



Dimensionalizing stardom in Tamil and Telugu cinema

An analysis of the personality profiles of top Tamil and Telugu male film stars decodes the idea of stardom in the South film industries, vis-à-vis Bollywood

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Summary

- In this analysis based on the personality profiles of the top male stars, the authors decode dimensions of the traits that define stardom in Tamil and Telugu film industries
 - Using a personality framework, they compare and contrast the commonalities and differences in the personality of the top male stars, across Tamil, Telugu and Hindi film industries
 - The analysis reveals that Tamil and Telugu stars have greater proportion of intrinsic traits associated with them, vis-à-vis Hindi stars, adding more heft to their stardom
 - The authors analyse the underlying reasons for the same, citing examples to illustrate differences in the inherent nature of stardom in Tamil & Telugu industries, vis-à-vis Bollywood
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The growing success of films from South India, especially Tamil and Telugu films, at the Indian Box Office, is often viewed from the lens of such content being more innovative and better suited to the theatrical experience. While there is great merit in understanding the underlying content factors that have worked for Tamil and Telugu blockbusters, to fully understand the success of these films, one must delve deeper into an aspect that defines key paradigms of these industries: Stardom.

In the South Indian film industries, particularly Tamil and Telugu, the top male stars wield immense influence, and are revered by millions of loyal fans. While there are many historical and socio-cultural reasons for the nature and extent of their stardom, which are unique to the two industries, understanding how these top male stars are perceived by their respective audience is an interesting approach to decode their popularity and fandom.

Methodology

To perform this analysis, the top five Tamil and Telugu male stars were identified by analysing their popularity over a period of six months (April-September 2023), using data from **Ormax Stars India Loves (OSIL)**. Ormax Stars India Loves is based on an audience survey that runs 365 days a year, with a monthly sample size of 8,000+ across nine languages. The survey samples regular theatre going audience across India, who are asked to name their two favorite male stars and two favorite female stars in each language they watch films in. This data is analysed separately for male and female stars, and separately for each language.

The top five stars in Tamil used for this analysis are: Vijay, Ajith, Suriya, Dhanush and Rajinikanth. Similarly, the top five male stars in Telugu were identified as: Prabhas, Jr. NTR, Ram Charan, Allu Arjun and Mahesh Babu. To compare and contrast, similar exercise was done for the top five male Hindi stars: Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan, Akshay Kumar, Hrithik Roshan and Ranbir Kapoor.

To understand how these superstars from three different industries are perceived, their personality maps were created using **Ormax Personality Framework**. This framework is adapted from Jennifer Aaker’s Brand Personality Framework, to suit the context of the Indian entertainment business. This framework is a collection of personality traits under five dimensions. Under these dimensions, 27 relevant traits have been retained from the original framework. The framework is used to analyse characters and celebrities, on how they are perceived by their audiences.

DIMENSIONS

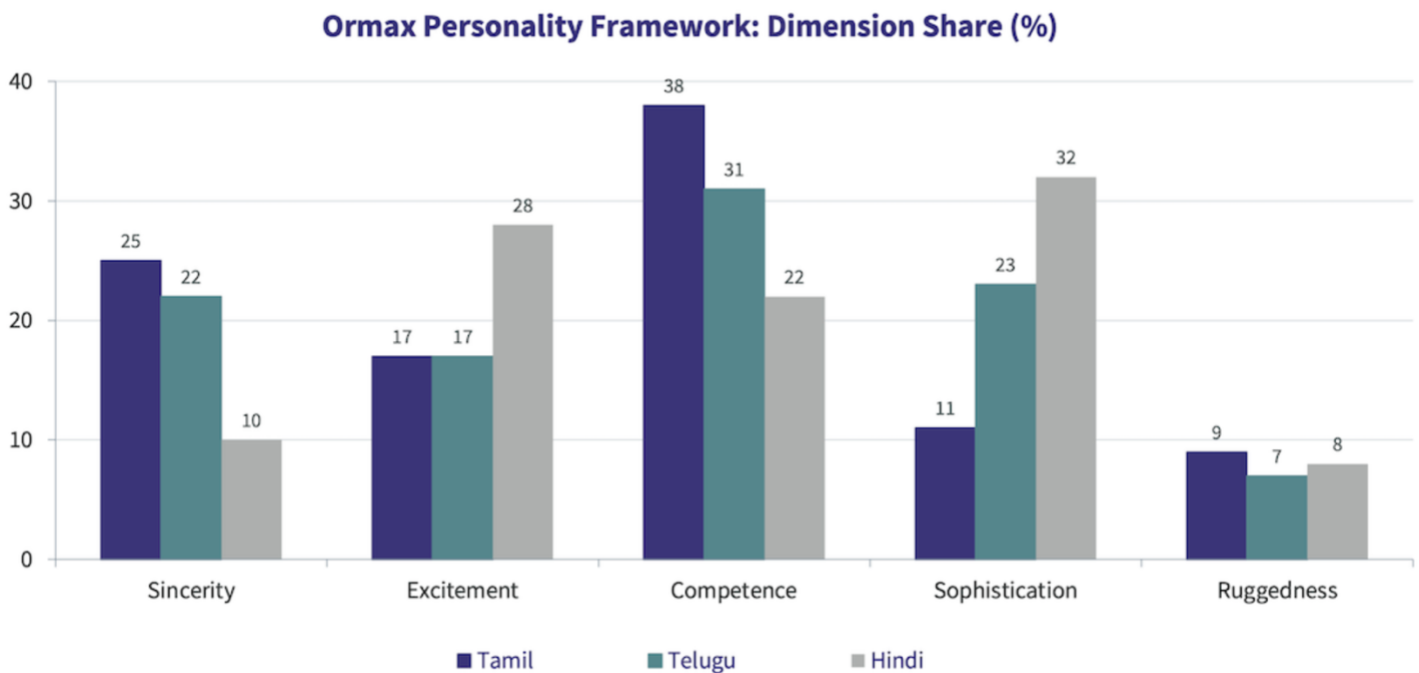
TRAITS

SINCERITY	EXCITEMENT	COMPETENCE	SOPHISTICATION	RUGGEDNESS
Emotional	Cool	Sensible	Upper Class	Tough & Rugged
Honest	Funny	Confident	Good-looking	
Wholesome	Spirited	Hardworking	Glamorous	
Family-oriented	Independent	Inspirational	Cute	
Real	Young	Successful		
Down-to-earth	Contemporary	Intelligent		
Friendly	Innovative			
Caring	Daring			

For the purpose of our analysis, a representative personality map was created for each of the three industries, based on the average association of traits (and hence, dimensions) for the top five male stars in that industry.

Findings

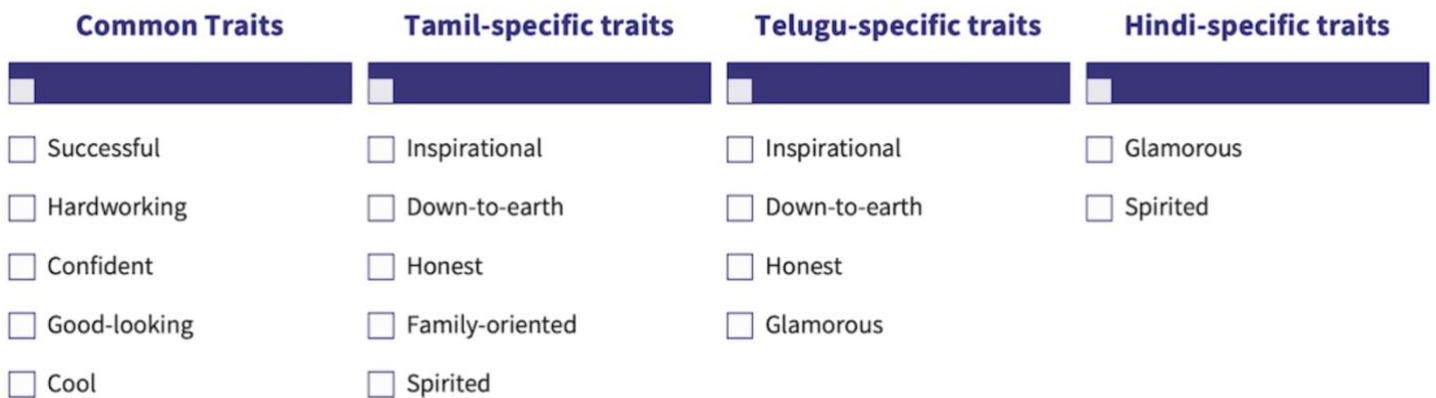
The chart below captures the average dimension share of the five dimensions, across the three industries, based on the profile of the top five stars in each.



The chart above highlights that top Tamil and Telugu stars are defined primarily by Competence and Sincerity dimensions, indicating that their persona is rooted more in their intrinsic nature, as opposed to their external characteristics. In sharp contrast, top Hindi stars are defined more by the more 'external' dimensions of Sophistication and Excitement.

This shows that the image and characteristics of what it means to be a popular star are fundamentally different, between Hindi and the two south industries.

The graphic below captures the various traits that were associated at a dominant level across the top five stars for each industry, explaining the difference in their dimension share.



Five traits are common to all three industries. These traits (i.e., Successful, Hardworking, Confident, Good-looking, and Cool) form the cornerstone of stardom in India, across geographies and industries. A combination of these five traits defines the archetype of a popular Indian male star: someone who works hard for their goal, manages to achieve it, and has a sense of attitude and swag in their demeanour. While these five traits present a common bulwark upon which stardom is built in India, despite geographical and cultural distinctions, the major differences in the other traits, which are specific to only one or two of the three industries, reveal the difference in the nature of stardom.

Decoding the Tamil stars

In addition to the five common traits mentioned above, male Tamil stars are seen as Inspirational, Down-to-earth, Honest, Family-oriented, and Spirited. Each of these traits have roots in the demeanour, behaviour and actions of the stars, and in the roles they portray on screen.

Tamil stars portray an image of social consciousness, both on and off screen. Through the work they do through their NGOs and foundations (like the Agaram foundation in the case of Suriya), or the charities they enable through their fan clubs and associations, they convey an image of a rooted, grounded and socially-responsible individual. Additionally, stars of Tamil cinema have consistently played the lead in social dramas, and action movies that have a clear social angle. This has a long legacy, starting in the 1950s with the films of MG Ramachandran (who later went on to become the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu), and has been taken forward by directors like Shankar (in films such as Indian, Gentleman, and Shivaji), and Atlee, among many others. This makes them come across as Inspirational, Down-to-earth, Honest, and Spirited.



Furthermore, their demeanour in interviews and audio launch events does not follow the template of a 'larger-than-life' celebrity. They are humble, dressed in a simple manner, express gratitude towards the extended team, and are grounded about their own achievements. The speeches given by the actors in such events tend to have the tonality of motivational speeches, with most actors mentioning their journey or important incidents in their life.

Decoding the Telugu stars

In addition to the five common traits, much like the Tamil stars, Telugu stars are also seen as Inspirational, Down-to-earth and Honest. Like with Tamil Stars, this is both as a function of their public image, as well as the characters they portray on screen.


The saviour archetype is prevalent in many Telugu films, as well, with actors like Mahesh Babu portraying the role of a humble and caring messiah who saves the day, in movies like Maharshi, and Bharat Ane Nenu. Additionally, superstars like Allu Arjun and Chiranjeevi celebrate and applaud the success of a much smaller film like Baby, without a sense of inflated egos. On social media, Mahesh Babu consistently praises the films of his contemporaries, as well as those of debutants and upcoming stars.


Mahesh Babu ✓
 @urstrulyMahesh

#Jawan... Blockbuster cinema... ✨ ✨ ✨ @Atlee_dir delivers king size entertainment with the King himself!! Comes up with his career's best film... 🌟🌟🌟 The aura, charisma and screen presence of @iamsrk are unmatched... He's on fire here 🔥🔥🔥!! Jawan will break his own records... how cool is that!! Stuff of the legends 😎😎😎

#Nayanthara @VijaySethuOffl @anirudhofficial @RedChilliesEnt

11:05 AM · Sep 8, 2023 · 7.8M Views


Mahesh Babu ✓
 @urstrulyMahesh

#MissShettyMrPolishetty... A complete laugh riot... Thoroughly enjoyed it with the family... @NaveenPolishetty is spot-on with his comic timing, and @MsAnushkaShetty was brilliant as always. Congratulations to @filmymahesh, @UV_Creations and the entire team on its success!! 🌟

12:05 AM · Sep 10, 2023 · 2.5M Views

There is also limited display of wealth and opulence in terms of lifestyle, dressing, and mannerisms. All of this contributes to the image of a star that relies on their competence and their rootedness, making them simultaneously inspirational and aspirational. Like with the Tamil Stars, Telugu stars also pose a humble demeanour in interviews, making them come across as Down-to-earth and Honest.



In an interesting contrast with the Tamil stars, Telugu stars are associated with the trait Glamorous. This is largely down to the syntax of Telugu films, that have an indulgence in visually-appealing songs, and glitz, as well as the younger nature of stars (i.e., Allu Arjun, Ram Charan, etc.) compared to their Tamil counterparts.

Decoding the Telugu stars

When compared to the average profile of the top Hindi male stars, it is evident that the Tamil and Telugu stars are defined primarily by their Competence and Sincerity, whereas Sophistication and Excitement drives stardom for Hindi stars.

Even in terms of traits associated, in addition to the five common traits, the additional traits identified for Hindi stars are: Glamorous and Spirited. A part of this association is driven by the difference in the needs satisfied by Hindi films vis-à-vis Tamil and Telugu films, as glitz and glamour form a far more central part of consumer expectations from Hindi films. However, over reliance on extrinsic traits impacts the nature, quality and strength of stardom, especially in the long run.

Association with intrinsic traits such as Inspirational, Down-to-earth, and Honest, among Tamil and Telugu stars, indicates greater emotional connect with their audience. Their audience is not just engaged with them in a superficial or transactional manner, from one movie to another, but is deeply invested in their success, making the quality of their stardom more robust, and providing these stars greater inherent longevity.