Promoting Feature Films: An Analysis of Changes in Advertising Ladder of Indian Films

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Abstract

A commercial movie, above all its claims about being a product of art, is ultimately a product to sell. And hence a good advertising strategy is integral for the promotion and success of a movie. The evolved national cinema in India quickly resorted to marketing means that advertised movies in a pattern of its own. This study tries to trace and contrast the methods of advertising followed by films produced in Indian subcontinent over the years of its development. The study will also analyse the advertising strategies in the Indian film industry, which has been into a sea change in the promotional tactics of Indian films, following the arrival of digital media outlet and internet.

Keywords

Cinema, Film Marketing, Advertising Movies, Advertising Ladder, Posters, Film Trailers

Movies are a consequence of self- expression and human needs for inventiveness. A commercial movie, above all its claims about being a product of art, is ultimately a product to sell. It is made with an intention to reach as many viewers as possible. Monetary feedbacks and good word of mouth are essential for the survival of the industry and associated cast and crew of every individual films.

Films, in India have attracted a greater number of audiences from its very early periods of inception. With largest number of viewing spaces, screens and theatre chains, India continues to be the largest producer and exporter of films in the world. Apart from its very early days of the evolution of film spectacle, it is a known fact that a good advertising strategy is vital for the promotion and success of a movie. Film exhibitors traditionally started with modest store- front picture show operations to theatrical posters which educated the film spectatorship. The earliest cinema advertising images mostly dealt with explaining what motion picture entertainment was and how everyone can experience them. The potential viewers walked down the theatres and window shopped the entertainment in offer on an everyday basis.

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In the case of India, unlike other nations, a national cinema evolved out of its various language counterparts with many commonalities. Increased adherence on melodrama, (Vasudevan, 2011) persistence on promoting family values and multitude of song and dance sequences (Gehlawat, 2017) remained the favourite terrain for Indian film texts which were to satisfy a billion viewers who largely believed in mythologies and its magical powers. Indian films have complex plot lines, non-linear narratives, romance is a central proposition and realism is less important than fast action, entertainment and escape from everyday life (Ganti, 2004).

A national film industry, according to Hayward (2000), "doesn't just need to present social specificities of a given previous country but also the traditions and history, together with the struggles and modes that it took in overcoming the obstacles to nation building and to end up as one". Higson (2006), finds a problematic connection between a nation and national cinema. He argues that "even while unity and disunity are features of all nations, a national film is established portraying imaginary communities as stable and homogenous, as a way of life with an envisioned network whose capacities are tirelessly portrayed inside a geo-political space".

But the evolved national cinema in India quickly resorted to marketing means that advertised movies in a pattern of its own. Burnett et al. (2006) when arguing that advertising is not a complicated thing, makes a point that all it needs is to get the point out to potential customers/viewers and to make a purchase, and in this case a ticket to watch a film.

Film marketing can be explained as any tactic, strategy and method used to inform the audience or to promote a film to a target audience (Nelson, 1974). This is a continuous marketing campaign process for any film that starts from the announcement of the project and continues through the shooting of the film, editing, movie premiere and release. Promoting, according to Nelson (1974) can be explained as "a controlled, recognizable influence using methods for mass communication. But it can take the function of demonstrating items being appreciated in extravagant or captivating settings. This control is accomplished by uniting the entirety of the different components of words, photos, and elements of design into a territory." The commercials for promotion will help a movie to stand out to itself; to enrol the watchers sympathy; and to show the watcher a methods for fulfilling a need or need through acquisition of the service or item. (ibid)

As with everywhere else, the first tool of advertising a movie in India was the movie poster, which passed a visual message. Following the century old traditions of the Hammurabi law code prescribing the laws of the kingdom of King Hammurabi, recorded on an a eight feet long stone (Hillier, 1969), the movie posters advertised

the faces of the leading stars and the title in varied fonts. They were placed at spaces of visibility in the streets apart from those placed in front of the screens.

This study tries to trace and contrast the methods of advertising followed by films produced in Indian subcontinent over the years of its development. This research is an interpretative study that will present with the advertising strategies in the Indian film industry.

Since the content of the cinema must gratify the entertainment needs of the viewers, it is already a known fact that the most ingenious advertisement cannot save a weak film at the box office. Through the heavy promotions, a film can survive in the opening weeks and attract a certain set of cinephiles and fan followings, but promotions cannot hide the weak qualities of the film and limit the negative word of mouth. According to Consumer's value theory what makes a product meaningful is the consumer's assessment of quality and value. Both the environment and consumer preferences and perceptions are changing, making this value volatile (Hassan, 2012). The theory also emphasizes on value of consumption which explains why consumers choose to buy or not to buy a product (Smith & Colgate, 2007). Moreover, the theory explains the priority of choosing a product or, brand over another, in this case the selection of a movie over another.

Early Promotion Methods

In India, it all started with simple printed signs announcing a moving picture entertainment. It gradually took the shape of re-purposed theatrical posters to emphasize the action and excitement of early film programs. The films of the1950's, the golden age of India cinema, like Awara, MotherIndia, Pyaasa and Kaagaz ke Phool liberally used hand painted posters which were used for Out of home publicity like billboards and wall posters. Since no radio or television was available then, the films in the early part of 1900's were never promoted in a national level. Instead they were done at the local level in a standard manner, no matter the budget of the movie. Posters that were placed on the railway stations on the cross-country routes were the only national manner in which films were advertised. Since they were supposed to cover a huge network for a national film, this poster placement was a slow process which kickstarted at least a couple of months before the release of a national movie, then the Hindi film.

Even since 'Dhoop Chaaon' (1935), the first Indian film to feature playback singing, promoting the film's music which was then played on gramophones were an important part in advertising a film. And when Radio Ceylon and Aakashvani started playing film music, fine songs and music pieces emerged as a sure shot promotional material for a film's success. The music of a film was well released in advance for

the sustained popularity of a particular film. The music release of a Hindi film was made an event with media participation. The showcards and photo sets of the release events were later displayed on the glass windows of cinema halls, as and when the associated film is ready to get released.

The lyrics of the songs of a film, printed and made into song books, were sold at lower price. In the early days, music rights of the films and associated revenue could cover one-third of the films costs. Hence much care and commitment were put into creating melodies that ran for years in viewers lips and on radio. Music directors like Pankaj Mallick, Shankar -Jaikishen, and S D Burman also become early superstars in Hindi cinema due to this hype on film music. But Radio was a sign of status symbol, since very few affluent people had radios in their homes. Ordinary people had to horde to hotels & salons, which used to have big radios and proved as an attraction for the customers. Interestingly viewers thronged to watch films repeatedly just to hear their favourite songs featured in the lips of their favourite stars.

Auteurs like Satyajith Ray, Shyam Benegal and Govind Nihalani started their careers as ad makers before joining films. But commercial film makers were more acquainted to and contributed much to the development of Indian style of movie advertising. Early film posters were done by expert design makers who used tableau style pictures, and original photographs from the film. Cinema halls put up small-sized banners on cigarette shops and distributed handbills. Booklets were designed for cinema holders, with the films being advertised through the names of the actors – the stars who are participating in the movie. At that time, filmmakers and other authors were not prominently listed in the printed advertising materials of the film. (Anilramesh, 2015)

It was a known practice till eighties to hire a rickshaw or tongas, equipped with loud speakers to distribute pamphlets and to announce the release of a movie in the rural and the semi urban areas. The announcement and the movie songs which played during the promotion attracted attention. In the height of the events one Telegu movie "Papam Pasivadu" is said to have hired a helicopter to threw pamphlets of the movie.

The earliest trailers were of longer duration and dealt with all aspects of a film like action, romance, music, drama, emotion and so on with, of course, music being highlighted. They were shown in screens in theatres before movie showings.

Print Media Promotions

It is learned that India's first newspaper Hickeys Gazette was the first newspaper to carry an advertisement of film. But nevertheless, it was not of an Indian movie. Post-independence, promoting upcoming movies in newspapers became a habit and Indian

films gradually developed an advertisement ladder which defined the movie content and its stay of screens.

The first print advertisement in the campaign about a film project came out as soon as it was announced with a prominent star. Sometimes it even never carried a title but was named as production no X of a particular film banner and featured the names of the commercial stars who has agreed to be on the film. Sometimes a special catalogue of films for the upcoming season by a production company were made and distributed. During the various stages of production, news was floated through a PRO who even created gossip stories accompanied with photos for the gossip mongers who liked to peep into the private lives of their stars. Many lead couples were publicised to be in a love relation during the shoot of a particular film. This in turn was publicised to create an interest in the part of the viewers, who would come up to see how the chemistry between them works more on screen. Gossip about stars is one of the ways interest is generated. Though few heroines have more than minor roles in films, editors of film magazines believe that a woman on the front cover generates sales (Dwyer, 2008), and film posters reflect the same assumptions.

There was even a trend to take the media on an outing to the film location. The media, the stars and the makers got to interact over a day or two and this resulted in some worthy coverage in publications that mattered. Interviews with the stars of a film and crew; prior to, and after the release happens often in weekly newspapers, tabloid news and mostly in magazines. For the stories they published in the pages, film production companies exchanged courtesy by buying the prime spots for the movie advertisements when the films were ready for release.

In the eighties, the first advertisement of particular movie appeared a month in advance of its theatre release. This announced the expected date of its release in film images with fresh and eye-catching copy. The second newspaper advertisement appeared a week before the actual release announcing the arrival of the movie the upcoming weekend. Since Thursday and Fridays were estimated as the best day for a movie release (with an eye on the upcoming weekend holiday collections), this ad carried a 'from next week ' tag at the top. The third advertisement came up one day before the actual release with the tag 'from tomorrow'. The next was the advertisement on the day of the movie release with the tag 'from today'. This ad also carried the name of the release centres, and if a national release the release centres of a particular state was given. The release day ads will be the most flashy, appealing, and may include funny slogans with weird wording. The next week on the same day, an ad with the tagline 'into second week' will be placed. This used to continue every weekend, stating the days the movie has completed till then, till the end of the theatre run of the movie. In the earlier days of limited release with different class of theatres

and release centres, a super hit movie used to run a hundred days or more. Then a typical advertisement ladder will have at least 17- 20 advertisement inserts coming up every week in a regular manner. Occasionally there were blockbusters which continued in theatre run of half an year or more.

Trailers, the video mainstay of film promotion, typically tell the gist of the story of the movie in a highly condensed fashion. Mostly around one to two minutes, the film makers try to generate maximum appeal in the mind of viewers, creating a favourable mood for the movie. Film trailers were/are often showed on TV, on music channels, and at movie theatres before the movie starts and also during interval. People made it a point to reach a cinema hall early, not to miss the trailer of a forthcoming film, screened before the main feature. Standees, large self-standing vinyl sunshine board cut-out of the film's star, had been a piece of attraction for a hero centric films in the theatre lobbies ever since stardom evolved in Indian cinema.

In India, films had always been fashion trend setters and the lifestyles portrayed in the films had been a sort of model for the viewers. Film makers often used the in-film content to advertise products which in turn result in increased viewing patterns. This phenomenon can be traced way back to the 1955 Raj Kapoor movie 'Shree 420", where the introduction scene of the protagonist in Mumbai was placed before a large Coca Cola banner.

Sarees, umbrellas, caps worn by the leading stars and other film merchandise were sold by the name of the stars or the film .There are many case histories in India cinema of this type of marketing, resulting in huge hits.(Anilramesh, 2015)

Promotions in Internet Era

Though wall posters still remain one of the major modes of promotion, some Indian metro cities like Delhi banned this defacing of city walls long ago, which demanded a change in the plan of action. But the arrival of Internet has made a sea change in the promotional tactics of Indian film, as Bollywood publicists started using the internet as a venue for advertising. Since 1997– 1998 sites such as IndiaFM.com and Indiatimes.com have also provided film content on the web. Internet competitions for 'best song' of the year also date from this time (Punathambekar, 2008).

Today, making a great movie must to be accompanied by a great marketing plan to taste success at the box office. Film making which has turned to be a costly affair needs to bring back the capital spent on it within a few weeks of its release. This, from a financial point of view, now depends on multitude of things including worthy content, proper pre-release campaigns, better ratings, popular genres, promotional tours by artists, and the opinion of critics .

Before a film hits theatres, distributors and producers hatch out an advertising campaign after deciding how to highlight the movie. The positioning, audience segmentation and marketing questions are tackled by then. Apart from a movie's star package, the worthy feel of witnessing a gratifying event unfolding on screen is what that is offered via film's trailer, and other components of the campaign. Apart from creating an official film site that contains basic information about the plot, actors and crew, YouTube, Telegram and Instagram pages are hired to carry and create positive images and messages about the movie. Trailers/Promos which are made with the selected highlights of a movie, are made available to all the social media platforms. Teasers, announcing the flavour of the film but often with no content of the original film are often shot especially for this purpose.

The use of social media in film advertising campaigns permit production companies to make an easy two-way connection with potential audiences. Social media allows consumers to watch and respond to advertising messages at the priority of their time. "But a regular connect with the potential viewers encourage them to participate in various associated campaigns which significantly change the viewer interest of a film" (Elliott, 2011). The connection with the followers creates a commitment that makes them consume the movie experiences and be a part of it.

The viewers, a core factor in addressing word-of-mouth element in marketing, now heavily rely on film reviews. Electronic word of mouth through internet forums, social media websites, and Film portals, now sprouting up more than usual, has made it a staple diet to create print and video reviews of film on the day of a movies release. Owing to the high popularity of the reviews, some of which are paid and sponsored by the movie producer, viewers check them before making a decision on current films running on theatres.

According to Moore (2019) the word of mouth, can be divided into two factors, volume and valence- the former being the amount of interaction that the film has received at the time of its release through word of mouth and the later, valence being the nature of the interaction that was involved in word of mouth. Interestingly this Volume factor is found to be a major predictor when it come to the theatre release of a film. (Roschk & Große's, 2013).

Nowadays, word of mouth advertising is fast, thanks to social media and modern ways of communication and sharing. The Internet and the opportunity to contact the audience from the very beginning of a film is a new and quite good opportunity to build an advertising campaign to engage potential viewers. "As media consumption is transferred into broadband medium, the conceptualization of the audience and the creation of images for them is becoming complex". (Puustinen, 2006). Extraordinarily mediated, interactive conditions are prompting sharp expansions in

media consumption. This also leads to undeniable degrees of personalization, multiplication of involvement sections, and the approach of cross-stage "fluid media". The roles of consumers, spectators, users, and player combinations over social media tend to use it in a multidimensional way (Napoli, 2008).

Typically, the total marketing budget of a Bollywood movie is 30 per cent of the total cost, of which 50 per cent is spent on digital marketing. TV shows remain the most popular destination for actors, directors and film units to promote their films. Leading actors, directors and producers make a beeline to be featured in a show so that they could get ninety (90) minutes of publicity. The latest way to promote a film is through popular TV shows.

Earlier, film posters and other display publicity were designed manually with the continuity stills shot during the actual shooting of a film and depicted what the film was all about. Today, all designing is done on computers. Designer now arrange a special photo shoot with stars so that publicity material can be designed from those pictures.

However, with the expected arrival of over the top platforms in upcoming years, crowds at the ticket window may not be a predictor of the success of a movie. More revenue is expected to come of the viewers who will watch the movie in the comfort of their homes and thence the advertising ladder will get much deviated and sophisticated than what is the trend as of now.

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