
The contemporary film public relations' ecosystem in India – from stars to stories

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Abstract: Indian cinema is now at its most experimental phase as we get to see unconventional stories more frequently than ever. While it reflects great creative progression in terms of filmmaking, at a deeper level, these stories are challenging the larger moral fabric that has existed conventionally. Of the many reasons that have contributed to this change, public relations (PR) is a major component. How do PR professionals build stories, create strategies that resonate with people despite having a starkly different tonality?

Keywords: storytelling; social media communication; popularisation of beliefs; star value; fandom; creative strategies; commercial returns; OTT; celebrity PR; digital media, film PR; India.

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1 Introduction

What is the most sure-shot formula of creating a successful film in India? A heart-wrenching story that is supported by larger than life locations, a quintessential morally upright, angry young man, a damsel in distress, a malicious villain and all of this

bound together by memorable music. While this answer would have gotten you undoubted consensus a few years back, the current times have evolved to expect new answers.

As an industry that is entirely run by what the audiences want, movies today are steering towards experimentation as seen in the kind of unconventional cinema that we are increasingly witnessing these days. From Ayushmann Khurrana's *Andhadhun* which is a tragedy of errors to Ranveer Singh's *Padmaavat* which has at its forefront a cold-hearted, merciless villain or even a film like *Thugs of Hindostan* which has an A-lister like Aamir Khan essaying the role of a pirate. An obvious conclusion from the cited examples would be that the Indian audiences have become more receptive to stories that may reflect alternative values. As a society and as a cultural cohort, India is obviously changing in its culture and moral fabric. Although this cultural change is becoming increasingly widespread, the fact remains that the creative content that emerges out of it is still not always in adherence to the larger moral yardstick we as Indians follow.

How do these films end up doing the kind of business they do? How do they manage to attract audiences who are ready to pay the price of potential moral and cultural dissonance and still go watch a film?

There are many socio-cultural changes that can be attributed to this new pattern in storytelling and consumer preferences for films. However, from a media and communication perspective, another interesting common point these films share is their promotional strategy. An equally massive and important factor of influence has been the changing shape of film promotion, public relations (PR), particularly. Actors and films are no longer just artists and pieces of art, they are full-fledged brands who run the whole industry based on the equity they hold in their audience's minds. As performers who belong to a medium that is extremely celebrated and hence influential, actors are prone to judgements, perceptions that are largely drawn from their filmography. Therefore, considering what we have been witnessing for years now, it would not be wrong to assume that ideal PR efforts are the ones that are directed at portraying the celebrity in their most ideal shade. Although what that ideal is has changed over the years.

Some studies have discussed this paradigm shift in the context of contemporary themes and bold marketing campaigns (Larouche and Brunet, 2015). In fact, one particular study discusses the new themes emerging from smaller towns and cities as another marker of this shift (Agrawal and Naresh, 2020).

From the perspective of the public relations industry, this shift and the consumer preference patterns it has given rise to is remarkable in more ways than one. In order to understand these changes, it is necessary to trace everything back to where it all started.

2 Review of literature

The role of PR behind the success of films is more intricate than what meets the eye. While it is obvious to conclude that most of the films undertake promotional efforts that appeal to the majority, what happens when the film at hand itself is reflective of an alternative culture and values?

Films and production houses have always steered towards promotional strategies that sell a film for its artists over strategies that sell a film for its story. Films in India have been essentially promoted successfully through the film stars (Bakker, 2001). As

elements that are promotional symbols themselves, they have been the anchors of their films in the truest sense. However, now as the audiences incline more towards content, the packaging of how a film is promoted has also changed. A simple example of this could be how audiences are more interested to know about the kind of acumen, hard work, story development and similar aspects that enhance a movie's technical richness over the typical 'masala' stories that come out before the release of almost every film. This tendency has led the entertainment PR machinery to frame strategies accordingly. So, a simple shift to note down is how film promotions are now moving towards more authentic narrative building (Loggerenberg et al., 2018).

2.1 Film promotions in India – a historical overview

As a business, it was not until the 2000s that Bollywood was exposed to global audiences or even foreign cultures. This happened only by the virtue of the Economic Policy of 1991 which opened the gates for international trade in India. In fact, it was only in 2001 that the Indian Government granted Hindi cinema the 'industry' status (Dudrah and Desai, 2008).

While the trade or any kind of business transaction to come out of it was seen rather later, an immediate effect to come out of it was more in terms of cultural exchange, both internationally and domestically.

Talking about the resultant exposure to domestic subcultures, it was mostly in terms of the kind of representation many communities within India started receiving on-screen. From Kamal Hassan's *Hey Ram* which featured a South Indian protagonist to Tabu's *Astitva* which was an authentic peek into the *Maharshtrian* culture, this effort from the industry to minimise the cultural distance within the country (which is an extremely multicultural one at that) was the first step towards full-blown expansion. As for revenues, the easiest way was to explore the opportunities of regional dubbing or adaptation (Dastidar and Elliott, 2019). Going a layer deeper would also reveal that this kind of expansion within the country, by Bollywood, also can be seen as sowing seeds for future desirable brand equity.

This attempt to combine subcultures and define a national culture so that everyone across the country feels drawn to watching their films can be recalled as the first formal value-based dissonance that the film industry of India witnessed (Punathambekar, 2013). This was also the time where films were slowly moving towards content. The rise of actors like Naseeruddin Shah, Anupam Kher, Tabu, Irrfan Khan among others marked the first instance of the blurring of lines between independent cinema and the mainstream.

Now, let us compare this large messaging of the film industry against the early to mid-2000s, a time where economists started noticing a higher percentage of lifestyle expenditure, where films were a pure source of entertainment. Although there were films which were powerful enough to initiate and sustain discourses, the audience, at least the majority, did not engage in it. This is why the need to sell films as the perfect weekend entertainment was the main role of the associated PR machinery. A classic example of this being all the scandalous controversies that one can recall and the evergreen linkup rumours (Punathambekar, 2013).

Linking back to the earlier point about the beginning of the Indian film industry's international association, it was this period that gave way to the development of the kind

of culture we see today. This kind of analysis needs to occur at two different levels-cultural and economic.

Culturally speaking, the reason why Indian films seemed to work in the markets abroad were mostly because of the NRIs who treated their cultural distance with this medium. However, as for the purely international audience, Indian films brought a sense of novelty to their typical ways of storytelling. Indian films gave them a peek into the exotic Asian culture where any story was incomplete without music and larger than life values. In order to keep up with the increasing popularity and to build on it further and further, Bollywood also did its best to increase its ties with the lands far away. The easiest way to do this was shooting abroad (Josiam et al., 2015).

However, with time, as the internet revolution picked, so did a rapid cultural exchange which led to the downfall of the typical cinema that India offered to the lands far away. Now, an obvious argument here would be that this viewpoint reduces Bollywood to only a certain type of filmography, however, this is especially true in how it was only these kinds of films that fetched the revenues.

Another source of cultural exchange within the context of films has to be contextualising stories in different cultural settings. This naturally gives way to arguments around the portrayal of the Orient by the Orient. Largely drawn from Edward Said's 'Orientalism', Amartya Sen in his essay, 'Indian Traditions and the Western Imagination', writes that the East is often represented in three distinct ways (Sen, 1997). These categories can evidently be seen in a few films which are cited as below:

- *Exotic*: concentrates on the wondrous aspects. Examples: *Eat, Pray, Love* and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*.
- *Magisterial*: third world status. Posits that third world societies needed colonisation as a step towards civilisation. Examples: *Slumdog Millionaire* and *Lion*'
- *Curatorial*: guided by systemic curiosity. Posits that the East is fundamentally different from the West and therefore all exploration is to find out the points of difference. Inclusive of the exotic approach but not guided by the quest to look for wondrous elements alone but anything that is different. Examples: *Victoria and Abdul* (although based on a true story) and *Life of Pi*.

Based on this premise and that of many similar scholars alongside conclusive evidence from the world of films, it can be said that the East is projected as being driven by the friction that is caused by the co-existence of many value systems which goes on to become the culpable cause in most of the films and the stories they convey. Indian stories and stories of India are no exception to this perception. Call it stereotyping or representation based on popular opinion, this holds true to date where a mainstream movie like *Extraction* starring a mainstream actor like Chris Hemsworth is situated in the morally depraved East with the vision of profitability (Hughes, 2019). While feeding this stereotype propagates convenience, it also takes care of the fact that the audiences are presented what they are familiar with.

Financially speaking, in order to continue making the kind of films Bollywood was making, it was crucial to have the financial sources in place. In 2002, the Industrial Development Bank of India developed the first ever film fund which would expect donations from Hollywood predominantly. Therefore, the need to produce extravagant films which gave better revenue anticipation (Dastidar and Elliott, 2019).

In order to market and promote a product like this, it was important to craft promotional strategies that followed a similar undertone. A major example of this can be seen in stunts like international dance tours done by all the A-listers, appearance on international TV shows with seemingly explosive statements etc.

3 Film PR – the contemporary landscape

With the aforementioned trajectory of Bollywood and entertainment PR, let us delve into where India currently stands, culturally, when it comes to its audience preferences in terms of film-viewing. Before we delve into it further, it is important to realise that the economic angle that comes out of this discussion is inevitable because marketing and PR as a tool in films is essentially driven by profit maximisation (Paunksnis, 2019).

The present time is as neoliberal as it gets, composed of transnational capitalism and globalisation. The metaphor for cinema would be the time and spatial exchanges (as proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin) that happen through multicultural storytelling aided by internet revolution and exposure. While this process is organic with culturally homogeneous societies, heterogeneous societies find this more complex. India for instance, is multicultural and also has many film industries working regionally and nationally. While this division is more in terms of language, in terms of genres, the categories have been mainstream, indie/ arthouse/ independent cinema. Until a few years back, where each of these categories targeted entirely different cultures and hence value systems, the categories were starkly different. However, now, with the development of a strong pan culture, the lines between the two categories of cinema are also blurring. While it is true that there is a higher general acceptance but it is not until these alternative stories become the norm that mainstream cinema would dabble into such subjects more frequently. For instance, while Ranveer Singh has done films like *Gully Boy*, he also has done films like *Simmba*. The reason for this is as simple as profitability (Paunksnis, 2019).

Any new value or new cultural change is viewed upon with slight resentment and discomfort which is why it is always the independent cinema – movies that have lesser money bet on them, that become the testing water. While this was a latent function of independent cinema back then, it is now being taken over by OTT content (Paunksnis, 2019). Today, it is easy to club most of the OTT content under one genre, almost similar to the status independent cinema enjoyed. From a financial angle, it could be hypothesised that OTT is the testing water to inject this alternative value system and eventually transform it into a bigger treatment in the mainstream (Mehta, 2019). As OTT films like independent cinema do not face an intense commercial pressure, they can afford experimentation and dabble into several unconventional genres. However, this deprived them of entry into the mainstream zone where they can transform themselves into culture shapers until very recently. As such content is consumed more and more and also gets a space in the highly influential social media, these films are moving towards shaping our culture (Akgül and Gökdemir, 2019).

The role of PR in a landscape like this becomes extremely crucial as the financial motives are at stake and also visible to the public eye. To dilute this down, many efforts these days are evolving to incline more to organic storytelling and collaboration with the audience, one of the primary stakeholders. As films are now moving to take a shape that reflects the lives of regular people, the ensuing PR also therefore aims to retain this spirit

by crafting strategies that involve maximum interaction with the audience. Undoubtedly, this is the result of social media.

4 The Indian film PR ecosystem

A research by Ormax Media in 2018 revealed that around 35–40% of the first day collection can be attributed to the social media buzz a movie garners within the marketing window of 45–60 days. This is why we often get to see behind-the-scenes bytes of a film and just a general overall social media activity. The rampant usage of social media has not only enabled reaching out to people faster but also given way to a participatory culture (Scott, 2015). The technological structure of the medium is such that it allows rapid transfer of information thereby facilitating smooth cultural exchange. It is this collaborative spirit that many film PR practitioners seem to inculcate in their endeavours. The entertainment PR industry has really kept up with this emerging medium which is not just about feeding narratives but also receiving them. Therefore, any film promotion endeavour ends up being collaborative these days. This exchange is not just limited in the space of promotion but the process of production itself. For instance, International Movie Database (IMDB) is more revolutionary than what meets the eye. It has evolved to influence major film production decisions and hence the ensuing film promotion (Kuşay, 2019). As artists who are here to promote seemingly realistic films, it is important for them to craft an image that is in line with the overall narrative their film is trying to build for promotion.

For instance, consider Anushka Sharma and Varun Dhawan during their movie *Sui Dhaga*. Everything, right from their media statements on how the exposure to the world of small town tailors has changed them to their social media #SuiDhaaga challenge where they could easily put the thread through the needle. These stunts add up to the portrayal of the actors as sensitive, relatable and locatable in the created world (Nanda et al., 2018).

Talking about social media, filmmakers and creators have better access to understand what the audience truly wants. Owing to the commercial pressure, the majority demographic ends up the determining factor that shapes the content and storytelling choices. As suggested by Statista, the media age of the majority social media using demographics is 27 and a whopping 54% of the total Indian user base is contributed by the age group 20–39 years. As an age group that is known to be digitally native, their exposure to the resultant cultural influx makes it believable that their content preferences differ from the previous generations. As a cultural cohort that demands new stories, accurate representation and realistic content and more importantly has the platform to voice its thoughts out, its preferences end up being the primary drivers for content creators and filmmakers for their creative decisions (Patel, 2019). The narrative of film going has been shattered by the rise we see in OTT, especially in a pandemic induced world like now. This has led to an increased reliance on social media. There are now web series and OTT films that star social media personalities and also do well (Mehta, 2019).

As a market that is known for its commercial viability worldwide and as a country with a favourable level of the younger population with access to platforms that enable them to vocalise their content preferences, India is gaining more attention than ever (Elliott et al., 2019). For example, Majid Majidi's *Beyond the Clouds* to Mira Nair's string of films, India has grabbed the attention of international filmmakers. This is also partly due to the interesting cultural fabric. The metric of success for these films may not

be the box-office alone but the fact that a director's decision to write a story for this culture exclusively. An effect this has on the ensuing PR activities is that these films end up lacking elements that may not necessarily grab the attention of audiences. This holds true for new-age films with new cultural settings as well.

The reception of content that does not reflect the immediate cultural context but something that is relatively distant can be looked upon in two different ways. One, the modern Indian audience has evolved to get adjusted to the media explosion and information revolution. As members of the movement that enabled the cultural mobility that we see today, the so-called experimental cinema is a treat to such audiences. This is because they have the right exposure, understanding and information symmetry (Paunksnis, 2019). The younger population of India would predominantly fall under this category. The new-age cinema which also includes OTT content caters to them. Another viewpoint is the inability to receive these new stories. We often see how the elders at home would react to certain stories dismissing it as an ill-effect of cultural exposure to the west or any alternate source. Therefore, the segments that lack the required information symmetry to have an inclusive outlook to values represented in films and instead dismiss it as a trickle-down effect. These segments naturally feel culturally distant from these new-age stories (Arul, 2019). This is usually the elder segment of the Indian population.

The distance as described in the above paragraph can be extended to the phenomenon of infringement, particularly in relation to low-budget films. While the mainstream cinema is known to present mainstream culture which is often devoid of harsh realities that the underemphasised cultures face. Therefore, the audiences of these mainstream films are bound to feel culturally distant to what is called representational cinema. Similarly, for these subaltern cultures to feel connected with the mainstream cinema is also tough as the represented culture is almost like a distant dream for most of these segments (Chatterjee, 2019).

These ways of reception are exclusive of age. It is more on the lines of who connects to what better. To understand this difference better, let us look at the example of *Padmavat* by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. While there was a segment that supported the portrayal of the community in the film owing to their ability to connect with the film, many spoke against it because of its seemingly biased cultural ethos, misrepresentation and political undertones. The basis of this divided view was simply because of the cultural friction between the various segments amongst the audiences. Despite having the maximum screen time, it was the character hailing from the majority cultural group of the country who was portrayed as heroic (Gehlawat, 2019). As a PR practitioner, what stance does one take when there are such polarised views pertaining to the product at hand? The most common strategy that the industry uses is to package the film for its technical richness over debates that may emerge out of it as a culture shaper. This is why all the interviews that Ranveer Singh gave for *Padmavat*, all his media statements, were solely centred on how the film forced him to push the envelope with his acting. Another selling point was Sanjay Leela Bhansali's directorial vision and execution. In fact, in their plea to support the film despite the socio-political and religious controversy it fell into, the entire star cast unanimously only spoke about the film as a piece of art and nothing else. These aspects create the much-needed distance from the obvious ongoing cultural debate.

This trend that focuses on logical narrative building to fulfil the public relations objectives at hand is becoming increasingly popular. As a practice it is subtle, organic and hence gradual. The pressure to start working towards this strategy precedes film

production itself. The concept of pre-selling is now more rampant than ever before. With tools that enable fast dissemination of information, it is important for PR practitioners to spread this ‘pre-buzz’, significantly early to the film. The advent of social media has been the biggest game changer in this regard (Valo, 2018). This pre-buzz is packaged and justified as a long preparation period for the film as undertaken by the whole cast and crew. This is especially true for mainstream projects that star big names who have enough brand equity to attract a new audience. Smaller films, OTT films, Independent films etc. are different with their PR that they focus on post-release promotion more. This is essentially for two reasons, budget restraints; and to streamline and limit their promotions to the specialised audience that loyally consumes these films (Hennig-Thurau and Houston, 2018).

5 Storylines, social media and film PR

Social media is a tool that has proven useful for PR practitioners time and again since its adoption. Making judicious use of this medium, the industry is moving towards a collaborative approach. The first step of this collaborative approach is reflected in how the PR efforts are more sensitive to what the audience truly wants. This was almost absent in the previous times where it was not possible for fans to create that collective fandom momentum mostly because of the absence of social media. As fans get to convey what they want from their stars and stars are also able to receive it effortlessly, the result that comes out is a win-win in its truest sense (Stahl, 2018).

Now that we have established that product-wise, the audiences are getting what they want as they get to dictate their preferences through interactive digital media. As we now see more dark genres and alternative moral yardsticks being showcased in our films, does this mean that this is what the audiences want and that there is a possible moral shift in the society itself? The audiences no longer feel as distant from film stars because of the realistic images they give out on social media. Therefore, it is easy for audiences to accommodate with this value dissonance as they expect realistic portrayal over ideal morals (Bird et al., 2018). This may seem like a transition that has taken place on a relatively individual level but this is what the latest media practices intend to target. As the audience engagement has now moved to a more dynamic medium, like the social media, something that attracts engagement on an everyday level, it is these micro experiences that PR tries to target as opposed to the larger cultural structures. This is what the pressure to create ‘relatable’ content strategies boil down to (Brauchler and Postill, 2010). This is particularly true for OTT films that have the freedom to engage with their loyal fan base very closely but this also calls for a highly hyper-individualised promotional approach (Chatterjee and Pal, 2020). However, as the OTT space is also exclusive, releases of big films owing to the pandemic, the promotional strategies are steering to something that is similar to the conventional. Movies like *Sadak 2* and *Laxmi Bomb* have been packaging their release along the lines of hassle-free delivery of entertainment and the angle of entertainment is something that is still used by actors like Akshay Kumar who do not particularly target a genre but a wide audience. The promotional tools of these films have also been social media.

The usage of social media comes with a string of undeniable benefits. However, it is also a medium that enables the co-existence of many viewpoints and value systems. This means that not every strategy can appeal to everyone, even if they fall under the segments

of target. For instance, let us recall the possible political agendas the film may try to cater to. The pressure is not direct but an obligation to come out of interdependence. The role of PR here is particularly important to not let the intent reach the public outright. However, as the audience evolves more and more, this becomes an uphill task. Content-wise, many filmmakers try to take the educational route as they try to paint an image that suggests objective analysis of a certain issue with its own subtle undertones. As the social learning theory (Bandura, 1969) suggests, the public consumption of a certain viewpoint is definitely stronger as it becomes shared knowledge as opposed to personal opinion building (Grady et al., 2019). Social media interaction has been a real influencer in this regard as hidden motives are not just hidden motives anymore (Grieverson, 2018).

This resistance is often reflected in the form of trolling but the only saving grace is that it adds up to the overall earned media of a film. To overcome this is also where the practice of logic driven narrative building works. While the grey shades portrayed by a certain artist may attract more dissent, something as objective as acting may not (Berger and Reber, 2006). Social media has also made it possible to reach out to communities that were earlier not as accessible. Therefore, even the mainstream cinema feels the pressure to cater or at least represent these distant communities (Molleda and Kochhar, 2019). For instance, Ayushmann Khurrana's *Article 15* was a mainstream film produced by a mainstream production house with promotions done predominantly on social media. This is also true for new genres. For instance, for a genre like science that is comparatively absent in the Indian cinema, is slowly starting to be included. For instance, *Brahmastra* is an upcoming film starring Ranbir Kapoor, Alia Bhatt and Amitabh Bachchan. While it may not be purely scientific in its treatment, it's the closest film to the concerned genre. This innovation is a result of the shift in content preferences that social media is causing and putting forth (Kapoor and Singh, 2019).

Talking about social media and outright display of fandom, out of home (OOH) has been a greatly symbolic medium of communication. Consider a state like Tamil Nadu where politics and cinema are extremely interlinked and fandom is at its hysteric best. As reported by many firsthand accounts, back in the day, public posters of films were symbolic of caste-based value systems. Tamil cinema was growing increasingly anti-Brahmin which gained more popularity amongst similar masses. The role of public display here indicates the growth of a certain type of collective conscience. And because it was growing every day, it became the norm in terms of cultural representation. Even now, there are very few movies that have Brahmin characters as protagonists (Gerritsen, 2019). This links back to the discussion on social learning theories.

The review of literature positions how entertainment PR posits cinema as a cultural industry. A cultural industry, as defined by Adorno (2001), a popular social thinker, is an industry that works on the principle of popularising certain cultural practices, transforming them into the standard culture and using them to fulfil its economic objectives. The entertainment PR industry's practices of storytelling, narrative building, messaging among other techniques are all in light with the kind of cultural ethos set by the umbrella cinematic environment with the outright aim of maximising ticket sales. A step that follows this is using the resultant economic gains to inject new practices which take their time to familiarise with the target audience and eventually sustain these new values. In fact, this discussion could be linked with how we see many characters play the role of PR professionals on-screen always which signifies the representation of new cultural practices. The portrayal may differ from culture to culture depending on the

perception of the industry itself (Tsetsura et al., 2018). The process of interacting this process of culture building with the audience is where PR comes in Oakley and O'Connor (2015).

6 Entertainment PR and the emergence of storytelling

Entertainment PR therefore relies on this cultural economics. The emergence of storytelling (which lies at the crux of the general set of communication strategies as seen in the world of PR is a result of the fact that selling culture is unlike selling any commodity? When a consumer consumes culture, they get to interact with, question, engage and maybe even reproduce it. Therefore, the economics of cinema is also the logic of cultural politics. The minute you induce new practices into this umbrella culture, the change takes a long time to sink in. This is why audience acceptance builds only eventually. Since there are obvious economic objectives at hand, a tool like PR is needed as the process of establishing a new culture is also coupled with monetary gains (Edwards and Hodges, 2011).

7 Research methodology

As a study that aims to delve into industry practice, the research methodology is based on gathering and analysing practitioners' perspectives through intensive interviews. The interviewees for this study include industry experts from entertainment PR. The interviewees comprise contemporary practitioners as well as seasoned professionals so as to understand a variety of perspectives that exist on the topic. Given the nature of the topic, the interviews consist of open-ended questions to draw multiple and diverse insights.

Type of sampling: purposive sampling was used to select the experts for intensive interviews. The sampling criteria were as under:

- Indian entertainment PR professionals
- with at least three years of experience
- combination of working on films and OTT
- based out of metros.

7.1 Semi-structured questionnaire

The primary reason behind having a semi-structured interview was to ensure that the conversations did not get limited at any point. The subjects for the interviews hail from a dynamic background career which is bound to have myriad of insights. The best way to make the most of this kind of interaction was to keep enough leeway for impromptu questions. Throughout the course of the interview, there were a variety of themes that the subjects touched upon. The most common ones being the current state of affairs in the world of entertainment PR, its operation in a multicultural context like India, films and

fandom in India, social media, digital communication and touchpoints, OTT and films and media management. Overall, the insights strongly pointed towards the inevitable linkage of films with culture and values and the rise of social media and digital communication which is changing the shape of PR every single day.

8 Thematic analysis

Entertainment PR in its operations is as dynamic as it gets. For starters as a field that balances multiple brands at once, the stars and the film itself, there is a variety of stakeholders to be catered to and the bigger challenge of operating in a co-created space which equally involves the intended audiences. As a mechanism that operates in the intricate ecosystem, entertainment PR professionals find it tough to narrow down their approaches and strategies into smaller objective points. As one of the subjects rightly says, “entertainment PR is always more strategic than it is tactical. Tactical is what meets your eye and strategic is what is happening to you without your realization”. The world of stories is not an uncharted territory for PR professionals who work in a profession that is based upon storytelling. The real challenge is to build a narrative of the story. Narrative building in this context comes with the pressure of consistency, acceptance and desirability. To understand this in the context of the paper, entertainment is aimed at something more wholesome. In many ways, it is that mechanism which transcends films from being mere stories to culture shapers. With this, let us move on to understand the extracted themes from the 23 codes derived from the insights gathered over a series of 9 interviews.

9 PR is used to amplify a film

In its core, the role of PR in the world of films is to amplify what the film represents. While marketing is a more of an economic function which has metrics like ROI and profitability, PR is more wholesome in that it tries to amplify the film as opposed to just promoting it. While it is true that economics is the biggest determinant for all the promotional strategies a film undertakes, PR is only linked to the process and not directly targeted at it. PR is more wide unlike marketing as PR is the wing that aims to connect all the stakeholders. In terms of a film, one of the most crucial functions of PR is to popularise opinions which work in the favour of the film. For best results, PR and marketing work together. As pointed out by one of the subjects:

“Now, your marketing team or your social media team are gonna highlight the same articles when they were posted on LinkedIn, or they were posted on Twitter, or they’re gonna tweet, tweet or talk about Yeah, even if they’re creating contests. They are creating communication channels, they are talking about the same thing. Driving the same keywords. Yeah, all of that narrows down to a tonality and see the entire agenda that you want to.”

Viewing films as culture shapers primarily may take away from the economic pressures they have but as a business, profitability and scalability are indispensable.

10 Commercial targets are the most important

Some of the best stories fail to do desirable business, even in a content-driven environment like this. From a PR angle, this could be accounted to potential value dissonance. In simpler words, the inability to connect with what the film is trying to convey. The experience of going to theatres for watching films is still a collective experience in India and family outings form a great chunk of it. As a social group that represents diversity of ideas, the best way to reach out to them seems like a masala film which does not display any polarised values but banks on the general, mass sentiment that exists towards an issue. This conundrum goes on to show what it takes to balance economic pressure and creativity. The lack of this overwhelming economic pressure gives more leeway for experimental content as can be seen in the case of independent cinema and OTT. OTT is still in its nascent stage, on its way to transition into a bigger industry. As a platform, it is still essentially targeted at sensitising the audiences to pave way for such stories. The rapid pace of content production is also to condition the audience with the presence of certain value systems.

In comparison to its bigger counterpart, films, one of the many reasons we see the rise of dark genres in Indian cinema is because OTT content paved the way for the success of it. If this genre was still at its nascent stage, it would have never been represented in mainstream cinema simply because the return on investment would not be as lucrative.

“It is easier to convince studios when there is an A-lister because you can expect better commercial returns. This is also why unconventional scripts are also given away to A-listers. For instance, ‘Gully Boy’ by Ranveer Singh.”

Talking about commercial pressure, marketing and PR are essential functions in ensuring profitability. Although it is mentioned earlier that PR plays a more wholesome role than just an economic function, it cannot be dismissed that the efforts undertaken by the PR team also add up to the larger return on investment.

11 Bigger the film, lesser the risk

The kind of commercial pressure mainstream films undergo is crucial to understand the effect it has on the ensuring PR and marketing strategy of the film. Big films which have more money riding on them refrain from resorting to outrageous narratives as they have a high chance of backfiring. This is why big films stick to tried and tested strategies. Although they also enjoy the luxury of having highly influential star power. No matter what the route these PR strategies take, the crux of it as we see these days is based on connections, personalisation and one on one connect with fans. This again links us back to social media and digital communication that is being increasingly included by PR professionals in their approach to the film at hand. The risk of something being too creative is avoided to not hamper the potential return on investment.

Let us recall an account shared by one of the subjects who says,

“For instance a film like Lucknow Central, we could take that kind of risk with memes etc because there was lesser risk. But we cannot extend such creativity to bigger projects. We better stick to the already known touchpoints and strategize accordingly.”

12 Dark genres or offbeat content is a function of demand

As aforementioned, OTT platforms have been successful in sensitising the Indian audience along with social media which has effortlessly enabled cross-cultural interaction. This has brought forth a world of opportunities for people and has also exposed them to the world outside their own cultural contexts. This has led people to grow more intricate in their choices as they wish to see more and more of stories which challenge their status quo. As rightly pointed out by one of the subjects,

“PR people are catching on to these signs that Indian audiences are looking at international shows of new language. Not just English, you’ll see Money Heist in Spanish? Yeah. That I think. Yeah, I mean, there are all kinds of shows now available. To understand, we need the proper research, writing team, proper marketing team, proper PR team, all of them have to work in tandem to achieve a certain, you know, goal set by the company or the studio or Netflix or whoever.”

A big point to drive home from the aforementioned points is the changing cultural fabric of our society. But this change precedes OTT and dates to the advent of the social media era in India.

13 Social media is the present also the future

A big factor behind the change in our cultural landscape itself is social media. It has helped people collectively get exposed to alternative value systems and adopt it in their own small ways in their personal contexts. As a medium that enables cross-cultural communication and wide exposure, filmmakers are now getting access to audiences which are sensitive to such unconventional stories as they get a peek into that world through social media. Social media platforms enable co-created communication which gives the audiences the power to influence the kind of choices their favourite stars are making.

“The success of international shows like Money Heist etc goes on to show how social media is minimizing that distance and from a PR standpoint, it is amplifying what your audience wants. PR people are constantly catching on to whatever is happening in digital media and there is a lot that happens there.”

While this type of exposure may seem phenomenal, it is still evolving everyday. Marketers and PR practitioners look at this evolving stage as something that promises ample opportunities for business expansion. Especially for a cultural industry like Bollywood.

To understand this from a PR standpoint, social media has not just given rise to alternate values but also expanded touchpoints and patterns of communication. Summarising this in a nutshell, this is what one of the subjects has to say,

“I tell people to not differentiate OTT and social media but to treat them as a singular digital ecosystem which cross-pollinate ideas. The most viral posts you may find on your Twitter or Instagram feed may stand in front of you a full-blown movie or series on the OTT platform of your choice.”

At a larger level, this practice has managed to stir things around in terms of how content is the primary determinant of audience engagement and preference. Although some

insights also point to how content and acting have always been the biggest drivers. What has changed is the definition of what is good content and what is not.

14 Acting and content are evergreen aspects

We often hear experts opine that the shift to content-driven cinema is a recent one. While it is true to a certain extent, what the proposition fails to include is that the shift is towards a particular type of content, the type that transports you to a different context, that challenges status quo, that makes your mind wander and shakes your long held belief system. Like aforementioned, this change can be attributed to social media which has normalised exposure to different cultures unlike the conventional school of communication which prioritised familiarity.

Regardless of what the preference is, the underlying commonality is that content and acting have always been the primary magnets to audiences.

“Masala films are also good content for people. Akshay Kumar, Salman Khan are good actors for many people. The question of what is good content is subjective so you cannot really determine. Critical acclaim is just a way of packaging.”

With a background information as multifaceted and dynamic, how do entertainment PR professionals then navigate this complicated space which involves an influx of several stakeholders and multiple aspects?

15 The ultimate PR tactics

The most common angle PR strategies adopt is using stories and popularising beliefs which make the film’s story to minimise the cultural distance. Another technique is to sell the film entirely based on storyline, performances or any technical richness that it possesses. Let us understand the two in more detail:

- **Minimising cultural distance:** PR as a mechanism is known to amplify what the film represents. This transcends the role of PR beyond just communication and includes positioning films as shapers of culture. At a practical level, this means involving all the relevant touchpoints and conveying consistent messaging which stresses upon that one key message you want your audience to drive home. In terms of messaging, the stories are directed at sensitising the audience to a certain idea and throwing the ball in their court.

For instance, for a film like ‘Thappad’, the outright challenge was to get a wider audience to resonate with something that is considered trivial. Therefore, one of the many PR objectives at hand was to amplify the nuances around feminism and consent. As part of this, Taapsee Pannu, the protagonist and Anubhav Sinha, the director, were seen saying similar statements in their press interactions. They were also seen on digital channels which are known for their feminist narratives and created educative content around domestic violence through the star’s social media accounts. Their biggest campaign was the *Thappad pe Disclaimer* which displayed strong tonality. Additionally, the entire cast and crew used their mothers’ names in

the credits section. So, as we see, the film did not just succeed at the box office but also at helping the audience drive the point home.

This resonates closely to what one of the subjects pointed out which suggested that PR popularises and ideally normalises opinions.

- Critical acclaim packaging: as discussed earlier, content and acting are the primary determinants of audience preference. However, the obvious risk is to determine whether the choice of story is made on the grounds of familiarity or on the ground of excitement? Does the audience want to watch something that validates their existing beliefs or something that challenges their status quo? These are some questions that are bound to rise when the PR strategy is closely linked to the plot of the film itself (i.e., feminist messaging for a feminist film).

A way to dodge these risks would be to distance the audience from the storyline and sell the film entirely on objective metrics like acting, technical richness, performances, preparation, etc. (i.e., strong messaging in terms how it was to put together a feminist film).

This can be understood better with an example shared by one of the subjects during the interview, “Films like ‘Kabir Singh’ and ‘Padmavat’ are not first hand story tellers of the plots they have and they were both sold on the kind of performances the protagonists put up. For instance, with Ranveer Singh, the larger picture only talked about how versatile an actor he is, yeah, that he can mold himself into something which is not believable, or which was, which was not acceptable. But still, when he came and played Khilji, if you hated him as much as he loved him that’s basically the narrative that was created”.

This is how the gamut of something as dynamic as PR plays out in a cultural industry like films.

16 Discussion

The process of studying the world of films is as dynamic as these stories themselves. The paper is contextualised in a country that loves its stories and the stars that come out of this populace. This gives the filmmakers and producers ample business opportunity which is seen in how big the industry here is. A major tool to amplify the already lucrative field is to reach out to people, to help them understand the stories that are being conveyed and this is where the role of Public Relations comes in. The need for PR is felt more than ever in the current context where our films are steering towards experimental content and bringing out unconventional stories. In case of dark genres which by essence are meant to disrupt people’s long-held beliefs, what kind of approach does PR take to make the movie reach and resonate with communities of all kinds?

While the expertise of PR stands unquestioned, it is interesting to note that the rise of dark genres we see today is actually a function of demand. The direction of these stories has been from the audience to the film industry through PR professionals and their active social listening. Let us look into the process further.

Any conversation around the media these days is incomplete without the mention of social networking platforms. As a medium which comes with its unprecedented wide

reach, social media has enabled cross-cultural communication thereby exposing its users to the world that exists beyond their personal contexts alone. This can be linked to how the audience is actively engaging in consuming content that crosses cultural and geographical boundaries. While this may seem like a modern day phenomenon, the roots of this cultural exchange date back to the early 2000s as the recently expanded Bollywood was aggressively pandering to its NRI audience (Josiam et al., 2015).

What is now seen in admiring international shows was earlier seen in exoticising foreign locations. Therefore, cultural exchange as a process has been around for a long time, the audience is therefore logically progressing to expect similar stories of similar momentum in their own cultural context. Giving this cultural shift a practical and materialistic turn was the advent of independent cinema earlier and now OTT platforms with path-breaking content which has shown phenomenal business. Playing on this sentiment is Bollywood which is trying to incorporate similar ethos in their storytelling. While the obvious argument of the audiences growing more content driven and eventually medium agnostic, the biggest selling point in Bollywood's favour happens to be the community viewing experience which OTTs may fail to offer.

Movies in India are adapting to this cultural shift but the change is not full blown yet. This is simply because this is a relatively new shift and movies are equally obligated to the wider audience that expects the conventional stories we have been exposed to. As important as it is to move towards experimentation to serve the expectations of the niche communities, commercial targets are always a constant metric to consider which lies with the majority audiences. As discussed earlier, familiarity is the bigger demand and therefore a bigger priority in terms of return on investment (Paunksnis, 2019).

Talking about demand and audience preferences, it is interesting to note that off-beat content and stories are a function of demand. This implies that the flow of these stories has been from the audience to the creators and not vice versa. This collective shift has been predominantly brought forth by niche communities which are able to voice their opinions and amplify them through social media. To cater to these audiences, PR professionals essentially resort to digital media as that happens to be the most logical place to connect with them. Other than this, social media is also a co-created and collective space which enables the effortless execution storytelling strategies.

However, when it comes to mainstream masala films the most popular choice of media happens to be traditional media such as Page 3, radio. As digital media is rapidly becoming a part of mainstream platforms, movies are investing almost equally in digital PR as well. This can be linked back to the Ormax Media research report which shows that around 35–40% of the first day collection can be attributed to the social media buzz a movie garners within the marketing window of 45–60 days.

Talking about the use of social media in audience engagement, an interesting observation to make here is that since the direction of such movies comes from the audience directly, the role of PR is narrowed down as there is no evident push strategy that is needed. To suit this audience dictated environment PR professionals are moving to more and more interactive approaches. In this regard, one of the most revolutionary platforms in our times is International Movie Database (IMDB) as it has enabled information symmetry and uniformity across all the major stakeholders (Kuşay, 2019).

As PR strategies move towards becoming more refined and connections driven, the scope of creativity is still very limited as the stakes are very high. This is why PR is often restricted to the tried and tested media and with almost similar ways. The only changes happen to be to the narratives which are created from the story of the film itself. The risk

of something being too creative is avoided to not hamper the potential ROI. However, regardless of choice of media, the messages are kept consistent to ensure that the larger cultural message is being pushed aggressively. For example, the PR plan executed by *Bazaar*, a Saif Ali Khan starrer which showed the dark side of trading and stock market, involved the actor making appearances on finance news channels and also gave an exclusive interview to the finance beat of ToI, Mumbai. The messaging was essentially around the stock market being a dark world already and the movie does not attempt to inject a new perspective but aims to bring forth a realistic image.

While PR is a very crucial element of film marketing, it can only help in amplifying the value proposition of a film which is closely linked to the story and performances. So, while the best of

PR efforts can ensure a good footfall on the first day first show, the ensuing response eventually boils down to the quality of the movie itself. To understand this better, let us consider the example of *Chhapak* a film starring Deepika Padukone. What was supposed to be a sign of support was entirely misconstrued to be propaganda amid a major social movement. Deepika's appearance at the JNU protest failed to create the intended impact and ensued a string of controversy for itself. While the film did have enough budgets and resources to support a campaign like this, it failed to guarantee the intended result.

A major inference to be drawn from the aforementioned points revolves around the cultural economics that film PR banks on. The emergence of storytelling (which lies at the crux of the general set of communication strategies as seen in the world of PR) is a result of the fact that selling culture is unlike selling any commodity. When a consumer consumes culture, they get to interact with, question, engage and maybe even reproduce it. Therefore, the economics of cinema is also the logic of cultural politics (Edwards and Hodges, 2011).

At a more tactical level, the kind of strategies that PR generally employs can be categorised into two large buckets. The first point is to ensure that the moral distance is minimised. While the groundwork for that is already laid as people are more used to alternative value systems, the ensuing PR focuses on amplifying it. For instance, many stars these days collaborate with digital influencers and create content that emphasises the message. So, the key is to popularise a certain opinion which works in the favour of the film. Common strategies for this would include powerful storytelling, social media communication (campaigns which are embedded with strong cultural messages like speak up against domestic violence or end racism etc.)

Another way to do this is by selling the film entirely on its quality especially in terms of components like story, plot, performances and any technical richness. This is why the trend of leaking Behind-the-scenes stories, stories of preparation for the role are of growing popularity. A prominent example of this could be the previously discussed *Padmaavat* and Ranveer Singh's pattern of engagement and image building.

17 Conclusions

The Hindi film industry is now at its most experimental phase as we get to see unconventional stories more frequently than ever. While it reflects a great deal of creative progression in terms of filmmaking, at a deeper level, these stories are challenging the larger moral fabric that has existed conventionally. Of the many reasons that have contributed to this change, PR is a major component. How do PR professionals build

stories, create strategies that resonate with people despite having a starkly different tonality? Through the course of the paper, it has been seen that the role of PR behind the success of dark genres in Indian cinema is more complex than what meets the eye. While in terms of strategies, we still see that PR professionals retain some traditional ways, what complicates the process is that the rise of demand is a function of demand is essentially to cater to what the audience wants. The increased usage of social media in India has led people to get a peek into the world that exists beyond their cultural boundaries. These include different cultures, different value systems and different ideas.

This exposure is often seen in terms of the shift we see in the kind of film people demand to see.

They look for stories that push them off their long held beliefs and challenge their status quo. Commercially speaking, the testing water for this kind of content was OTT which stood the test preference by showcasing phenomenal business in the darkest of its offerings. So, as the Hindi film industry moved into such experimentation, there was considerable groundwork laid out already. Additionally, the biggest advantage that PR professionals enjoy in this case is that there is no need for an apparent push strategy as the audience is already ready to watch a movie like this. So, the strategy for such movies is generally restricted to two wide approaches.

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So, as we see, the role of PR is essentially about amplifying the film at hand and to bridge the gap between 'dark' and normal.

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