

THE INFLUENCE OF BOLLYWOOD FILMS ON PUNJABI  
SIKH YOUTHS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR RELIGIOUS  
IDENTITY

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AUGUST 2015

**THE INFLUENCE OF BOLLYWOOD FILMS ON PUNJABI SIKH  
YOUTHS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR RELIGIOUS IDENTITY**

By

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A dissertation submitted to the Department of Mass Communication,  
Faculty of Creative Industries,  
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman,  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Communication  
August 2015

## ABSTRACT

### THE INFLUENCE OF BOLLYWOOD FILMS ON PUNJABI SIKH YOUTH' PERCEPTION OF THEIR RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Ashwinder Kaur A/P Gurbanjan Singh

Minority religion gets very less coverage, be it at school teachings or local media. With less than one percent population to represent themselves, the Sikhs in Malaysia, being a double minority in ethnic categorization often gets very limited media coverage and representation, let alone, an accurate portrayal. Bollywood movies are often time deduced to a cultural product of the Sikhs to non-Sikh Malaysians. With a severely lacking representation of Sikhs in local media and the inaccurate portrayal of Sikhs in Bollywood movies, the Sikh community tries to preserve as much of their religious identity as they can. This research is a humble attempt to analyse the influence of Bollywood films on Malaysian Punjabi Sikh youths' perception on their religious identity. The study uses Hall's encoding and decoding (1980) model to look at how the Malaysian Punjabi Sikh youth interpret Bollywood films and its portrayal of Sikh characters which in return, influences their religious identity. By utilizing one-on-one in-depth interviews, the researcher interviewed 15 Punjabi Sikh youth, aged 16-23 years consisting of eight males and seven females from the Klang Valley until the data saturated. The study showed Sikh youth deduced the *dastar* as a vital factor in maintaining their religious identity. However, Bollywood movies cannot be considered as an influential or the only factor that affects the identity of a Sikh. Primary and secondary agents of socialization such as family members through daily life experiences, peer group and social media do play a vital role in changing youths' perceptions about their idealistic and practical religious identity.

**Key Words:** Bollywood, Sikh, youth, negotiation, religious identity

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

First and foremost, I would like to thank God for giving me the strength and courage to pursue this journey of higher education. My heartiest thanks go to my parents, Mr. Gurbanjan Singh and Mdm. Manjit Kaur, for their endless words of support and prayers. They followed half of the times during the lengthy data collection process and guided me in every possible manner, especially when I was so close to giving up. No words can express my gratitude for them. I would also like to thank my siblings who constantly asked me about the progress of my paper and offered me kind words of support and help.

I would also like to convey my utmost appreciation to Dr. Charanjit Kaur, my supervisor. Though she came into the picture towards the completion of my study, she picked up right away and offered me her valuable knowledge. Thanks to Dr. Carmen Ng, my previous supervisor, who worked with me to draft the entire dissertation in the beginning. I would also like to thank all my lecturers and classmates during the first year of this program for their valuable insights to enrich this paper more. Mannu who helped me adjust the formatting of this paper every now and then whenever I gave up on MS Word, thank you. Last but not least, thanks Rajiv, for being there and assisting me during the end of my paper in terms of support and encouragement, and for loaning your laptop of course.

Thank you everyone once again.

## APPROVAL SHEET

This dissertation/thesis entitled "BOLLYWOOD FILMS INFLUENCE ON PUNJABI SIKH YOUTHS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR RELIGIOUS IDENTITY" was prepared by ASHWINDER KAUR A/P GURBANJAN SINGH and submitted as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Communication at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman.

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**SUBMISSION OF FINAL YEAR DISSERTATION**

It is hereby certified that Ashwinder Kaur A/P Gurbanjan Singh (ID No:09UJM08867) has completed this dissertation entitled "Bollywood films influence on Punjabi Sikh youths' perception of their religious identity" under the supervision of Dr. Charanjit Kaur (Supervisor) from the Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Creative Industries.

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Ashwinder Kaur A/P Gurbanjan Singh

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the dissertation is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UTAR or other institutions.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter outlines the introduction of the Sikh people and their religious identity, which mainly revolves around the 5K (5 *Kakkars*) and the meaning behind having these religious symbols. The importance of *dastar*<sup>1</sup> to the Sikhs and maintaining their unshorn hair is also briefly discussed further in this chapter. The lack of comprehension amongst people of different faith of the *dastar* and Sikhs' unshorn hair can lead to many unnecessary controversies and media, such as Bollywood films which happens to be a globally consumed product does not help the situation by presenting inaccurate portrayals of the Sikhs to people around the world. Hence the current study looks at Malaysian Sikh youths' understanding of their religious identity vis-à-vis Bollywood films using a qualitative research design.

#### **1.1 BRIEF HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION ON SIKHISM**

Sikhism is one of the world's youngest religions, with its roots dating back to five hundred years ago in Punjab, India. Sikhism's fundamental concept acknowledges truth that transcends beyond space, time and gender without any physical form as the ultimate being, better known as the One (Singh 1993, Gill

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<sup>1</sup>*Dastar* is a more accurate word for Sikhs' who wears *dastar* as *dastar* in general is also worn by other communities such as Muslims or Rajput's' in India.

2005). Born in a conflict ridden environment between Hindus and Muslims as a response to religious intolerance, caste system, mistreatment of women and other forms of injustice inflicted over the people of Punjab at that time by the rulers and Brahmins” (Gill and Gopal, 2010:139).

Sikhs are administered by a certain code of conduct, known as the *Sikh Rehat Maryada*. The *Sikh Rehat Maryada* incorporates in it the teachings of the Sikh Holy Book, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, together with Sikh traditions and conventions. The *Rehat Maryada* guide Sikhs to perform religious ceremonies according to Sikhism universally. In the explanations of the code of conduct and conventions of the Sikh, the *Rehat Maryada* booklet, which is universal and applicable to any Sikh in this world, has identified what it means to be a Sikh, together with precise elaboration on the things Sikhs should do and avoid in order to be a good, pure Sikh as lined by the Guru.

The *Rehat Maryada* book defines a Sikh as

“Any human being who faithfully believes in One Immortal Being; ten Gurus, from Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh; the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji; the utterances and teachings of the ten Gurus and the baptism [Amrit] bequeathed by the tenth Guru; and who does not owe allegiance to any other religion”

(*Sikh Rehat Maryada*, p.7).

The Sikhs are immediately recognized by some of their religious symbols; uncut hair, *dastar*, and the five emblems, or also better known as the 5 *Kakkar* (5Ks: *kesh*, *kangha*, *kara*, *kachha* or *kachhara*, and *kirpan*).

The *kesh* (unshorn hair and beard) in Sikhism is considered holy, apart from being a proof of living with harmony with the will of God (Gill and Gopal, 2010:140). The *kangha* (small comb) is a vital element that is added to the hair. Meant to keep the hair neat and tidy, it is to be placed in the hair knot. Sikhs must also wear a *kara* (steel bangle). The *Kara* is normally worn on the right hand. It is known as a symbol of poverty and pledge to the Gurus. Next in the 5K emblem is the *kachha* or *kachhara* (knee length breeches). The breeches are a mean to cover private body parts. The breeches symbolize moral restraint and conjugal fidelity. It keeps the wearer covered all the time and makes them move with briskness and agility. Lastly, to always carry the Kirpan (small dagger) to defend and protect the dignity or honor of others (Mansukhani, 1997:316-319).

Apart from religious symbols, Sikhs also have to adhere to several rules of conduct as aligned by the *Sikh Rehat Maryada* booklet, including prohibition of consuming alcohol, drugs, tobacco, or other intoxicants, eating the flesh of animals that have been put down with several blows as done in the Muslim rituals of serving Halal food, and committing adultery. The *Sikh Rehat Maryada* booklet also touches on marriage practices by strictly stating that the marriage of a Sikh man or woman should only be with another Sikh. Gurdwaras' in Malaysia over the years seemed to have loosened their grip on this matter and have been allowing interfaith marriages between Sikhs and non-Sikhs, until the Supreme seat of authority of the Sikhs back in Punjab, called the Sri Akaal Takht Sahib

issued a decree on 16 August 2007 against allowing interfaith marriages to take place in Gurdwaras. If such a practice must still take place, the non-Sikh partner shall be baptized into being a Sikh (Gill and Gopal, 2010).

Its importance is stated in the *Guru Granth Sahib* as well. In describing God, Guru Arjun Dev wrote:

*Tayray bankay lo-in dant reesaalaa, Sohmay nak jin lammrhay vaalaa.*  
Your eyes are so beautiful, and Your teeth are delightful, Your nose is so graceful, and Your hair is so long.

*(Guru Granth Sahib, p.567)*

Guru Nanak Dev, while addressing the Muslims about Islam stated the importance of wrapping the gift of natural hair with *dastar*:

*Naapaak paakkar hadoor hadeesa saabat soorat dastaar siraa.*  
Purify what is impure, and let the Lord's presence be your religious tradition. Let your total awareness be the turban on your head.

*(Guru Granth Sahib, p.1084)*

It is said that in the past, the Moghul ruled Punjab and offered remunerations for those who would bring them back the head of a Sikh. Due to this, the Sikhs had to resort to jungles, but always kept their hair intact. Some examples were people like Bhai Taru Singh, who accepted death easily rather than letting them cut his hair. While Sardar Mehtab Singh allowed himself to be sawn alive, but he never allowed them to cut his hair as it was seen as an act of going out of faith.

Most of the writings in the *Guru Granth Sahib* and the *Sikh Rehat Maryada* emphasize on the importance of unshorn hair, as it is the most visible marker for Sikhs and is considered a sign of their commitment and devotion to the Guru. It is clear from the history of Sikhism why *dastar* is to date considered important to Sikhs<sup>2</sup>.

## 1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

In 2011, 18 year old Basant Singh (see Appendix 1) from Ipoh attended National Service at Seri Impian Training Camp at Sungai Bakap, Penang to fulfill his responsibility as a law abiding Malaysian citizen. His excitement was however short lived as upon waking up one morning in the camp he realized his hair had been cut off. Basant Singh who has never cut his hair since birth and wears a *dastar* stated, his one meter- long hair was snipped about 60 centimeter whilst he was asleep with 10 other trainees in the camp dormitory. His father who is a priest in one of the gurdwara in Ipoh claimed that the shocking incident revealed a lack of understanding amongst people about the significance of Sikhs' unshorn hair. Unhappy about what had taken place, Basant Singh lodged a police report so that a thorough investigation would take place to identify the culprit. However, according to the National Service training programme department, no malice was involved in the hair cutting incident. This conclusion was formed upon calling and investigating 16 witnesses from that camp.

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<sup>2</sup>It is to be noted that some of the Sikh peasantry in India (the Jatt Sikhs), due to occupational reasons (farming), do trim their beards and hair.

Basant Singh and his family were in the end left with no choice but to accept the conclusion. MIC<sup>3</sup> President, G. Palanivel however expressed his regret over the incident and called upon National Service officials to apologize formally to the Sikh community. Palanivel further stated that “serious action should be taken to find the culprits as unshorn hair was a very sacred symbol for Sikhs” (Hong Chieh, 2011). The incident was however forgotten conveniently over time with no formal apology from National Service officials to Basant and his family. No action has been taken til date to find the people behind the heinous act as suggested by Palanivel. This goes to show how lightly minority issues are dealt with.

The lack of understanding amongst people of the Sikh community’s unshorn hair is not just in the local sphere but also the international. In 2004, the French government passed a decree banning all religious signs in school. Among the included religious signs was the *dastar* as well. In the following years, the decree was also in effect on official photographs such as driving license renewal and certain other official documents. Motorists in France were told to appear bareheaded and face forward in order to take photographs. Many Sikhs’ wearing the *dastar* refused to part with their headgear as it felt like parting with their identity. Singh (2012) identified the *dastar* not only as his identity, but also as a part of his body and refused to part with it. As a result of this refusal, quite a

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<sup>3</sup> MIC is the acronym for Malaysian Indian Congress, a political party which looks out for the Indians well- being in Malaysia.

number of Sikhs did not get their ID cards and passports and many Sikh children could not attend school as the *dastar* was a banned headgear.

Similar phenomenas involving the Sikhs' *dastar* also took place in the sports arena. During the FIBA Asia Cup in Wuhan,China last year, the Indian basketball team's two Sikh members were told to remove their *dastars* before stepping into the court. This was in rule with their Article 4.4.2 of FIBA's rules where "players shall not wear equipment (objects) that may cause injury to other players," adding, "Headgear, hair accessories and jewelry are not permitted" (IBN Live, 2014). The two players however did remove their headgear to play the match, but felt incomplete without it, as they had never parted with it. The same unfortunate event took place in Doha, Qatar just a month after the China incident. This time FIBA instructed another Sikh player to remove his headgear during the Under-18 Championship match.

In Malaysia, the government has never imposed any such act, in which a Sikh wearing *dastar* would have to remove it for photograph purposes or participate in sports. In fact, Baljit Singh, a young Sikh with *dastar* is a part of the Malaysian National Junior hockey team. He played for Malaysia in Antwerp, Belgium (2015) for the World League Semifinals with a *dastar* (Appendix 2). The Malaysian Federal Constitution, under Article 11 clearly states that one can rightfully profess and practice one's religion. However, Basant Singh's case, which was mentioned above, clearly highlights that there is a severe lack of



knowledge and understanding amongst the non-Sikhs when it comes to the sacredness of Sikhs unshorn hair.

The lack of understanding amongst people of different religions about the significance of the *dastar* to the Sikh community is prevalent in the cases mentioned above. On the other hand, according to an article written in New York Times (2007), Jugraj Singh, an 18-year-old business student removed his *dastar* and snipped his hair on his own accord. According to him, the *dastar* was becoming bothersome as taking care of the hair hygienically and wrapping yards of cloth around his head every morning was time consuming. Claiming that it was uncomfortable and hot wearing a *dastar*, he concluded “in the end, it was a question of fashion. I felt smarter without it” (Singh, 2007). Commenting further in that same article was a hairdresser in Amritsar, India, who claimed that it is the college going group that is more concerned with their looks compared to maintaining their religious identity. There is normally a flush of relief as they get their *dastars*’ removed and hair chopped as technically, it releases a certain amount of pressure from the head. Despite acknowledging that it is good business, she says “at the end of the day, it is a bit hurtful. It means one more identifiable Sikh is missing” (Saluja, 2007)

In a community where the *dastar* is fiercely guarded and seen as an integral part of a Sikh’s identity, one also hears of incidents involving Sikhs abandoning the practice of their faith by removing the *dastar* and cutting their

hair for a better physical appearance and/or fashion. For members of different faiths who do not have any idea of the significance of *dastar*, the removal of the *dastar* or the cutting of hair might seem like a norm. However, for those who are aware of the historical and spiritual value of the *dastar* and hair, would know that the absence of *dastar* and hair for a Sikh is similar to losing one's identity and individuality.

In a multiracial country like Malaysia, it is important to know the various cultures of the people to ensure better harmony amongst one another. We are all different in our own ways which makes us a unique country in the end. Media plays a vital role in educating people and also in setting the right image of an individual's religion, race, and culture due to its vast reach and accessibility. Being a minority in Malaysia, it is obvious that the Sikhs' have a limited presence and representation in the local media arena. This indirectly enables a greater leverage for the non- Sikhs to deduce Sikhism to how normally they are shown in local programs and Bollywood movies; portrayal of men in turban with funny accents.

Even to date, the Sikh 'identity' for many locals are mainly the '*Bai*, *Bengali*'<sup>4</sup> or '*Dutt*'<sup>5</sup> and the similar physical look they notice between Bollywood movie actors and actresses. All these further deepen the misconception of who the Sikhs are and what are their religious identities. With the lack of an accurate

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<sup>4</sup> 'Bai' or 'Bengali' are often time two common racial slur that Sikhs' in Malaysia hear, though the racist sentiment is often time minimized and the "joke" or "funny" sentiment heightened.

<sup>5</sup> 'Dutt' is often time depicted as turban by other races in Malaysia.

portrayal in Bollywood movies and limited representation in the local media, the Sikh community tries to preserve as much of their religious and cultural identity as they can. Parents and community leaders in the gurdwara are often seen as the mediating factors between the youth and media content that uphold these religious notions to ensure the positive growth of authentic upbringing that reflects robust religious teachings.

### **1.3. MEDIA VS SIKH IDENTITY**

The Bollywood film, *Son of Sardar*<sup>6</sup> (2012) starring Ajay Devgan, made news, not for having an acclaimed screenplay or making millions at the box office, but rather for offending the Sikhs. The movie which portrays Devgan as a *dastar* wearing Sikh character has been said to contain dialogue that depicts the Sikh community in a negative manner. Ajay Devgan himself has been seen sporting a tattoo of Lord Shiva<sup>7</sup> on his chest, which is not with accordance to the tenets of Sikhism. These scenes of the movie did not go down well with some Sikh community members.

Hence legal notices were sent to the producers of the movie by a Sikh political activist and lawyer, Bhai Harpal Singh Cheema, who also happens to be the Senior Vice President of Akali Dal Panch Pardhani (ADPP)<sup>8</sup> as well as by

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<sup>6</sup>*Son of Sardar* was released on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2012. It revolves around a Sikh character who returns from the town to his village only to find himself in the middle of an old family feud.

<sup>7</sup> Lord Shiva is a Hindu deity known for His many benevolent and fearsome forms, but He is not worshipped in Sikhism nor does he have a foothold in Sikhism.

<sup>8</sup>The Shiromani Akali Dal, also known as Supreme Akali Party is a collection of Sikh political parties based in Punjab, India. Akali Dal is ideally recognized as a religio-political party and professes to be the principal representative of Sikhs. The current practice of Akali Dal consists of

Karnail Singh Peermohamad, President of All India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF)<sup>9</sup>. To sweeten the sour mood, he also added how an expert was brought to the set of the film more than 20 times just to tie the *dastar* properly without any mistakes, as “in Bollywood films the *dastars* don't reflect the original style” he said. Everyone in attendance accepted and agreed with his justification (Bawa, 2012)<sup>10</sup>. It is however to be noted that apart from Ajay Devgan’s *Son of Sardar*, there are other Bollywood film directors and actors that have been summoned by the Sikh board of authorities for their poor portrayal of Sikhs in the films.

Films such as *Singh is Kinng* (2008)<sup>11</sup>, *Love Aaj Kal* (2009)<sup>12</sup> are all films that feature a central Sikh character in them and some of these films, such as *Love Aaj Kal* was seen as not portraying the Sikh character well. According to the president of The All India Punjabi Cultural and Heritage Board, Saif’s character which sports a trimmed beard with *dastar* is seen as giving out a wrong message to not only people of other religions, but also to the young impressionable Sikhs, “young Sikhs have been wrongly inspired by Bollywood movies to trim their

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several break away factions, Akali Dal Panch Pardhani (ADPP) being one of it. The ADPP was founded on 30<sup>th</sup> November, 2007 at Alamgir Convention which was held at Gurdwara Sahib. Alamgir, Ludhiana Punjab. Retrieved from [http://eci.nic.in/eci\\_main/mis-Political\\_Parties/Constitution\\_of\\_Political\\_Parties/Constitution\\_of\\_SAD.pdf](http://eci.nic.in/eci_main/mis-Political_Parties/Constitution_of_Political_Parties/Constitution_of_SAD.pdf) and <http://panchpardhani.com/>

<sup>9</sup>All India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF) is Socio-political and advocacy organization that practices and follows the teachings of Shri Guru Granth Sahib and which strives to promote the heritage and future of Sikhism.

<sup>10</sup>H.S Bawa, a senior journalist and editor of an online news portal YesPunjab.com in the state of Punjab, India wrote an article for Sikh Siyasat News regarding Bollywood movie, *Son of Sardar*’s lack of addressing Sikh tenets and importance of the turban.

<sup>11</sup>*Singh is Kinng* was released on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2008. It revolves around Happy Singh, a naïve villager who goes through a series of mishaps which indirectly makes him the king of the underworld. In the midst of all these, he falls in love with Sonia (Katrina Kaif) who happens to dislike criminals.

<sup>12</sup>*Love Aaj Kal* was released on July 31<sup>st</sup>, 2009. It revolves around two people who initially hook up casually, but they soon come to realize that their career goals and direction in life are different from one another and they head towards breaking up.

beards and the trend was a cause of concern to the community” (Singh, 2009). Singh’s (2009) concern is valid as youngsters today are avid media consumers and often tend to adopt a new way of life, inspired by their favorite celebrities.

Whereas for *Singh is Kinng*, a truce was achieved between the Sikh board of authority and director of *Singh is Kinng* whereby Akshay Kumar was to be shown in an ideal Sikh identity with his *dastar* and untrimmed beard at the end of the film. The call of showing Akshay’s character in his full Sikh getup in the end of the film was suggested by the director as he claimed re-shooting scenes of the actor with untrimmed beard was not feasible economically and also time constraining. Staying true to the truce made, the director did show the actor in a *dastar* and untrimmed beard in the end, but the scene was shown during the end credit titles where most people would have already left the cinema hall or have decided to press the stop button on their players. Hence, the truce made was merely oxymoronic.

The concern raised by the Sikh community for Bollywood films and the inaccurate portrayal of Sikhs is a valid concern, for Bollywood films are not merely made and viewed in India, but are globally consumed. The Indian cinema industry today, also called Bollywood, is the world’s largest film industry in terms of employees and the number of films produced; an average of 1000 feature films a year (Dwyer, 2006). Sikhs, a diasporic community in Malaysia, is acknowledged as a minority group (Gill and Gopal, 2010, Zain et al, 2011). With

less than one percent of the population to represent themselves, the government television stations are normally seen making an effort to air Punjabi movies<sup>13</sup> during Vaisakhi Day (holy day for the Sikhs all across the world), that too movies which were produced in 1960's-1970's. However, over the years, the films have been replaced with locally produced half an hour to an hour musical shows on terrestrial and cable channels. A Sikh male and female normally hosts these shows, dressed in traditional Punjabi clothing (see Appendix 3), speaking in the Punjabi language and sharing historical information about Vaisakhi.

The local media however never forgets to air Bollywood movies. Government owned channel air a Bollywood movie every week while a privately owned terrestrial channel airs Bollywood movie every Saturday afternoon. During the festive season such as Deepavali or Hari Raya, the local media generally airs a couple of them, as Bollywood movies have quite an aesthetic appeal on the Muslims in Malaysia. In other words, Bollywood movies are showcased every week in local media without fail. Speaking of cable television, Malaysian cable television has an Indian channel, Zee as a part of the channels that come with the cable subscription. Zee channel is known for its Hindi content, be it songs, movies, dramas, lifestyle or and religious shows. The only Sikh program on Zee is the daily one hour prayer shown live from a gurdwara in Delhi from 6.30-7.30 a.m. and the once in a while songs sung by a local Sikh group, Goldkartz or international Sikh groups. The cable subscription however does have more than

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<sup>13</sup> The Punjabi films aired also do not portray the ideal identity of the Sikhs.

one Malay, Chinese, and Indian channel to cater to the other dominating races in Malaysia<sup>14</sup>

With almost zilch information of Sikh religion and culture in learning institutions and an extremely less coverage of them in the local media, Bollywood movies, which come from India, are often deduced to the cultural product of the Sikhs. What further enhances the prejudice of Bollywood so called representing Sikhs is the fact that famous Bollywood actors such as Akshay Kumar, Saif Ali Khan and Ranbir Kapoor have all worn the *dastar* to play a Sikh character in their respective movies. With a severely lacking representation of Sikhs in local media and the inaccurate portrayal of Sikhs in Bollywood movies, the Malaysian Sikh community tries to preserve as much of their religious and or cultural identity as they can. However, the younger Sikh generation often tends to take the significance of Sikhism values lightly.

#### **1.4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Therefore, the researcher devised a couple of research questions for the current study to further look into this area while contributing to a larger audience reception domain:

1.4.1. What kind of religious values do the Sikh youth think Bollywood movies are communicating to them?

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<sup>14</sup>Other Indian minorities such as Sindhis' or Bengalis' are also given a very less coverage in the local media.

The objective of this question was to determine the awareness of the youth when it comes to Bollywood films' Sikh characterization. Their awareness on the inaccurate portrayal of Sikhs' in Bollywood films' would highlight that the South East Asian group of audience are a neglected group when it comes to Bollywood films' consumption. Since Bollywood is a product of the East, many think that it is often the West born and brought up audience that will be impacted by it. This leaves the diverse minority groups from South East Asia forgotten by the impact of the gigantic industry.

1.4.2. What aspect of Sikhism is deemed important by the Sikh youth and how has Bollywood influenced their identity?

The objective of this question was to investigate the youths' level of religious knowledge and whether can Bollywood films then influence their religious identity understanding. Upon learning the youths' awareness of the inaccuracy of Sikhs identity in Bollywood films, it is vital to gauge their personal understanding of Sikhism and how they navigate between what is portrayed to what is understood ideally and to what is eventually practiced.

## **1.5. RESEARCH LIMITATION**

The researcher decided to look upon Bollywood films instead of any other media simply because these films are easily available and accessible through the



internet and DVDs' and some local television channels also air Bollywood films weekly. Apart than that, Bollywood films have always been looked upon as a source of entertainment for many as a large number of Sikh youth have been exposed to these films since their young days. Klang Valley was chosen as the area of focus because of a greater access to media, in terms of multiplexes airing Bollywood films and also due to fast Internet speed and a wider coverage area, as youngsters normally use the Internet to download these movies the urban area provided.

This sort of study that looks at the Sikh religious identity through Bollywood movies consumption is important as it triggered the researcher to look into this area academically. This area is clearly an under research area as no study has been conducted to gauge the Sikh religious identity understanding vis-à-vis Bollywood films. The researcher looked for information and read up on Bollywood movies consumption by the diasporic Indian youth from various Western countries (Gillispie 1995, Maira 2002, Durham 2004, Desai 2005, Hirji2007, Tirumala, 2008, Chacko 2010,) but came across nothing that mentions the Bollywood movies consumption by Sikh youth in South East Asian countries, let alone, the Malaysian Sikh youth.

Hence in chapter two, the researcher shall look upon the active audience paradigm which would allow the researcher to examine the relationship of audience-media and find out if the Bollywood movies affects are directly mixed

into the youths' perception of their religious identity or it is sieved carefully to only take in what would strengthen and enhance their existing perception of their religious identity.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter outlines the active audience paradigm to shed light on audience and media relationship. By focusing on Hall's (1980) encoding and decoding model, the current study examines the decoding process of Bollywood films by Malaysian Sikh youths and how they actively negotiate and adapt or reject the Bollywood films effects on their religious identity. The current study also looks upon a number of researches done on the diasporic audience and Bollywood films in the West to further strengthen the ignorance of Bollywood films in representing the minorities.

#### **2.1. A BRIEF BACKGROUND ON MEDIA AND AUDIENCE**

As early as the 1920s and 1930s, researchers were aware that films impact on children was dependent on age and cognitive abilities (Wartella & Reeves 1985). In general, media effects can take place at 3 different levels, namely cognitive, affective, or behavioral (Ball-Rokeach & DeFlur, 1976; Chaffee, 1977; Roberts & Maccoby, 1985). Many scholars have looked at media being an essential tool that helps people to shape their perceptions of the world (Fishman 1980, Eagly 1987, Eagly and Wood 1991, Shoemaker and Reese 1996).

The powerful impact of media over peoples' lives can be further seen in the theory of social construction. This theory looks at mass media reflecting a so called realistic image of the world. The media, being a part of a larger social

process, is often times seen imposing certain stereotypes to its viewers via discourse (an example would be the world is a mean bad place as news programs mostly air and sensationalize crime and violence news) However, a much earlier era of communication effects saw audience as passive receivers, who mostly accepted the media messages projected to them (Reisman 1950, Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980/1986, Rouner, 1984).

In today's time, many scholars share the notion that an absolute media effects model has lost its appeal. However, theorists of critical research are still unconvinced with the audience capability of consuming the media actively. Such is the Frankfurt School which still looks upon media as a vehicle to entertain the public, while maintaining a social order which distracts the masses from an economic reality while downplaying the audiences' ability to think critically of what they are consuming and why (Herzog 1941, Lowenthal 1961, Max Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno, 1972, Wiggershaus 1994, T.W. Adorno, 1991/1994). While critical researchers, Marxist scholars and political economists allow some form of authority to the audience in decoding media texts, they also note the power and influence of media producers and certain social and economic factors, that are also bound to influence the interpretation of media texts by audience (Curran et al. 1982, Kellner, 1989; Morgenstern, 1992; Schiller, 1992; Seaman, 1992).

However, vital studies of audience acceptance of media texts carried out throughout the years have led to the discovery of a different dimension of audience where audiences are no longer primarily influenced by the media. Instead, social groups such as family and friends have been seen to play a more important role in influencing them (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1968, Blumler 1979, Iwao, Pool, de Solo, and Hagiwara, 1981, Morgan and Gross, 1982, Abramson and Hayashi 1984, Cotton 1985, Anderson and Collins, 1988, Brannigan and Kapardis, 1986, Joy, Kimball, and Zabrack 1986).

## **2.2. MEDIA EFFECTS**

Mass media are usually seen portraying “Western lifestyles” to the Asian youth audience and is “believed to play an important role in shaping the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of the younger generation. Thus, they might be providing a powerful resource for counter nodes of identity which youth might possibly project against the wishes of their parents and other traditional authority figures” (Apadurai 1996, pp. 44). A similar notion is proposed by Christiane Brosius (1999, pp. 105) in which she states that the middle class and the younger generation’s vulnerability and acceptability towards the varied opportunities and ideas of the West is mostly viewed as a threat.

The influences of “Western lifestyles” are not merely limited to Asian youth. Such an example is the study of Thomas Burgess (2002), which noticed the youth of Zanzibar to be heavily influenced by the Western movies. In the 1960s

and 70s, Zanzibar movie fans were noticed to be charmed by the suave and dapper fashion of the actors. The impact could clearly be seen on young Zanzibarians, who kept themselves updated with the latest fashion as seen in the movies by sporting similar dressing styles.

Scholars studying media effects are often intrigued by the influence and power of certain media products on people. The process of understanding this phenomenon often reveals the intricate process that media viewers go through based on their varied individual differences. To understand the process of media production, its circulation, and reception, it is vital to study the audience as encoders and decoders of the varied media forms available. The audiences' attraction and reaction of the media messages are correlated with "cultural, generational, gendered, local, national, regional, and transnational" (Ginsburg, 2008:219) variables of identity, revealing the notion of a complicated and multiple identity audience.

### **2.3. ACTIVE AUDIENCE**

The complex interpretation of media texts by the audience intrigued scholars to zoom in the audience domain and discover what influences them to consume certain media and how they decode a particular media text. Various studies revealed that audiences' are often time not influenced directly by the media itself, instead social groups, demographics, socioeconomic status, personal experience and selective exposure and perception function as primary influential

factors in why and how audiences receive and interpret media texts (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1968, Cotton, 1985). This brought about the chain of Audience-Centered Theories, where the audience are acknowledged as ‘user’, based on the large active role that is in play compared to merely ‘receiving’ a text passively. Blumler and Katz’s uses and gratification theory (1974) and Hall’s encoding and decoding model (1980) are vital audience centered theories that can enable one to understand the complex audience interpretation of media text better.

The paradigm of Audience-Centered Theories flourished further and stated that audience members “exist among a larger cultural environment, and this environment consistently advances various meanings and identities” (Pierce, 2011). Audiences counter these stimuli differently by negotiating their meaning in complex and paradoxical ways. Media then is important to this self-construction, as it plays such an important role in contemporary society (Durham & Kellner, 2001). Blumler and Katz (1974) uses and gratification model, highlight the selective active nature of audience when it comes to media texts. Known for his active audience scholarship, Katz (1987) who agreed with the existence of active audience and media effects noted that media effects do exist, but in a far more limited manner as opposed to earlier research done.

Katz’s uses and gratification model highlights audience choice of consuming only those media that would benefit them in return. Uses and gratification theory, which first came about in 1940’s using a more functionalist

approach, was then re-introduced by Blumler and Katz (1974) using a larger social science paradigm. It presented media usage by looking at an individual's social gratification or psychological needs. It is the audience's capability of selecting and consuming specific media that brings about the important tenet of active audience; selectivity.

The uses and gratification model deposits that different needs would influence the audiences on how to use and respond to a particular medium. Therefore, audiences are seen as capable of selecting the media they want to consume and how they interpret the information posed in the media texts. The model places media as a source in re-enforcing beliefs and ideas that already exist rather than creating or altering them. The uses and gratification model provides a refreshing way of looking at people's ability to use media intelligently. Unlike the typical scenario where the power of influence lies within the media, the uses and gratification model minimizes the media effect and maximizes the audience capability of decoding the media texts (Hirji, 2007).

Other theorists too, do acknowledge the power of media effects, but they are also aware of the diversity that exists within the audience itself. An example is David Morley's "Nationwide Audience" (1978/1980) reception research. Morley, instead of focusing solely on the message or audience, looked at both textual analysis and audience analysis of BBC's current affairs news magazine, called Nationwide. His focus group study highlighted how social, economical and



individual elements such as gender, race, and class drive active audiences' interpretation of the media texts. Morley, apart from noting the importance of media messages, also acknowledged that analyses of media must take into account the production of meaning, which to an extent is based on the context of reception (Hirji, 2007).

#### **2.4. HALL'S ENCODING AND DECODING MODEL**

Audience-centered theories look at the more active nature of the audience and deduce that individual experience and values located in a person's sense making process allows the audience to actively negotiate the media text (Sood, Witte, & Menard, 2003). The shift towards a more audience centered paradigm championed Hall's encoding and decoding model (1980), which noted three different ways audience can read and interpret media texts: dominant, oppositional, and negotiated. The model gives importance to both the production of texts (encoding) and reception of texts (decoding). Hall focused on looking at construction of meanings at the point when the text would encounter the reader. As noted by Kelner (1995), Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding model (1980) tends to look at different categories in which the audience can decode the media texts, but it still upholds the original emphasis of cultural studies which looks at "political economy, process of production and distribution, textual products, and reception by the audience" (Kelner, 1995:5)

Using the Encoding Decoding Model (1980), one is able to study the audiences' active role in decoding media texts even further compared to previous studies. Hall (1980) further stated that the intended meanings encoded in media texts are not necessarily decoded the same way by the audience. Hall (1980) revisited the Lasswell (1948) model of "sender > message> receiver" by adding encoding and decoding in between "sender and receiver" ("sender> encoded by the sender> message> decoded by receiver> receiver. Hall's (1980) scholarship was simple and clear: audience may accept the intended text, audience may reject the intended text, or audience may accept certain parts of the text and reject some parts.

Hall's work acknowledged that individuals' social experiences and realities are correlated with the way they interpret the media text. The odds of tension brewing are possible between the "structure of the text (which necessarily bears the dominant ideology) and the social situation of the viewers as this will position the audience at odds with the ideology of the text" (Hall, 1980 as cited in Crew, 2004). Fiske (1987) added to Hall's Encoding and Decoding model (1980) by looking at media as a cultural agent that is capable of dispersing meaning and presentation of media characters not merely as representations, but rather as encodings of a specific ideology too.

In relation to the current study, Bollywood films can then be seen as propagating an inaccurate representation of the Sikhs. Bollywood has only in

recent years begun to portray a central Sikh character in their films; before this the turbaned Sikh character was always an extra role that people could laugh at due to his funny accent, and joker like appearance and personality. This is an important issue, as non-Sikhs' would basically review the identity of a Sikh as stupid funny joker, which is certainly not accurate. Though the scenario seems to be changing now, with Bollywood films featuring central Sikh characters, it is still not sufficient as the only obvious Sikh identity the character has is the turban. Though the turbaned character is usually presented with a beard too, but it is trimmed, which ideally, is prohibited in Sikhism. People who are unaware of the ideal Sikh religious identity have been gazing upon these images of a Sikh person through Bollywood films for years: funny, dumb, and allowed to trim bodily hair.

McKee (2003) who looked at Fiske's (1987) encoding scholarship expanded the view by discovering that audience negotiate with media texts to obtain a sense of themselves as well as how they fit in the world in which they live. Elements such as values, experience and media are key tools of this process. Each of us has our individual sense making system which enables us to view the world in various perspectives. Hence, it is to be noted that it is impossible to find the right way of reading a specific media text.

Various scholars who have studied the audience reception domain look upon the audience members' interpretation of the texts and the possible meanings that could arise from the interpretation. What remains consistent is the possibility

of various interpretations. Researchers such as Ang (1985) and Kietz and Liebes (1990) who looked at the American show, Dallas and its reception by Dutch audience and different ethnicity audience residing in Jerusalem, discovered that audience member interpreted the show Dallas in their own different ways, with American Israelis decoding the show based on production and financial issues, Russian Jews interpretation on the producers of the content rather than the show or its characters, and audience of Arab and Moroccan lineage were noticed to be more keen on the characters' place within their family structure (Martin, 1997:141-144). Cultural differences together with individual factors as noted above in Morley's study can be seen as important factors that influence audience reception.

Cultural Studies research looks at a variety of reception studies, in which audiences are studied using the realms of "political, policy, technological, economic and social theory and by developing this multi-level conception of audiences, a better understanding is gained of the audiences', activity and resistance towards media text" (Livingstone, 1998 as cited in Crew 2004:12-13). However, Kellner (1995) stated that cultural studies practitioners seemed to have moved away from their goal of demonstrating resistance towards media texts, to an assumption that resistance must be taking place. This notion was further demonstrated by Gripsrud (2002) in which he stated "the idea of audience resistance has gone too far in the opinion of many, almost to the point of caricature: it is as if, the dumber, more simplistic and reactionary media offerings

become, the more creative and sharp the audience's resistance" (Gripsrud, 2002:58).

Though having laid the basis for audience reception analysis, the encoding and decoding model of Hall was criticized by fellow audience reception researchers. Such an example would be from Ellen Seiter (1999) as cited in Wood (2007) who stated "the encoding-decoding model seems to work better for news and non-fiction programming than it does for entertainment programming where it is much more difficult to identify a single message or even a set of propositions with which audience members could agree or disagree" (Seiter, 1999: 20-1).

## **2.5. AUDIENCE AND BOLLYWOOD**

The Indian cinema better known as Bollywood has been around for the last sixty years. With its colorful and over the top style, Bollywood is deemed to be the world's biggest film industry, thanks to its huge production (Dwyer, 2006). Bollywood caters to approximately 14 million daily cinema goers in India alone. Calculated to have a total of 3.6 billion viewers across the globe, the Indian film industry takes pride in producing over a thousand films, while Hollywood produces merely half the number (Tirumala, 2009). With no sign of slowing down, Bollywood continues to churn out more films in order to facilitate the growing number of viewers. With such a huge number, one is left wondering what it is about Bollywood movies that attract both Indian and non-Indian viewers to it and does it exercise a degree of influence on its consumers. Though it is to be

noted that films produced by the Southern part of India; Tamil films have been portraying Sikh characters with their full getup; *dastar* and beard. Perhaps Bollywood films could focus lesser on profitability due to audience expectation and invest more in research when it comes to portraying the minorities.

An interesting example of Bollywood movies influence on a region and people that have no connection with India or its culture is the study of Brian Larkin who looked at Bollywood movies consumption in Northern Nigeria. He stated in his research, “If, as Bakhtin (1981) writes, communication is fundamental to human life, that self and society emerge in dialogue with others surrounding them, then Indian films have entered into the dialogic construction of Hausa popular culture by offering Hausa men and women an alternative world, similar to their own, from which they may imagine other forms of fashion, beauty, love and romance, coloniality and post-coloniality” (Larkin, 1997:406).

Larkin’s (1997) study of Zanzibari youth uncovered how Bollywood movies have been a part of their popular culture and is predominantly consumed by northern Nigerians, who seemed to be mesmerized by the Bollywood stars, fashion, music and stories. The Hausa community, who has no cultural or linguistic connection to Bollywood, seems to be carried away by the Bollywood charm. This could be seen through their incorporation of the alternative Indian romance in their local Hausa reality through romance story books. In Malaysia, a large number of the Malay Muslim community can also be seen practicing the

same mannerisms as the Hausa community. They too watch Bollywood films and are mesmerized by the actors, songs and fashion Bollywood has to offer. This makes the transnational cultural flow not only limited to the Hausa community, but also to many other communities around the world.

Researchers in recent years have been more actively looking at Bollywood movies consumption amongst a growing Indian diasporic audience. According to Mishra (2002) Bollywood films build an “Indian diaspora of shared cultural idioms” (Mishra, 2002: 238), acting as a bridge between home and diaspora and “often becoming their only connection with the homeland and the main intergenerational culture diasporic families share while located in places as far-flung as Australia, Africa, Britain, Canada, the Caribbean islands, Southeast Asia, and the United States” (Viridi, 2003: 2).

Just like Viridi (2003), Tirumala (2009), who interviewed and conducted a focus group session with 16 second-generation Indian American students to discover the role Bollywood films play in identity construction amongst second generation Indian Americans also identified Bollywood movies as a “bridge between home and diaspora, which helped to transmit the culture and traditions that play a crucial role in maintaining the “Indianness” amongst the second generation” (Tirumala, 2009:2). He discovered that despite family and peer groups being in dominant positions to construct the Indian identity, Bollywood movies seemed to have played quite an important role in the lives of second

generation Indian Americans in maintaining their identities. However, in the researcher's study, it has been discovered that the Malaysian Sikh youth do not see Bollywood films as connection to their religion. The youth negotiate their understanding of Bollywood films with their religious identity and accept what they practice and reject what they do not practice in their realities. This is the reality of today's youth, whereby it is not just the Sikhs' who negotiate their understanding of films and religious identity, but many other cultures around the world too.

Bollywood films can be seen as the Indian cultural ambassador mainly because of its so-called authentic representation of South Asians, namely Indians and their lifestyles. Many diasporic audiences see Bollywood movies as a legitimate tool to help maintain cultural teachings and lifestyles to the youth born and brought up abroad (Brosius, 2005). Duda (2006) furthermore states Bollywood movies can be seen as the alternate platform of representation of Indian traditional culture, something which is not commonly and accurately depicted in the western world and media.

However, Bollywood movies too, despite becoming a glamorous cultural ambassador of the Indian culture on a global scale, have failed to portray the various regional, religious and ethnic cultures which are also very much a part of India. Desai (2005) who interviewed around 16 South Asian American youth from New York and New Jersey for her essay Planet Bollywood: Indian Cinema



Abroad stated an interesting point about how the same cultural product (in this case, Bollywood films) can be viewed differently by the various minority groups of Indian origin, “second generation South American Asian youth, especially those who are a religious minority (in this case Sikh) in India, view films with these differences in mind. They view these films with little nostalgia or as articulations of a shared Indian cultural idiom” (Desai, 2005: 66).

Apart from pointing out the negative representation of Sikhs in the Bollywood film, *Mission Kashmir* (only Sikh character portrayed as a coward soldier who peed in his pants), the two Sikh interviewees in her study pointed out how Sikhs in India are an oppressed community and Bollywood films seem to be amplifying the fact by such portrayal. Hence, both of the interviewees “reinforce their understanding of the oppression suffered by Sikhs in India and encourage their distance from an identification as Indian or Indian diasporic. Instead, they seem to have “strong conceptions of a racialized ethno religious Sikh identity that is threatened by Indian national narratives” (Desai, 2005:67).

Hirji’s (2007) research examines inaccurate cultural portrayal of the minorities (Muslim specifically) in Bollywood movies through a series of interviews with South Asian origin Canadians aged from 19-29 years old. Muslim and Sikh participants in her study pointed whilst Muslims are often portrayed as terrorists or villains, Sikhs are narrowly stereotyped as fanatical or objects of ridicule. The Sikhs as described by the participants are generally viewed as “the

clown, the (possibly alcoholic) party animal, and the warrior (Hirji, 2007). Noting the similarity of her Sikh participants' response with Desai's (2005) participants, Hirji (2007) said a study on Sikh people in future is fruitful as "Sikhs have also implied that they have long been the subject of stereotyping in media and elsewhere" (Hirji, 2007:200).

Apart from highlighting stereotypes, interviewees in her study also talked about the loss of traditional Indian values in recent Bollywood films. The increased portrayal of sexuality in Bollywood films according to the interviewees are somehow a hasty assumption of the Bollywood script writers about people living in the West. The increase of sexuality and decrease of chastity in Bollywood movies made the interviewees voice out their discomfort and disagreement of watching such explicit scenes with their elders.

Menon (2009) who examined identity construction of first-generation South Asian youth in Canada looked at what is not being represented in Bollywood films through a phenomenological method of auto ethnography. She notes that it is a hasty assumption to look at Bollywood movies as the sole representation of India and its culture. The common images of a pan Indian identity that are portrayed in Bollywood movies fail to address and represent the many religions and cultures that stem out of that nation, thus providing a misleading creation of meaning for Western audiences and diasporic South Asian audiences. She states that the idea of what makes up a South Asian identity in a

diasporic community is dangerous when the youth looks upon media for better clarification, be it directly or indirectly. Her questions of the Western community's assumption about her cultural identity, and how people around her expect her to behave or talk because Indianness is represented in a certain stereotypical manner in Bollywood movies, reflects how Bollywood movies fail to address the vast cultures that are Indian as well.

The common practice of grouping all images and characters under one blanket (Bollywood movies) and ignoring the multiple cultures that are also Indian, gives rise to a lack of diversity in the South Asian representation as well as the inability of South Asian diasporic youth to identify with it. Seiter's (1999) argument that the encoding and decoding model is unable to work for entertainment programs can be argued further. This is because if one looks at the studies mentioned above, it is obvious that the encoding and decoding model can be partly applied to entertainment programs. Interviewees in both Desai's (2005), Hirji's (2007) study as well as Menon's (2009) auto ethnography research clearly reflect that the minority groups are often able to identify and disagree with their religious or cultural representation in Bollywood movies.

## **2.6. DASTAR'S SIGNIFICANCE TO SIKHS'**

It is important to note the philosophy and history of *dastar* in Sikhism itself in order to understand why the *dastar* is important for Sikhs. Hair is an integral part of the Sikh faith. Sikhs believe that hair, including bodily hair should

be respected as it is provided by the Guru. The act of trimming or shaving only highlights the futile efforts of humans to go against natural law. Hair maintenance is a part of the Sikh faith. It is regarded as the seal of the Guru (Singh, 1997:264). Not only is that, but the head of a devout Sikh also an offering to the Guru as a proof of his devotion (Singh, 1997:264). Also, a Khalsa (Sikh) should look like his Guru and wear a natural uniform, which is given to all human and is both inexpensive and dignified, i.e., to keep the Guru's form. Thus, the keeping of uncut hair and wearing a *dastar* are both necessary (Singh, 1997:264)

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The *dastar* is a visible manifestation of Sikh identity. The *dastar* has historically been regarded as a product of high culture in the east and Middle Eastern countries. It is hence viewed as a marker of royalty and dignity. The *dastar* was brought into Sikhism by its tenth and last Guru, Gobind Singh as a religious article of faith, providing Sikhs' a sense of high self-esteem. What differentiates the Sikhs' from other religious followers with long hair is the fact that Sikhs *dastar* cannot be covered by any other head gear or cap or hat, unlike others who can wear caps or keep matted hair. The *dastar* is deemed must for Sikh males and optional for its women<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> It is said that in the past, the Mughal ruled Punjab and offered remunerations for those who would bring them back the head of a Sikh. Due to this, the Sikhs had to resort to jungles, but always kept their hair intact. Some examples were people like Bhai Taru Singh, who accepted death easily rather than letting them cut his hair. While Sardar Mehtab Singh allowed himself to be sawn alive, but never allowed them to cut his hair as it was seen as an act of going out of faith.

<sup>16</sup> Recent times have revealed that there is a rise in Malaysian Sikh women wearing a *dastar*. Sikhism preaches equality between men and women, which mean its devotees, irrelevant of gender can have the same identity in terms of wearing a *dastar* and sporting untrimmed beard and adorning the 5K.

The *dastar* is also to be worn at all times by the Sikhs as suggested by the Sikh Holy book, Granth Sahib, unlike certain communities where it is acceptable to remove it and wear it as one wishes. The *dastar's* significance is interwoven in a Sikh's faith, as a Sikh is seen carrying *Gurmukh* (Godly personality) if he or she wears the *dastar*. Therefore, a *dastar* for the Sikhs holds significance historically, adds *Gurmukh* personality and an undying representation of faith. The organized head dressing is not a part of the 5K ideology, but nevertheless, it is included in the *Rehat Maryada* booklet as a codification of the rules of proper Sikh conduct that were promulgated by the Gurus (Singh, 1997 as cited in Gohil and Singh, 2008:12).

First, is the relation to *kesh*; one of the 5K elements. The *dastar* is considered as an essential tool in guarding the hair by keeping it tidy. The *dastar* is also a form of common outward identity for Sikhs. The *dastar* represents a form of equality as it can be worn by anyone and not just the social elites or aristocracy like in the olden days (Gohil and Singh, 2008). The *dastar* allows Sikhs to be identified as ambassadors of the religion. The *dastar* is easily recognized and added with Sikhs' distinct appearance serve as helpful deterrents against undesirable acts and behaviour [sic] and keep [Sikhs] on the right path"(Singh G. , Importance of Hair and Turban , 2000). The *dastar* serves as a reminder to a Sikh that he is supposed to be following the Guru's path and

teachings and avoid any misconduct. Sikhs wear the *dastar* for any of these stated reasons or simply to be in accordance with their faith.

However, it is important to note that while the *dastar* has a special placement in Sikhism; it is not exclusively for the Sikh community. The *dastar* is also largely worn by people from all across the world for the past 3000 years. In Islam, the *dastar* is tied to Prophet Muhammad and is viewed as a true mark of sovereignty and a crown (Gohil and Sidhu, 2008), while the wealthy wear it to signify their royalty. High caste Hindus, on the other hand utilized the *dastar* as a tool to differentiate the high caste from the lower caste. Men in the desert areas together with rural farmers adorn the *dastar* for practical reasons such as heat and dust. The *dastar* is also swapped with one another in agreement or dealing at times to signify good faith and hospitality. During Hindu weddings, some male members of the bride or groom normally don the *dastar*.

Bollywood films on the other hand, from time to time are seen portraying Sikh characters. These Sikh characters portrayed in the films can be misleading in several areas, such as prayers, wedding, language, significance of the *dastar* and alcohol. Sikhs pray to the Holy book, *Granth Sahib* and not to deities as often shown in Bollywood movies. Weddings for Sikhs happen in a gurdwara by taking four *pheres*,<sup>17</sup> around the Holy Book and not in temples by taking seven *pheres*.

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<sup>17</sup>There is known as a holy ritual in Sikh anandkaraj (wedding), where the bride and groom go around the Holy Book, *Granth Sahib* from left to right together four times. Each round signifies a specific vow.

around the fire as in normally shown in Bollywood movies. Next is the language; Sikhs' spoken language is Punjabi, not Hindi as often thought by many. The *dastar* spotted in Bollywood movies are merely to portray a Sikh, in his most visible manner, leaving untouched its significance on a Sikh's head. Lastly, alcohol, which is often seen, consumed by characters in Bollywood movies, but the Sikh religion by right prohibits its people from consuming alcohol or tobacco<sup>18</sup>.

In a study conducted by Gill (2005) in Canada, she stated that Sikh youth, who are immediately recognized by their dressing style, religious symbols as well as the length of their hair, goes through a constant juggling process between their professed cultural and religious identity based on the opposing expectations imposed by parents and schools. She highlighted the struggle Sikh youths go through when it comes to understanding what it means to be a part of the Sikh community and religious group. Gill's (2005) respondents' has to constantly juggle between contradicting rules and regulations of what is religiously accepted but culturally prohibited by their parents and community. The same phenomena could be taking place across the world with other Sikh youths'.

Apart from that, Sikh youth across the globe are also exposed to Bollywood films, which further highlight the Sikh religious identity in an inaccurate manner. If one takes a look at the media impact studies discussed

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<sup>18</sup> It is to be noted that the local Sikhs' however practice alcohol and tobacco consumption. Alcohol consumption is generally a standard practice in weddings and social gatherings.

earlier in this chapter, it is clearly stated that social agents tend to play a greater role in influencing audiences. Hence one might think that in comparison to parents and community, Bollywood films might not elicit that great an impact on Sikh youths' religious identity. This is because, Bollywood films, which normally present the Sikhs' in a negative light, would be looked upon as non-influential to their religious identity simply because it does not match the Sikh youths' parents and community's beliefs and feelings.

However, previous researchers such as Gillispie (1995), Maira (2002), Durham (2004) and Desai (2005) have all subscribed to the idea that Bollywood movies do tend to be influential on youth, including those who claimed to be unfazed by the movies too. Though not catering to everyone's taste, Bollywood movies according to interviewees in the researchers study have respectively hinted at the unique impact of Bollywood movies. Everyone seemed to have an opinion about Bollywood movies, be it positive or negative, but Bollywood movies did elicit an opinion from each participant.

The large number of studies on audience reception, active audience, and media effects together with Bollywood movies representation of minorities has revealed that mass media consumption brings forward a group of active audience who selects and compares bits and parts of the media to make sense of who they really are. Bollywood movies being a powerful form of mass media, is consumed actively by people around the globe. The Sikh youth in Malaysia are no different;



they too do consume Bollywood movies on a weekly basis. The current study therefore revolves around how they decode Bollywood movies in reference to their religious identity.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. OUTLINE OF RESEARCH DESIGN**

This chapter explains the qualitative research design, in particular in depth interview, choice of respondents, and data analysing. The researcher adopted a one on one, in depth interview method to conduct this study. In depth interviews allows the researcher to gain a greater sharing of information on matters such as media impact and religious knowledge, which are normally hard to quantify. While the choice of one on one interview allows the researcher to build a much needed rapport with the interviewees individually. As addressed by Babbie (2010:317), in qualitative field of research, establishing rapport with those the researchers are observing, especially if it includes in-depth interviews and interactions, rapport is an exigent part that shall assist the researcher in gaining rich data.

For a study focusing on individuals' perception, it is vital to acknowledge that human actions cannot be understood unless the meaning that humans assign to them is understood. Because thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptions are involved, the researcher needs to have a face-to-face interaction and observation in the natural setting (Marshall and Rossman, 2011:91).

### **3.2. SELECTION OF RESPONDENTS'**

By keeping in mind a balanced representation, the researcher interviewed 15 Punjabi Sikh youth, comprising of eight males and seven females until the data saturated. Biber and Leavy (2011) claim that the logic of qualitative research is rooted in an in depth understanding of a process in which individuals assign meanings to their social situation. The interviewees were between the ages of 16 and 23 from urban areas, namely the Klang Valley. The reason the researcher chose such an age group is simply because the youngsters are likely to watch more Bollywood films in comparison to their elders. Also, unlike their elders, who might straight elicit a yes or no response based on a higher level of maturity, these age groups are still in the midst of figuring their place and identity in the world while having media access in abundance, thanks to the advancement of technology (Hirji, 2007).

The selection of urban area was also in relation to a greater access of media, with more multiplexes airing Bollywood films. However, it is to be noted that the interviewees in the current study are not originally from the urban area, Klang Valley. Some of them hail from different states such as Selangor and Perak. They are all however currently residing in the Klang Valley in order to further their tertiary education. Therefore, the choice of urban area is more suited as more youngsters are to be found in urban areas due to a greater number of higher institutions. With each interviewee, the researcher enquired about their individual exposure to Bollywood movies. All respondents have been exposed to

Bollywood movies from a very young age which makes them ideal candidates for interview.

The researcher filtered the interviewees by their frequency of watching Bollywood movies. All respondents in general watch a minimum of one Bollywood movie per week. The second filter question was to ask if respondents have consumed Bollywood films such as *Singh is Kinng* or *Love Aaj Kal* and/or *Rocket Singh* since these movies featured central turbaned Punjabi Sikh characters in them. All the respondents answered that they have watched *Singh is Kinng* and *Love Aaj Kal*. Therefore, the researcher decided to remove the movie, *Rocket Singh* as none of them had watched it. It is to be noted that the reason of selecting these movies were solely based on the fact that it featured a Sikh man as the main character as the focus of the current study is on Bollywood's representation of the minorities.

The *dastar* unquestionably forms and reflects a visual religious identity of Punjabi Sikhs, not only in Malaysia, but across the globe. Though there are *dastar* wearing Punjabi Sikh females today, the Malaysian turban scenario is still pretty much a male dominated one. The number of turban wearing Punjabi Sikh males are still greater compared to their female counterparts so to generally speaking. However, having said that, the researcher also kept in mind the fact that not all Punjabi Sikh males are with turban. There are Punjabi Sikh males without a

turban too. So, the researcher selected turban and non-turban wearing male interviewees.

Hence, it was essential to incorporate both turban and non-turban wearing males and to further ensure a balanced representation, females too. This form of participants selectivity ties with Bryman's (2012:418) point, where he asserts that purposive sampling is a non-probability form of sampling. In this form of sampling, the researcher does not attempt to sample research participants on a random basis. The goal of purposive sampling is to sample cases or participants thoroughly so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed. Often, the researcher will want to sample in order to ensure that there is a good deal of variety in the resulting sample, so that sample members differ from each other in terms of key characteristics relevant to the research questions.

### **3.3. OUTLINE OF INTERVIEW PROCESS**

The researcher has adopted Kvale's (1996) seven stages of the interview process as a guide as cited in Tirumala (2009):

- 3.3.1. Thematising – This is the primary stage of the interview. The main objective for the interview should be clarified before the interview.
- 3.3.2. Designing – The interview is designed to achieve the objective of the study. The researcher designed open ended questions that

would both reflect the interviewees' Bollywood viewing experience as well as their understanding of the Sikh religion.

3.3.3. Interviewing – Interviews are conducted at this stage. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and informed respondents about audio taping their answers, and also gave respondents letter of consent to read and sign. The researcher must be sure of what he or she wants from the interview. The researcher remembered during each interview to examine respondents' religious identity vis-à-vis Bollywood movies. Once the researcher started the interview process, the data collected started to show a similar pattern of answers such as “girls today are no longer interested in guys with turban, it is not cool, traditional, and not stylish, it is our pride, it is given to us by our Guru” during the fifteenth interviewee. Hence, the researcher stopped as the data collected had reached its saturation point. This is in line with the saturation point made by Mannel, Martens & Walker (2007), where it was stated data collection continues until no new information is obtained during the interviews or participant observations (the point of saturation). At this point, there is redundancy in the information. This simply means that there is no need to continue interviewing people once the researcher finds that further interviews are not adding to the findings or repeating what was already found in the previous interviews.

- 3.3.4. Transcribing – The data obtained through interviews are transcribed for analyzing the data. The researcher transcribed all 15 interviews in order to look in depth for certain key words that arise across all the interviews to form specific themes.
- 3.3.5. Analyzing – The researcher decides the proper method for analysis. The researcher broke down all 15 transcripts into a table form, categorizing the transcription of each interview. Using thematic analysis, the researcher categorized the data in two main themes, Bollywood and Sikhs representation and Personal Attitude (Sikhs Rules of Conduct).
- 3.3.6. Verifying – The researcher to her level best chose a balanced number of gender, age, geographical location, turban and non-turban wearing participants.
- 3.3.7. Reporting – Discuss the findings from the study and explain how those results follow scientific criteria and the ethical aspects (Kvale, 1996).

#### **3.4. INTERVIEW PROCESS**

This section looks at the creation of questions to understand the Malaysian Punjabi Sikh youths' perception of their religious identity vis-à-vis Bollywood films, followed by limitations that occurred during the actual interview sessions. The researcher has basically included both open and close ended questions. The close ended questions are designed to provide the researcher some of the

interviewees' basic personal information, such as name, age, location, and also to filter the right interviewees for interviewing. The filter questions (duration, frequency and likeability aspects of Bollywood films consumptions) also enable the researcher to find out about their Bollywood films consumption habit, which is vital as it provides an idea to the researcher on how they decode Bollywood films and how that in return impacts their religious identity. The open ended questions on the other hand were designed to provide the researcher an idea of the respondents' religious knowledge and media impact.

### **3.5. LIMITATIONS**

A researcher who does not share the same cultural background as his interviewees are normally seen as an objective researcher as he do not normally have a specific interest in promoting the religion positively. On the other hand, researchers who share the same cultural background with their interviewees are normally claimed to be biased or with lopsided objectivity (Hinnells, 2005:2). Such claims however have been counter argued by stating that a researcher who shares the same culture with the ones he is interviewing can be proved to be quite insightful. This is because the researcher would be able to relate and have access to the culture background he is researching for. Not only that, but similar social world and language increases the likelihood of grasping information more affectively and quickly while eliminating any possible "culture shock or disorientation" (Hockey 1993:119). Researcher or better known as the insider



then, “has a potential of having insights and sensitivity to things both said and unsaid and to the culture operating at the time of the research” (Dhesi, 2009:16)

As the researcher for the current study comes from the same cultural background as the interviewees, there are clearly some issues of ethics and objectivity that would come into play. There were times when interviewees would share some common cultural knowledge with the researcher and the researcher replied, “yes, I know” with a smile and a nod. The researcher also interjected the interviewees in explaining some questions that were less understood, especially those with the word ‘culture/religion’. However, the researcher did her best in adhering to the script in hand and keeping her comments as neutral as possible in explaining the questions and also adding on the “yes, I know” remark by asking further questions like “but why do you...”.

Another limitation faced by the researcher is terminology. The word culture and religion have proven to be strongly overlapped with one another. During each interview, whenever the researcher would pose questions using the word religion, quite a number of the interviewees’ are often seen pausing and unsure about how to answer certain questions. The researcher then realized that most of the time, the interviewees’ are using the word culture to answer the same question. The same question would yield two different answers based on the choice of word used. This shows that interviewees are unaware and believe that culture and religion are the same thing. This is voiced out by Gill (2005) in her

qualitative research of Canadian Punjabi Sikh youth in which she claimed that culture and religion are intertwined in such a sense that it becomes hard for the Punjabi Sikh community to pinpoint what is based on faith and cultural, especially when “culture is fluid, and relative to the geographic location” (Gill, 2005:16).

This terminology fluidity then is not only proven true in Canada, but also here in Malaysia. Hence, to ensure that the interviewees are able to answer accordingly, the researcher actively made a mental note of the words they used. For example, if an interviewee has from the beginning used the word religion and answered well, and then the researcher would continue to pose questions and interact with her or him using the word religion. However, if an interviewee finds it difficult to answer when the researcher used the word religion, the researcher then quickly utilized the word culture from then onwards till the end of the interview.

The researcher initially tried to look for possible respondents by going to a Sikh youth gathering, but it did not work out, as many of them were either reluctant for an interview or otherwise preoccupied. The researcher then tried going to the gurdwara more often to build a rapport with the Sikh youth and at the same time, illuminate them about researcher’s study. This was indeed a fruitful effort as the researcher managed to conduct two interviews at the Tatt Khalsa gurdwara.

The researcher began each interview session by illuminating the respondents about the study, and how all information shared would be highly private and confidential matter, including their real names. Letters of consent were also signed. In the beginning, a few respondents' answered a number of questions in relation to Sikhism rules of conduct in a blanketed manner. Keeping in mind that the researcher is dealing with a group of young people and a topic involving identity, the researcher realized that rapport needs to be established between the researcher and the respondents. Building a rapport can be seen as a way to facilitate smoother interview sessions as the Malaysian Punjabi Sikh youth would feel more relaxed and comfortable sharing their personal thoughts.

As Babbie (2010:317) explains, if the researcher has a genuine interest in understanding the people he or she wants to observe and are able to communicate this interest to them, rapport is easier to establish. The researcher agrees with Babbie and strongly believes that building a rapport with participants would also easily come with time and experience. As the researcher continued to seek a deeper understanding of the participants' social reality in one interview after another, the researcher came to the realization that building rapport seemed much easier once the participants felt assured that the researcher would not judge them. These assurances came often as a result of the researcher's continuous smile, nod to each of their answers as well as a serious 'wanting to know more' look.

The researcher started realizing that upon the fourth meeting with the respondents, their body language and tone of talking changed from being alarmed and rigid, to more relaxed and comfortable. They then started talking to the researcher in a relaxed manner, somehow indicating that they expected the researcher to know whenever they talked about certain religious information. This led to disclosure of essential information for the current study. The researcher however tried her level best to not get absorbed emotionally in their disclosure and other non-research related information.

### **3.6. ANALYSING DATA**

Thematic analysis comprises the identification of the main, recurrent or most important issues or themes arising in a body of literature. It is one of the most common methods for identifying, grouping and summarizing findings. Thematic analysis tends to work with, and reflect directly, the main ideas and conclusions across a body of evidence, looking for what is prominent rather than developing 'higher order', new explanations for findings that do not appear in any of the published accounts of individual (Mays, Pope & Popay, 2005). Upon finishing transcribing, the researcher categorized all the answers under two main different themes: Bollywood and Sikhs representation and Personal Attitude (Sikhs rules of conduct).

The researcher later began to compile and input all of the transcriptions in the two tables created. The researcher then began aligning the Malaysian Sikh

youths' Bollywood and Sikhs' representation together with their personal attitude and realized that the most contradictory category that emerged from their responses was the *dastar*. The only apparent Sikhism marker in Bollywood films would be a turbaned character with trimmed beard. Despite most of the interviewees' ability to quickly identify the inaccuracy of Sikhs' representation in Bollywood films based on the trimmed beard and *dastar*, mixed responses emerged from the data when it came to their understanding and maintenance of the *dastar* in their own social reality. The researcher then started to read through the lines of indirect, subtle answers to see if a common pattern emerges that would enable the researcher to group specific interviewees under different categories based on their Bollywood experience and their understanding of the Sikh visual marker.

In a nut shell, one on one, in depth interview is best suited to explore, examine and meet the current study's objective of gaining insights to how Punjabi Sikh youth in Malaysia view their religious identity with years of exposure to the glitz and glamour of Bollywood films. In addition to that, various researchers (Gillispie, 1995, Larkin, 1997, Brosious and Butcher, 1999, Burgess, 2002, Desai, 2005, Hirji, 2007, Tirumala, 2009, and Menon, 2009) have all studied the influence of Bollywood films on minority youth using interviews. All the researchers brought forward a process of understanding the minority group's social reality (Indian diasporic youth) that seems to form a specific comprised identity within the western community.

The researcher in the current study is also looking at a minority group's (Punjabi Sikh youth) construction of social reality, in relation to their religious identity vis-à-vis Bollywood films. In depth, one on one interview allows the researcher to yield a form of personal communication which is necessary in comprehending the relation the youth experiences with the media in order to make meaning of their identity. Interview sessions also allow the researcher to have the opportunity to do some observation on the interviewees' behaviour to make sure they are consistent with the verbal answers given. In conclusion; Bollywood movies impact on the Malaysian Punjabi Sikh youths' understanding of turban is mainly based on physical appearance. However, their private domain, which includes their social groups such as family, peers and personal experience, also influences their understanding and maintenance of the visual marker.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### 4.1. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis comprises the identification of the main, recurrent or most important issues or themes arising in a body of literature. It is one of the most common methods for identifying, grouping and summarising findings. Thematic analysis tends to work with, and reflect directly, the main ideas and conclusions across a body of evidence, looking for what is prominent rather than developing 'higher order', new explanations for findings that do not appear in any of the published accounts of individual (Mays, Pope & Popay, 2005). Upon finishing transcribing, the researcher categorized all the findings under Bollywood and Sikhs' representation and Personal Attitude (Sikhs' rules of conduct).

The researcher then began aligning the Malaysian Sikh youths' Bollywood and Sikhs' representation together with their personal attitude and realized that the most contradictory category that emerged from their responses were on the *dastar*. Hence, the current study explores Bollywood viewing habits and its impact on the Sikh religion visual marker, namely the *dastar*. The *dastar* is explored in the findings because not only is it considered as one of the most identifiable and prominent religious markers in Sikhism, but the *dastar* also visually identifies a person as a Sikh in the media. This can be due to the fact that the *dastar* is an external manifestation of Sikhism. In comparison to the 5K

markers, which are normally less focused or shown in Bollywood films, the *dastar* is often the most visible and a quick form of identification of a Sikh. Normally, an apparent Sikhism marker in Bollywood films then would be a *dastar* adorning character with trimmed beard. Despite most of the interviewees' ability to quickly identify the inaccuracy of Sikh representation in Bollywood films based on trimmed beard and *dastar*, mixed responses emerged from the data when it came to their understanding and maintenance of the *dastar* in their own social reality.

Ideally, Sikhs should wear a *dastar*. Once you have a *dastar*, trimming of bodily hair is not allowed. However, Bollywood films throughout the years in portraying a *dastar* wearing Sikh have mostly done the opposite. It has been established by a number of researchers in the literature review chapter that Bollywood is often seen depicting an inaccurate portrayal of many minority groups (Desai, 2005, Hirji, 2007, Menon, 2009). The *dastar* then worn by the character is a quick way of establishing the character's religion scholarship. And it stops exactly there as apart from the *dastar*, the character normally has a trimmed beard and is sometimes even seen consuming alcohol and/or tobacco, which are prohibited in Sikhism. Though the prohibition of tobacco and alcohol is applicable to all Sikhs, the idea of a *dastar* wearing Sikh consuming alcohol and tobacco usually has a stronger negative impact. This is because the *dastar* is regarded with utmost respect and discipline in Sikhism. Hence, the current study



explores how the Malaysian Sikh Punjabi youth interprets their visual marker, the *dastar* vis-à-vis Bollywood films portrayal of *dastar* adorning Sikh men.

#### **4.2. STEREOTYPING OF SIKHS**

Bollywood films have been known for its role as the cultural ambassador of the Indian culture to the world. Bollywood films get consumed globally and people with little knowledge of the various ethnicities that are a part of India would sooner or later come to form an idea of Bollywood films representing the real Indian culture. Bollywood films all these years have always focused on Hindu central characters. When and if Bollywood films portray a Sikh character, it is typically a minor character that has a colorful *dastar* in a funny looking manner such as in *Raja Hindustani*, *Jo Bole So Nihaal*, *Singh is Kinng*, and *Paying Guest*. In the 2002 production, *Kitne Door Kitne Paas*, Jatin (Fardeen Khan) stated to a *dastar* wearing Sikh character “*tum sardar kitne smart hote ho, lekin phir be lok tumhara joke kyun banate hay*” (you Sikh people are generally smart, so why is it that people still make fun of you).

Fardeen Khan’s dialogue was a sympathetic one; however the message underlying his dialogue was much true. *Dastar* wearing men in Bollywood films have always been presented with a specific behavior, such as someone who has a funny accent, is naïve, dumb, can be made fun of easily, and also party animals as pointed out in *Hirji* (2007). This form of representation does not actually represent the actual Sikh men in reality. Since the *dastar* is easily identified as

Sikh men identity, Bollywood films have been taking advantage of that fact and representing *dastar* and the Sikh community to the world in a poor manner.

#### **4.2.1. BOLLYWOOD'S REPRESENTATION OF SIKHS'**

In the current study, when it comes to Bollywood's stereotyping of Sikh characters, the interviewees are aware of the Indian film industry's ways of presenting a Sikh:

“They (Bollywood) are mixing up some religions in our religion. In our religion, we don't pray to statues like Lord Krishna for example, but in Bollywood movies, they often portray the Sikh characters praying to these statues”.

(Anmol Singh)

“Sometimes they say Punjabis' are like Arabs, Iraqis'. They should know what they are talking about. Punjabis' are not Iraqis'. Maybe we have similar physical outlook, but totally different identification”.

(Ekroop Singh)

“I understand that we are changing according to time and that there are people without *dastar* and they go to clubs and all that. But it is very wrong in the sense that they want to show that with *dastar*. Because when you are having a *dastar*, it is said that you are a very respectful person and a very pious person. And you don't go to places like clubs, or hold liquor and all that, just like in *Singh is Kinng*. So at times this pisses me off”.

(Fatehpal Singh)

“Singh is King, they have drinks and all. But in my religion Sikh, we don’t believe in drinking. So, that is one thing I dislike about it”.

(Balbir Singh)

“They (Bollywood) portray our Sikh religion towards a more negative aspect. As an example, a *dastar* wearing Sikh shouldn’t cut or shave his beard. But in the movie of *Singh is Kinng*, we look at the actor with stylish shaved facial hair”.

(Gauravdeep Singh)

Fatehpal Singh, Balbir Singh, and Gauravdeep Singh have all noted the inaccurate portrayal of Akshay Kumar’s character in *Singh is Kinng* as a negative perception of the Sikhs’ by drawing upon their understanding of the Sikh religious identity. These views shows a stark contrast in comparison to what was said by Gurbachan Singh Bachan, a member associated with the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC)<sup>19</sup> when it came to rectifying some scenes in *Singh is Kinng*, which highlighted an inaccurate portrayal of the Sikhs’, “Vipul (director) told us that it would be very difficult for him to reshoot the entire film. And we understood that it is a film meant to entertain the audience and not to hurt the sentiments of any religious community. So we asked him to show Akshay going back to his roots at the end of the film wearing a proper beard and turban” (Singh, 2009).

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<sup>19</sup>SGPC looks after the gurdwaras management in India as well as run education institutions, hospitals and charitable trusts.

By merely portraying a Sikh character returning to his roots in the end does not justify the violation of Sikh tenets committed by the character throughout the film. With Gurbachan Singh Bachan (2009) acknowledging the director's plight and crafting an excuse of the film as mere entertainment is equivalent as saying that it is okay to portray a Sikh character wearing the *dastar* with a trimmed beard and consuming alcohol, as long as he returns to his Sikhism roots in the end. Coming from the Sikh board of authority, this sort of oxymoron views can lead to further confusion of the religious identity symbols amongst the Sikh community and members of different religions:

“The character representation is weak. For a Singh man, his darhi (Punjabi word for beard) or his beard must be there. In the characters, the beard is not there”.

(Charanjot Singh)

“I think it (Sikh characterization in Bollywood movies) make Sikhs' look more stupid. People love the movies, I don't understand why they made us look more stupid, like become mafias', become dons'. It gives people a perspective that we are only doing that, like killing people. They all wore funny, colored *dastars*' such as pink, green, in which I don't see any significance”.

(Inderpal Kaur)

Inderpal Kaur's choice of word “funny” regarding the various colored *dastar* she often observes in Bollywood depicting Sikhs reflects her lack of knowledge of the *dastar* as a fashion icon. It is to be noted that in many parts of

the world, more and more Sikhs' have started to match their *dastar's* color with their shirts, as a form of fashion statement. Inderpal Kaur refuses to acknowledge that *dastar* can have a dual functionality, whereby primarily it is seen as religious identity and secondarily, handled with care and respect, the *dastar* can also be a fashion statement. She blames it on Bollywood for igniting the insignificance further. This highlights her ignorance to accept the iconic symbol as more than a religious product.

#### **4.3. DASTAR AS AN IMPORTANT RELIGIOUS VALUE**

The male interviewees have all pointed out Bollywood's common way of portraying the Sikhs from specific perspectives, namely religious related areas: praying, identification, alcohol, and beard. These rules of the *dastar* with beard, and alcohol consumption pointed by the male interviewees clearly shows that they are aware of what is commonly expected from a Sikh. The male interviewees have clearly all pointed out the lack of accuracy in terms of visual markers alone, instead of the characters personality or values. This shows that for Malaysian Punjabi Sikh males, visual markers in Sikhism are quite essential and carries with it certain caliber which can reflect a person's values. For example, when one sees a man with a *dastar* and beard, one forms a quick first impression of the person most probably being a pious person. Hence, when the male youth sees a *dastar* wearing character in Bollywood films, most of them are able to recognize and state the stereotype of Sikhs presented by Bollywood.

However, Inderpal Kaur went a little further to incorporate the negative identification of Sikhs together with the religious misrepresentation:

“They portray our religion as the most screwed up. When there is a bad person, there is a Singh behind there, like Gabbar Singh. Why is there a Singh behind there? Why can't they put any Sharma or Kumar?

(Inderpal Kaur)

Inderpal Kaur's comment on the usage of the surname 'Singh' is for a villainous character in Bollywood. She has quickly identified 'Singh' as a Sikh. Inderpal Kaur has once again reflected her lack of knowledge as the title 'Singh' is not exclusively reserved by and for the Sikhs. In fact, the word 'Singh' derives from Sanskrit and was first used in Hinduism by the Rajput's of Rajasthan, India. The surname 'Singh' (lion) was made compulsory and incorporated in Sikhism only in 1699. It was a form of a gift by Guru Gobind Singh to the entire Sikh male community as a sign of bravery. To date, many Hindu communities are still using the 'Singh' title as middle name or surname. The specific character mentioned by Inderpal Kaur, 'Gabbar Singh' was in fact not even wearing a *dastar* and made no association to being a Sikh character throughout the movie.

#### **4.3.1. DASTAR AS A SACRED VISUAL MARKER**

The female interviewees pointed at a more generic misrepresentation of Sikhs' in Bollywood films. Most of them find that Bollywood does not portray Sikhs wedding related functions accurately as they are normally infused with Hindu culture. Basically, most of the interviewees stated Bollywood's inaccurate

representation of Sikhs. Based on the interviewees answers, Sikhs' misrepresentation in Bollywood can be categorized by inaccurate understanding of Sikhs or the *dastar* and using the *dastar* to identify someone as Sikh and then portraying that particular person negatively, mainly involved in criminal activities. It is understandable why the male interviewees have pointed out at *dastar* and beard as there are normally worn and kept by them. The female interviewees on the other hand have pointed at a lack of cultural inaccuracy when it comes to portraying the Sikhs as it is easier for them to relate themselves with cultural perspective such as wedding compared to beard or *dastar*. The awareness shown by interviewees support both previous studies of Hirji (2007) and Menon (2009) who claimed Bollywood movies fail to represent the various cultures that are also a part of India and how interviewees were able to identify the inaccurate representation of their culture depicted in Bollywood while reflecting on their own personal experience of being born and raised in the particular religion (Hirji, 2007).

Though the current study revolves around the Malaysian Sikh Punjabi youth's interpretation of their visual marker vis-à-vis Bollywood films, it is worth to uncover the Sikh Punjabi youths' awareness when it comes to their religious knowledge first. This information would reveal how aware are they of the importance of the *dastar* in Sikhism and how they decode it vis-à-vis Bollywood films portrayal of Sikhs.

In Sikhism, the *dastar* foregrounds one of the essential 5K items (*Kesh*-hair) that makes up the outward appearance of a Sikh. According to Sikhism rules of conduct, hair should not be tampered with, be it for males or females. However, the function of *dastar* is so intertwined with hair that it is looked upon as one of the 5K item (*Kesh*-hair). Also, the fact that all 10 Sikh Gurus (all males) were with *dastar* only enhances the value of the *dastar* as a sacred visual marker:

“A *dastar* is given to us as crown by our 10<sup>th</sup> Guru, Guru Gobind Singh Ji. It helps us to keep our hair neat and tidy. It was also one of our teachings that we should have unshorn hair”.

(Darpreet Singh)

“It’s an identification of yourself; because God gave hair as a gift, so you should keep it”.

(Ekroop Singh)

“*Dastar* represents a symbol of Sikhism”.

(Gauravdeep Singh)

“It’s like a dignity for us; it symbolizes a man as a really good person. *Dastar* means when you keep your hair, which means we respect our natural gift from God that is hair itself”.

(Anmol Singh)

Anmol Singh’s words such as ‘symbolizes’ and ‘really good person’ reflects a very clear understanding of the *dastar*: outside and inside symbol. The



*dastar* is clearly an external symbol for the Sikhs', but it is at the same time viewed as representation of piousness, which is why the Punjabi Sikh males are against Bollywood's representation of *dastar* wearing men consuming alcohol:

“*Dastar* is our pride, our culture. *Dastar* is our blood. *Dastar* is everything. It really shows you are a Sikh. It's not that guys who do not wear *dastars* are not Sikhs. They are, but probably for me they are not real Sikhs'. They are just partial Sikhs”.

(Jaskeerat Kaur)

Jaskeerat Kaur does not wear a *dastar*, but her understanding of the *dastar* as Sikh culture clearly shows that religion is actually intertwined with culture that it becomes difficult to distinguish what is religion based and culture based, though the *dastar* is strongly identified formally as a religious marker. She further adds on the word “pride, culture, and blood” to showcase her understanding of the *dastar*. This is interesting because, just like Anmol Singh who decodes *dastar* as both an outside and inside symbol, Jaskeerat Kaur decode the *dastar* as an outside and inside symbol. Words such as pride and culture is more on an external perspective, while her usage of the word ‘blood’ was to indicate that *dastar* is more than just an outside symbol. It is intertwined within the Sikhs, like a need rather, just like blood is to human being:

“*Dastar* symbolizes Sikh, if you want to be recognized, be proud of your own religion, then you wear it. My grandfather used to say that a guy in a *dastar* will be recognized in a million people. There may be Christians or Muslims around you, but when you are finding for a guy in a *dastar*, it is very easy”.

(Inderpal Kaur)

Inderpal Kaur's response on how easy can a man in *dastar* be identified is exactly why Bollywood portrays a Sikh character with the *dastar*. In order to portray a Sikh character, all they got to do is utilize the *dastar*, because *dastar* has the strength as a symbol that gets decoded universally as 'Sikh'. Interviewees' words like "symbol, crown, identification, shows, and recognized" clearly indicates how *dastar* is viewed as a visual symbol of Sikhism. It is interesting to note that both *dastar* and non *dastar* wearing men are very aware of its significance regardless of whether they wear it themselves.

Despite associating positive elements with the *dastar*, both male and female interviewees decode the *dastar* differently. The male youth associated *dastar* with hair. This is mainly because *dastar* is a male dominant product and therefore the specific interpretation of maintaining the gift of hair with a *dastar* is easily made by Sikh males, who are affected by it directly at a physical level. What is important is not the *dastar* itself, but the act of keeping the hair, as it is the hair that is seen as a gift from God, and *dastar* in this sense then is merely a tool that assists in protecting the actual gift: hair. In this manner, the *dastar* then becomes the outer or exterior shell that protects the inner religious marker, the hair. While only one out of the seven female interviewees associated the maintenance of hair with *dastar*, the remaining six associated *dastar* with pride, identity and respect. The females make a generic interpretation of associating the

*dastar* with pride, identity and respect because they experience the *dastar* indirectly at a secondary level.

#### **4.4. DASTAR'S SIGNIFICANCE TO THE 5 KAKKARS' (5K)**

*Dastar* is often time decoded in relation to 5K as it is intertwined with hair, and all the interviewees are aware of the ideal ideology the 5K presents:

“The 5K elements, that is our identity, it makes us different, so why not have it”.

(Charanjot Singh)

“Every Singh should have the 5K's. They should have their *dastar*, their beard, just as our Gurus' had”.

(Anmol Singh)

“5K's are a part of the principles of our teachings and therefore, we need to follow it as we are the Sikhs of the Guru”.

(Darpreet Singh)

“To become a true Sikh, you must have all of the 5K elements. These are the five things that are truly important to a true Sikh”.

(Fatehpal Singh)

“A Sikh must have all the 5K elements; it is a must, because it defines us as Sikhs to the world”.

(Gauravdeep Singh)

The male respondents clearly approach the 5K principles as a standard of defining a true Sikh. From their words ‘makes us different and defines us as Sikhs’, it is obvious that in their understanding, 5K is an important concept for Sikhs’ that should ideally be adhered to by all Sikhs’. The male interviewees’ specific interpretation of associating the maintenance of hair with *dastar* can also be seen as a part of their larger understanding of the 5K principles. Hence, the male interviewees’ in the current study can be seen as quite knowledgeable about their own religion.

Since the *dastar* is a direct link and a visual marker for the Sikh people, one would think that having a *dastar* would then be sufficient for a Sikh to consider himself as an ideal member of the religion. In my study however, the Malaysian Punjabi Sikh females revealed that it is not necessary for a Sikh to subscribe to the principles of 5K:

“If other people, of course they would want to be a true Sikh and all by having all those 5K, going to temple, be humble and kind, but to me, as long as you practice it internally, it is good enough. There is no need to profess it externally”.

(Karamdeep Kaur)

“I mean, going to temple, praying, having the 5K’s. But, some people are very busy, so it is understandable if they cannot go to temple. It is fine for them to at least pray at home. Keeping hair and all, yeah it is a good thing if they can keep, but vice versa if they keep hair and they are not really

into the religion and sometimes they just fake it around, and then it is pointless. Frankly, in today's era, 5K's can no longer be considered a measure for a true Sikh".

(Livsharan Kaur)

"I think a true Sikh is the one who believes in the religion and calls himself a Sikh. Yes, that is all. No higher expectations in reference to 5K's and going to temple because I myself don't go to that expectations".

(Inderpal Kaur)

Inderpal Kaur is basically stating that she does not expect anyone to subscribe to the principles of 5K and going to temple in order to become a true Sikh.

The Sikh females' understanding of a true Sikh in the current study pretty much boils down to a very practical and functional definition. For the female youth, 5K in today's time is no longer a practical approach to make and define a true Sikh, unlike their male counterparts. The *dastar* represents unshorn hair, as it is one of the 5K elements and is commonly tied by the Sikh male community. Hence the Sikh females often take a back seat in terms of visible recognition of being identified as Sikhs as the *dastar* mainly is a male dominant product. This point could not have been proven more accurately by Nikki-Guninder Kaur Singh (2005) in which she states:

"Sikh women do not normally wear a *dastar* and in most instances it will not be possible to distinguish a Sikh woman from a Punjabi Hindu

woman. The well informed will be able to recognize a male Sikh man and will then recognize a Sikh woman by virtue of her association with a male Sikh. Those who are particularly well informed will be acquainted with the Five Ks and may observe the wrist-rings that Sikhs (women as well as men) are required to wear”.

(Nikki-Guninder Kaur Singh, 2005:99)

It's common for the female interviewees to lack direct attachment to the *dastar* and beard as they do not need to adorn it upon themselves. Therefore, they seem to take on a more laid back attitude when it comes to seeing a character with the *dastar* without beard in a movie.

Based on the interviewees' understanding of the Sikhism visual marker, it is clear that both Sikh females and males are knowledgeable about their religious teachings and they are also aware of the *dastar's* ideal significance. However, is Bollywood films inaccurate portrayal of Sikhs acceptable for the Malaysian Sikh youth as long as they (Sikh youth) are aware themselves of the accurate definition? This is because there clearly seem to be differences in both the male and the female interviewees' understanding of what makes a Sikh when it comes to their understanding of Sikhism.

It is to be noted that the interviewees mix around with friends with and without the *dastar*. Their response of feeling the importance of wearing a *dastar* in reality but not minding seeing a *dastar* wearing character with trimmed beard

in Bollywood reveals a form of non-judgment. They seem to showcase a tolerance for individual freedom instead of going with societal acceptance of such people.

Table 1 (see Appendix 4) which highlights male interviewees' response on the importance of wearing a *dastar* in reality and Bollywood and Table 2 (see Appendix 5) shows only three out of eight seem to be bothered about Bollywood's lack of representing a *dastar* wearing character with trimmed beard. While five out of eight male interviewees (three with *dastar* and two without) clearly do not seem to mind looking at a *dastar* wearing character without beard in Bollywood films. The majority of the male respondents however expressed the importance of wearing a *dastar*.

As for the female interviewees, all seven of them revealed that they are not so concerned when it comes to seeing a *dastar* wearing character without beard in Bollywood films. It doesn't matter to them if Bollywood films are showing a Sikh *dastar* wearing man without beard. Interestingly however are their responses when it comes to the importance of *dastar* in reality. 71 percent expressed that it is important to wear a *dastar* in reality. However, two out of the seven female interviewees (29 percent) also revealed that despite it being a non-matter to them personally, they believe it is not right for Bollywood films to show a *dastar* wearing Sikh man without the beard because Bollywood films are watched by many non-Sikhs around the world, and therefore it is sending an inaccurate message about Sikhs' to the world and ideally a Sikh *dastar* wearing man should

not have trimmed beard. This reflects that it matters to the Malaysian Punjabi Sikh youth on how the world views them. As a minority group, they feel the need to be presented accurately as the channels to showcase their religion are very limited. Bollywood films have the capacity of reaching millions of people at once. Hence the need to be portrayed and presented well is of utter importance for the Sikhs’.

The Malaysian Sikh youths expectation out of Bollywood films when it comes to their religious identity understanding are based on how rigid or open their understanding is when it comes to Sikhism:

“Sikh culture portrayal...basically I can say that they didn’t make their research fully on it. So that is why after making the movie, they are getting some criticism. Basically it’s the character’s representation. Look, it’s the name...from the name itself we can know. It is Singh is King. For Singh, his darhi (beard) or his beard must be there. In the character, the beard is not there”.

(Charanjot Singh)

Clearly, Charanjot Singh is consistent with his reality and of what he expects to see in Bollywood films as he wears a *dastar* and would like to see the *dastar* wearing character in Bollywood films with beard; he expresses the importance of wearing a *dastar* in reality. This shows that he has a clear understanding of Sikhism and therefore while viewing Bollywood movies that portray Sikh characters, he has an expectation of Bollywood having to carry an accurate or ideal representation of his religion.



Some of the interviewees view Bollywood films primarily from a realistic perspective. They then form an expectation of Bollywood having to merely portray a realistic representation of their religion. This group of interviewees showcases a form of navigation process. Some of the male interviewees in this group wear a *dastar* and express the importance of wearing a *dastar* in reality but at the same time, do not mind or expect to see a bearded *dastar* wearing character in Bollywood films:

“By wearing a *dastar*, I am standing out, I am unique...It doesn't really matter if the guy has a *dastar* but no beard when it's Bollywood because Bollywood has to portray good looking people, and the untrimmed beard sometimes is not very attractive”.

(Darpreet Singh)

“It's important to wear a *dastar*...actually, no. Because we are nowadays modern and everybody doesn't keep *dastar* like last time, they still do trim their facial hair and do away with the *dastar*, so it doesn't really matter if Bollywood is portraying a *dastar* wearing character without beard”.

(Nameet Kaur)

Some view it for the sake of pure entertainment, which then forms an expectation of Bollywood having to carry no specific representation of their religion:

“I am okay with *dastar* characters without beard. It doesn’t affect me much because at the end of the day, it is what I think and know that matters. It doesn’t matter what they show in the movies”.

(Karamdeep Kaur)

Some interviewees seem to go through a more tiered process of decoding and navigating between what is acceptable to them ideally and realistically. Instead of deciding their final choice between personal experience and religious knowledge, they decide to simply have more than one choice in the end, in which they allow the co-existence of both ideal and realistic views that run parallel:

“I think it is important to wear a *dastar*, but I am fine with Bollywood portraying *dastar* characters with a trimmed beard. But, it would be better if they portray it together because there might be people from other religion who will see that and come and question us. Because as far as we know, it’s just a movie, so it would be fine. But then, when people start questioning you and all, then you feel like they should portray the *dastar* and beard together”.

(Livsharan Kaur)

Livsharan Kaur seems to go through a process, in which she realistically thinks it is important to wear a *dastar*, but yet does not mind the portrayal of a Sikh character with trimmed beard in Bollywood. She states her ideal view in which it matters to her how the world views Sikhs. It is because she gets questioned by people on the accurate tenets of Sikhism, she then feels Bollywood should portray a *dastar* adorning character with beard. This shows that Livsharan Kaur is unable to pick one domain and therefore, has both of her ideal and realistic view co-existing.

Interviewees' responses basically highlight how they navigate fluidly between their personal experience, social reality, family and peer influence with the ideal world view on Sikhism, together with Bollywood movies' representation of Sikhism, where they seem to uphold idealistic views in some aspects and realistic in some and in the end triumph in picking a resolution that brings about either consistency with their reality or separation.

However, both male and female interviewees have pointed out that the necessity of beard is negotiable, though ideally, both the *dastar* and the beard goes hand in hand for a Sikh. The Malaysian Sikh females experience *dastar* from an external, secondary level and hence place Bollywood films portrayal of *dastar* wearing Sikh men without beard as a non-issue matter. Majority male youth experience the *dastar* from an internal, primary level, and have an ideal understanding of the *dastar's* importance. However, the same male respondents seemed to contradict their own ideal understanding because most of them view Bollywood films' portrayal of *dastar* wearing Sikh men without beard as pure entertainment. One would think that having experienced the *dastar* primarily would mean that the male respondents would be able to pick a resolution that is consistent with their reality.

#### 4.4. *DASTAR IS NOT COOL*

According to Renteln (2004:575), individuals have always looked upon symbols as a form of identity. It is because of this, that they feel it is vital to guard and preserve the symbol well. Moreover, with people often time accepting the notion “seeing is believing”, a result of symbol reification is often generated<sup>20</sup>. This view of decoding religious symbols as a form of identity is illustrated well in Gohil and Singh’s 2008 study of how Sikhs view the *dastar*. According to them, the Sikh manifestation for the *dastar* is an outward act of devotion and therefore is “not a fashion trend or indicia of social standing, but rather it is an essential part of their faith” (Gohil and Singh, 2008:1).

The view stated in the above paragraph however cannot be applied to the current study. Ideally, interviewees have associated *dastar* to something extremely sacred and positive such as God, identity, and pride. However at the same time, the *dastar* is also decoded by the interviewees on an external level by relating it to physical appearance. It is viewed upon as a depiction of modern lifestyle (*dastar* equals to not cool). The interviewees’ understanding of separating the *dastar* and the beard (ideally, it goes together) and to be fine with seeing a *dastar* character without beard in Bollywood films is subtly understandable:

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<sup>20</sup>Dundes (1980) commented on the “primacy of vision in American culture” as children learn that “what you see is what you get.”

“Girls I think look for guys without *dastar*. Probably they find them cuter”.

(Jaskeerat Kaur)

“My girlfriends always complain that *dastar* doesn’t look cool. So I don’t think we girls are into it these days. I mean we are the new generation, and *dastar* just feels old”.

(Namgeet Kaur)

“I would say some of the girls are more towards the cool guys. Girls think guys with *dastar* are not cool. I have personally come across girls who would never ever go out with a *dastar* guy”.

(Darpreet Singh)

“Girls feel if a guy has *dastar*, then he is boring, he is only going to talk about prayers and not updated to the current fashion. I have joked with my cousin sisters about finding them a *dastar* guy. You should have seen their faces; an instant horror and rejection. They don’t really tend to see if he is good, or whether he is working or not, or is he handsome in that *dastar* or not. The moment you mention *dastar* to them, the answer is immediate; rejected”.

(Fatehpal Singh)

All of the respondents’ pointed that a majority of today’s Sikh females are no longer interested in a *dastar* wearing Sikh male. One then might wonder what the Malaysian Punjabi Sikh youth mean by cool and why is *dastar* viewed as not cool, despite being noted as an evident visual religious marker. The Malaysian Sikh youth are well informed about the 5K’s and its importance to an idealistic extent. The female respondents in the current study vocalized their perception of

*dastar* being not cool but being traditional and not wanting to be with a *dastar* adorning man:

“I would not want to be with someone with *dastar* because I find that is like so not cool and I don’t want to be seen with a *dastar* guy or a *dastar* community somewhere out there”.

(Opinder Kaur)

“Guys with *dastar* sometimes don’t look neat, a person who doesn’t know how to dress up in a proper manner, they don’t set their beard in a proper neat manner, sometimes they do set their beard in a proper manner, but throughout the course of the day, it comes out, looking untidy. So appearance...nowadays, girls are more interested in appearance of the boys”.

(Harcharan Singh)

This re-affirms the current study’s findings that the Malaysian Sikh youth, especially females are drawn to visually appealing elements. The need for an attractive visual emphasis amongst the youth is driven indirectly by Sikhism teachings itself, where one is able to see it emphasized on an external outlook, such as the 5K and *dastar* as a form of identification. The irony lies between 5K and *dastar* being external elements of Sikhism; however it still does not appeal to the Malaysian Sikh females who are drawn to visually appealing elements.

Clearly, words utilized by the interviewees’ such as “seen, don’t look neat, doesn’t know how to dress well, don’t set their beard, and appearance” are an indication as to how *dastar* is visually decoded, and hence deduced to being not

so cool. Not only that, but all the interviewees' have also pointed out that girls today are no longer interested in guys with *dastar*. Pressed for a reason to answer such, all the interviewees associated *dastar* in today's time as not stylish, not modern, traditional, and wanting to be with a non-*dastar* adorning guy. This "not cool" idea comes within a larger context of other visual elements. If earlier all the interviewees noted the association of *dastar* as crown, pride and or honor, and identity, now we get to peel another layer of the *dastar*; not stylish, not cool, traditional, and old. The *dastar* is decoded by interviewees on two different levels: ideal and realistically.

Hence, despite noting the ideal significance of *dastar* in Sikhism, the Malaysian Punjabi Sikh youth also reflects on their modern day practice of maintaining an enhanced physical appearance, while being exposed to Bollywood movies. Bollywood films provide them a total form of visual pleasure in terms of actor, actress, clothes, and body build, places and many others. Therefore, *dastar* and beard are merely noticed by many Malaysian Sikh youth as a form of inaccuracy and not a primary deal breaker in making or defining a Sikh. This is because although the majority of the respondents' pointed out keywords such as traditional, not stylish, and not modern for the century's long religious product, they were still able to identify the *dastar* as a crucial element that makes up Sikhism. This very disjuncture of the interviewees' views reveals a form of compromise and contradiction between what is ideally stated and realistically practiced.

The revelation of females' wanting to be with a non-*dastar* adorning guy by both male and female interviewees further affirms that Bollywood's lack of Sikhs representation in terms of the *dastar* and the beard will clearly not be a major concern for the Malaysian Sikh youth. Their perception of the *dastar* is narrowed down to the enhancement of physical appearance due to lack of proper, in depth knowledge about the *dastar*. Based on their social reality, interviewees' draw their perception of things around. Outer appearance clearly seems to be a primary force that drives their thinking while being mashed with their own diverse personal experiences that form a more modern Sikh diasporic identity. This is a very crucial finding for the current study as it foreshadows a serious change of thinking in the current Malaysian Sikh youth when it comes to their visible visual marker. However, it is also to be noted that Bollywood films have never really portrayed a central Sikh character until lately (late 2000). Even if they have started to portray a *dastar* wearing Sikh character these days, it is rather on a superficial note where it seems sufficient to merely show a Sikh character with a *dastar* as pointed by Inderpal Kaur.

The fact that Bollywood is media and media is visually consumed, added together with the enjoyment aspects of Bollywood films by the Malaysian Punjabi Sikh youth, who are highly driven by visual elements such as actor and actress and body builds, it then makes sense how *dastar* is easily viewed as a fashionable product. This is because *dastar*, despite having significant internal values for the



Sikhs', is still very much a visual symbol. Hence, there is a clear link between Bollywood films and *dastar*: visual consumption. It is based on this visual consumption that *dastar* gets decoded as a product of unfavorable fashion.

The fact that the female interviewees seem to be less concerned with *dastar* characters without beard in Bollywood movies and how all 15 interviewees have unanimously pointed out that Sikh females in today's time would not be interested in a *dastar* male is intriguing. This is because though all seven females have pointed that females are more interested in males without *dastar*, 71 percent have also expressed that it is important to wear a *dastar* in reality. The reason behind the rejection as pointed out by all 15 interviewees are blatantly fashion related, as pointed earlier, not cool, traditional, and not stylish. These views of the interviewees seem to be pointing at an underlying fact that Malaysian Punjabi Sikh females are more drawn to external appearances. These external appearances are not just any external appearances, but one that fits contemporary notions of cool and stylish, or in other words, not religious related external appearances.

Females in the current study have clearly shown that they favor the external outlook more. For them, the need to look attractive physically seems far greater than wearing a *dastar*, which represents an ideal form of Sikhism. Table 3 (see Appendix 6) which reflects the interviewees' enjoyment aspects in Bollywood films clearly shows that the female interviewees have listed aspects

like actor, actress, clothes, and dance with majority being attracted to actor and actress. This proves that they are more prone to physical aspects compared to their male counterparts.

However, their male counterparts are not completely internally driven; 17 percent (three *dastar* wearing ones and one non *dastar* wearing) showcased their interest in viewing body build of actors. The hint for a preference in body build of actors' by these male interviewees is interesting as there could be a high possibility of them wanting to beef up their physique simply because they know girls generally are not interested in *dastar* wearing males. Hence an appealing body structure might work better in their interest as Fatehpal Singh, Anmol Singh, Charanjot Singh, and Darpreet Singh are all in agreement on the importance of wearing a *dastar* and yet wanting a good physique as normally shown in Bollywood films. It is however to be noted that having a good physique is not a religious concern, but it has now been given more priority compared to having a *dastar* whereby it has become a trend which youth uses as an excuse to flaunt their bodies.

Depending on the importance and their personal understanding of a particular issue, their primary influential factors would continue to change. Despite acknowledging the importance of wearing the *dastar* ideally, some of them continue to have a less favorable impression of someone with *dastar*. Hence these people look upon their own thinking, parents and peers together with their

social experiences, to justify their view on the need or importance of maintaining the ideally professed religious elements in today's time. Therefore, the influence of Bollywood films on Malaysian Sikh Punjabi youth seems to narrow down to specifically physical appearance preference and fashion choice. Their understanding of the visual marker or the maintenance of it is also intertwined with ideals, fashion and personal reality.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

To discover the influence of Bollywood films on Malaysian Sikh youths' religious identity, respondents between 16-23 years old were picked from the Klang Valley. Respondents were further filtered by the number of years they have watched Bollywood films as well as watching films that featured central Sikh characters. *Dastar* and non-wearing *dastar* respondents were selected to know if there was a difference in their religious identity understanding and how they decode Bollywood films. In-depth interview with closed and open-ended questions was the mode of this qualitative research to examine the influence of Bollywood films on the Sikh youths' religious identity.

#### **5.1 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of the study were analyzed by using thematic analysis with the aim of determining the influence of Bollywood films on Malaysian Sikh youths' religious identity. The primary contribution of this study is that the findings answers all the research questions proposed earlier in the study. The first research question was to investigate what kind of religious values the Sikh youth think Bollywood movies is communicating to them. The objective of this question was to determine the awareness of the youth when it comes to Bollywood films' Sikh characterization. Upon conducting the research, it is discovered that the Malaysian Sikh youth believes that Bollywood films propagate inaccurate

portrayal of the Sikhs'. The *dastar* wearing characters in Bollywood films are often spotted with a trimmed beard and consuming alcohol. These two are the main variables highlighted by the respondents that go against an accurate portrayal of a Sikh. Interviewees have pointed out that ideally a Sikh with *dastar* should not drink alcohol and mentioned the character of Akshay Kumar in *Singh is Kingg* consuming alcohol as an inaccurate portrayal of Sikhism. What makes this response of the interviewees interesting is the fact that they are able to quickly pinpoint the fact that a *dastar* wearing character should not be shown drinking alcohol, but in reality, when they attend social functions, there are hundreds of *dastar* wearing males consuming alcohol, in fact, some of the interviewees' fathers are also with *dastar* and they too do consume alcohol. This reflects a form of hypocrisy and contradiction between what is ideally professed and what is realistically practiced.

Respondents however are able to reconcile this contradiction by heavily relying and looking upon their social realm, where the act of consuming alcohol is loosely accepted as a societal norm. However, the consumption of alcohol is at the end of the day a personal choice. Technically, a Sikh should not be consuming alcohol, but as have been established above, respondents tend to look and be influenced by their social circle on accepting or rejecting ideas. Hence, the possibility of their social groups accepting the idea of alcohol consumption has been imprinted in the respondents' social reality to a great extent whereby they view alcohol consumption as a norm.

The second research question was to identify what aspect of Sikhism is deemed important by the Sikh youth and how Bollywood has influenced their identity. The objective of this question was to investigate the youths' level of religious knowledge and whether can Bollywood films then influence their religious identity understanding. Through the study, it has been discovered that the *dastar* is deemed as the connecting link in Bollywood films that represents Sikhs across the world, as all the respondents are aware of the religious power the *dastar* holds. The *dastar* however, is decoded on two different levels: ideally and realistically. Hence, despite noting the ideal significance of the *dastar* in Sikhism, the Malaysian Punjabi Sikh youth also reflects on their modern day practice of maintaining an enhanced physical appearance, while being exposed to Bollywood movies.

## 5.2. CONCLUSION

So what is it about Bollywood movies' portrayal of *dastar* adorning characters consuming alcohol that disturbs the interviewees? Perhaps it is the fact that the *dastar* immediately reflects a Sikh, not only to the Sikh community, but also to the non-Sikhs. And attached with the *dastar*, are some ideal values that are indirectly expected of a Sikh, namely that of being a pious person. While a Sikh without a *dastar* is not quickly looked upon as a pious person, indirectly, the Sikh community is less judgmental on the moral values of non *dastar* wearing men compared to the *dastar* wearing men. Also, it all boils down to the fact that Sikhs

are not only a minority in Malaysia, but globally. The Sikh population in the world is only around 27 million people, a mere 0.39 percent of the globe's population. How many of us out there are aware of the Sikhs, let alone its rule of conduct? Being a minority in terms of global media representation heightens the need to be represented accurately. Hall (1997) noted that the audience could learn cultural values of other people through media and so they might recognize that they live in different cultures. Accordingly, they could get other cultural perspectives through mass media so that they might realize that the culture they are living in differs from other cultures. Bollywood movies are known as the primary Indian media product that gets consumed globally and since there have always been a misconception that Bollywood movies represent "Indianness" as a whole, many people out there in the world can take a look at *dastar* wearing Sikh represented inaccurately and form an opinion of Sikhs as that is how a *dastar* wearing Sikh is like.

Interviewees' responses such as "they (Bollywood films) are showing something on Sikhism, better than nothing, because as far as we know, it's just a movie, so it would be fine, and you can't just make your own concepts and show it to the world" once again reflects their expectations of Bollywood films. For Harcharan Singh who is constantly reflecting upon himself as a Sikh and what he practices in reality, Bollywood films' imperfection in portraying the Sikhs' is justified and consistent with how he views himself. This is because Harcharan Singh himself is not perfect as a Sikh; he is just doing what he can to his best,

hence for him, there is at least a representation in Bollywood films that this is somehow what and how a Sikh looks like, which should be good enough already.

Whereas for Livsharan Kaur, who acknowledges that as long as she knows what and who the Sikhs are in reality, Bollywood films' lack of accurate representation of the Sikhs are a non-issue matter to her personally. She is merely uncomfortable with the idea of non-Sikhs' understanding of the Sikhs'. This idea of her being not bothered about Bollywood's inaccurate representation of the Sikhs and then yet at the same time feeling uncomfortable on how non-Sikhs view Sikhs based on their Bollywood films consumption can be seen as a contradiction. This is because it is a fact that people that are so diversified in religion, culture, and ethnicity consume Bollywood films globally. So her response clearly reflects that she has a realistic understanding of what and who a Sikh is, but at the same time wants the non-Sikhs to have an idealistic view of the Sikhs. Jaskeerat Kaur also somehow echoes the same point as Livsharan Kaur.

She too is not happy with the idea of being viewed inaccurately by non-Sikhs, and has indirectly hinted at the power of Bollywood films' influence on its audience. By creating their own version of Sikhs, Bollywood films have been projecting this compromised, believable identity of the Sikhs' to the world for a very long time now. This compromised identity of Sikhs by Bollywood is basically a character with a *dastar* that has a slight trimmed beard. The researcher is not saying that Bollywood does this on purpose, but they are merely portraying



a character to fit their storyline, with little concern given on how it will affect the particular community, especially if it is a minority group like the Sikhs.

All three of them have basically revealed that they are aware of their religious identity, however they all decode Bollywood films representation of Sikhs' based on their personal experience and social surrounding, which in return, forms a compromised form of reality for each of them. The respondents' social reality reflects the importance of *dastar* in Sikhism with most of the people in their social circle wearing the *dastar*. In other words, a Sikh character in Bollywood would be identified primarily from his *dastar*. Whatever Bollywood portrays him doing, be it consuming tobacco or alcohol or as naïve or funny with an accent, the Sikh will be seen as “the *dastar* guy, who...”.

Bollywood films have always portrayed good looking actors (male and female) and formed a certain stereotype on what is deemed beautiful and what is not. Hence the respondents' responses on the *dastar* being ideally a sacred symbol but realistically not cool highlights the need to blend in with the crowd and be liked or loved based on their appearances. Their ideal and realistic understanding of the *dastar* in today is very much interlaced with fashion. In Hall's (1993:136) concept of minimal selves, identity is conceptualized in a constant flux. The “minimal self” is constantly negotiated as the construction of identity becomes evident through the difference between cultures. The minimal self can be viewed as a state somewhere between the mask of identity negotiation and true self.

However, individuals must have some sense of themselves for the negotiation of culture to take place.

The negotiation of the Sikh youths' "true self" religious identity and the "minimal self" religious identity while viewing Bollywood movies, whose annual output of over 400 films a year with 3.6 billion audiences across the world, is worthy to note. The interviewees' answers reflect a clear negotiated stance of their "minimal self" when it comes to seeing a *dastar* Sikh in Bollywood movies portrayed with trimmed beard. The interviewees are aware of their religious identity, but they relate what they see on screen with their personal opinions and experiences of coming across Sikhs that carry a similar outlook as shown in Bollywood films. Thus, they are able to accept a Sikh man on screen with *dastar*, but without beard to justify and suit their own needs and thinking.

### **5.3 RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE STUDIES**

For future researchers aiming to expand on this study, the non-Sikh's perception of the Sikhs' vis-à-vis Bollywood films can be considered. This should be done to know in depth if media plays a role in influencing perception of various cultures. Also, to fully appreciate the understanding of what constitutes the Sikhs' religious identity, a study should be conducted with Sikh adults to determine any significant changes in comprehension of their perception and religious identity compared to that of the Sikh youths'. Another aspect for expansion by researchers in future would be to study a larger film body of work

(Bollywood and internationally produced) involving the Sikhs as central characters and its impact on a larger sample size of the Sikh population. This would allow us to comprehend the similarities and or differences in which international film makers and Bollywood filmmakers portray the Sikh community.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1



Basant Singh showing his snipped hair

Retrieved February 18, 2015, from The Malaysian Insider:  
<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/palanivel-wants-no-apology-over-haircut-prank>

## Appendix 2



Baljit Singh representing Malaysia National Junior hockey team in Antwerp, Belgium.

Retrieved December 15, 2015 from Asia Samachar:  
<http://asiasamachar.com/2015/06/29/no-sikhs-in-malaysia-junior-hockey-team/>

### Appendix 3



Sikh male and females are normally shown wearing costumes such as above during the Vasakhi programs on air.

Retrieved February 18, 2015, from Corbis Images:  
<http://www.corbisimages.com/stock-photo/royalty-free/42-26263907/bhangra-the-traditional-folk-dance-from-punjab>

Appendix 4

Interviewees- Males	Wears Dastar	Untrimmed Beard	Parent With Dastar	Bollywood Character With Dastar But No Beard	Important / Necessary to Wear Dastar
Charanjot Singh	✓	✓	✓	Unhappy	✓
Anmol Singh	✓	✓	✓	Unhappy	✓
Darpreet Singh	✓	✓	✓	Doesn't Matter	✓
Balbir Singh	✓	✓	✓	Doesn't Matter	✓
Harcharan Singh	✓	✓	✓	Doesn't Matter	×
Fatehpal Singh	×	×	×	Doesn't Matter	✓
Ekroop Singh	×	×	×	Doesn't Matter	✓
Gauravdeep Singh	×	×	×	Unhappy	✓

Table 1: Male interviewees' response on the importance of wearing a dastar in reality and Bollywood

Appendix 5

Interviewees-Female	Wears Dastar	Parent with Dastar	Bollywood Character With Dastar But No Beard	Important/Necessary to Wear Dastar
Opinder Kaur	×	×	Doesn't Matter	✓
Karamdeep Kaur	×	✓	Doesn't Matter	✓
Namgeet Kaur	×	×	Doesn't Matter	✓
Manat Kaur	×	✓	Doesn't Matter	×
Inderpal Kaur	×	✓	Doesn't Matter	×
Jaskeerat Kaur	×	×	Unhappy (from religious perspective) & Doesn't Matter (from entertainment perspective)	✓
Livsharan Kaur	×	✓	Unhappy (from non-Sikh understanding perspective) & Doesn't Matter (from personal perspective)	✓

Table 2: Female interviewees' response on the importance of wearing a *dastar* in reality and Bollywood



Appendix 6

Aspects Enjoyed In Bollywood Films	Inderpal Kaur	Jaskeerat Kaur	Karamdeep Kaur	Livsharan Kaur	Manat Kaur	Namegeet Kaur	Opinder Kaur
Actor	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Actress	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Songs	✓					✓	✓
Storyline		✓	✓	✓			
Clothes	✓					✓	✓
Body Built of Actors			✓				✓
Body Built of Actress			✓				
Places Shown in the Movie					✓		✓
Dance	✓	✓				✓	✓
Issues Highlighted by the Movie				✓			
Values Portrayed in the Movie							

Table 3: Female interviewees' enjoyment aspects in Bollywood films

Appendix 7

Aspects Enjoyed In Bollywood Films	Anmol Singh	Ekroop Singh	Fatehpal Singh	Balbir Singh	Gauravdeep Singh	Charanjot Singh	Darpreet Singh	Harcharan Singh
Actor	✓							
Actress				✓				
Songs			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Storyline		✓				✓		✓
Clothes					✓		✓	
Body Built of Actors	✓		✓			✓	✓	
Body Built of Actress			✓					
Places Shown in the Movie								
Dance	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓
Issues Highlighted by the Movie								
Values Portrayed in the Movie			✓					

Table 4: Male interviewees' enjoyment aspects in Bollywood films

Appendix 8

Name	Age	Wears Dastar
Anmol Singh	19	✓
Balbir Singh	20	✓
Charanjot Singh	23	✓
Darpreet Singh	23	✓
Ekroop Singh	20	×
Fatehpal Singh	21	×
Gauravdeep Singh	23	×
Harcharan Singh	23	×

Male Respondents' Biographic Details

Name	Age	Wears Dastar
Inderpal Kaur	20	×
Jaskeerat Kaur	16	×
Karamdeep Kaur	19	×
Livsharan Kaur	22	×
Manat Kaur	20	×
Namgeet Kaur	18	×
Opinder Kaur	21	×

Female Respondents' Biographic Details

## Appendix 9

### **Letter of Consent to Participate in Interview**

I have been briefed about the purpose of this academic study, which is a case study to examine the influence of Bollywood movies on Sikh youth's perception of their religious/cultural identity. I confirm that my participation in this academic research project is purely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from this research at any time.

I understand that, as part of this research project, the interview session will be audio recorded for the purpose of accuracy, and that the interview will be transcribed for the purpose of the analysis. I understand that my identity will be kept confidential and will remain anonymous as no name will be mentioned in the report. I voluntarily agree that the transcript of the audiotape may be studied by the researcher for use in the research project and used in academic publications and at academic conferences.

I understand this information and agree to participate fully under the conditions stated above.

---

Name:

IC No:

Date:

## Appendix 10

### INTERVIEW GUIDELINE

1. Name
2. Gender
3. Age
4. Location
5. Education Level
6. Do you watch Bollywood movies?
7. How often do you watch Bollywood movies?
8. How long have you been watching Bollywood movies?
9. If you do watch Bollywood films, in what setting do you normally do this? At home with your family, friends or others?
10. What aspects of Bollywood films do you most enjoy?  
(Actor, Actress, Songs, Storyline, Clothes, Body Build of actors, Body Build of actress, Places shown in the movie, Dance, Issues highlighted by the movie, Values portrayed in the movie)
11. If you don't watch Bollywood films, is there a reason why not? Is there an aspect you particularly dislike?
12. There are some Bollywood movies in present time that has portrayed men with turban such as Singh Is King, Love Aaj Kal or Rocket Singh to name a few. Have you seen any of these movies?
13. What do you think about the Sikh religion/culture portrayal in these movies?
14. How do you think Bollywood films portray your religion/culture?
15. Do you consider yourself to be a true Sikh?
16. How often do you pray?

17. What is your understanding of a true Sikh religion/culture?
18. Why do you wear a dastar?
19. What do you think of dastar? (For those who are not wearing a dastar)
20. Do you think Sikh girls these days are interested in guys with turban?
21. What do you think of males with turban?
22. What do you think of long hair, be it for guys or girls?
23. Do you think Bollywood films have influenced the kind of person you are now?
24. What do you think of people who smoke?
25. What do you think of people who drink?
26. There are plenty of Bollywood movies which show the actor/actress smoking or drinking openly, dancing away in pubs and discos. What do you feel when you see such scenes?
27. What do you think about the Sikh religion/culture?