack of film franchises in *Bollywood* is the high-budget nature of Hollywood film franchises. Compared to Hollywood, Hindi films often operate on a far lower budget, and this could also be due to the fact that technology required for creating special effects of the quality seen in Hollywood blockbusters simply does not exist in India. For example, the 2011 science-fiction superhero film *Ra-One* starring Shahrukh Khan is the

[5] Barnes, Brookes and Cieply, Michael. 2013. The Movies With Pasts Ruled The Year. *New York Times* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/30/movies/the-movies-with-pasts-ruled-the-year.html?_r=0>.
[6] Ibid.

most expensive *Bollywood* film till date, costing "US$ 27 million"[7] to produce. The "most expensive movie ever made in history",[8] on the other hand, is 2007's *Pirates of the Caribbean – At World's End*, the third film in the *Pirates* franchise. Produced at a whopping US$ 332 million, its budget is by no means unusual for Hollywood standards – several other films within popular, special effects-heavy franchises such as *Spiderman*, *Harry Potter* and *Avatar* (soon to become a franchise) were all produced within the US$ 200 million-300 million range. Therefore, the difference in production costs between a typical Hollywood blockbuster and its *Bollywood* equivalent becomes remarkably clear.

Furthermore, Hindi film studios may be unwilling to invest in creating special effects if they are viewed as unlikely to be a major draw for Indian audiences. The lukewarm audience-response to the previous attempts to make Hindi fantasy-adventure films with special effects, such as *Drona* (2008) and *Aladin* (2009), has arguably played a part in steering Indian movie executives away from making the kinds of films that lend themselves easily to franchises of the Hollywood mould. The extent to which India lacks a tradition of comic book and popular literary characters as compared to the West is another factor that may explain the relative absence of Indian film franchises.

Changing Nature of Film Evolution in India

However, the *Dhoom* series suggests that the direction of film development and marketing in India is changing. With the record-breaking success of *Dhoom3*, the latest in the franchise, it is possible that high budget action-adventure films of a similar nature will become an increasingly common part of the fabric of Indian cinema, whether they are stand-alone films or part of a franchise. For all its differences from Hollywood cinema, the *Dhoom* franchise bears many resemblances to one of the longest-running and most financially successful film franchises of all time, the *Fast & Furious* series. The continued success of the franchise (*Fast & Furious 6* was the third most successful film of 2013, grossing nearly "US$ 790 million worldwide"[9]) may have been a factor in persuading movie executives to build a franchise around *Dhoom*, which is highly similar in its concept to *Fast & Furious*. High speed chases,

7   Kumar, Ashish. 2013. Top 10 Most Expensive Indian Movies. *The Richest* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.therichest.com/luxury/most-expensive/top-10-most-expensive-indian-movies/>.
8   Mathew, Sebin. 2013. Top 10 Most Expensive Films Ever Made. *List Dose* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://listdose.com/top-10-most-expensive-films-ever-made/>.
9   Barnes, Brookes and Cieply, Michael, above n 5.

dangerous stunts, explosions and a focus on state-of-the-art vehicles are some of the similarities that can be drawn between the *Dhoom* and the *Fast & Furious* films. Even the marketing strategies that have been employed to promote *Dhoom3* seem to have been modelled on the way in which Hollywood film studios have expanded into producing merchandise for their film franchises.

Toys, clothes, stationery, action figures and memorabilia have been produced to tie-in with the release of popular American film franchises for decades. Conveying the extent to which this form of movie marketing has taken root both in the United States and elsewhere outside India is the world-famous Disney store franchise. First launched in 1987, the entertainment retail model is devoted entirely to selling Disney movie-themed merchandise ranging from apparel to stationery. Today, it has "more than 350" locations worldwide and attracts "more than 200 million"[10] visitors every year. *Dhoom3* marks the first time that this form of movie marketing has been officially introduced in India on such a large scale. Working together with Yash Raj Films, "as many as 200 brands" helped to create and market "*Dhoom3* merchandise"[11] including dolls, hot wheel bikes and dog tags.

Differences in Marketing Hindi and Western Films

Another interesting aspect of the marketing campaign behind *Dhoom3* is the relative lack of promotion by the stars of the film. This is surprising for a film of such a large scale. Typically, before the release of a widely anticipated film, *Bollywood* stars make numerous public appearances in different cities and on television to promote their film. The fact the film's leads, Aamir Khan and Katrina Kaif, "restricted their public appearance to the unveiling of the film's merchandise"[12] points to a new accent within the marketing of Indian films. Hollywood franchises are marketed almost as 'brands', with the storyline, concept and affiliated merchandise being given just as much exposure during the film's promotion as the

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[10] Turner, Shawn. 2012. Disney Store celebrates 25th Anniversary. *Reuters* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/26/idUS200253+26-Mar-2012+BW20120326>.

[11] Srivastava, Priyanka. 2013. Dhoom 3 thrives on subtle advertising strategy. *India Today* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/dhoom-3-subtle-advertising-strategy-aamir-khan-katrina-kaif-box-office-yash-raj-films/1/333314.html>.

[12] Ibid.

stars appearing in it. Hindi films, on the other hand, have traditionally relied extensively, if not solely, on the star power of their actors as a way of ensuring box office success.

The actor-audience relationship in India is a highly personal connection as the audience idolises and worships actors in a way that is less evident in the West. Whereas much focus within the Western world of acting is placed on the actor's ability to portray a character, Hindi film actors often use their films as vehicles to entertain. Many exaggerate aspects of their own public personas in their performances, playing directly to the audience through their dance moves and dialogues. This explains the stronger sense of connection between film actors and audiences in India, and therefore also the greater reliance that Hindi movie studios place on film stars during the promotion process. The choice to shift the focus to merchandise, evident in the marketing strategy behind *Dhoom3,* represents a break from the norm.

The genre-specific nature of the *Dhoom* films and the way in which they are now being marketed reveal an increasing desire on the part of Indian filmmakers and movie executives to borrow from Hollywood-style filmmaking and marketing. Furthermore, the use of merchandising points to the possibility of further future partnerships between Indian film studios and the other businesses being formed to help promote films in an innovative and unique way.

Formula for Global Success of Hindi Films

There are already expectations in some quarters that Salman Khan's new film *Jai Ho* will overtake *Dhoom3* at the box office. This remains to be seen. The recent films of his contemporaries like Shahrukh Khan (*My Name is Khan* and *Jab Tak Hai Jaan*) and Aamir Khan (D*hoom3* and *3 Idiots*) have been, for one reason or another, successful among international audiences. Each of these four films has broken box office records for the release of a Hindi film in countries such as the US and the UK. For example, the socially-conscious films of Aamir Khan have been well received by the Indian Diaspora who are perhaps more receptive to slightly more serious films based on issues and social messages rather than escapism and exotic locations. Shahrukh Khan, on the other hand, has been able to project

himself as the quintessential non-resident Indian in his films by typically playing characters living in the UK or the USA (both countries are home to large Indian Diaspora populations).

There appears to be a certain formula for success when examining the latest *Bollywood* films that have broken box office records worldwide. They have either specifically targeted Diaspora audiences through using familiar locations and stories about the Diaspora experience (eg. *My Name is Khan* and *Jab Tak Hai Jaan*) or have represented a complete break away from the traditional *masala* film format (eg. *3 Idiots* and *Dhoom3*). They have also all featured either Shahrukh or Aamir Khan in leading roles. The films of Salman Khan can be said to represent a far more indigenous version of 'Indianness'.

Conclusion

With the success of *Dhoom3*, the move to franchise films is something we can expect to see more in the future. As film franchises often require a highly unique or recognisable concept, making them instantly familiar to audiences the moment that any sequels in the franchise are released, there may be a shift within Hindi cinema from actor-based films to ones with highly defined concepts. This itself may lead to global audiences becoming even more receptive to Hindi films than ever before, particularly if they are unfamiliar with Hindi film actors but are able to relate to universal themes or concepts.

Through franchising, Hindi films may become increasingly influenced, both in style and in terms of marketing, by the West in the way that *Dhoom3* has; but if the film's success is anything to go by, Hindi cinema may in turn reap the benefits of globalisation as it begins to command greater influence in the West than ever before.

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