An in-depth analysis on the Impact of Fictional Movies and Books on an Individual's Real-Life Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Theories have indicated that there is a close relationship between fiction and reality. It depends on the mindset of individuals on how they perceive fiction and whether they should apply it to real situations. The emotional make-up of individuals will have a bearing on whether they are actually influenced by fiction and stories to such an extent that they feel that it is reality.

Research Question: How far do expectations of individuals in real life depend on fictional movies and books they see and read? What percentage of people and at what age are they impacted by fiction? Does this have a positive or a negative impact on relationships and thought process? To what extent does a human's thought process change in the aftermath of reading and watching movies? These and similar type of questions would be attempted in the course of the analysis.

1. Introduction

Fictional movies and books tend to create unrealistically high expectations of relationships in the minds of people. This is especially true for the vulnerable age group which could vary from the teenage years right up to the mid-twenties. The susceptibility to media influence varies on the basis of different genders and ages. Children develop emotional and social capabilities from parents, friends, teachers, and siblings. They also bring their own personalities, temperaments, and cognitive abilities to each social situation. Besides just looking at cartoons and other type of serials, there are also fictional stories and movies that emphasise on relationships. It is this area which the paper has delved into to understand the extent of its impact on the manner in which an

individual behaves, thinks, and acts.

The relationships that are impacted could vary from those that exist between friends (male and female), love relationships (boy-girl, boy-boy, girl-girl), relationships with parents, siblings, and the extended family.

Reality is what one experiences in daily life whereas fiction is in fact a figment of one's imagination. *The reality is that fiction is not real*. Fiction comes in various formats that includes books, short tales, and films. It is intriguing that humans do, to a large extent, have the ability to distinguish between fiction and reality. But, on the other hand, when one is engaging in the fictional world, it is likely that a person becomes completely immersed and emotionally engaged in that world and it becomes difficult to leave the fictional landscape and get back to reality.

In recent times, there have been tell-all memoirs, reality shows and talk shows which have, in fact, blurred the boundaries between reality and fiction.

**Fig 1: Visual representation of image v/s reality**

Source: antennaland.wordpress.com

Causal-constraint Hypothesis

Fiction often influences the reality of the person, especially their relationships in life. It drives a person to expect different things from the other person in a relationship. Focusing on 'ideal couple, ideal family and ideal friends' results in a make-believe scenario that influences all real-life situations. This type of thought-process starts the moment a person enters his/her teenage years. Research has indicated that the moment the child's age increased, they claimed to have successfully imagined situations that were based on characteristics that they thought were ideal.

In fact, younger children, before they entered teenage years, quite correctly reported that *the improbable and impossible phenomenon cannot occur in real life.* But as they grew older, they started believing in the improbable. This phenomenon is a part of **causal constraint hypothesis**. Trait adoption from narratives tends to occur in older children due to their perspective taking skills rather than younger ones. It is evident that adolescents are influenced by movies and books that depict ideal couples, friends, families, and other types of relationships. These create a distinct set of expectations in the minds of these children, and they tend to look at relationships based on the images that have been planted in their mind due to the type of books and films that they have been watching/reading.

Fig 2: Influence of social media on expectations of adolescents
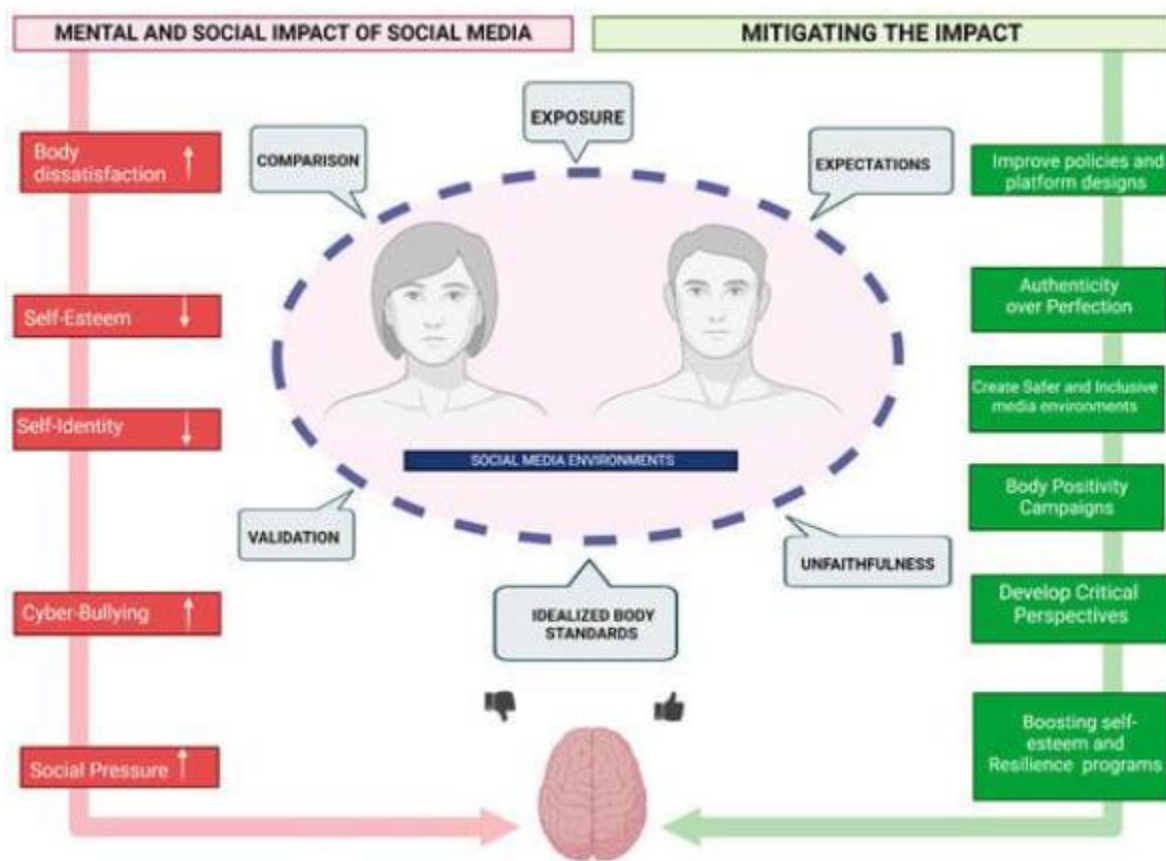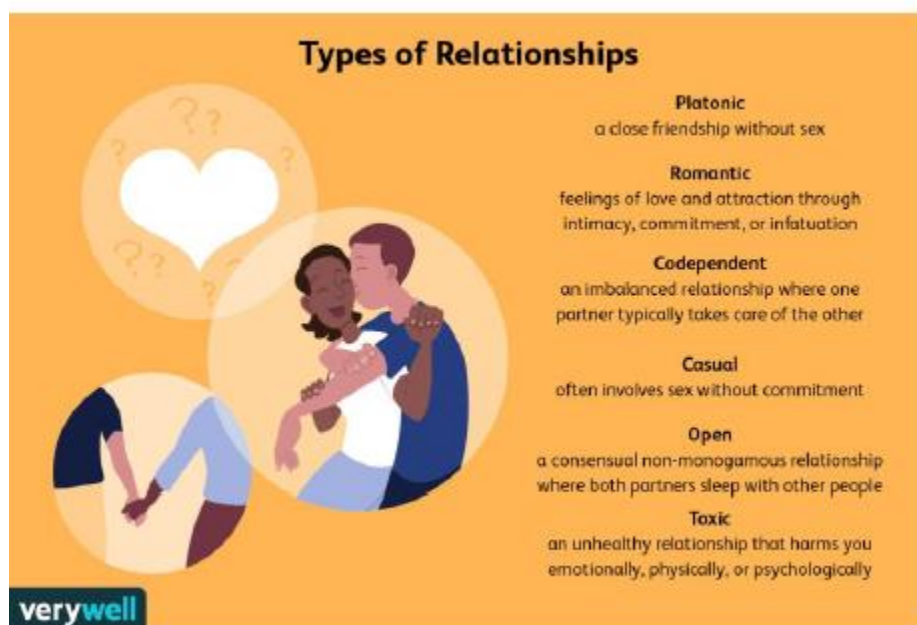

Source: mdpi.com

2. Definitions

Relationship: It refers to the way in which two or more people feel and behave towards each other and connection and bond between two people. Relationships focus on generally four types

which are:

- Family Relationships

- Friendships

- Acquaintanceships

Romantic Relationships Fig 3: Types of relationships

Source: verywellmind.com

Social relationships refer to the connection that exists between people who have recurring interactions that are perceived by the participants as having a personal meaning. This is also defined as an association between two or more people or things eg: kinship by blood(consanguinity), marriage(affinity), adoption or fictive ties.

Interpersonal relationship is an association between two or more people that is based on limerence, love, solidarity, regular business interaction or some type of social commitment. It is also a close relationship between two people, especially those that involve romantic or sexual feelings.

The moment one defines a relationship, it means that boundaries and expectations have been defined. It is difficult to leave the above two adjectives as vague.

Love is one of the most profound emotions known to human beings. There are many kinds of love, but many people seek its expression in a romantic way with a compatible partner or compatible partners. For individuals that are involved in this relationship, they comprise of one of the most meaningful aspects of life and are a source of deep fulfilment. The ability to form healthy and loving relationships starts to form during infancy. This is with respect to the caregiver who reliably meets the infant's needs for food, care, warmth, protection, stimulation, and social contact. These relationships are not destiny but are part of deeply ingrained patterns of relating to each other.

It can also be defined as "the mutual dealings, connections of feelings that exist between two parties, countries, or people. As long as one can respect and accept that the other person is more than a friend, and they share this affection, then one is in a relationship. According to some researchers being in a relationship takes hard work and commitment. The key factors of such a relationship are:

- Selflessness

- Respect

- Trust

- Honesty

- Forgiveness

- Love

The basic types of relationships are:

- Family relationships: Referring to the connection and dynamics between individuals withing a family unit.

- Long-distance relationships: Normally referring to intimate relationships between people who stay apart geographically.

- Asexual: These people have little or no interest in sex. Their relationship is based on intellectual, spiritual basis.

- Casual: These can be both simple and complex: Simple such as those between casual friends and lovers or terribly complex such as those with a former and complicated relationship among polyamorous people. These could be further divided into

acquaintances, casual, close friends, intimate, platonic relationships, parent-child, sibling, marriage, romantic, casual orientation, casual sex, friends with benefits, open relationships, polygamy, trophy relationship, polyamorous relationship, asexual relationship, toxic relationship, co-dependant relationships.

Fig 4: The Psychology of Love Relationships

Source: Linkedin.com

Fiction:

This word is from the Latin *fictio* (the act of making, fashioning, or moulding). The idea of writing about what one never knows- the interior lives of others- was born in a fertile hybrid culture of 12th century England. It was made possible by the pursuit of romantic love. It refers to something invented by the imagination or feigned. It is also a deliberately fabricated account of something. It could also be a literary work based on imagination rather than fact like a novel or a story. It is any creative work portraying individuals, events or places that are imaginary or in ways that are imaginary. They are inconsistent with history, fact, and/or plausibility.

Within this genre, there is realistic fiction which could have actually occurred to people or

animals in a believable setting. But normally, it is a book or a story that is written about imaginary characters or events and does not describe real people and not deal with facts.

Themes in fiction are over-arching ideas or messages that serve as the underlying foundation of a story. It conveys the author's perspective on human nature, society issues, personal growth and more. These themes allow the readers to relate to characters and their experiences, making the narrative and their experiences more impactful and memorable. Fiction, thus, refers to any type of literature that is created from the imagination and typically has a narrative.

Parasocial Relationships:

These are one sided relationships where one person extends emotional energy, interest and time and the other party is completely unaware of the other's existence. These are most common with celebrities, organisations, or television stars.

3. Literature Review

1. Elizabeth Van Monsjou and Raymond A Mar from York University stated that on an average, participants were slightly interested in fictional couples. This did not indicate a deep interest in fictional couples. A large number of participants identified a favourite fictional couple and were emotionally interested in the outcome of their relationship. There was a moderate overlap in a couple's relationship and an ideal relationship. Their research indicated that individuals may not necessarily be interested in fictional couples simply because a certain relationship is being presented to them, but the investment can occur before characters get together and persist even after they are broken up. There also existed a gender differentiation where 96% of the women identified a favourable couple while only 84% of men were interested in doing so. It was also found that participants in a romantic relationship were more interested in fictional relationships rather than those who were single. This indicated that the perception, concern and liking of a fictional relationship is closely related to the current relationship status of the participants. Relationship interest was positively associated with participant's perception of their own success at developing and maintaining romantic relationships. It appears that interest in fictional couples is not a means of compensating or lacking intimacy and support. Instead, it seems that those who are more satisfied with life and more experienced with intimacy are interested in fictional relationships.

Overall, participants were emotionally involved in both the couple and their individual characteristics. Individuals interact with fictional couples in a different way than they interact with specific characters. A correlation between interest in fictional couples and a parasocial relationship did exist but it was moderate in magnitude and neither high enough to suggest an identity.

**Fig 5: Relationships in real life and how they are affected by fictional relationships**

Source: pinterest.in

2. Fictional Crush and Its Impact on Adolescent Relationships

Romantic movies, TV shows and mature novels are endorsed and consumed by many individuals in society, particularly women. But media, more often than not, does not portray reality, which is why adolescent females who are still developing socially, sexually, emotionally, and cognitively, may get enamoured by such narratives. As this is a one-sided romantic relation, it could also be called parasocial. Several effects of PSRR (parasocial romantic relation) may have a detrimental impact on adolescent females whose emotions become extremely invested in fictional characters. It may result in them adopting unrealistic expectations and act on unhealthy sexual behaviours portrayed in the romantic media. It is possible that these expectations and behaviours that begin at adolescence may carry into adult life. They have the potential to impact not only current relationships but also long-term future relationships. Thirty-eight percent more women than men reported a favourable opinion towards romantic movies in a study done in 2018 (Morning Consult, 2018), illustrating that romantic media is more popular among women than men. Perhaps this type of media is popular because it can serve as a way for women to escape from stress or disappointment they experience in reality. Adolescent females often find that developing a one-sided crush on a fictional character is appealing, because there is no fear of rejection, and it seems emotionally and physically safer than becoming involved in a real-life relationship. However, because media does not always accurately portray reality, adolescents may form relationships with media figures that would not otherwise be possible in real-life scenarios.

While PSRRs may be natural, they could have lasting negative effects on future relationships. Adolescents may not receive accurate information regarding what first relationships look like, which can misdirect future development of healthy relationships. Although romantic movies, TV shows and mature novels have historically been popular and are widely recognised as a natural part of cultivating romantic ideologies, adolescent females should be educated on the possible detrimental effects of developing a one-sided romantic relationship; otherwise this parasocial attachment may create unrealistic expectations of romantic relationships, promote unhealthy sexual behaviours, and decrease satisfaction or commitment in current and future relationships.

Fig 6: Parasocial relationship
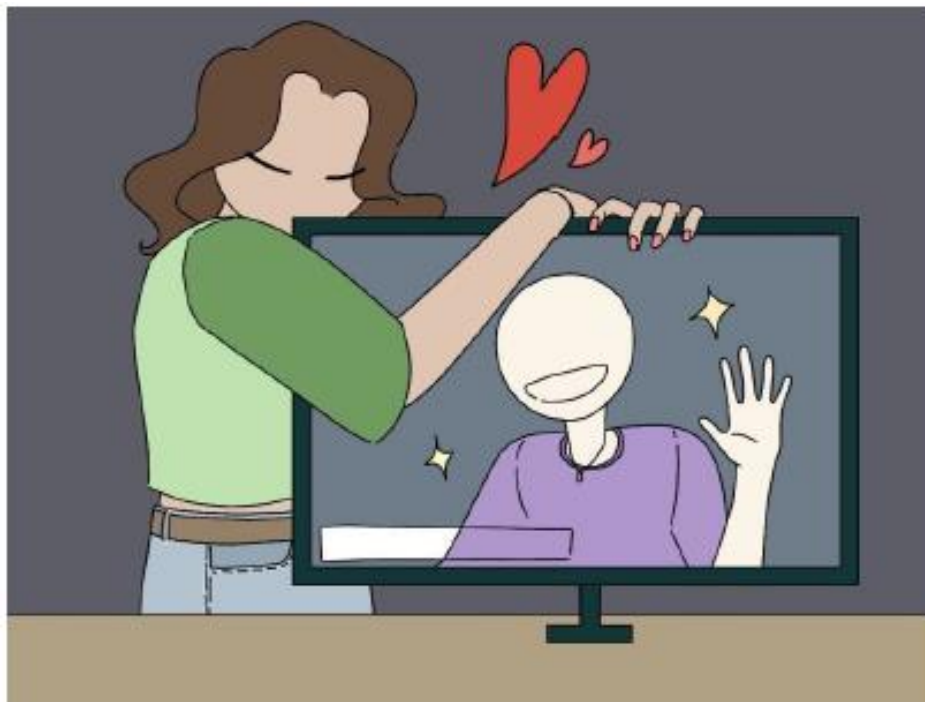
Source: jyssicaschwartz.medium.com

**Reasons for why women are more emotionally susceptible**

Females are believed to have superiority in emotional competence in understanding other people's emotions. Decoding of this resulted in decoding neural pathways and varied neurodynamics. A meta-analysis research indicated that the medial pre-frontal cortex, anterial cingulate cortex, frontal pole and the thalamus were more recruited in men relative to women. Males tend to activate bilateral pre-frontal regions which are involved in rational thinking and cognitive control whereas females tend to activate bilateral amygdala that is involved in emotional evaluation (AIRyalat, 2017).

Fig 7: Picturisation of emotional v/s rational thinking
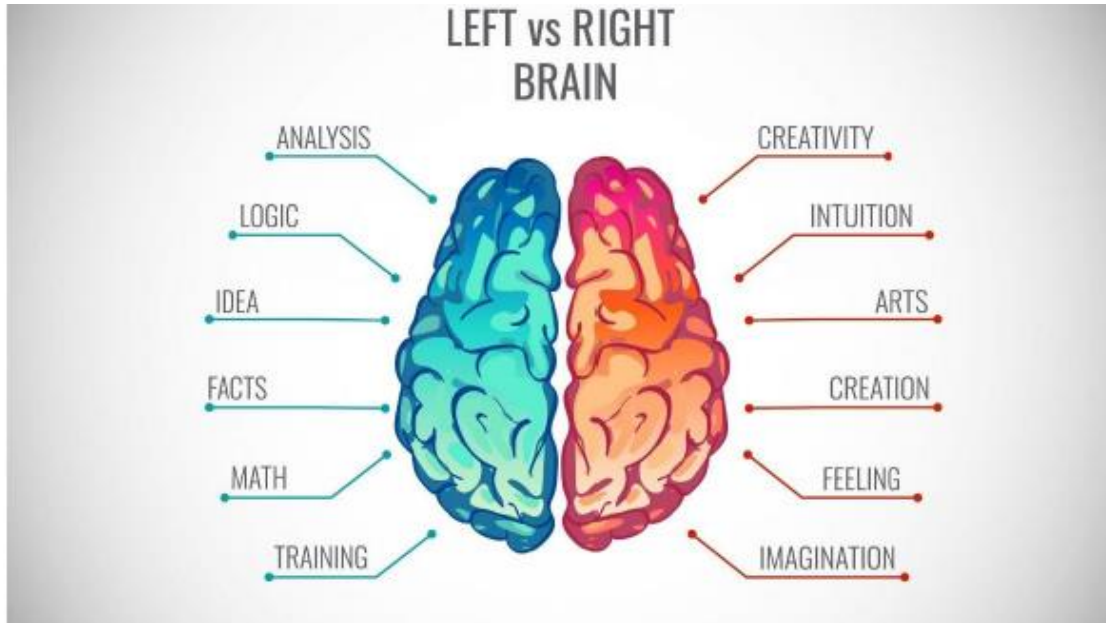
Source: aceproductions.in

Fig 8: Frontal Lobe representing the rational mind
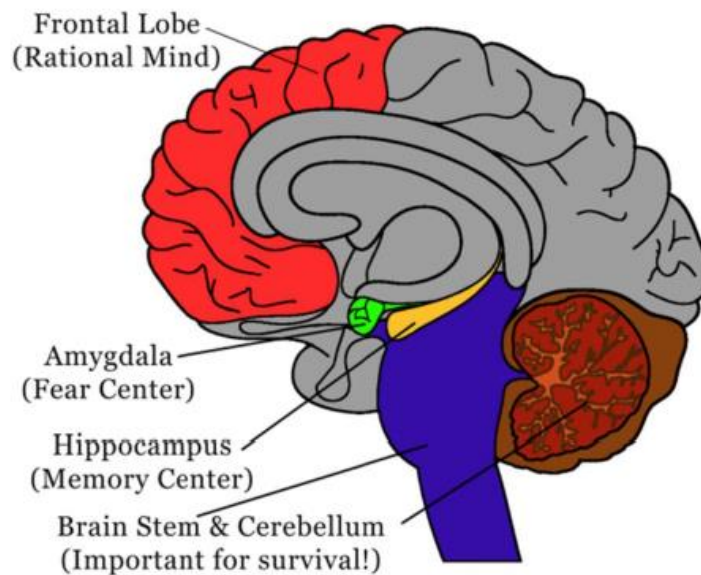

Source: southcounselling.com

Females, as compared to males, are highly sensitive and react to facial expressions of others, whether in reality or in photographs.

4. Hypothesis

Fictional movies and books impact a person's real-life relationships and more so for women. To validate the above, a questionnaire was sent to 50+ respondents out of which 42 responded. The survey indicated the following:

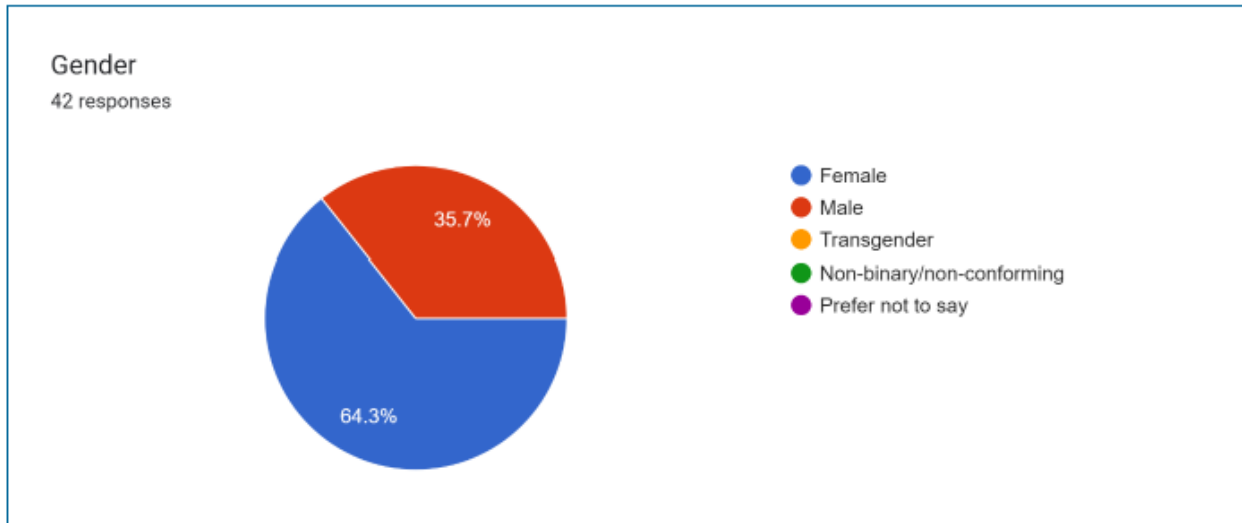## 5. Methodology

5.1. Age Group:
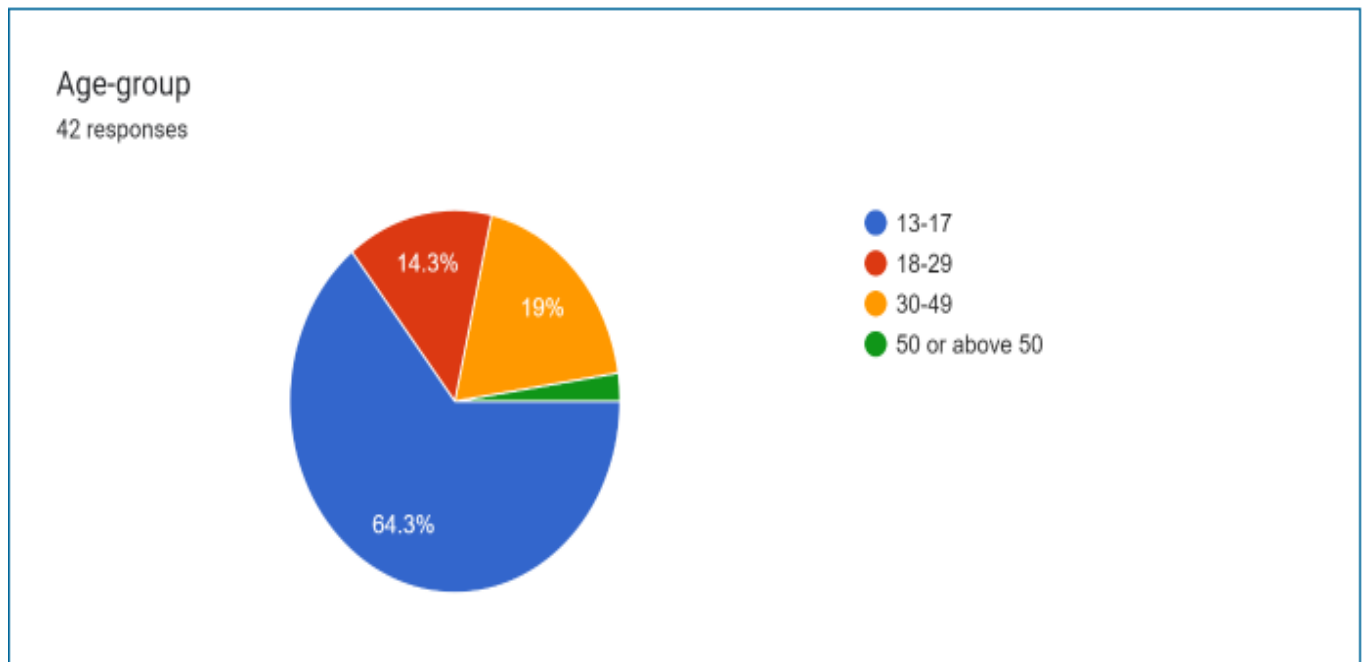
Source: Own source

64.3% of the respondents were in the age group 13 years to 17 years.

14.3% of the respondents were in the age group 18 years to 29 years.

19% of the respondents were in the age group 30 years to 49 years.

2.4% of the respondents were in the age group 50 or above 50.
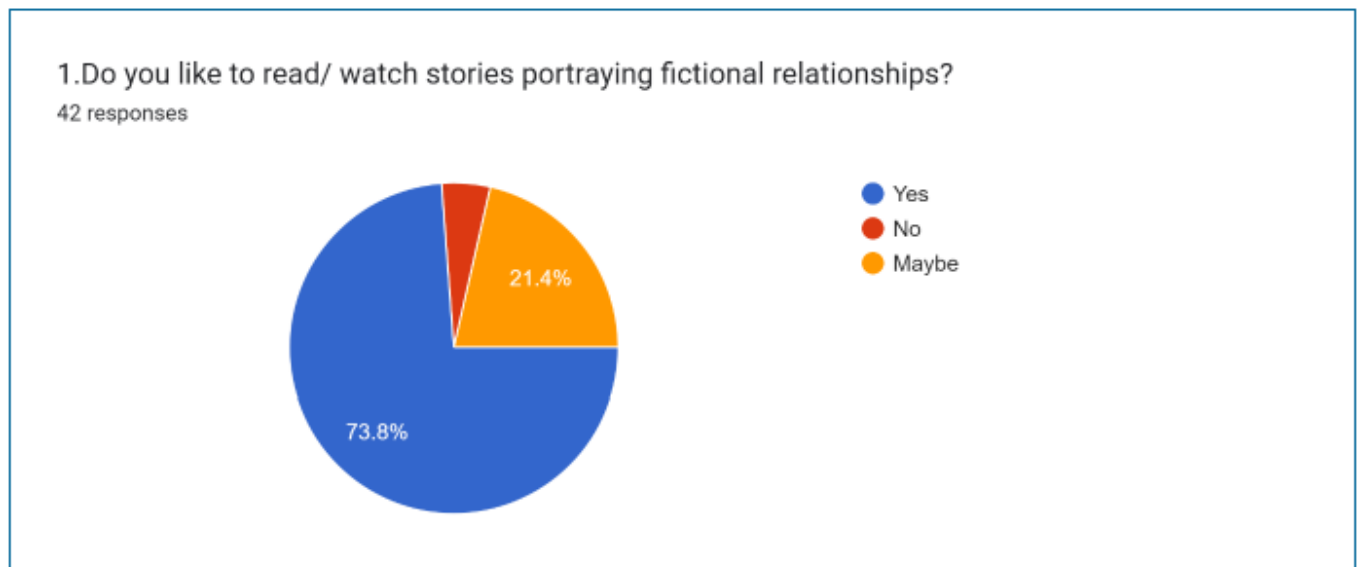
5.2 Gender:

Source: Own source

64.3% of the respondents were female.

35.7% of the respondents were male.
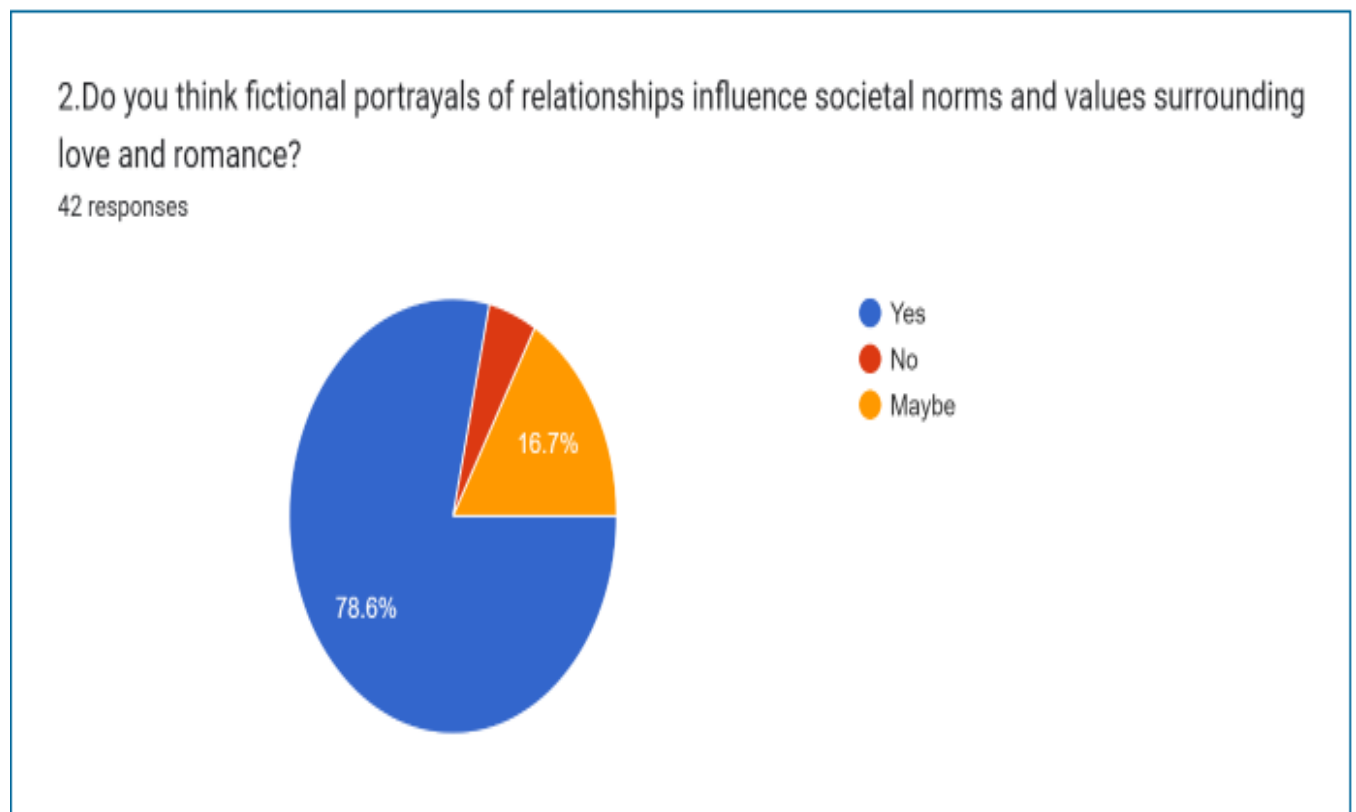
5.3. Reading fictional stories

Source: Own source

73.8% of the respondents stated that they like to read/watch stories portraying fictional relationships.

21.4% of the respondents stated they did not like to read/watch stories portraying fictional relationships.

4.8% of the respondents do not hold a clear stance.

5.4. Influence of fictional stories on relationships
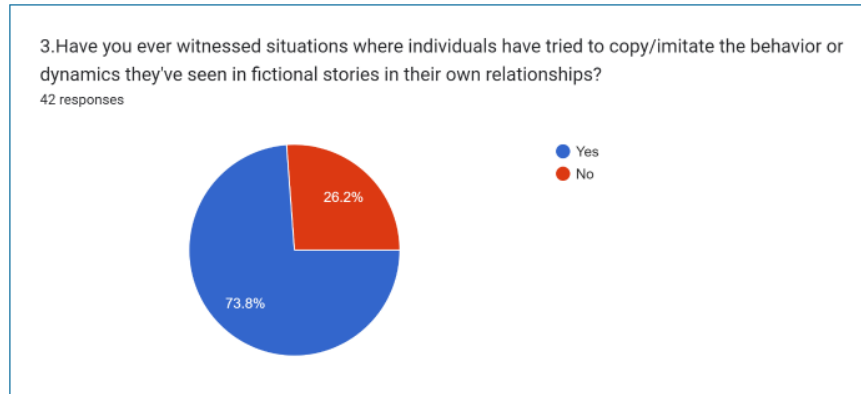

Source: Own source

78.6% of the respondents believe that societal norms and values surrounding love and romance are influenced by fictional portrayals.

16.7% of the respondents do not believe that societal norms and values surrounding love and romance are influenced by fictional portrayals.

4.7% of the respondents do not hold a clear stance.

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## 5.5. Using fictional relationships in real-life situations

Source: Own source

73.8% of the respondents have witnessed situations where individuals have tried to copy/imitate the behaviour or dynamics they've seen in fictional stories in their own relationships.

26.2% of the respondents have not witnessed situations where individuals have tried to copy/imitate the behaviour or dynamics they've seen in fictional stories in their own relationships.

5.6. Impact of fiction (positive or negative) on real-life situations
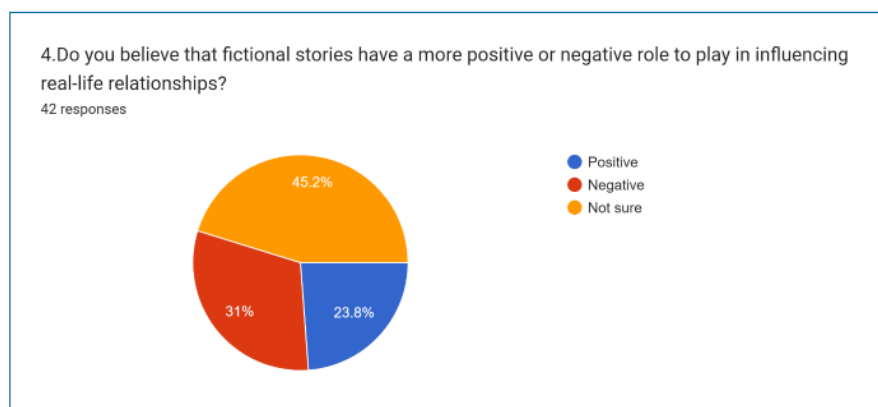
Source: Own source

45.2% of the respondents do not hold a clear stance.

31% of the respondents believe the role to be more negative.

23.8% of the respondents believe the role to be more positive.

5.7. Enumeration of specific instances of influence

5.Have you noticed any specific instances where fictional movies or books have influenced your own or someone else's perception of relationships? If you have, please elaborate.

42 responses

> Yes, nowadays everyone wants a fictional novel like relationship as they're so mesmerizing and pure. They've also provided ways to build strong and healthy, dreamy relationships which is turning into reality as alot of people are pushing themselves to have them.

> Yes fictional books and movies have influenced perception of relationships for my friend as she believes that she can relate to the fictional characters and the situations .

> Haven't experienced anything as such personally but in my opinion such fictional books raise people's hopes in a relationship leading to people desiring for unrealistic things in their daily life

> Depends on the story line a few have movies have influenced to accept themself and be more open while some have impacted in negative but moreover positive

> Fiction can often convey topics we might we uncomfortable to touch in real life. How I've seen people being impacted by it is learning when a relationship is getting toxic. Watching shows that are woven around relationships, we get to know what is healthy behaviour in a relationship. It doesn't necessarily have to be romantic, settings where family values are conveyed also influence people.

Source: Own source

5.8. Learning from fictional relationships
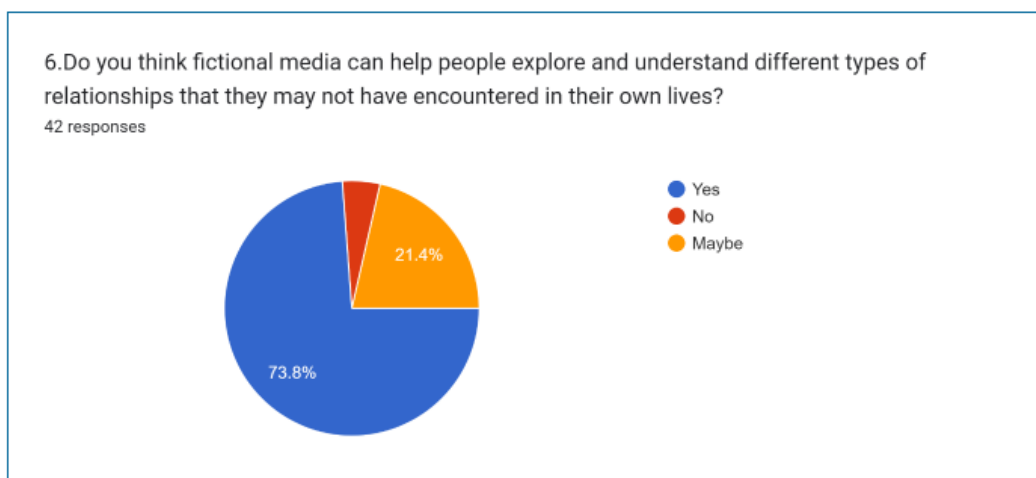
6.Do you think fictional media can help people explore and understand different types of relationships that they may not have encountered in their own lives?

42 responses
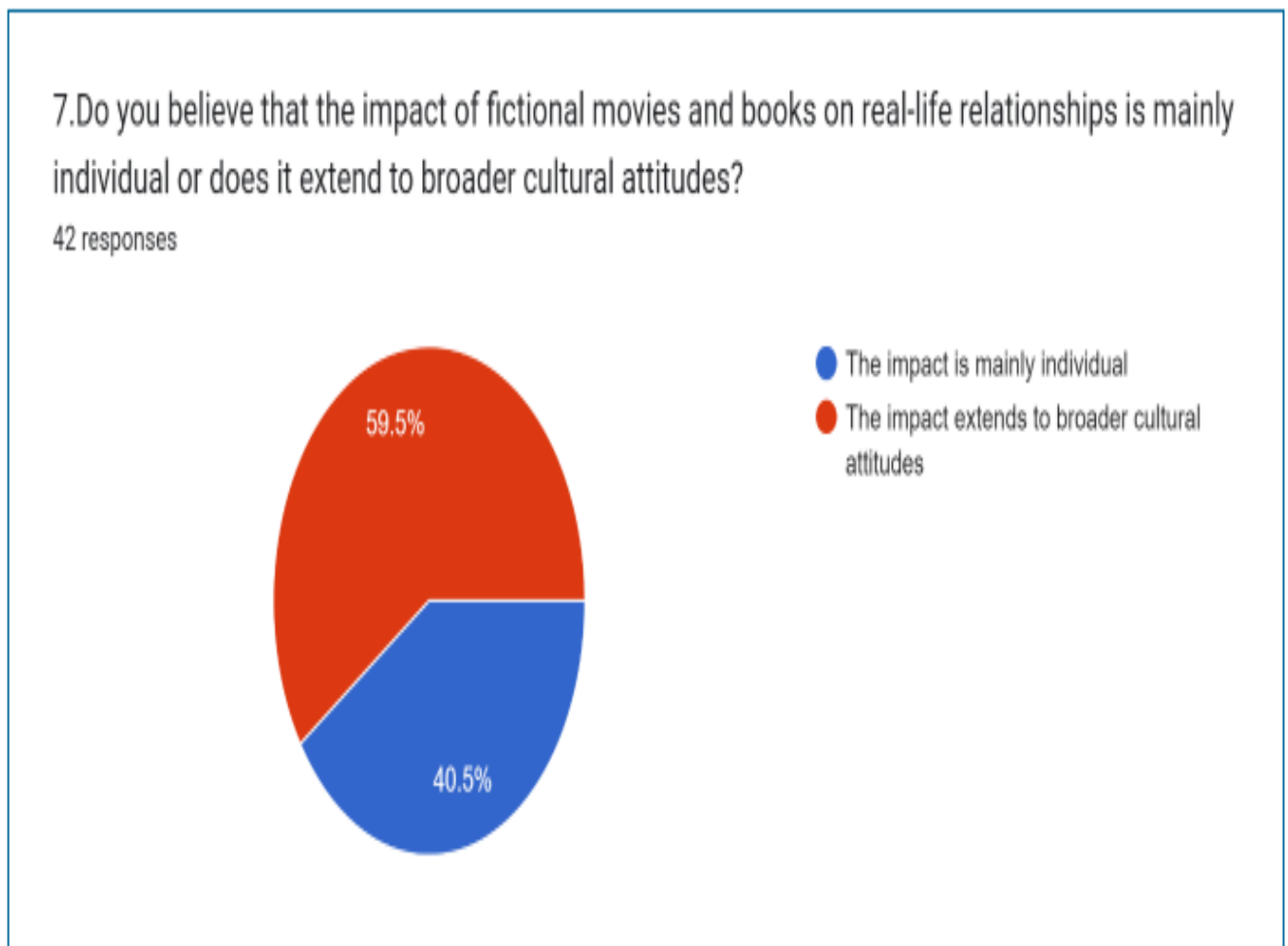

Legend: ● Yes ● No ● Maybe

21.4%

73.8%

Source: Own source

73.8% of the respondents believe that fictional media can help people explore and understand different types of relationships that they may not have encountered in their own lives.

21.4% of the respondents do not hold a clear stance.

4.8% of the respondents do not believe that fictional media can help people explore and understand different types of relationships that they may not have encountered in their own lives.

5.9. Are imbibing and practising fictional relationships individualistic or cultural?

7.Do you believe that the impact of fictional movies and books on real-life relationships is mainly individual or does it extend to broader cultural attitudes?

42 responses

- The impact is mainly individual
- The impact extends to broader cultural attitudes

59.5%

40.5%

Source: Own source

59.5% of the respondents believe that the impact extends to broader cultural attitudes.

40.5% of the respondents believe that the impact is mainly individual.

5.10. Are authors and storytellers responsible for portrayal of relationships?

8.What role do you think the responsibility of creators and storytellers plays in portraying realistic and healthy relationships in fictional content?

42 responses

Responsible storytelling seeks to create connection, tap into emotions, surface shared values ,reach the right people and not harming religious sentiments

Ig that the creators should show all the ups and downs of a relationship and how to keep up the relationship as only showing healthy relationships doesn't help one irl like geography in school.

The responsibility of creators and storytellers in portraying realistic and healthy relationships in fictional content is significant. Media has a powerful influence on how people perceive and understand relationships, and fictional content can shape societal norms and expectations. By presenting realistic and healthy relationships, creators have the opportunity to promote positive values, inspire audiences, and contribute to a more inclusive and empathetic society.

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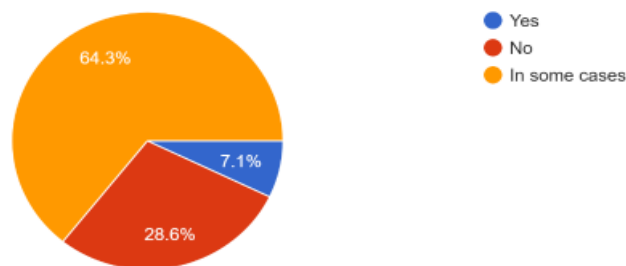The creators must portray healthy yet believable relationships.

Story tellers should have a more practical approach

Source: Own source

5.11. Should fictional relationships encourage idolisation?

9.Do you believe that fictional relationships should be idolized?

42 responses
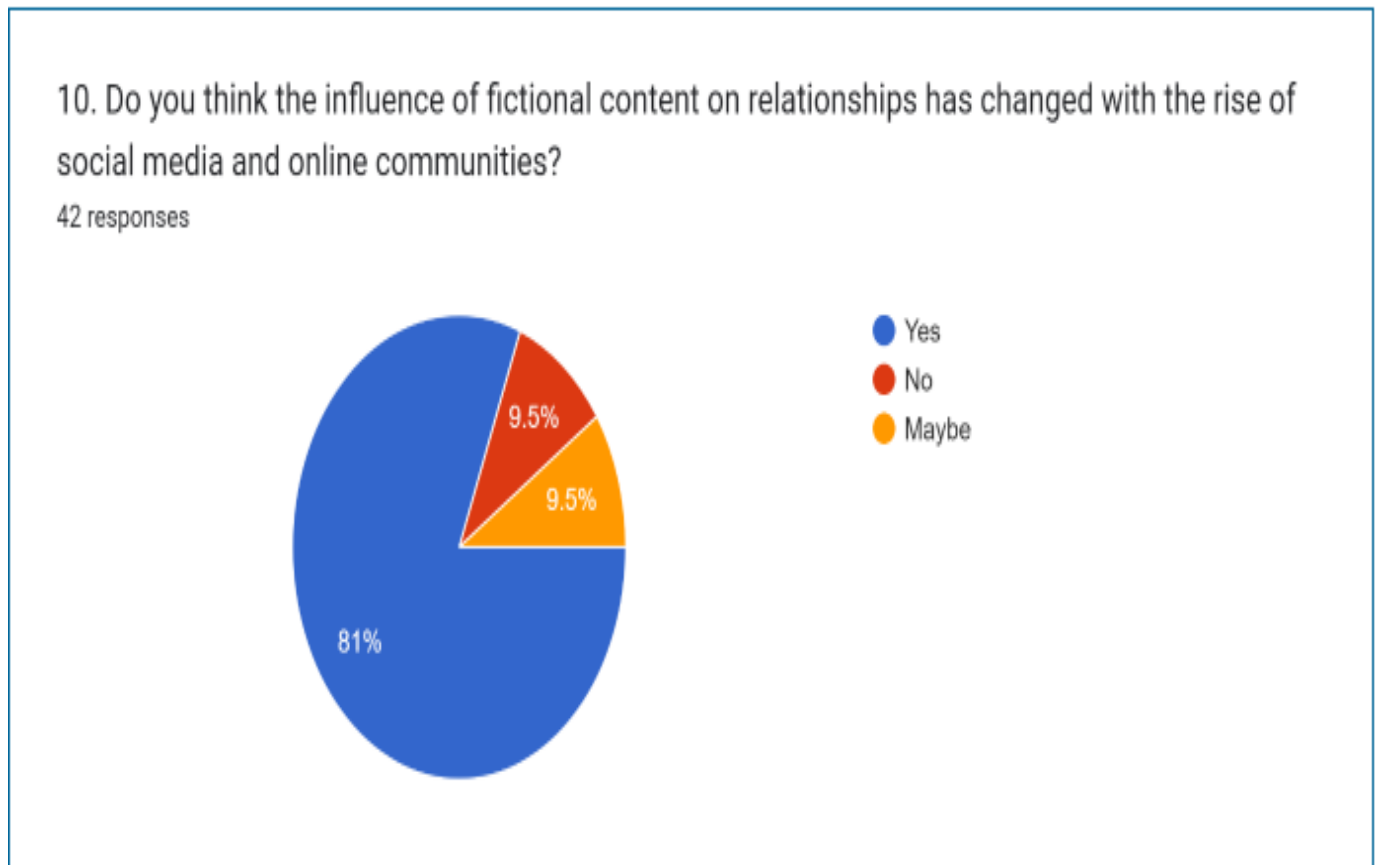
Yes
No
In some cases

64.3%

7.1%

28.6%

Source: Own source

64.3% of the respondents believe that fictional relationships should be idolised in some cases only.

28.6% of the respondents do not believe that fictional relationships should be idolized.

7.1% of the respondents believe that fictional relationships should be idolised.

5.12. Impact of social media and online communities on fictional relationships

10. Do you think the influence of fictional content on relationships has changed with the rise of social media and online communities?

42 responses

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

9.5%

9.5%

81%

Source: Own source

81% of the respondents think that the influence of fictional content on relationships has changed with the rise of social media and online communities.

9.5% of the respondents do not think that the influence of fictional content on relationships has changed with the rise of social media and online communities.

9.5% of the respondents do not hold a clear stance.

5.13. Fictional media should be analysed with respect to reality before it is adopted
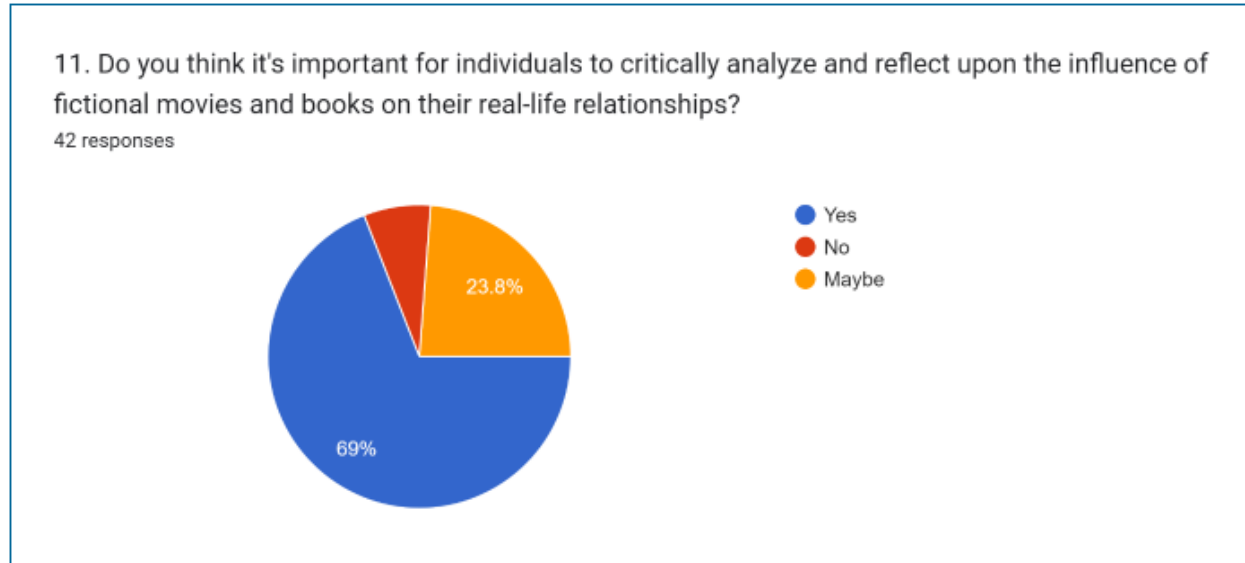
Source: Own source

69% of the respondents believe that it is important for individuals to critically analyse and reflect upon the influence of fictional movies and books on their real-life relationships.

23.8% of the respondents do not believe that it is important for individuals to critically analyse and reflect upon the influence of fictional movies and books on their real-life relationships.

7.2% of the respondents do not hold a clear stance.

6. Analysis and Conclusion

The analysis indicated that mainly amongst the female respondents, a substantial number liked to read stories portraying fictional relationships. Most of them believed that fictional portrayals influenced societal norms and values surrounding love and romance. Nearly 75% of the people in the study witnessed situations where individuals have tried to copy or imitate behaviour or dynamics that they have seen or read in fictional stories. A large number of the respondents indicated that fictional media portrays relationships that they may not have encountered before. Impact of fictional books and movies does extend to broader cultural attitudes. Care should be taken by the creators and storytellers to not show something that negatively influences or goes against the beliefs or values of a particular community.

Majority of them believe that fictional relationships should be idolised in certain cases. A large number of the respondents showed a cautious attitude indicating that individuals need to critically

evaluate the impact that fiction has on reality.

Majority of the respondents recognised and acknowledged the prominent impact that fictional movies and books have on reality. This has also been indicated clearly by all theories that have been put forward by various psychologists. Fiction can give an insight on ideal relationships as well as be a revelation on toxic ones as they, at the time, emphasise on the negative consequences that these fictional relationships have on people.

A large number of people enjoy watching and reading accounts of different types of relationships, but they do not feel the need or the importance to draw any conclusion or apply them in their own lives. It is the responsibility of storywriters and movie maker to portray appropriate content that is non-controversial.

Thus, the impact of fiction on an individual's life definitely depends on the following factors:

- Age of the person

- Gender

- Emotional state

The younger the person, and if one considers a female, then she is more affected by novels and movies with respect to relationships. The vulnerability of emotional status of individuals also indicates their proneness towards being influenced by fiction, whether movies or books. All the above parameters, thus, play an extremely important role on the impact and influence of fiction on relationships.

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