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Viewing through the queer lens: Reception of homosexuality in South Indian cinema

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Abstract

Indian cinema, transregional by nature, has not only produced commercially successful films in Hindi language but also has succeeded in producing box office hit films from the regions like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, which constitute the popularly known south Indian film industry. The success of these films is influenced by various factors, to list a few, widespread audience, technical and technological advancements, rational, close to life and sensitive narratives, the advent of OTT platforms etc. Films dealing with queer themes in south Indian film industry have gained prominence worth discussion and debate post 1990 with gender sensitisation and awareness programmes leading to a ripple formation in the dichotomous male/female gender hierarchal system of the Indian society. This study, adopting a quantitative approach, focuses on films dealing with homosexuality produced by the south Indian film industry. It investigates the effect of destigmatisation of homosexuality through films and delves deep to understand the common perception on films featuring queer themes as well as audience interpretation of these queer visual texts. The study concludes on how the queer representations in south Indian cinema are yet not fully engaged with the audience contributing to an increased awareness about the sexual minority communities to build and promote an inclusive society.

Keywords: audience, destigmatisation, homosexuality, reception, representation, south Indian cinema



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Public Interest Statement

The research is positioned in the context of South Indian film industry, which is regarded to be the most happening segment of the regional cinema in India. A potential medium like cinema, has failed to accommodate the gender minority community as well as represent them. Furthermore, it has often led to symbolic annihilation, reiterating the cis heteronormative patriarchal practices. This paper examines how films of South Indian industry dealing with homosexuality are perceived by the audience in South India and explores whether such films have contributed to the promotion of an inclusive society in these regions.

Introduction

The Indian film industry in the 1990s underwent a significant transformation as a result of globalisation and liberalisation, leading to a paradigm shift. While Third cinema struggled for recognition in the global cinematic landscape, regional cinema faced its own set of challenges and trials within the Indian film industry. However, the landscape is now witnessing a gradual shift, with regional cinema steadily gaining prominence and exhibiting its unique characteristics within the broader context of Indian cinema. This evolution marks a notable transition in the trajectory of regional cinema, signifying its increasing relevance and impact on the Indian film industry. Over the past two decades, the conflation of Hindi cinema with Indian cinema and the notion of Hindi Cinema being the sole representative of Indian Cinema have been increasingly challenged by the rise of successful regional films produced in various languages and regions across the country. The instance of the renowned director Rajamouli, after receiving the prestigious Oscar award, consciously correcting the host's statement "RRR is an Indian Film" to "RRR is a Telugu film" is a marker of the prominent and promising position regional cinema is gaining within the Indian cinema. S.V Srinivas elaborating on the significance of partition of India based on languages and cinema of the regions, says,

In discussions of Indian cinema, the region has often signified a language other than Hindi and a linguistic state. In other words, regional cinema is the cinema made in the official language of a linguistic state. Such a conception of the region and cinema is derived from and reinforced by post-1956 developments in Indian states when the linguistic reorganization of the Indian union resulted in the suppression of linguistic and cultural diversity within states. (Srinivas, 2015)

The longstanding monopoly of Hindi cinema over regional cinema in reaching out to a wider audience has been traversed in the recent years with technological advancements and technical strategies like dubbing, subtitling, popularity of film festivals and expansion of OTT platforms. A shift in the spaces where films are screened "ranging from single-screen theatres, multiplexes, film festivals, academic institutions, cultural institutions, film clubs, and more private modes of viewing" also needs to be stated in this context (Mokkil,2019). Experiments with form, content and style in filmmaking practices opened up creative avenues for the regional filmmakers.

The Indian film industry is the largest globally which churns out over 1,000 movies annually and showcases them across a massive network of 13,000 exhibition sites nationwide (Qasim Khan et al., 2024). This leads us to look into the success of regional cinema from the perspective of increased number of screens for films from the regions throughout the globe. A recent report by the Bureau of Outreach and Communication reveals that India possesses around 31.52 lakh seats in approximately 8,700 screens across the nation. The states of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala collectively account for about 4,150 screens with a combined seating capacity of 18.16 lakh. This indicates that these states together represent nearly 47.78 percent of the total screens and contribute to roughly 57.61 percent of the seating capacity (Nandwani, 2024). Another study on viewership of films in south India records

an increase in per capita consumption of films from states like AP/Telangana (415 hours) and Karnataka (206 hours) in comparison to the consumption of Bollywood films (125 hours). Furthermore, in south, films took the major share of 23 percent of viewership in televisions. These statistics by stating that the “number of channels showing films is higher than other regional languages” of the country throw light on the importance of movie viewership in south India (THINK, 2019).

The data highlights the prosperity of cinema as a cultural industry in south India. Additionally, south Indian cinema is renowned for its unique experiments with characters, narratives and themes on one hand and technical aspects like sound production, cinematography, and editing on the other. It has emerged as a powerful medium that transcends its primary function as an entertainment industry and has demonstrated a growing inclination to give voice to the unheard and underrepresented segments of society, including gender minority communities, Dalits, tribals, and even the de-notified communities. These shifts in cinematic narratives also reflect its potential to set agendas, influence public perceptions, and raise awareness about the persisting unresolved challenges and crises prevalent in the society.

Although studies have examined audience reception and perception of films in various mediums, there is a lack of research on understanding the common perceptions of films featuring queer themes and their effects, as well as audience interpretations of queer visual texts, within the south Indian context. This study aims to investigate how audiences in south India understand and respond to films portraying homosexuality as a central theme. It seeks to explore the common perceptions and interpretations of queer representations in south Indian cinema, and how these depictions have yet to fully engage with and raise awareness of the LGBTQ+ community. The review of existing literature on the portrayal of homosexual characters, films featuring themes of homosexuality and audience perceptions of such films produced in south India could provide valuable insights into the evolving landscape of south Indian cinema, particularly in the period following the year 2000.

Literature Review and Background of The Study

One of the most interesting peculiarities of south Indian cinema is that even though it comprises films from four different languages produced from four different regions, it acts as a single entity attracting and appealing to the audience of all these regions. Srinivas in his essay ‘Rise of the Regional Blockbuster’ contends that:

Distribution of films made in the four major south Indian languages was till recently largely limited to the southern states, or to places with sizeable populations speaking those languages. Southern industries are also regional because they do not cater exclusively to any one linguistic state or territory. Films made in the region have a history of crossing linguistic and state boundaries and have been dubbed into one or more south Indian languages. (Srinivas, 2022)

In the last two decades, south Indian film industry (Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada and Telugu) has experimented with new ways of film making practices and has nurtured a celluloid culture dealing with challenging narratives as well as advanced technologies. This paved way for the filmmakers to experiment with queer narratives and LGBTQ+ characters on screen. Unlike the New Queer Cinema in the West, Indian cinema does not have an exclusive genre dealing with films on LGBTQ+ themes or characters. It is also important to note that the visibility of LGBTQ+ community in media is significant for mainly two reasons. “First, for many groups in society, media visibility is considered an important form of social and political recognition. Second, for GLBTQ people, media representation is often a vital source for self-recognition and identity formation” (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). In countries like India, people depend heavily on media to understand and construct ideas on gender minority groups as their direct interactions with gender non-conforming people are limited. As Andre Cavalcante points out, “for those living on the margins of

society, queer media presence offers a knowing wink and a nod of assurance that they are a part of a larger world, that they matter, and that queer life is possible” (Cavalcante, 2018).

The representation of homosexuality in Indian media is not a new phenomenon. There were subtle references of queer elements even in the earlier Indian cinema which were not read or interpreted through a queer lens then. Srijia Sanyal asserts that in Indian context it is popular culture that constructs the notion of homosexuality (Sanyal, 2023). “The mass media’s determination to profit from LGBT content has created a shift in the current digital age’s popular culture” (Habidin, Adzmi, Salleh, & Al, 2023). On one hand, the industry offers acceptance and inclusivity for the queer individuals, but on the other, it explores the enormous potential in fetching monetary benefits by exploiting the trend of a new movie consumption culture which tries to represent the gender minority communities. This trend of representation resonates “deeply with a neoliberal ethos that has begun to value gender “diverse” people as a potentially valuable forms [SIC] of human capital” (Currah, 2016). It is also interesting to note that while virtual and online media gave the queer individuals a safe haven to express their identity, the mainstream cinema failed to portray them and sensitise the audience. Furthermore, queer representation in Indian cinema often included only the transgender individuals and limited the representation of gender minorities like gays, lesbians and bisexuals. Therefore, it becomes crucial to understand, analyse and examine the meaning making process associated with cultural products like cinema and its impact on the audience to construct and reconstruct notions about queer identities.

Gender issues and gender sensitisation have become a major trope of discussion through visual media since 1990s owing to the global changes in approaching gender and its associated issues. Films are a potent tool for captivating the audience’s imagination and offering insight into unfamiliar subjects. A notable strength of films is their capacity to tell an engaging narrative, allowing viewers to gain understanding and empathy for individuals facing discrimination, poverty or hardship that may be foreign to them (Thangavelu, 2020). In south Indian cinema, queer characters and queer themes were introduced subtly in the visual texts of 1990s. These characters were given a screen presence which lasted less than 15 minutes in the average 2 or 2.5 hours long feature films. Apart from minimum screen presence, they were depicted with dark and negative undertones encouraging the viewers to categorise them as villains or ‘bad’ people. It took a long time for the south Indian film industry to talk explicitly about homosexuality and gender fluidity.

In regional cinema of the south, the first film to discuss homosexuality explicitly in its narrative is Mohan’s *Randu Penkuttikal* (1978), a Malayalam Cinema, which narrates the story of a beautiful love bond between Kokila and Girija. But the film does not explore the possibility of a lesbian relationship, instead makes Girija not to reciprocate to Kokila’s love and fall for a cis heterosexual hero. Most of the early 2000 films which had homosexual characters often had a cliched representation where homosexuality was portrayed as arising out of deprived or unfulfilled heterosexual relations. Narratives emphasised on homosexuality as a psychological disorder which can be corrected through counselling or treatment. Table 1 summarises the mainstream films that were released in south India from the year 2000 which had homosexual characters in lead roles.

Table 1. List of Mainstream South Indian Films with Homosexual Characters in Lead Roles Post 2000

| Language | Title of the Films | Director | Platform of Release |
|-----------|---|-----------------|---------------------|
| Kannada | <i>141</i> (Theme - Lesbian, 2015) | Bavaji. V | Theatre |
| Malayalam | <i>Moothon</i> (Theme - Gay, 2009) | Geethu Mohandas | Theatre |
| | <i>Kaathal – The Core</i> (Theme - Gay, 2023) | Jeo Baby | Theatre |

| | | | | |
|--------|--|--|--------------|---------|
| Tamil | | <i>En Magan Magizhvan</i> (Theme - Gay, 2017) | Lokesh Kumar | Theatre |
| Telugu | | No mainstream films with homosexual characters in the lead role. | | |

The landmark NALSA judgement (2018) decriminalising same sex love in India was an assurance of acceptance of the homosexual individuals by the society, seemingly offering them numerous opportunities to come out of their closets. The legal, social and political climate of these four regions also contributed to discussions and debates around the gender minority communities and their inclusivity in society. But from the data table given above, it is clearly evident that apart from rising activism and legal amendments for the betterment of the conditions of the queer individuals and attempts to bring awareness as well as sensitise the public, the representation of homosexuality in south Indian cinema is notably lacking. It is also intriguing to observe that all the lead roles in these films have been portrayed by cisgender heterosexual individuals. This undoubtedly highlights the entrenched dominance of actors and directors from this group, while underscoring the marginalised status of homosexual individuals within a prevailing cis-heteronormative societal framework. Furthermore, even in the presence of films representing the homosexual characters in lead role, symbolic annihilation of this community has often affected the way the dominant heterosexual members of the cisheteronormative society perceive and view the gender minority communities.

The films discussed here are based on the responses collected through the questionnaire. Films like *141* (Kannada), *Mumbai Police* (Malayalam) and *Monster* (Malayalam) have homosexual characters with more screen duration. They play a crucial role in the storyline, but are misrepresented in the narratives. They are misrepresented as the characters who fail in life due to their sexuality or sexual orientation. Apart from the films recorded in the data collection of the recent study, the Malayalam film, *Sanchaaram* (2004) deserves a special mention. It does not present a cliched climax, but points to the idea of convenience marriage as an alternative solution to be accepted by the society, which is why in *Sanchaaram* one of the lesbian characters chooses to marry a heterosexual man to have a privileged life in the society. It is also a subject of interest as well as concern that in a progressive state like Kerala, *Sanchaaram* was not even given a theatrical release. *Moothon* (2009), *Kaathal-The Core* (2023) and *En Magan Magizhvan* (2017) take into account the intricacies of homosexual lives, experiences and intimacy to weave acceptable and credible homosexual characters throwing light to the gender spectrum and gender fluidity.

Material Studied and Research Methodology

This paper focuses on the audience as the subject of research and follows the method of reception analysis to understand the consumption of media messages by the audience, how they make meanings and how this meaning making process is influenced by the consumption culture to produce the dominant narratives of the societal system. Thus, this paper tries to critique the discourses which claim that films produced from south India has made a significant contribution in promoting inclusivity within the mainstream society. The term ‘audience’ has undergone multiple layers of transition since its origin. Audience is “the readers of, viewers of, listeners to one or other media channel or of this or that type of content or performance” (McQuail, 1997). The presence of an accepted discourse on audience places them as “one branch of the subject matter in the study of mass communication and one main field of empirical research” (McQuail, 1997). Various theories that explore the impact of media on society emphasise the significant role of cinema in moulding public opinion. These theories underscore how the media determines which subjects are crucial for people to consider and also how their emotional reactions affect their viewpoints on these issues. Consequently,

the storylines depicted in films have a critical influence on shaping public viewpoints and mindsets. Films function as more than mere entertainment and serve as a conduit for shaping societal beliefs and values. By presenting compelling narratives and addressing social injustices, cinema possesses the ability to cultivate empathy and understanding among audiences, thereby potentially fostering positive societal change (Natarajan, 2020). Cinema, a medium for mass communication, therefore, has always considered audience as an integral part of study in understanding the impact of cinema on society and people.

Cinema plays an integral role in developing audience as a social scientific concept for research (Jowett & Linton, 1980). It also led to the emergence of the concept of mass audience which advanced the studies in reception (Mc Quail, 1997). Cinema does not open up the scope for interaction with its “object of attention” but the audience can interact with each other leading to the interpretations and opinions that can form or transform the belief, value and cultural system. The essence of “active audience” lies in the process of involvement which defines the experiences constructed by them in the process of film viewing. Understanding involvement is critical if one is to understand the relationship between audiences and media products, and how audiences make sense of the film and the event” (Srinivas, 1998). Cinema is often looked upon as a medium to understand the patterns of social experience or social isolation. The choice of content is highly dependent on the seek for knowledge to comprehend the new and existing societal structures. Therefore, cinema cannot be understood simply as a medium for entertainment but as powerful tool that propagates agendas and transforms the mindset of the audience.

Reception analysis, which sees audience as “interpretive communities” who can decode the visual texts becomes crucial here. Reception analysis explains how the audience decipher the hegemonic discourses offered by cinema and how the audience resist or subvert such dominant power narratives. Aminudin quotes Mc Quail’s take on reception analysis and says, “reception analysis emphasises the use of media as a reflection of the socio-cultural context and as a process of giving meaning to an experience and cultural production, culture and media experience in the public environment influence the process of public acceptance of media messages” (Aminudin, 2018). This paper highlights that meaning is not associated with the visual text but is created through the interaction of the text and audience. Therefore, the processing of visual texts becomes crucial which in turn influences the way audience think and perceive certain issues and challenges in the society. The paper adopts the theory of encoding-decoding proposed by Stuart Hall where he categorises the audience into three categories as: a) dominant hegemonic position where they read the connotations and engage in the dominant preferred readings, b) negotiated position where audience can decode the messages from the sender within a dominant social and cultural view, and c) oppositional position where audience oppose the dominant hegemonic practices. The viewers try to decipher a different meaning which is not explicitly revealed and is oppositional to the messages of the sender (Hall, Hobson, Lowe, & Willis, 2015).

Sampling and data collection

This paper uses questionnaire as a tool to collect data. It is widely acknowledged that the south Indian cinema has made significant impact through the representation of homosexual characters and themes in building an inclusive society. But the data collected from this study presents significant findings which question the claims of the destigmatising effects of mainstream cinema. The snowball sampling technique was adopted to get the sample population. The questionnaire was circulated in the form of a Google form and 109 participants responded to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was circulated among potential respondents for a time span of 3 months. The responses to the questionnaire were collected during the period of March 2024 to May 2024. The questionnaire included statements seeking the consent of the respondents to participate and also assured the confidentiality of the data shared by the respondents. The questionnaire is structured into two sections: demographic details and research topic-based questions. The various types of questions included are

a) Demographic questions which aimed at collecting the basic details of the respondents like name,

designation, age and geographical location to gain an overall understanding of the sampling population.

- b) Awareness questions which were directed to understand the knowledge of the respondents in the topic of discussion. These questions reflect the extend of awareness and understanding the respondents possess regarding the topic of discussion, that is homosexuality. This helps in gauging the responses to gain a clarity. It included questions like whether they were familiar with the term 'homosexuals', whether they have watched south Indian films with homosexual characters etc.
- c) Attitude questions which attempted to understand the positive or negative perceptions, views, feelings, sentiments and attitude of the respondents towards the topic of discussion. The questions seeking opinion about the role of south Indian films developing positive attitude towards homosexual individuals and the role of films in affecting or helping homosexual individuals struggling with sexual orientation are of this nature.
- d) Intention questions which tried to understand the intentions of their behaviour or approach towards the subject of discussion were also included. Questions to understand their willingness to engage in discussions about the community, future recommendations for the filmmakers as well as the role of films in influencing their perception about homosexual individuals are intention questions asked to the respondents.

Results And Discussion

Has south Indian cinema become successful in addressing the issues and challenges of homosexual individuals, thereby producing a destigmatising effect as claimed in the regions? This is the question to which this article seeks answer. The study focussed only on the participants from the states included under the umbrella term 'south India' which comprises of the regions of Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. The researcher selected south India as the focal region for this study, citing the significant rise in the popularity of south Indian cinema in comparison to other regional cinemas and Hindi cinema. This trend has been particularly pronounced following the release of pan-Indian films originating from south India, along with the continued success of uncensored content on OTT platforms which further justifies this choice. It is important to note that the preferences for films and its genres vary with many factors including age, education and socio-economic status (Dixit, 2022). According to the audience-focused perspective, people actively choose media content and types that fulfill their specific preferences. Students, academicians and professionals in various fields responded to the questionnaire. The sample taken for study were representatives of different backgrounds of social strata and of different age groups. Out of the total number of respondents, the majority belonged to the age group of 18 to 25 years. This study takes into account individuals who have watched films on homosexuality or films with homosexual characters produced in the south Indian film industry. The questionnaire was circulated among people of all the five southern states which is the home of south Indian film industry and 75.2 percent respondents were from Tamil Nadu.

Reception analysis also takes into consideration the platform used by the respondents to watch the films. The film viewing culture of south India has always promoted the theatre going practices for movie consumption. 37.6 percent of the respondents watch films once in 6 months and 33 percent watch films monthly, whereas 16.5 percent of the participants do not prefer to watch films in theatres. One among the manifold reasons of not watching films in theatre or decreased frequency of theatre going practice is the availability of digital content through various platforms like OTT. With technological advancements, the movie consumption patterns have changed showing an increase in film viewing practices with 30.3 percent of the participants watching films every week through OTT. As the study deals with the theme of homosexuality in films, it is important to understand the familiarity of audience with the term, homosexuals. 85 percent of the participants responded that they understood the term 'homosexual' whereas this answer contradicted with the responses they gave while enlisting the movie titles with homosexual characters in south Indian

cinema as many of them have mentioned films with transgender characters as well. The participants were asked for the source of knowledge of the term as well to confirm their familiarity.

Have you ever watched South Indian films (Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada) with homosexual characters (major or minor roles) in it?

109 responses

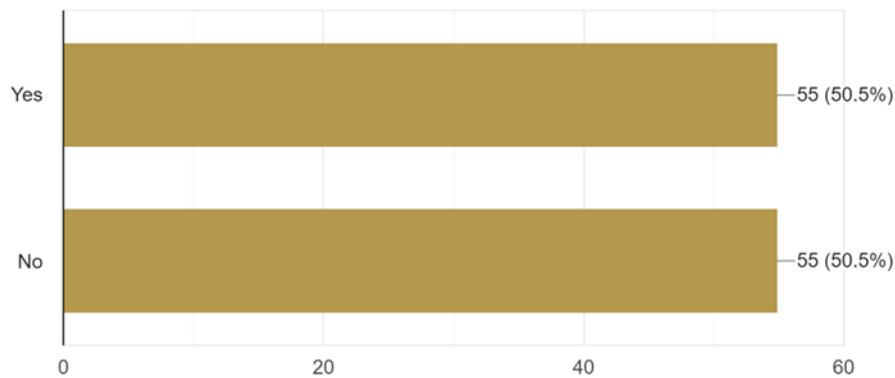


Figure 1

The above data clearly illustrates that from the total number of survey participants, half of the population have not watched films dealing with homosexuality and given attention to the major/minor roles with queer traits in south Indian cinema. This indicates a proportionality to the lack of availability and accessibility to the minimal repertoire of cinematic productions dealing with homosexuality as well as lack of awareness and interest in watching films with homosexual themes or characters.

Have you watched any South Indian film with a homosexual character in the lead role?

109 responses

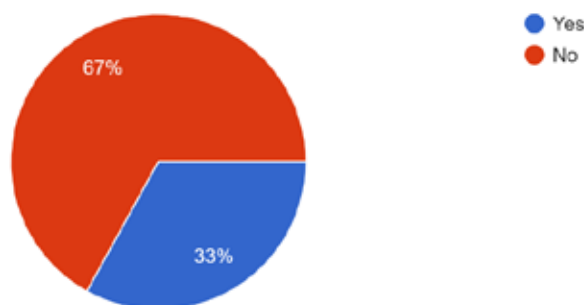


Figure 2

Most of the respondents included films with transgender characters in the list of films dealing with homosexuality and this shows the lack of understanding among the participants in differentiating the members of the gender minority communities. Despite the diversity of sexual and gender identities within the LGBTIQ+ community, the dominant narrative in Indian films has often been limited to the portrayal of transgender individuals as the sole representation of non-heteronormative identities (James & Venkatesan, 2022). This myopic perspective not only erases the multifaceted nature of queer experiences

but also perpetuates a narrow understanding of the queer community, which often reduces it to a singular, commercialised caricature which is well reflected in the responses of the participants.

The number of participants who have watched the films mentioned in Table 1 become significant here. According to the sample data, among the given films, there are no viewers for *141* and *En Magan Maghizhvan*, whereas the films like *Mumbai Police*, *Monster*, *Moothon* and *Kaathal* have 10, 3, 4 and 13 viewers respectively. It is interesting to note that all the films watched by the viewers are produced in Malayalam which indicates a trend of gender sensitisation by the Malayalam filmmakers within the south Indian regional cinema. However, the films which are mentioned in the list of homosexual films watched by the survey participants need to be critically examined before they are placed under the label of films dealing with homosexuality. A further enquiry on the selection of films is needed to confirm whether they are enlisted for the attempts made to bring in sensitive narratives or due to the star value of the actors taking up films dealing with homosexuality. The movies *Mumbai Police* and *Monster* enlisted by the participants are murder mysteries and the homosexual characters are represented as the murderers. The stereotypical association constructed between homosexuality and villainous traits, suggesting the inherent nature of such traits in homosexual individuals, places the visual texts as misrepresentation of homosexual characters. It is also interesting to note in these films that these murder mysteries investigated by a cis heterosexual man, unveils the sexual orientation of the homosexual murderers through a narrative which reinforces heterosexuality as normal and natural, and therefore, acceptable.

Choice of Medium for Watching Films

As discussed earlier, it can be posited that contemporary society epitomises a “streaming generation,” with instant access to an array of desired services and goods. This immediacy and transient nature define our consumption patterns. The COVID-19 pandemic which was a halt to this fast-paced lifestyle, accentuated the significance of streaming culture, particularly the video OTT sector (Dutta, 2022). This claim is supported by a recent article in *The Hindu* which claims that India contributes to the highest viewership of films on Netflix, globally (Bhargava, 2020). Therefore, it becomes important to understand whether there is an influence of the medium of consumption on the choice of films the respondents prefer to watch. Out of the 52 responses to the query enquiring the participants’ preferred medium to watch films with homosexual characters and the reasons for their choice, 36 respondents preferred OTT, 13 preferred both the medium, whereas only 3 respondents preferred cinematic experience in theatres.

The emergence of OTT services has substantially reshaped the film viewing landscape. This is evident from the responses of the participants who defended their preference by citing factors such as the ease of accessing films, the diverse content offerings, and the ability to enjoy a peaceful viewing experience without the need for parental consent when watching films that discuss homosexuality. For those who preferred both the medium, characterisation and storyline or plots were more important considerations than the specific platform used for viewing. Conversely, respondents who preferred the theatre-going experience emphasised their love for the cinematic experience in theatre and the unique atmosphere it offers, rather than being primarily concerned with the content of the films. Thus, it can be inferred that audience’s preference to watch films dealing with homosexuality predominantly in OTT, suggests the audience’s reluctance to engage with films that depict homosexuality in public theatrical settings, where open discussions may be inhibited. Additionally, it highlights the increased accessibility and convenience enabled by OTT platforms in facilitating the consumption of such content.

Impact on Audience

The paper also attempted to comprehend the impact of films dealing with homosexuality on audiences and analysed how viewers perceive the evolving representations of homosexuality in south Indian cinema over time. This investigation revealed a diverse array of responses, including a rise in nuanced and positive portrayals, an increase in the number of films addressing homosexuality, and a growth of viewership for

these films. Furthermore, respondents expressed that these films have facilitated the destigmatisation, recognition and acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community within society. They highlighted that increased awareness about the community has contributed to change public perceptions, sensitise audiences to issues of homophobia, and highlight the challenges and hardships faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. Additionally, these films have provided reassurance and support for those grappling with their sexual orientation. Another notable development is the trend of superstars portraying homosexual characters in mainstream cinema. This leads to the inference that significant shifts in representation by moving away from cliched portrayals such as convenience marriages as alternatives to conceal homosexuality and depictions of homosexuality as a mental illness or psychological disorder. Contemporary representations now address the plights and struggles faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in their daily lives, as well as the homophobia directed towards the community.

An essential inquiry is whether these changes in representation have effectively destigmatised perceptions and attitudes towards homosexuality. Addressing this question is crucial to understand the potential of cinema to alter public perceptions and opinions, thereby contribute to the destigmatisation of homosexuality. Among the respondents, 46 indicated an increased awareness about the LGBTQ+ community, noting the creation of space to discuss homosexuality, the possibilities for becoming supporters or allies of queer communities, and heightened sensitivity towards individuals regardless of their gender. In contrast, 65 respondents believed that homosexuality should not be normalised and that south Indian cinema has not significantly altered perceptions of the society towards homosexuals or homosexuality. This suggests that despite changes in representation, there has not been a substantial shift in how audiences engage with visual texts or interpret messages from filmmakers. Society, by and large, continues to be reluctant in acknowledging the normalisation and naturalisation of diverse sexualities.

Audience Recommendations for the Filmmakers

A lack of acceptance of sexual minorities necessitates an exploration of audience recommendations for altering perceptions and shifting the cinematic lens to harness the destigmatizing potential of cinema. The majority of respondents provided no suggestions or recommendations for future filmmakers, indicating a continued reluctance to engage with issues concerning queer communities. Many respondents expressed a desire to avoid films addressing homosexuality or featuring homosexual characters, describing such content as uncomfortable and inappropriate. Additional suggestions included restricting children under 15 years of age from viewing these films due to a perceived lack of awareness about homosexuality, banning films that address homosexuality and avoiding the promotion of homosexuality, which some respondents still consider a mental illness.

Despite these negative recommendations, there were also some thoughtful and insightful suggestions. These included avoiding the portrayal of homosexuality as obscene, prioritizing authentic storytelling, collaborating with LGBTQ+ communities for accurate representations and providing platforms for LGBTQ+ voices. Respondents also recommended that filmmakers produce more films in regional languages to reach a broader audience, conduct thorough research before filming, avoid exaggeration, create films that focus entirely on LGBTQ+ issues, and produce works that dispel myths surrounding homosexuality. The recommendations for filmmakers highlight the necessity of redefining current narratives and discourses to comprehensively address LGBTQ+ issues. This approach aims to destigmatise existing perceptions of homosexuality, promoting a more inclusive and accurate representation within the cinematic landscape.

Positioning the Audience

The detailed analysis of the responses gives an explanation of how the audience of films dealing with homosexuality in south India can be grouped under the categories of Hall's hegemonic and negotiated positions. Only 12.8 percent of the respondents agree to the fact that these films could bring a noticeable change in the way homosexuals are accepted and homosexuality is normalised. 39.4 percent respondents

deny any interventions from the south Indian cinema in providing a favourable societal climate of existence for the homosexuals. The audience often aligns with the hegemonic discourses on sexuality which ultimately hurdles the process of destigmatisation.

47.7 percent of the respondents are unsure about the inclusivity paradigm propagated by films as significant visible transformations in providing inclusive environments for the homosexual individuals are not evident in real life situations. This has led to negotiated readings by the audience where they often make a chaotic comprehension of the message the filmmaker is attempting to communicate. The interpreted readings move away from the authorial intension This intensifies the complexities involved in understanding the filmmaker and the societal background in which he produces as well as places the visual text often leading to a negotiated reading of the text, they produce. From the interviews (available as open access materials in YouTube and other archives) of the filmmakers of the discussed films, it is evident that the prevalent negotiated readings have complicated “the authorial intention, reception and cultural articulations” (Bartling, 2003). As a result, cinema must look for opportunities to create a safe place to discuss and sensitise topics like homosexuality paving way for inclusivity in society.

Conclusion

Films frequently act as agents of social change and challenge cultural norms by depicting the struggles individuals endure under unjust conditions. These narratives encourage viewers to empathise with the characters and celebrate their triumphs over adversity. Moreover, films significantly contribute to raising awareness about societal injustices, disparities and discrimination. Films, thus serve as a catalyst for fostering empathy and understanding among audiences (Thangavelu, 2020). This study is evidence to the fact that films do play an integral role in shaping perceptions and viewpoints of the audience pertaining to societal injustices and social discrimination. Homosexuality, a not much discussed theme in south Indian cinema, has witnessed shifts in its representation, but has not resulted in consequential changes the way audience perceive the notion of homosexuality. The misrepresentation of the queer community through mass media like films, is a major challenge in this regard. The audience is placed in the hegemonic negotiated group in their interpretation of the visual texts reflecting the unacceptance of the sexual minority communities within the dominant cis heteronormative society. The study clearly states that south Indian cinema has failed in its attempt to sensitise the audience on queer issues. The study stresses the need for film makers in south India to implement the recommended changes and emphasises on authentic narratives by collaborating with individuals of LGBTQ+ communities and to make cinema not just a medium for representation, but a platform for their voices to be heard. As it is understood, “normalisation denotes the gradual acceptance of phenomena previously considered unconventional or taboo, eventually becoming integrated into everyday lives” (Habidin, Adzmi, Salleh, & Al, 2023). This study urges for the normalisation of the sexual minorities and the utilisation of the immense potential of cinema as a medium in accelerating this normalisation thereby, contributing to the destigmatisation of homosexuality. The investigation has its limitation in terms of the audience sample, but the researcher has attempted to give an empirical study. A further exhaustive and extensive research on perception analysis on a larger heterogenous group will provide scope for researchers in this domain as well as filmmakers in exploring the potentiality of cinema in building and promoting and inclusive society.

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Disclaimer Statement

This work is not a part of the thesis to be submitted to the university and it does not contain any sections from the thesis of the researcher.

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Authorship and Level of Contribution

Corresponding author (First Author): Neethu S. Nair has done the idea formulation, conduction of the survey, analysis of the data and wrote the research paper based on the findings.

Co-author: Dr. Deepa Mary Francis is the doctoral supervisor of the first author and has contributed to the paper by providing proper guidance in idea formulation and writing of the paper, rigorous reviewing as well as with insightful suggestions and corrections.

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