A Study on the Depiction of Substance Usage in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema.

Sachin Krishna¹ & Sreehari K G²
¹Master of Journalism and Mass Communication
²Assistant Professor
¹,²Department of Visual Media, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Kochi

Abstract: This paper attempts to determine whether contemporary Malayalam films have an influence in the increase of substance usage among the audience. This is precisely focused due to the fact that recent movies released in the new generation film movement of Malayalam have an increase in the onscreen depictions of alcohol and other kinds of drugs. These movies are shot in such a way that depicts the characters indulging in the use of these substances in a glamorized manner as if they are promoting its use amongst the audiences. For this, selected films released in the previous four years that earned the biggest box office revenues were selected for analysis. This paper also tries to examine whether these onscreen depictions have any significant persuasion among the audiences.

Keywords: Substance usage, Alcohol, Malayalam cinema, onscreen depiction, new generation film movement, promoting.

1. Introduction

The history of Malayalam cinema goes back to the early part of the twentieth century when cinema was still in its infancy. It was in 1930 that cinema entered into the heart of Keralites through the first ever film made in Malayalam which was Vigathakumaran (1930) produced and directed by J.C Daniel (Rajadhyaksha, 1999) and released at Capitol theater in Trivandrum on 23 October 1930. In 1938 the first talkie ‘Balan’ was released which paved the way for the introduction of sound into Malayalam cinema. This was followed by a dozen of films released some of which were Gnanambika (1940), Prahlada (1941) which were entirely produced under theatre and this trend of film production continued until 1947 after that films began to be produced by natives of the state. This was also a period when Malayalam cinema began to liberate itself from the clutches of theatre and became independent. Neelakuyil (1954) directed by the duo of P. Bhaskaran and Ramu Kariat was the film which began this change and was the first movie to accurately depict the typical lifestyle of Kerala as well as the first film to be shot outdoors and was subsequently awarded the Presidents silver medal. The sixties was a period of an intellectual awakening in Malayalam cinema which made its presence all over India and the world. Chemene (1965) directed by Ramu Kariat (Saran, 2012) which was based on a novel of the same name by Thakazhi Shivashankara Pillai was immensely popular and became the first Malayalam film to win the National Film Award for Best Feature film. This was also the period when Malayalam cinema became much more organized and acclaimed filmmakers such as Adoor Gopalakrishnan and G. Aravindan began their career.

It was in the seventies that Malayalam cinema entered a new phase of growth that reflected the patterns of world cinema particularly the French New Wave. Malayalam cinema witnessed the emergence of a new wave that brought attention worldwide. This was spearheaded by the film society movement which introduced the world classics of cinema into the audiences in Kerala. Adoor Gopalakrishnan’s Swayanvaram (1972) was critically well acclaimed and brought forth Malayalam cinema to the international stage (Ganguly, 2015). John Abraham and G Aravindan arrived in the medium with films that were radical and with much emphasis on social change. P. Padmarajan and K.G George also debuted into the industry with groundbreaking films such as Prayaanam (1975) and Swapnadanam (1975) respectively that led to beginning of yet another movement in Malayalam cinema known as middle cinema. This movement combined artistic quality of parallel cinema with commercial cinema that went into the 1980s which was a time when Malayalam cinema progressed to new heights under an array of talented filmmakers which utilized innovative methods in technical as well as storytelling aspects to convey to the audiences. Malayalam cinema also made several technical achievements in the 1980s such as the first 70mm movie released in India which was Padayottam (1982) as well as the first ever 3D film made in India My Dear Kuttichathan released in 1984. Malayalam cinema continued this trend of artistically brilliant and commercially feasible films into the final decade of the century. Up until then
the cinema of Malayalam was a mirror into the workings of the society reflecting the life and struggles of people of various sections and was the forefront of a social mission in bringing about a change in the society. The beginning of the millennium the 2000’s was a period of decline in the quality of Malayalam cinema. It was mainly slapstick comedies and larger than life characters that ruled the industry which led to a downfall compared to the rich legacy of Malayalam cinema during the seventies and eighties.

In the later part of the decade a new trend of filmmaking arrived in the scene popularly known as new generation cinema with a lot of young filmmakers making their films in a very liberated atmosphere both creatively as well as technically. It was accompanied by fresh themes and innovative narrative techniques much of which is influenced by world cinema trends. It was spearheaded by a group of filmmakers such as Aashiq Abu, Sameer Tahir, Anwar Rasheed, Amal Neerad etc. who overthrew the conventional hero centric films with realistic portrayals and new themes that resonate with stark depictions of urban centric and middle class life. Women have acquired a new role in these films as that of independent and bold which is more equal with their male equivalents on screen. They are shown indulging in the usage of addictive substances such as alcohol and other drugs and engaging in explicit and frank conversations that was considered a taboo in earlier films and in the typical Kerala society. The advent of digital cinema in production as well as distribution was the main factor in the rise of such films during the time as it has led to a democratization of the entire medium.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Persuasion theory

Persuasion is a symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their attitudes or behaviors regarding an issue through the transmission of a message in an atmosphere of free choice (Perloff, 2010). Another definition states that it is the successful intentional effort at influencing another’s mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom (O’Keefe, 1990, p. 17). The theory of persuasion was developed in between the 1940s and 50s after witnessing the power of political propaganda in various parts of the world. It is similar to the Hypodermic needle theory in which messages are aimed directly and the audiences are considered passive. According to this theory the communication process is a three phase model which is Communication-Attitudes-Behavior. In persuasion theory and research, the relevant mental state has most commonly been characterized as an attitude. Even when persuader’s goal is the modification of another’s behavior, that goal is often seen to be achieved through a process of attitude change the presumption being that attitude change is a means of behavioral change. (O’Keefe, 1990) The fundamental concept underlying theory is that messages are provided to influence the behavior of the receivers. Applying this theory to the case of films it has been found that it being a mass medium can certainly have a profound influence on the viewers. This is specifically in case of films with an overall increase in the onscreen depictions of alcohol and substance usage as well as other factors such as violence, sex etc. According to the persuasion theory this can certainly have an influence among the viewer’s particularly the youth to persuade in using such addictive substances or other unhealthy habits. The most significant use of persuasion is in the domain of advertising where companies and brands utilize various methods such as product placements and subliminal messages to covertly influence the buyers for their profit. Persuasion theory has other numerous applications in politics, business as well as in areas of conflicts and negotiations.

2.2. Social cognitive theory

Social cognitive theory states that the knowledge acquired by an individual is directly related to observation within social interactions, experiences and media. It explains psychosocial functioning in terms of triadic reciprocal causation. In this causal model, behavior, cognitive and other personal factors and environmental events all operate as interacting deterrents that influence each other bidirectionally. (Bandura, 1989) It is mainly used in the fields of psychology, communication and education. This theory further elucidates that people learn new behaviors not only by trying them but thorough observing others to replicate that behaviors in themselves. The underlying concept of this theory is that people learn by observing others. Other factors also come into play in this process such as environment, behavior and cognition. The social cognitive theory provides a framework that simultaneously addresses psychological, social and environmental factors that influence physical activity. In addition to providing a conceptual framework it also provides an empirically validated model of behavioral change (Bandura, 1997). According to social learning theory and social cognitive theory, individuals acquire behaviors through a series of vicarious observations and imitations. Social learning theory emphasizes the process by which individuals primarily learn from modeling the
behavior of others. In addition, social cognitive theory posits that individuals learn things from which rewarding consequences and experiences can be drawn. Positive expectancies of substance use can be primed through the influential figures portrayed by characters that adolescents respect. For example, when other known factors such as family and peers smoking behaviors are controlled, research indicates that adolescents are more likely to take up smoking and have favorable attitudes towards if their favorite stars do so. Positive portrayals and appeals in movies can stimulate the desire to emulate the portrayed behavior, such as drinking and smoking (Arnett, 2007).

3. Review of literature

There have been many studies conducted in the area of alcoholism and its relation with cinema and other forms of mass medium particularly television. (Merchant, Zain Farook, 2013). A study on the depiction of drug usage, alcohol consumption and cigarette smoking in movies and its perceived effect on a young audience analyzes the depiction of drug usage, cigarette smoking and alcohol consumption in movies in terms of character stereotyping and typecasting. It also focuses on how the youth perceive these contents and its major implications on the behavior of young children. It focuses on two of the largest film industries Hollywood and Bollywood to determine whether this issue pertains in both of them and in need of a global attention. The major findings of this research as evident through the focus groups findings is that movies tend to glamorize drinking and smoking and this has a perceived effect on the audience to try a hand at drinking. The use of alcohol and other substances in terms of character stereotyping and typecasting is also found in another paper ‘Alcohol in the Media: Drinking Portrayals, Alcohol Advertising and Alcohol Consumption among Youth’ (Joel W. Grube, 2005) identifies television, films, radio and popular music as sources that promote the youth to try drinking. One of the major findings of this research paper is that almost every medium from television to films tend to portray alcohol in a more positive light associating drinking with largely positive consequences while negative consequences of drinking are portrayed rarely. This paper also tends to find out whether alcohol advertising has an effect on the beliefs and behaviors of the youth against drinking and determines that there exists a significant correlation between alcohol advertising and drinking behavior. This is also explored in another paper titled ‘Impact of Alcohol Advertising and Media Exposure on Adolescent Alcohol Use: A Systematic Review of Longitudinal Studies’ (Peter Anderson, 2009) which tends to assess the impact of alcohol advertising and media exposure on adolescent alcohol use. The major areas of this research are commercial communications and the media and its influence among the adolescents to try drinking. Alcohol advertising in movies is also focused in this journal. The methodology used is through longitudinal studies of a number of key journals, publications, papers etc. The major findings of this research suggest that exposure to media and commercial communications that portray alcohol is associated with the likelihood that it promotes drinking behavior among the adolescent and baseline drinkers. Also evidence of alcohol advertising with the use of alcohol non drinking young people and increased consumption by their drinking peers was another major finding of this study.

Another paper ‘Alcohol use in motion pictures and its relation with early onset teen drinking’ (James D Sargent, 2006) published in the Journal of studies in alcohol intends to assess drinking from a sample of current movies and its association with alcohol depictions and early teen drinking. The methodology used in this research was cross sectional surveys in various schools of adolescent groups aged 10 – 14 years. The results of this survey are that ninety two percent of the movies taken in the sample depicted drinking. Also statistical evidence inferred from this study revealed an association between exposure to movie alcohol usage and the risk of incident alcohol use. One of the major findings of this paper is that it provides first evidence for an association between exposure to movie alcohol use and early onset teen drinking. This is also covered in the paper ‘Media Exposure and Marijuana and Alcohol Use among Adolescents’ (Brian A. Primack, 2009) which aimed at determining which media exposures are strongly linked with marijuana and alcohol usage among adolescents. For this the methodology utilized was that of surveys and questionnaire. Approximately 1211 students of a high school in Pittsburgh were surveyed regarding substance use, exposure to entertainment media and alcohol use. These surveys contained various measures regarding substance use, media exposure etc. Apart from these various relevant covariates were also assessed. This includes demographic information including race, gender, age, socioeconomic status etc. The major findings highlighted in this research were that movie viewing was more associated with alcohol use among younger students than older students. Marijuana use falls behind with it being as a result of exposure to music than movies. It also suggests that the different forms of media have a significant influence on health risk behaviors. This has led to a conclusion that younger adolescents are more
susceptible to alcohol content in movies and thereby prompting them to try drinking.

4. Methodology

This research study is an attempt to find out whether the depictions of substance usage in contemporary Malayalam movies have a perceivable influence on the viewers of Kerala. For this purpose two selected movies released in the previous four years were used for this study. The movies such as Spirit (2012) and Premam (2015) are subjected to analysis to determine whether these movies have indeed tried to promote alcohol and other drugs. These two films are selected on the basis that they contain the highest amount of onscreen depictions of alcohol, cigarette and drug usage and were also box office successes the latter film being the second highest grossing Malayalam film of all time. In order to establish a solid foundation for this study a review of literature was undertaken in five different research papers published from various parts of the world that dealt with the same topic. Almost all of these research endeavors single handedly proclaim that there exists a strong relation with substance use among the audience with exposure to movies and other forms of media. Two major communication theories persuasion and social cognitive theory are also utilized as a foundation for this study. Content analysis of the movies as well as various similar papers is done to determine the outcome of this research study.

5. Analysis

There has been an increase in the amount of onscreen depictions of alcohol and drug usage amongst Malayalam movies released recently. This can have an overall negative impact on the audience that persuades them to using alcohol or drugs as is evident in the two major communication theories that have been used as a framework for this study. For this analysis one of the biggest box office hits of Malayalam in 2015 the movie Premam (2015) and Spirit (2012) are used. ‘Premam’ a coming-of-age film directed by Alphonse Puthren was a milestone in terms of popularity and box office success with a production cost of 40 million rupees that grossed an estimated 600 million worldwide making it the second highest grossing Malayalam film of all time. It was the core movie that has been used in this analysis due to the fact that it was one of the biggest hits of the year in box office collections, popularity and in an increased onscreen portrayal of alcohol, cigarette and drug usage. With a running time of two hours and forty three minutes there were 27 instances where the usage of alcohol and cigarettes were shown throughout the movie. In one case a character is also shown consuming the psychotic drug cocaine. The way the character consumes cocaine through snorting is clearly shown. Apart from the numerous onscreen portrayals of alcohol consumption and cigarette smoking there are also few instances in the movie when the character dialogues tries to glorify the act of drinking. One such case is in the scene where the character George’s (Nivin Pauly) father played by Ranji Panicker is brought to the college for a meeting with the principal and the rest of the staff. The principal is harshly criticizing the students for their misconduct of drinking alcohol inside the classroom while the teacher is present. The father instead of being angered at his son’s misbehavior tries to justify his behavior by saying to his son that he likes what he did and if he is that much insistent on drinking he should join him at home and not at the classroom. This is a message that is directed as an encouragement to character to continue drinking and this can actually tempt the young viewers to try drinking or continue the habit. The way the movie has been shot particularly the actions of the lead characters in drinking and smoking are depicted in a highly stylized manner. In another instance the lead characters are planting an explosive under a stage while smoking severely. They come out and start drinking through a small easily concealable can while also smoking. The explosive detonates injuring the performer on stage who happens to be George’s arch enemy and the scene ends in a fight.

This can actually invoke a sense of feeling among the viewers that alcohol is a prerequisite for manly qualities. The movie being in the coming of age genre depicts the life of the character in three time periods. When as an adolescent still in high school the main character George and his friends are shown smoking cigarettes while hiding in the rooftops. The transition towards alcohol is also clearly shown in the film when George out of grief due to the loss of his love interest consumes alcohol when he is persuaded by his friend to do so. This instance is repeated when the character indulges in alcohol heavily after the breakup of his second relationship. This can reinforce the false message that drinking can relieve grief and provide respite when confronted with hardships in life. As an adult while in college the usage of alcohol and cigarette usage has increased among the characters with almost every scene containing either one of these element. Also the lead characters are also shown drinking inside the classroom while the teacher is taking classes. This can ensure a similar copycat behavior among youngsters to mimic the act that their favorite characters are portraying on screen. The rest of the characters of the classroom students are depicted as if they were passive and this is in stark contrast to the lead characters which
are always shown lively because they smoke and drink. The slow motion shots of George and his friends drinking and smoking while on the way to the classroom is an attempt to glamorize the very act. As he becomes a much more responsible adult in his thirties the main character along with the other supporting characters is also shown consuming alcohol and smoking. The way the characters throughout the movie indulges in these acts are glamourized on screen as if they are promoting alcohol and smoking as a habit that every youth should have. This can mislead the younger generation who are watching the movie as they are more vulnerable to such negative messages that are propagated through this movie. It can also prompt them to try a hand at drinking or smoking as is evident in the general paranoia that was prevalent amongst the audience to mimic the lead characters lifestyle when the movie was released (Muruvelil, 2015). The presence of an actor such as Nivin Pauly who has a huge amount of fan following amidst the viewers of Kerala has reinforced the messages given throughout the movie.

The total duration of the movie is 2 hours and 43 minutes and approximately 15 percentage of the movie contains instances where the characters are indulging in the use of alcohol and cigarettes. According to the research papers reviewed from numerous journals it is amply clear that the onscreen portrayals of drinking and other substance usage can have a perceived effect on the audience. And so accordingly the increased onscreen depictions of substance usage in the movie Premam (2015) can have a perceived effect on the audience to have an overall positive image regarding drinking and smoking.

![Figure 1. Total amount of drinking and smoking portrayals in the movie Premam (2015).](image-url)

The other movie used for this analysis is Spirit (2012) which is a satirical written and directed by Ranjith and focuses on the alcoholism habits in Kerala. The film was marketed by the filmmaker to not proscribe or advocate the use of alcohol but contained many onscreen depictions of alcohol usage which is on par with the film Premam. It had a theatrical run for more than hundred days in Kerala and was a huge box office success and was exempted from the entertainment taxes levied by the state government as the film propagated a good social message against drinking across the masses. With a running time of two hours and twenty five minutes there were approximately thirty six instances where the usage of alcohol and cigarettes are portrayed onscreen throughout the movie.

The film is about a prominent TV anchor and writer whose severe alcoholic habits cause a breakdown in his personal and professional life. As the titles appear in the beginning of the movie Raghunandan the character portrayed by notable actor Mohanlal is working on his novel in a typewriter whilst smoking and drinking. A narration at the scene describes the character can carry out his literary and every other work with dedication only when he is intoxicated under alcohol. Interpreting the scenes at the beginning we get an understanding about the characters life and surroundings as he is divorced from his wife and he lives alone in a well-furnished and lavish house with his cupboards containing selections of expensive and rare liquor bottles. He is also seen drinking alone in the bar celebrating his divorce from his wife six years ago. He is having a conversation with the bartender explaining that he is celebrating because he has a reason. This is the first instance in the film where drinking is shown as a way to celebrate the ups and downs in life. The character is seen stopping at his regular bar every morning before going to work. After becoming frustrated with his inability to light a gas stove for making coffee due to shaking hands as a result of severe drinking the character is shown afterwards consuming alcohol to have a relief. Another important character a plumber is seen drunk and beating his wife in the middle of a road. After getting drunk at an evening party where almost everyone present there are shown drinking and smoking the main character gets angered at his fellow mate over a phone call and leaves the hall. This is one of the moments in the film which actually shows the characters anger and frustration at everything as a result of severe drinking. In another instance the main character is shown drinking while doing a live interview in front of the television cameras. There is also another instance where the main character along with another supporting character is drinking while driving and the former continues the act even while they were pulled over by the police. This can reinforce the message that drinking is cool and can prompt the audience to try drinking while driving which it is dangerous and fatal to the drinker as well as rest of
the society. The character Raghunandhan’s regular visit to the bar and drinking with his friends is repeatedly shown across the whole of the movie. He also engages in a heated argument with a female police officer while drunk during an evening party which creates an adverse atmosphere among the individuals present there. To relieve from bitter news regarding his ex-wife’s husband who also happen to be his good friend and is diagnosed with cancer the character is seen drinking heavily in the bar. He is also seen drinking in the bar and engaging in a friendly argument with the bartender in another scene. Another instance shows the character already reeling under alcohol addiction having a conversation with another character in which he repeatedly states that he is not an alcoholic. Samir another character who is also an alcoholic hospitalized recently in the film due to vomiting blood tries to justify drinking saying that the vomiting blood happens when the amount of blood increases in the body. The main character is also shown smoking and drinking while working on his book which reinforces the false belief among the viewers that drugs can boost creativity. Heavily intoxicated a character is shown severely beating his wife in front of his children. This can trigger a feeling among the viewers that drinking is a requisite for displaying manliness by engaging in violent anti-social behaviors and abusing women using physical means which is also previously portrayed in the movie Premam (2015). The total duration of the movie is two hours twenty five minutes and approximately eleven percentage of the movie contains instances where the characters are indulging in the use of alcohol and cigarettes.

![Figure 2. Total amount of drinking and smoking portrayals in the movie Spirit (2012).](image)

6. Conclusion

The popularity of Malayalam movies have been steadfastly increasing amongst the viewers and as a result of these it have a noticeable influence on the formation of lifestyle and culture among the audience. The new generation film movement which showed its presence in the films released from the year 2010 onwards was radically different from all the previous movements that accompanied through the history of Malayalam cinema. It was accompanied by fresh themes and was liberal in the ways that the characters are portrayed particularly their way of life. The way the characters are involved in the use of alcohol and other drugs are shown openly in these films and women have acquired a new role which is more equal with their male counterparts. The huge popularity generated by this films particularly among the youth is due to this realism and frankness in the way the characters behave on screen which the viewer’s associate with popular Hollywood films. This film movement has also been criticized due to its content and is seen as lacking in a clear social perspective which the previous film movements in Malayalam have. Premam a wildly successful movie of 2015 has a huge impact that youngsters began to mimic the main characters lifestyle. This includes the drinking and smoking habits of the character that is depicted on the screen. Also some of the scenes analyzed from this movie have cemented the fact that it had promoted drinking and smoking among the viewers. The other movie Spirit (2012) also had numerous portrayals of alcohol drinking which exceeds the amount of onscreen depiction than the previous movie used for this study. These films have also tried to market the image of substance use as a requisite in a changing lifestyle scenario of cities and villages across Kerala. This can be a trigger for the youth to try using these intoxicating substances and it can lead to decline in personal interests and productivity that can affect the society in the larger extent. Apart from promotion the mere portrayal of alcohol and other drugs can cause a behavioral change in adolescents which is evident in the research papers that were being reviewed for this study. The two major communication theories persuasion and social cognitive theory which were used as a theoretical framework for this study single handedly proclaim that characters which portray such substance usage behaviors on screen can have a perceivable influence in the viewer’s particularly minors who are more vulnerable to negative messages in mimicking such behavior which results in the formation of a more favorable attitude towards using such addictive substances. As of recent times the duration of alcoholic and other related content has been increasing in the media particularly cinema at an exponential rate and this means increased duration of exposure to such content amongst the audience. Prolific exposure to such content as of recent times has also precipitated a demand for more such content amongst the viewers and this is also one of the major causes for its increase.
7. References


A comparative study of American and Indian cinema and their respective Audiences (Doctoral dissertation, University of South Florida) [Abstract].


