

Case Study on Tom Hanks' Films: Catalyzing Societal Shifts Through Cinematic Narratives

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Abstract:

This case study explores renowned actor Tom Hanks' three decades of filmography from 1992 to 2022, with the objective of tracing the societal shifts through his selected films. Major issues of 1990s like Inequality, Social & Political Unrest can be seen in the movies - A League of Their Own, Philadelphia, Forrest Gump, Apollo 13, Saving Private Ryan & The Green Mile. Movies such as Cast Away, The Terminal, Captain Phillips, Bridge of Spies, Sully, The Circle, The Post & A Man Called Otto throw light on refugee crises, terrorism & security, disrupted global health – especially the mental health and the rise of mass surveillance. Findings through the Theory of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions demonstrate that Hanks', morally grounded characters spark public discourse, and contribute to progressive societal transformations of - Empathy, Resilience and Patience.

Keywords: Social Commentary, Empathy, Resilience, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, Inequality, Mental health, Surveillance, Moral Integrity.

Introduction

From time's inception, people were influenced by various forms of entertainment. These include books, radio, theater, film, television, and podcasts. Of these, films are the most influential by bringing stories alive on screen showcasing the values and struggles of every generation and spreading awareness causing societal shifts. A Reader's Digest poll in 2013 brought Tom Hanks as No. 1 in the 100 Most Trusted People in America. The beloved star of the blockbuster films is one of the most powerful and well-respected actors in Hollywood, portraying a common man that are easily relatable and make us reconsider our own moral choices. His diverse role in family friendly movies exposes the social issues gently to self-correct our own opinions, making it easy to be broad minded without any shame of our ignorance. His light humour in the movies is a form of existential therapy by itself. His characters brought grace and eloquence in emoting loss, grief and love. His movies make acceptance of one's suffering in a kinder way, opening the doors to wisdom as the ultimate glory of a man.

This enduring appeal positions Hanks as a cultural icon whose films not only entertain but also foster societal introspection. As Pulver (2021) notes, Hanks embodies honesty, bravery, and modesty, making

him a global favorite who subtly influences moral perspectives. His roles often highlight racism's burdens, urging the industry to portray such issues authentically (Hanks, as cited in WRAL.com, 2021). Moreover, in interviews, Hanks explains his craft as a means to explore human complexities (The New York Times, 2022), while his transition to writing novels underscores his multifaceted storytelling prowess (NPR, 2023). These elements reinforce his status as an ethical role model, inspiring audiences worldwide (EL PAÍS, 2024).

Literature Review

Fondly celebrated as "America's Dad"—a brand of nostalgia and reliability that Jacob Higgs explores in his 2023 dissertation, shows Hanks' charm turning films into comforting cultural anchors. Bryce E. Thompson's 2023 work gently unpacks the 1990s films, where Hanks renegotiated traditional masculinity through emotional vulnerability and melodramatic warmth, letting men cry without shame. Early analyses like Lawrence B. Goodheart (1995) on *Forrest Gump* highlight its myth of enduring American innocence amid chaos, a theme echoed in survival tales like *Cast Away* (Ridhani, 2007) and ethical stands in *The Terminal* (Nakamotoi).

Recent studies: Dan Gardner's 2024 data dive marvels at Hanks' consistent excellence and blockbuster pull without capes or superpowers. Even quirky articles "on Hanks humorously trace his influence on pop culture quirks, while broader works (Bamman et al., 2024; Papp-Váry & Novodonszki, 2016) note his role in spotlighting diversity, ethics, and product-integrated storytelling.

Thompson's 2023 dissertation dissects Hanks' 1990s roles as renegotiating white masculine hegemony via melodramatic vulnerability, permitting emotional expression without undermining authority (Thompson, 2023). In analyses of aging and male stars, Hanks' persona evolves to embody refined, tempered masculinity that deepens with experience, contrasting earlier boyish charm while maintaining reliability (Wokaty, 1995). Recent work on films like *A Man Called Otto* explores subversions of traditional masculinity, portraying emotional restraint giving way to compassion, independence yielding to interdependence, and grief transforming through connection (Zahra, 2025). Studies of tears in sports and cinema, including Hanks' iconic "no crying in baseball" line in *A League of Their Own*, illustrate how male emotional displays negotiate hegemonic norms, allowing vulnerability in high-stakes contexts without loss of status (MacArthur & Shields, 2015). Broader critiques position Hanks' characters as models of presumed masculine sensitivity amid cultural crises, fostering empathy and redefining goodness through kindness rather than dominance (Collier, 2024). These perspectives collectively portray Hanks' oeuvre as a catalyst for progressive values like emotional openness, resilience in adversity, and relational healing, blending entertainment with profound social insight into contemporary manhood.

Kindness, resilience, and empathy are the watch words of every character of Hanks, delivering both an eye opening and a feel-good film.

Methodology

The method of analysis used here is “*Quantitative Content Analysis*”. A research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. - Bernard Berelson (1952).

The metric used to assess Tom Hanks filmography over a span of 30 years from 1992 to 2022 is “*Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory*”. Hofstede's six key cultural dimensions are —Power Distance Index (PDI), Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV), Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS), Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation (LTO), and Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR). Power Distance Index (PDI): Extent to which inequality is accepted; high PDI means hierarchy is respected.

- Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV): Focus on "I" (individual achievement) vs. "We" (group loyalty).
- Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS): Preference for achievement/assertiveness vs. cooperation/quality of life.
- Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI): Tolerance for ambiguity and preference for strict rules/structure.
- Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation (LTO): Focus on future rewards (thrift, persistence) vs. present/past traditions.
- Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR): Degree of freedom for social desires vs. strict social norms. (Lars de Bruin, "Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions", 2017)

Case Description

The objective of this case study is to explore Tom Hanks' films from 1992 to 2022 as vehicles for *social commentary*—the reflection on societal issues through narrative; *empathy*—the ability to understand and share others' feelings, and *resilience*—the capacity to endure and recover from adversity.

It starts in 1992 with *A League of Their Own*. Hanks plays a gruff coach who ends up believing in a group of women ballplayers during wartime. The film doesn't shout about gender equality—it just shows women stepping onto the field and proving they belong. (Library of Congress catalog entry.) Then came *Philadelphia* in 1993. Hanks, sick with AIDS, fights not just for his job but for people to see him as human. The movie opened minds by teaching us empathy, making conversations about HIV/AIDS to shift from fear to compassion. (AFI Catalog: Philadelphia, 1993.)

Forrest Gump (1994) gave us something softer: a man who runs through history with kindness and an open heart. Amid all the chaos Forrest just keeps going—and somehow keeps loving, reminding that resilience need not look tough but can be a quiet decency too. (The Creative Launcher, 2021)

Apollo 13 (1995) turned Sci-fi into a story of people refusing to quit on their comrades. “Failure is not an option” became a classic one liner.

Both the films - *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) showing the brutal cost of war and the effect on soldiers and *The Green Mile* (1999) forcing us to delve into injustice, racism and prejudice within us brought a shift in our mindset to DEI. These movies make us ponder the essence of life, meaning of sacrifice and the quiet courage to face inevitable situations.

Cast Away (2000) stripped everything away except one man and his will to live. (Ridhani, 2007) Watching Hanks talk to Wilson the volleyball, portrays loneliness in a new way—and makes resilience appear lonely, but never hopeless. *The Terminal* (2004) turned an airport limbo into a gentle lesson on immigrants' plight. Hanks' character waits, adapts, and still manages to be kind, making us look at borders and bureaucracy with softer eyes. (Shinichi Nakamotoi)

Captain Phillips (2013), *Bridge of Spies* (2015), and *Sully* (2016) gave us calm men in impossible moments—ordinary people doing extraordinary things through steady nerves and clear heads. *Sully* portrays understated heroism through calm decision-making and post-crisis resilience amid intense scrutiny, highlighting professional integrity and human vulnerability in high-stakes adversity (Spirituality & Practice review; QF32 analysis).

The Circle (2017) felt like a warning wrapped in unease—privacy slipping away while we scroll. The lack of privacy and the digital imprint straining relationships make a nightmare into reality. *The Post* (2017) answered with courage: truth matters, even when it's hard. It dramatizes the courageous defense of press freedom and truth against governmental overreach, affirming journalism's vital role in safeguarding democracy and accountability (The Guardian, 2018; Spirituality & Practice review).

In 2022, *A Man Called Otto* brought us to a full circle. An older, grieving man, slowly lets neighbors in. Hanks portrays a grieving widower whose initial isolation and bitterness gradually give way to renewed human connection through small acts of neighborly kindness, highlighting themes of loneliness, mental health, and the healing power of community (SocialWorker.com, 2023). The film doesn't fix loneliness, it shows how small acts of connection can heal it.

Decency in adversity reassures audience that goodness prevails, even in impossible situations, making every role of Hanks a cinematic anchor of hope and humanity.

That same thread of hope and humanity runs through almost thirty years of his work, and it feels natural to turn from these powerful stories to what the study actually measured. By scoring the movies against Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, the research puts numbers to those changes we sense on screen: power distance gradually dropping (meaning less acceptance of rigid hierarchies and more room for ordinary people to stand up), while individualism stays consistently high (celebrating personal courage and self-reliance). Together, these patterns line up beautifully with the way Hanks' films gently nudge us toward more equal, empathetic, and resilient ways of living in a world that keeps changing.

Findings

Theoretically, this research uses Hofstede's model to film analysis, suggesting tools for predicting societal shift in trends. On a scale of 0-5, the movies are rated on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions in Table 2.

Table 1: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Source: Adapted from Lars de Bruin, "Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions" (2017)

0 -----Hofstede's cultural dimensions----- 5		
Low Power Distance	(PDI)	High Power Distance
Collectivistic	(IDV)	Individualistic

Feminine	(MAS)	Masculine
Low Uncertainty Avoidance	(UAI)	High Uncertainty Avoidance
Long-Term Orientation	(LTO)	Short-Term Orientation
Restraint	(IVR)	Indulgence

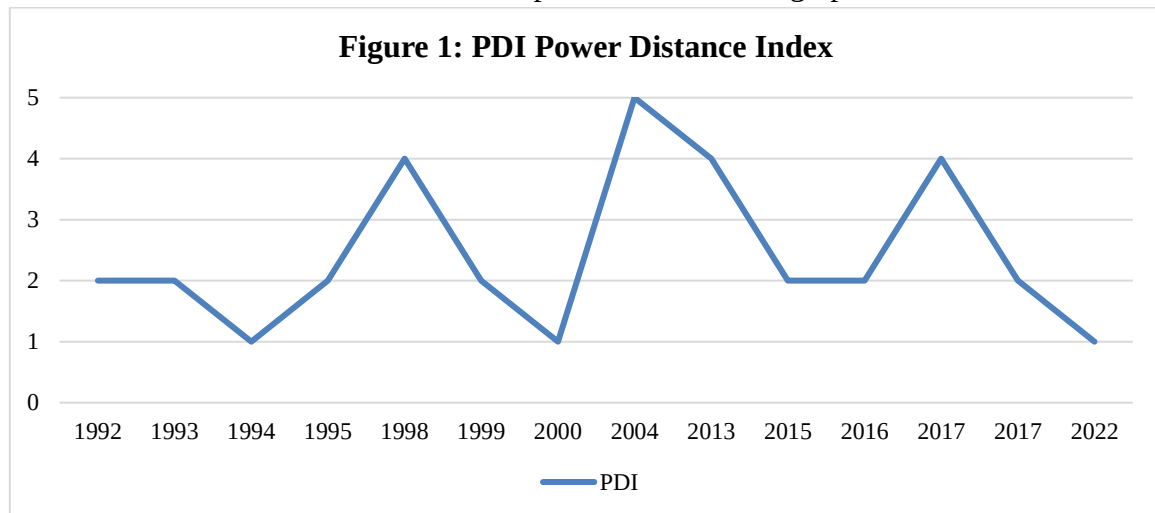
Table 2: Rubric for Assessment based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Dimension	1	2	3	4	5
PDI: Power Distance	Strongly low power distance : hierarchy is challenged; ordinary people stand up	Mostly low PDI with minor deference to authority	Mixed : hierarchy present but questioned;	Mostly high PDI: authority respected, but some challenge	Strongly high power distance : rigid hierarchy accepted;
IDV: Individualism vs. Collectivism	Strongly collectivistic : group loyalty	Mostly collectivistic with some individual agency	Mixed : individual and group need balanced	Mostly individualistic : personal achievement/courage emphasized, with some group ties	Strongly individualistic : personal autonomy, self-reliance, individual heroism dominates
MAS: Masculinity vs. Femininity	Strongly feminine : compassion, care, quality of life, empathy	Mostly feminine with some achievement themes	Mixed : caring and heroism balanced	Mostly masculine : assertiveness, success, heroism, achievement emphasized	Strongly masculine : competition, assertiveness, achievement, dominance
UAI: Uncertainty Avoidance	Strongly low UAI : ambiguity tolerated; improvisation, risk, flexibility	Mostly low UAI with some need for structure	Mixed : ambiguity and structure both present	Mostly high UAI : preference for rules, order, predictability, but some improvisation	Strongly high UAI : strict rules/structure; ambiguity avoided; need for certainty
LTO: Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation	Strongly short-term : present/past traditions, immediate results	Mostly short-term with some future planning	Mixed : immediate and long-term concerns balanced	Mostly long-term : persistence, thrift, future payoff emphasized	Strongly long-term : future rewards, perseverance, ethical payoff.

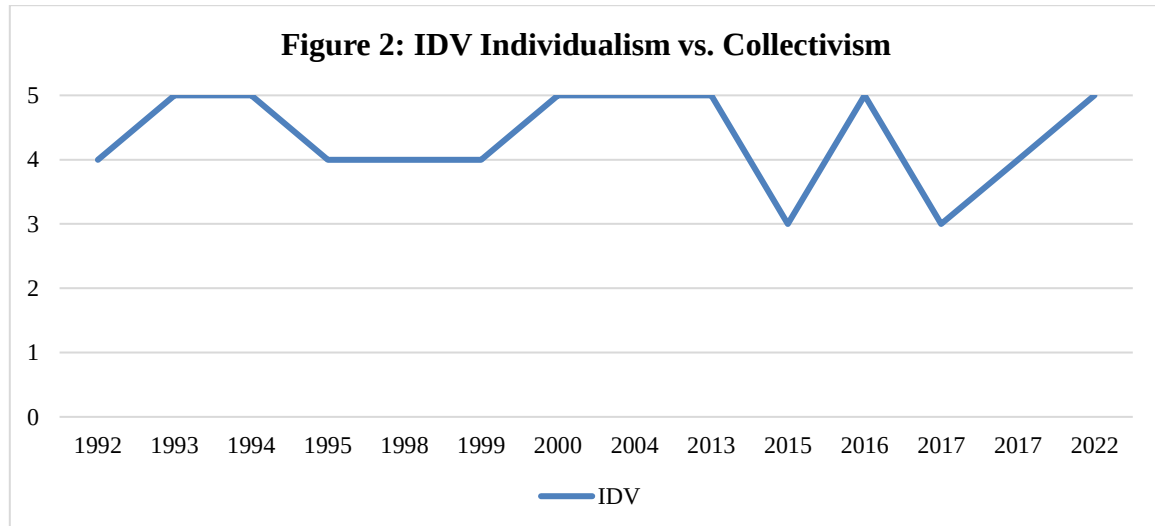
Table 3: Assessment based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions

S. NO	YEAR	MOVIE	PDI	IDV	MAS	UAI	LTO	IND
1	1992	A League of Their Own	2	4	3	2	3	4
2	1993	Philadelphia	2	5	4	4	5	4
3	1994	Forrest Gump	1	5	4	1	3	5
4	1995	Apollo 13	2	4	3	3	4	3
5	1998	Saving Private Ryan	4	4	5	2	5	2
6	1999	The Green Mile	2	4	2	1	4	2
7	2000	Cast Away	1	5	2	1	4	3
8	2004	The Terminal	5	5	2	1	5	4
9	2013	Captain Phillips	4	5	4	1	5	2
10	2015	Bridge of Spies	2	3	4	4	4	1
11	2016	Sully	2	5	5	1	4	1
12	2017	The Circle	4	3	5	3	4	1
13	2017	The Post	2	4	5	3	4	1
14	2022	A Man Called Otto	1	5	2	1	5	5

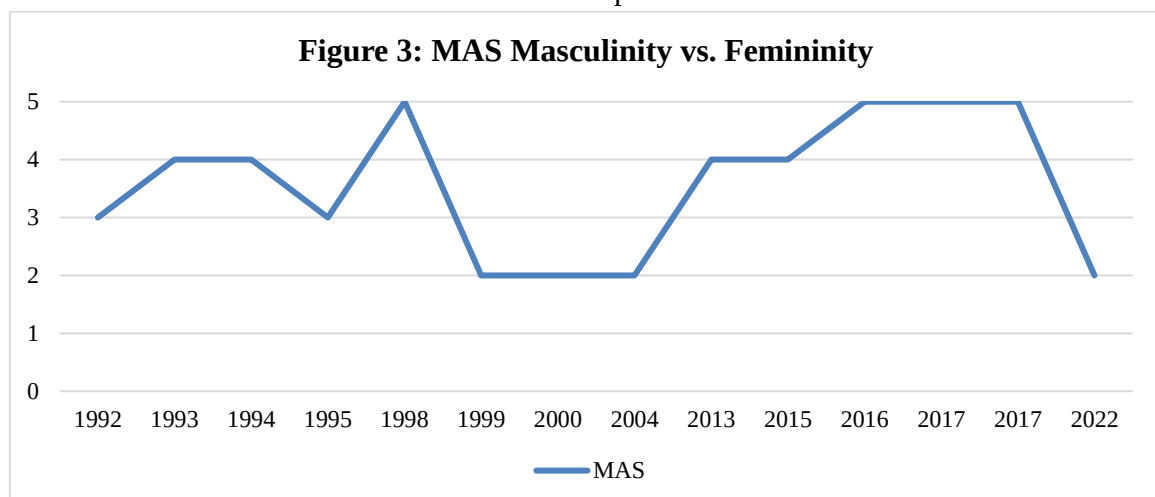
The above data is pictured in the next graph.



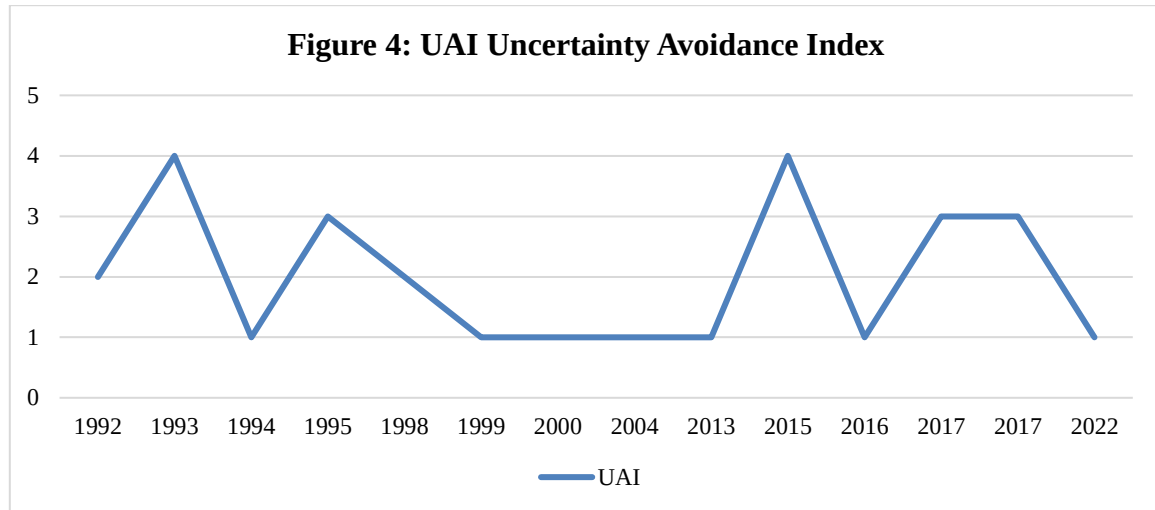
Interpretation: PDI fluctuates but trends downward long-term → films increasingly portray protagonists who challenge or bypass unequal power dynamics.



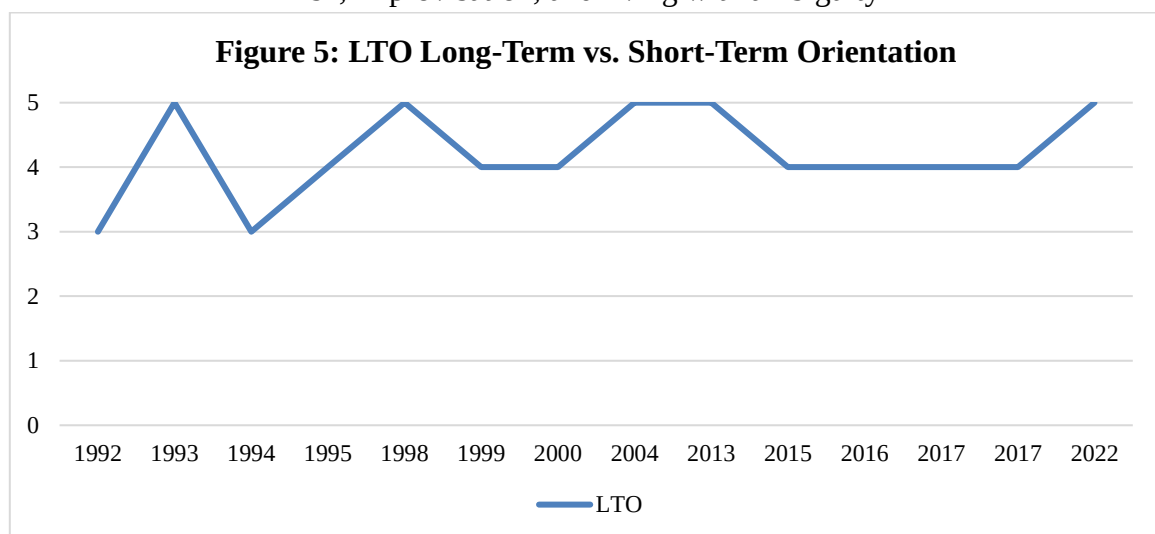
Interpretation: Very high and mostly stable → reflects enduring American cultural priority on individual heroism and personal resilience.



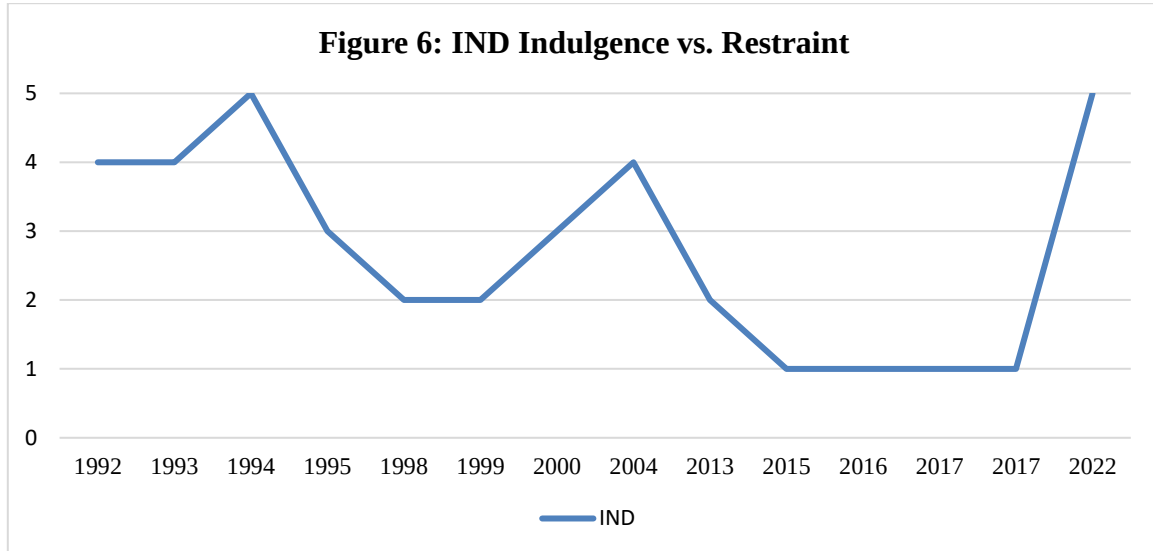
Interpretation: Wavy but with peaks in achievement-oriented periods → films alternate between "masculine" success/heroism and more caring/compassionate tones.



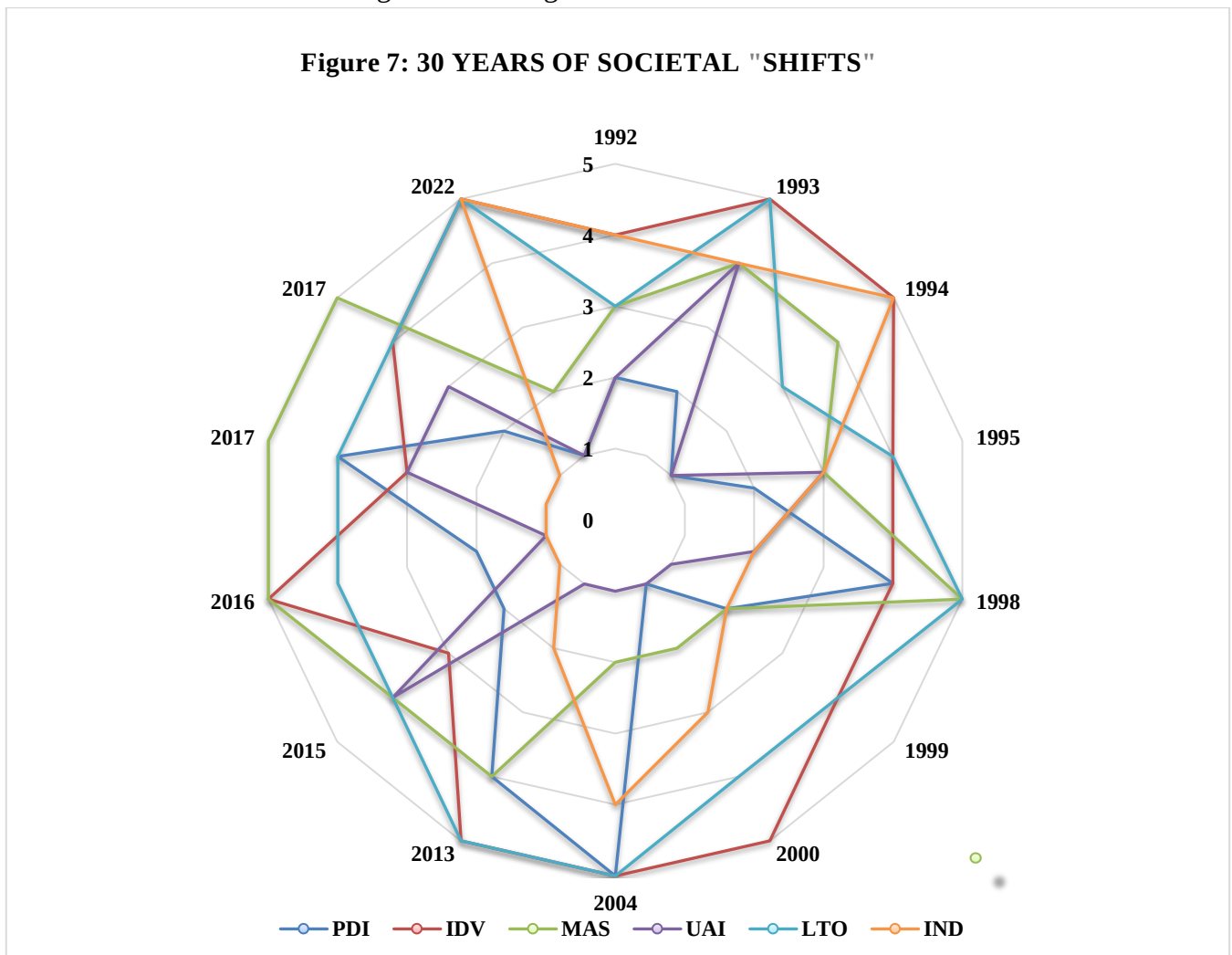
Interpretation: Generally low and trending lower → consistent portrayal of American tolerance for risk, improvisation, and living with ambiguity



Interpretation: Consistently moderate-to-high → films often blend immediate resilience with longer-term personal/ethical payoff.



Interpretation: Volatile with a U-shape → early optimism → mid-period restraint/seriousness → recent resurgence of indulgent/human-connection themes.



Interpretation: This radar chart illustrates how the cultural "shifts" reflected in Tom Hanks' filmography gradually evolves, showing shifts in *emphasis* rather than *dramatic reversals*. The profiles remain broadly consistent with American cultural norms (low PDI, high IDV/INV, moderate-high MAS, low UAI, low-moderate LTO, moderate-high IND/IVR)

Analysis

Tom Hanks' films consistently reflect very *high* IDV, *declining* PDI, *fluctuating* MAS, *low* UAI, *moderate* LTO & *volatile* IND.

Implications

Practically, this research implies filmmakers like Hanks can promote positive shifts. For educators these films help teach global values, adapting to Indian contexts. Businesses could leverage "Hanks Effect" (Hall et al., 2024) for ethical marketing.

Limitations

The study is U.S.-centric, limiting generalizability to non-Western cultures like India. Reliance on secondary literature overlooks primary surveys. Chronological gaps (e.g., no films in some years) skew trends.

Conclusion

These cultural signatures portray a society that prizes individual strength yet increasingly seeks connection. By extrapolating trends and forecasting cultural evolutions, future Hanks-style films might emphasize - even stronger self-reliance, "feminine" narratives promoting empathy to satisfy consumer trends toward feel-good, nostalgic content.

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