

Social Media Preview and Review: Malayalam Cinema in Digital Age

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Abstract

From the humble days of bicycle promotions and film snippet books, the concept of film marketing and promotion has undergone radical changes, catering to the tech-savvy audience. As people became more mobile, the need for a global and instant promotional platform became inevitable. The result is the choice of online social medium like Facebook and YouTube that can virally distribute the promotional materials within a click of a mouse to a multifarious audience. Traditional bill-boards and hoardings are replaced by the new Facebook-wall, which democratically allows anyone to 'paste' (or post) anything. This is also met with a significant advantage for the filmmakers to get a pilot response from the audience even before the release of a film. The fate of a film, hence swings on the impact of these viral materials online. In this article, this concept of internet film promotion is deeply examined considering the so called new-generation films of Malayalam film industry (a regional film industry in India) that thwarted the traditional promotional concept. This article analyzes the role of user to user relationship and the impact of social media in the Malayalam film promotional activity through a series of content analysis of the teasers of certain selected films and its public response along with its box-office data.

Key words: Marketing, social media, promotion, Malayalam film, advertisements, new generation film, prosumers

Introduction

Film and television promotion involve several diverse procedures of which market research, publicity, advertising and marketing go on to form the fulcrum. While publicity and advertising have been closely associated with the film industry for a long time, marketing is relatively a new phenomenon, which began to have its impact on the film and television industry primarily from the sixties (Berry, 2005). Within the market sphere, a film is also a commodity for sale rather than a work of creativity per se. A successful marketing strategy accurately targets an audience and schedules the movement of the product through different outlets, such as a theatrical release, video cassettes, CDs, airline distribution, cable and broadcast television, syndicated television and international exports etc. (Izod, 1988).

From the sixties, when the marketing bandwagon began its chug, the concept of film marketing and promotion have seen a paradigm shift from simple banners and hoardings at every nook and corner of the street and calls for a more active as well as interactive medium: the social media. However, this gradual changeover in no way diminishes the significance and importance of the earlier strategies employed, rather this new approach and/or makeover has helped in adapting and acclimatizing oneself to a newer form and platform where, with a click on the mouse, a message is circulated virally to a wider world and audience connected over the web. Whilst traditional forms like film trailers, promotional montage and film posters widely distributed via theaters, television and out of home advertisements seize a large section of the local/regional/national audience, the novel platform of social media involves the 'global' audience and also is a gateway to sense their pre-vibes in the form of likes, shares and comments. While the promotion through traditional media is totally and centrally controlled by the producers of the content itself, in the social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, it is the consumers who are responsible for further distribution. Traditional forms of film marketing is more of a controlled mechanism, wherein the stakeholders of the film have the direct upper hand in drawing the crowd, whereas with the new generation of film marketing via social media, it is the consumers who directly have the edge in defining the success/failure of a film per se and thereby having a control of the audience or the crowd sometime even before the film is released, as the user-engagement or rather the consumer-engagement is much more direct and proportionate to the promotional materials and thereby the level of appeal and enthusiasm. Under the traditional form of film marketing, when a poster is put up before the public, the stakeholders of the film have virtually no 'assured' way to gauge the public pulse, which is good from the point of view that there is an element of an 'unknown' and thus a certain percentage of the crowd is indeed likely to step into the hall and fulfill the required footfall to recover the investment behind the project; whereas, with the advent of social media marketing there is a straightforward link, wherein if a poster in itself is not liked, consumers would vent their opinions then and there with 'Likes' / comments etc. This new generation marketing does give a much more definitiveness in view of the consumer/viewership connect, but on the flip side, this can also lead to 'negative marketing' as the viewers even on just viewing your ads or promos are expressing themselves upfront to not only a regional audience, but to a global audience.

This paper analyzes the role of user to user relationship and the impact of social media in the film promotional activity. This analysis is done through a selection of promotional materials and the user virality of the new generation Malayalam cinemas, mainly, *Salt and Pepper* (2011), *Beautiful* (2011), *22 Female Kottayam* (2012), *DaTadiya* (2012),

Trivandrum Lodge (2012), *NatholiOruCheriyameenAlla* (2013) in major social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube. A major challenge of the study would be to look into the way in which social media has predicted the outcome of a film through the viral promotional materials, and by looking into its characteristics correlating it with what McLuhan said as medium is the message (1964).

Film marketing and promotion

Facebook has seen a phenomenal growth in the number of users in India in the last one year, with India climbs to the tenth position in the global ranking for its total number of users. According to recent estimates, the number of Facebook users in India will grow to have a base of over 12 million users. Not surprisingly, brands which cater to the youth are found to be the most popular brands on Facebook in terms of their fan base and the amount of interaction on their page. From the study, it becomes evident that social media usage for marketing and PR purposes is gaining momentum amongst Indian firms. The history of the film industry and its promotion runs in a fascinating parallel with the chronological evolution of film, not just reflecting the evolution of the new medium, but also encouraging it to expand its reach, especially by focusing on film stars, something that the earliest advertisements did not do (Kher, 2011). The film, as a medium of entertainment was a magic or miracle of the new century. The modes of film promotion adapted itself to the evolution of mass medium.

Kuhn and Westwell (2012) noted that during the studio era, posters, trailers, fan magazines, star appeal and appearances, and the brand identity associated with particular studio, were all used to draw film goers to the cinema. The marketing strategy for a film would be established early on; indeed, many films are regarded from the outset as a brand, with producers seeking out pre-sold properties such as successful bestselling novels or big stars, in order to ensure that the film will be recognizable to consumers.

Along with the film industry, film advertisement is also a money generating industry. Marich (2013) observes that there can be no cinema without an audience. The audience decides the success and failure of a film at the box office, but producers and promoters can predict or manipulate the outcome of a film through effective marketing. This questions the established consumption and theories of entertainment marketing and advertising.

As Clow and Baack suggest in their work *Hierarchy of effects model of advertising*, there are six steps by which consumer moves through purchasing a product or opting for a service (2007). They list out awareness, knowledge, liking, preference, conviction and purchase as the primary steps of the model. For film promotion and marketing, the steps taken are varied and the medium used are numerous. The sudden shift of promotional medium with the rise of social media has made a dramatic change in the aesthetics, style and content especially to the marketing strategy of Malayalam cinema.

A lot of technical expertise is involved in the development and the creation of motion pictures and they in turn help invent and reinforce the cultural repertoire of a society. Dupont and Augros (2013) observe that the film industry at large is rather a complex and culturally industry, and the challenges faced by film marketers are quite daunting. The challenge is even more overwhelming for independently-produced films that, contrary to many basic studio blockbusters, are usually unheard of right till the time of their release. Globally, the trend of new media, film promotion and marketing originated from these independently produced films.

This trend may be observed in Indian and Malayalam films also. Dupont and Augros state that the promotion and marketing of films fall into two categories: one is about how to market a film and the other is about how to control audiences (2013).

The “*how to drive*” leads us to think of innovative ways of effective marketing, which eventually gave birth to the rise and dominance of marketing through social media platforms. The likes, the tags, spam reporting, shares are but immediate and spontaneous expressions of the audience/prospective audience, which are expressed via the social media platform and thus going on to play a critical and decisive factor on a film's economic outcome.

However, the economics of the film industry obviously aren't the only factor determining the final quality of the outcome of a film produced within the industry; factors such as the story, the script, the music and the overall direction of a film are all very important and critical in making in the moolah. These days, even the local vis a vis the global perception of a film is crucial too, and again is very much dependent on the depth and intensity of marketing the film. Hollywood, being the global film benchmark reaches the whole world, but when we consider a small industry like Malayalam cinema, the limited domestic reachability.

Hence, while observing and studying film promotion strategies of the Malayalam film industry with models of global perception, one should keep in mind this limitation faced by Malayalam film industry. Using social networking to its fullest extent in a marketing campaign enables producers to create a two-way discussion with prospective viewers. This is different from the traditional one-way marketing of trailers and posters. On the other hand, encouraging discussions on the social media platforms may either have a negative or a positive effect on the success/failure of a movie. Since reviews and opinions travel fast, appreciation by word-of-mouth can often look to cushion the producer from an expensive large-scale marketing effort and may just go on to achieve excellent results (Business of social media, 2011).

There are many ways of using social media websites for promoting movies. Some examples of this include creating Twitter accounts for the movie, and tweeting updates on the various premieres, star interviews, or even gossips. A marketing company like metromatinee.com of Kochi might also make a Facebook page for the movie, encouraging (ethically and unethically) people interested to “Like” their page and share it with their friends. YouTube may be used as a platform to not

only show trailers, but also to create a channel dedicated to all official promos for the particular movie. By actively utilizing each channel of social media, a movie that may not normally garner a nationwide release might earn one. For example, Paranormal Activity, and a low-budget “found footage” movie like *The Blair Witch Project*, went on to become blockbusters (Carvell, 1999).

Many films are now attempting to use both traditional marketing and social media marketing simultaneously, which makes the job even more challenging. Even today in an era, where we live virtually in the world wide web, creating a successful movie marketing campaign using social networking websites is not achieved by simply creating Facebook and Twitter accounts and uploading a trailer onto YouTube. Social media marketing cannot be a one-sided flow of information from film makers to the spectator that traditional marketing has relied on in the past. Even though there are many online film promoting groups; Elliott of the New York Times observed that early moves/movers from the film producers are themselves a big encouragement for viewer participation in social media campaigns and therefore are undoubtedly revolutionizing the way movies are marketed (2011).

Social media and Malayalam cinema

The education level and the highest literacy rate of Keralites have always influenced the habit of cinema viewership amongst them. International film festivals of Kerala are received with much appreciation by the people and hence it is now an annually held event, celebrated by all sections of the society. Kerala boasts of a unique culture with a high appreciation level when it comes to cinema. Rajeev (2012) notes the changing trend of the Malayalam film audience who have become more mature with the new wave of social media marketing. Now, the Malayalam film industry is celebrating a new generation cinema (wave). The wave does not restrict itself with the content or form, but also with unique ways of marketing the film. The role of social media like the Facebook has played a huge role in supporting this wave cinema.

The social media promotion often appears to be a non formal communication. They play a role of medium of interaction with film personalities (cast, crew) and the audience. The trend started with the promotions of *Salt N Pepper* and *22 Female Kottayam* for which its director Aashiq Abu made intelligent use of the new media and the internet. He made strong virtual relations with his audience and his film emerged as a huge success at the box office. His presence in the virtual form turned out to be the USP of the film. His movies like *Salt N Pepper*, *22 Female Kottayam*, *DaTadiya* became viral among social media by different methods. But the ultimate aim of this non – formal communication is promoting the film. Films like *Thattathin Marayathu* (2012) by Vineeth Sreenivasan, *Trivandrum Lodge* (2012), *Natholi Oru Cheriya Meen Alla* (2013) by V K Prakash and *Ustad Hotel* (2012) by Anwar Rasheed also provide specific examples of films that made waves after effective film promotions. Coming back to Ashik Abu, later on, his comments on the much discussed Tamil film, *Viswaroopam* (2013) on Facebook turned the virtual crowd against him. Thus the character of the medium stipulates that it should be handled smartly or it will turn out to be dangerous (Duran, 2011). By understanding the popularity of Facebook in this region, the social media giant chose film actor Mammooty as its brand ambassador. Even though there are many other social media websites and plug-ins, Malayalam film industry promotion strategies are planned by foreseeing the scope and possibilities of Facebook. YouTube stands next which is a leading network for video publishing.

There are many accredited and non accredited websites and Facebook pages which promote films. These batches of online promoters offer comprehensive packages to directors and producers, including more than 1,500 'likes' on FB, for posts regarding films, nearly 100 positive reviews on day one itself, at a price between Rs 3 and Rs 5 lakh (Malayalam Films: Internet racket to make a film virtual hit, 2012). In the same article, directors Abu, B Unnikrishnan and Arun Kumar share the offers they received from promoters. Offers ranging from sharing posters and trailers, but also guarantee a certain crowd for the first show and numbers of positive reviews on respective groups and pages. These unethical playoffs surely lead to a mucky selling behavior of marketing and advertising.

There have also been cases, wherein such promoter groups have themselves gone ahead to create fake promotional materials being passed off as fan made posters and re-made trailer. This activity helps them in two ways: at first, it helps them to earn a name and fame within the industry and second, increase internet traffic to their respective pages or profiles, where they also popularize the marketing and advertising of another brand or product which brings in money. These groups also use the brand or company logo or names as watermark with the posters and trailers which lends an apparent authenticity. The verbiage like “Official Facebook partner” and “official online promoter” also lend significant credibility in displaying the prominence of branding. Since cyber laws are rather lenient in India, a control over these kinds of groups is virtually null.

Metromatinee, Moyalmedia, Onlookers media, Doctor’s design, Papaya media are a few of the online promoters of Malayalam cinema. The responses from authority and filmmakers towards online promotion are also positive. With an aim to market the Malayalam films to an international audience, a new program called “Marketing Malayalam Cinema” was launched as part of the 16th International Film Festival Kerala, 2011. This initiative is an attempt to bridge the gap between the international film promoters and the filmmakers in Malayalam groups to enable them to effectively use this platform for their respective film industry (The Hindu, 2011).

The online promoters basically functions, thus: they predict the outcome of films by analyzing positive and negative reviews, often without even actually seeing the films. Online film promoters also propagate, generate or hide opinions about the film from the audience. The administrators can even create fake accounts and profiles for the same purpose. Keeping apart

the unethical side, the online marketing of the film certainly gives some kind of direction to the promoters of the film in terms of their return on investment.

Changing face of Malayalam cinema

The new generation Malayalam film is viewed and analyzed in various perspectives. In order to understand our objective, one needs to first understand and appreciate the success mantra of the new generation of Malayalam films, which is its promotional strategies. Thereby, our paper analyses mainly films like *Salt N' Pepper* (2011), *Beautiful* (2011), *22 Female Kottayam* (2012), *Da Tadiya* (2012), *Thattathin Marayathu* (2012), *Trivandrum Lodge* (2012), *Natholi Oru Cheriya Meen Alla* (2013) which are noted examples with experimenting story, direction, technology, casting and promotion. At the first public screening of *Salt N' Pepper*, during the title credits, there was a huge applause from the audience. The reason for this was that the title card said “thanks to all my Facebook friends”, thus making every viewer feel that *Salt N' Pepper* is their film. The same style was followed by many other filmmakers. The new generation of Malayalam films also referred itself as the Jasmine revolution of the film industry. The observations of M.G. Radhakrishnan is regarding the new swathe of Malayalam film industry:

Once known for its Arthouse movies at one end of the spectrum and semi-porn fare on the other, Malayalam cinema is now experiencing a brave new wave that is challenging established social mores. And it is being lapped up by the people- especially the youth- even as conventional films with big budgets and superstars sink without a trace one after the other. The new Malayalam cinema, like its Bollywood counterpart, is characterized by fresh and unusual themes; plots which are urban-centric and middle-class oriented; they are modestly budgeted, shun superstars and some entirely shoot with DSLR still cameras; and they heavily use social networking sites for online marketing (Radhakrishnan, 2012; emphasis by authors).

Director Aashiq Abubecame popular among social media network by managing filmy and non-filmy issues as his status message, which was greatly appreciated. His controversial talk about Viswaroopam had damaged his reputation a bit (Rohit, 2013) but he sustained by gaining support from his fans and friends who made their statement clear that they would indeed support Aashiq. Aashiq views on films is pretty simple (Shilpa, 2012). She says:

“These were small films. And it gave the confidence to everybody in the business that small films can work, that people would want to see such films. You can make a commercial film that has class. The class doesn't have to mean making a film for the festival circuit. These formulae cannot be turned into money making ventures because it will not work. Nobody is going to want to see another Salt N' Pepper. Each film has to have its stamp of individuality” (Shilpa, 2012).

Apart from Aashiq Abu, there are other filmmakers and producers who stand out as regards the film promotion. V K Prakash promoted his film *Natholi Oru Cheriya Meenala* (2013) by creating a poll contests on various questions about the film and Sugheet launched a first of its kind gaming application for his film *3 Dots* (IANS, 2013).

Despite the fact that all the films mentioned above looked for that extra piece of the pie, what was indeed noteworthy was the fact that an individual was visible as regards the promotional method of each film.

The promotional content and film's outcome

The director Lal Jose, who is known for his customary film making style became a producer and distributor after 2010. Being successful at producing and distributing initial films, he addressed appreciation to the “new generation” of filmmakers who taught him new methods of film marketing through his Facebook page. He was referring to *Thattathin Marayath, Theevram and Neram*. The film, *Salt N' Pepper*, a romantic comedy was labeled as a “feel good movie” for promotional purposes. The promotional campaign began even before the film shooting got over. The director and crew released teasing posters revealing stylish makeover of characters. The makeover of popular actor Baburaj from negative roles in a comic role evinced interest among the internet users. Internet promotion had begun even before *Salt N' Pepper*, but the medium of promotion only became popular post-*Salt N' Pepper* days.

The film released with the tag line “*oru dosa undaakiya kadha*” (the story created by Dosa /A story about making a dosa) marked the beginning of the immense popularity of the genres. The film won critical acclaim as well as popular support. Since there was no fan community for the film, audience reaction was neutral. After the success of the film, the lead actor Asif Ali did many actions and new generation films, but they were disasters at the box office. Those films were also marketed online, but the outcome of the film did not satisfy the producers and the audience.

22 Female Kottayam, also known as *22FK*, released in the year 2012 starring Rima Kallingal and Fahadh Faasil in lead roles. The film deals with the travails of a nurse who was victimized for no fault of hers and who takes revenge on her tormentors in a rather unusual manner. The film's teaser was strikingly different. The teaser featured women of various age groups placed in diverse social conditions reacting towards eve teasing. The teaser looked realistic and aroused the curiosity of the audience and thus made a strong statement with very clear intentions. These teasers were not circulated via television, but only online. YouTube and Facebook shares made them, viral among movie goers and well wishers of Aashiq Abu. The Facebook URL of *22 Female Kottayam* was included in all the posters and teasers which invited Facebook users to visit and like the page. The page became the voice of women and spoke for them and reacted against exploitation of womanhood. The

mass media also gave good support since there were many burning issues of recent times, which immediately connected the right chords with women and men alike in today's generation and thereby went on to become a great success.

On the other hand, there was a group formed from among internet users to degrade the film. They directly and indirectly abused the film maker in public forum pointing out the film portrayed the educated community of Bangalore and Kerala nursing professionals in a bad light. This act antagonized a section of viewers citing that the film is regressive and speaks against the youth who strive to live in strange lands. Thus abusive reporting turned to be a killer of films. The spams and spoiler alert created a noisy environment for social network between the user and film makers.

Da Tadiya (Hey fatty) released in the same year of 2012 and was a social drama treated like a romantic comedy. The film also likes previous entries by AashiqAbu, created a hype and was viral among social media networks. The film made an early entry viral by posters calling for fresh cast and also after the principal photography, promotional song "*Enthanu Bhai*" (What's up Brother!).

The films by V K Prakash mentioned here are *Beautiful* (2011), *Trivandrum Lodge* (2012) and *Natholi Oru Cheriya Meen Alla* (2013) which quite made up for the box office coffers and also gained critical acclaim. V K Prakash may be noted as one of the pioneers in radically transforming Malayalam film industry along with Roshan Andrews, Shyamaprasad. With a background of advertising industry V K Prakash believes in perfection. The perfection of his craft, may be also observed in his film marketing and promotional strategies. He uses simple and yet traditional ways of advertising content, but effective way of making it viral. His film making and attitude towards the vision of films which he has shared through several interviews garnered a huge fan following of youngsters, who in turn are the highest users of social media in this region.

The repetition of dialogue, pictures and incidents in the film also acts as a social media text for personal communication. The one word review and reporting abuse on films and film stars have made the social traffic network busy. In such cases, negative propaganda becomes helpful for the promotion and publicity of the film. Likes, shares, tags and spamming turning out as elements of promotion. It is also important to note that many of these are targeting the audience without a proper direction. So control of those contents are not with the producers but prosumers. The identity of a film becomes more social thus even audience and social media users also turn representative of the film.

Conclusion

As Marich (2013) observes that a film per se cannot do business without the audience, as it is the audience, which decides the success and failure of the film at the box office, even if producers and promoters can predict or bring out a desired outcome of a film through effective marketing. Traditional media marketing is controlled by time and space constraint, but when it comes to online marketing, the audience has the final say. The prime aim of promotion of any service or product is to alert and inform audiences about the content. Through online promotion strategies, every film is known to the audience since online users spend the maximum time on the internet.

An effective film promotion strategy is not just about praising a film like selling any other commodity in the market. It does need a planned and sustainable path at every stage of filming. The actual film promotion on social media platform starts with choosing the right platform. After choosing a platform, one has to initiate or join any discussion group which is relevant to the film being promoted. Most often new groups are being created on all platforms. The Google Plus and other Blogging community see this process as important and critical rather than *just liking and commenting* on Facebook.

Newsletters may be made and circulated as part of promotion, providing various information regarding film release dates, music launch, character background and location trivia. A good promoter should be a good administrator having the ability to track and control discussions based on the film related to him or her. Most often, especially in the Malayalam film industry, fake accounts named after film personalities or characters become administrators

After the release of the film, administrators can ask readers (here the reader can be a non viewer too) to respond to the film. These are the actual feedback on the film. In a personal group interview of movie-going youth of Kochi, they admit that the selection of films is primarily based on reading *one line* review and ratings of the films. Society tends to change with time. Producers who accept and understand the altered scenario can do an effective film promotion.

The online promotion is a low budget and easy way of creating hype for films. With efforts to create a positive relationship with the target audience, promotions for a film per se may grow beyond the traditional mediated counterparts. With examples like *Salt N Pepper*, *Beautiful*, *Trivandrum Lodge* and *Natholi Oru Cheriya Meen Alla*, *22 Female Kottayam* and *Da Tadiya*, it can be understood that a film's success is directly related to the way in which the film is marketed.

By keeping a planned strategy in mind and good knowledge of the use and application of the medium, producers of films can control, coordinate and influence user communication and distribution of content. The important factor here is to understand this popular and influential medium. For instance, Facebook is the most popular online networking website of Kerala compared to Twitter, Google Plus etc. Thus the effective marketing over Facebook results in creating awareness and knowledge of the film's release, plot and other trivia. The online promotion works best when creating a social media platform which interlinks other social plug-ins.

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