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Dr. Priyanka Bassi
Assistant Professor, PG
Department of Journalism and
Mass Communication, BBK
DAV College for Women,
Amritsar, Punjab, India

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Priyanka Bassi
Assistant Professor, PG
Department of Journalism and
Mass Communication, BBK
DAV College for Women,
Amritsar, Punjab, India

Communication strategies adopted by multiplexes for revival post COVID-19

Dr. Priyanka Bassi

Abstract

The year 2020 was one of the most difficult for the film business around the world, with the Indian film industry being no exception. As soon as the pandemic hit, 95% of theatres, or about 10,000, were forced to close to prevent the virus from spreading. The owners of these movie theatres and multiplexes thought that these restrictions would only be for a limited period of time. However, the lockdown grew throughout the year, leaving them financially unprepared to face the consequences of a near-total suspension of their operations. There was no reprieve for them even after the return to routine in October 2020, as no major Bollywood or Hollywood films were released in Financial Year 21, though many films from the South did spark some optimism for a revival. The return of COVID 2.0 resulted in yet another round of cinema closures resulting in a tougher time for multiplexes. For single -screen theatre owners, things were far worse. In order to gain the momentum back, multiplexes adopted various strategies and preventive measures to ensure safe environment for cinema lovers. This study is an attempt to find the communication strategies adopted by multiplexes of Amritsar to attract the audiences back to cinema halls for its revival. For the same, structured interview of the Multiplex staff members were conducted and the findings are analysed in this paper.

Keywords: Communication strategies, multiplexes, single screens, cinema revival

Introduction

According to an article published on SMEFUTURES "Future of cinema halls" PVR Ltd declared a combined net loss of Rs 289.12 crore in the quarter ending March 2021, after suffering massive losses. In the same quarter of 2020, the company reported a net loss of Rs 74.49 crore. Similarly, FY21 was a complete washout for INOX Leisure. Total operational sales were Rs 148 crore, with an EBITDA loss of Rs 204 crore and a PAT loss of Rs 257 crore, respectively.

The pandemic has altered our perceptions of 'normalcy.' Life has been interrupted, and the world has had to make numerous adjustments as a result. Some of these changes are only temporary, and after the pandemic ends, things will return to normal. However, certain alterations will be permanent. The cinema -and-Over-the-top(OTT) combo that has arisen since the coronavirus outbreak is likely to last for a long time.

Single -screen movie halls and talkies ruled long before Netflix, YouTube, and even multiplex theatres, some going back to the 1930s. These India's oldest movie theatres now serve as relics of a bygone era. Nevertheless, they remind us how cinema theatres were once a cultural icon in bringing people together under one roof. They're tucked away in bustling cities that now boast cutting - edge multiplexes. For many Indians, cinema, also known as motion picture or film, gives delight and excitement. We have made cinema a part of our daily existence. It's not just millennium youngsters who are fascinated by it; cinephile has been a part of the culture since the beginning. Films have evolved as well, from black - and - white to colour, from numerous reels to a single showreel, from no visuals to animation and from a single - take artist to "no comments." Although there is no historical proof to support the beginning of cinema, it is widely assumed that the Lumière brothers were the ones who first exposed the motion image to the public.

While the epidemic has been a stumbling block for the last two years, we do have some wearable, realistic fashion that reflects society. The Indian diaspora, on the other hand, has made a significant contribution to Indian cinema's ability to raise its flag on a worldwide stage. Theatre proved to be the one source of entertainment for people and is still the same for people. Movies welcomed movie buffs and critics; overall everyone with open arms. Cinema halls have evolved, from pre-independence to post-independence to the present, equipping themselves with larger screens, better seating capacity, sound and video equipment, and graduating from black and white to colour and digital experiences to present-day multiplexes, with time.

People are now referring to "before Covid" and "after Covid" situations. The experience of going to the movies on a big screen feels like it was "pre - Covid." The theatrical experience encompasses far more than just watching a movie. It's usually a family outing or a get-together with friends. It's a complete package of a fantastic experience, right down to the popcorn. However, lockdowns, movement restrictions, and fears of contagion have put an end to that experience. Theatres and movieplexes have generally remained closed since the first lockdown began in late March of last year. They did open following the unlock last year, but few people were in a hurry to see the movies.

People resorted to TV displays and cell phone devices for entertainment during the initial lockdown. While TV has a loyal following for both entertainment and news, it is the OTT platform that has built a name for itself. Several OTT players had already entered the scene, but they rose to prominence during the first shutdown. Most films are heading to the OTT if it makes sense for their budget and financial formulae, although big-budget, big-banner, and blockbuster films are still going to theatres (provided there are no lockdowns). This combination appears to have struck a balance in the market, and there's nothing wrong with it – in fact, it's a win-win situation.

According to an article 'OTT Platforms Vs Theatres' published on My best guide, 'OTT Platforms may pose a threat to movie theatres, but they will never be able to eliminate them from the Indian entertainment industry. For a long time, movie theatres have been up against competition. When televisions, VCRs, and DVDs were introduced in the past, theatres faced problems, yet they still held a place in people's hearts. OTT platforms obviously offer a variety of alternatives and benefits, but in India, it is difficult to replace movie theatres. Thus, in terms of the future of movies and entertainment in India, it appears that OTT platforms and movie theatres can coexist.

According to News18.com article 'OTT vs Cinema', Ajay Devgan believes; "There will be a fair balance between both," said the author of the book. It's as though you're eating. You can't go outside for eating seven days a week, but after four days, *ghar pe toh khana banega hi phir aap restaurant kyu jaate ho, ya mangwate kyu ho.* "Aap ne 3 - 4 din OTT pe dhekha phir once

a week or twice a week you need to go out and have a big screen experience," Even after eating "home food," people still eat out. That's how it is." Some concept-based films with powerful plots/projects directed by younger people, and "hatke" pictures—in other words, what used to be referred to as "made for multiplex" films—will undoubtedly find an audience on OTT. Similarly, an OTT consumer is simply interested in the film experience, not the entire

outing with family. For the producer, the OTT platform is the best way to reach this target demographic, and there is no need to spend money on theatrical release and distribution.

On the other side, there are some films that people insist on seeing on a big screen. The excitement and romanticism of the big screen aren't going away anytime soon. The only difference today is that moviegoers will be apprehensive about the potential of infection and may not be able to see as many films in theatres as they formerly did. They will go to the movies if the situation permits and theatres are open until the pandemic's shadow is lifted, but they will be very picky. They just want to see movies that will not let them down.

In an optimistic view, where there are no lockdown and people are visiting plexes for great movies like 'The Kashmir Files' and 'Gangubai Kathiawadi.' The audience has returned to the cinema halls after nearly two years, thanks to recent blockbusters such as Gangubai Kathiawadi, The Kashmir Files, and RRR, among others. Gangubai Kathiawadi, starring Alia Bhatt and released on February 25, was the first film to do well following the outbreak. The picture was well-received by both reviewers and the general public. According to msn.com, on its first day, it made Rs 10.5 crore, rising to Rs 37.5 crore over the weekend. According to Box Office India, Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film grossed a total of Rs 122.76 crore globally. Gangubai Kathiawadi had already given the box office a much-needed boost after a long period. The Kashmir Files, directed by Vivek Agnihotri, was released on March 11 with Prabhas and Pooja Hegde's Radhe Shyam. It's no secret that The Kashmir Files triumphed over Radhe Shyam at the box office, outperforming every other film released in the aftermath of the outbreak. The film presented the story of the Kashmiri Pandits' flight. It starred Anupam Kher, Mithun Chakraborty, Darshan Kumar, and Pallavi Joshi and was written and directed by Vivek Ranjan Agnihotri. It made Rs 3.36 crore on its first day, and by Sunday, it had risen to Rs 26.41 crore. The Kashmir Files also stole the show from Akshay Kumar's Bachchan Pandey, which came out a week later, on March 18. Because of its emotional impact, The Kashmir Files pushed audiences to purchase tickets and visit theatres. The political controversies that surrounded it only added to the film's box office success. The film has grossed Rs 234 crore globally as of March 29. According to msn.com, following The Kashmir Files, RRR, a much-anticipated film that received 5/5 stars from critics and broke the box office, was released. On its first day, SS Rajamouli's blockbuster starring Ram Charan and Jr NTR topped all other films, grossing Rs 223 crore. The film crossed the Rs 500 crore mark worldwide in barely three days. Even the Hindi version of the film has grossed over Rs 100 crore as of March 30. It will be intriguing to see if RRR can top SS Rajamouli's 2017 film Baahubali: The Conclusion, which grossed more than Rs 1000 crore globally. While films like Gangubai Kathiawadi, The Kashmir Files, and RRR have already helped to resuscitate the box office, the release of several other major films this year will hopefully help to make up for the pandemic's losses. From Yash Raj's KGF 2 to Kartik Aaryan's Bhool Bhulaiyaa 2, Shahid Kapoor's Jersey to Ranbir Kapoor's Brahmastra, Aamir Khan's Laal Singh Chaddha to Vijay Deverakonda's Liger, the year 2022 will undoubtedly be a year of Bollywood.

Hoping for the best!

According to a news report on Predicting the Future of the Entertainment Industry Post-COVID by USC News it revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic created a major upheaval in the entertainment industry. Most theatres, concert halls and cinemas were shuttered for at least a year and television and film production halted for months, leading to hundreds of thousands of layoffs and large sums of money lost. Not only were those directly working in production affected but so were people that support the industry, such as caterers, florists and trucking companies. But while the film industry has seen several negative effects due to the pandemic, it hasn't been all bad. With many movie theatres either in the process of reopening or still uncertain about the future, production companies have turned to these streaming services to debut their movie slates. Streaming is more than a trend; it's the future of entertainment. COVID-19 showed a great number of consumers that it is far more convenient and cost-efficient to stream films and TV shows. Ultimately, more people will end up watching movies on Netflix at home because we have gotten used to that. There is still a future for movie theatres. The lowering of production standards via remote production practices has taken away one of television's core advantages in both domestic and transnational markets: high production values. The trend is likely to continue as international companies continue to produce content at a similar quality or even higher quality than the content American companies are creating.

Profile of Cinema in Amritsar

The traditional single-screen theatres in Amritsar, which used to be packed with people selling tickets outside in black, gradually faded away. Though some were converted into multiplexes to survive, others continue to provide a nostalgic trip down memory lane. Remember how kids used to be so obsessed with going to the movies that they would watch the same movie in two days-the first half on one day and the second half on another-to avoid being away from home for too long. Nonetheless, the theatres suffered financial losses as a result of competition from the city's numerous multiplexes.

In comparison to other major cities, Cinemas in Amritsar have gained significant prominence due to multiplex penetration. The convergence of multiplexes has not only given the Punjabi cinema a new lease on life, but it has also given rise to new marketing and promotional strategies. This has not only improved the facilities but has also sparked a renewed interest in watching movies among the general public. Thus, Amritsar Cinemas have set standards in multiplexes with best-in-class projection and viewing, as well as suitable viewing facilities.

The aforementioned utility services have also improved moviegoers' overall experience. The first cinema in Punjab was built in Amritsar, and it is still the largest. Chitra talkies lost their allure due to a lack of maintenance and high financial requirements.

Following the Chitra Talkies, many single-screen theatres opened in Amritsar, including Adarsh Cinema, Sangam Cinema, New Rialto Cinema, Big Cinema, Fun Cinema, Raj Theatre, Aanam, Cinopolis- Celebration Mall, Cinopolis-Mall of Amritsar, INOX VR Ambarsar, PVR Suraj Chanda Tara.

- Multiplexes in Amritsar adopted certain strategies after Covid-19, which included providing masks, gloves, sanitizers, and contactless experience to their audience.
- In the beginning, multiplexes took adequate time to sanitise and disinfect between shows, resulting in fewer shows per day and fewer films that could be screened at a property.
- Before the pandemic, cinemas were looking at about five shows per screen in a typical three-screen property, given that most films run over two hours and require time for intermission and advertisements.
- Every day, multiplexes planned to cut at least one show per screen. This meant that approximately 20% of the business opportunity was lost. There is still a chance of recovery in cities where malls and multiplexes are permitted to remain open 24 hours a day, but this was not possible in most other cities.
- However, keeping in mind the audience's safety the prime concern, Multiplexes considered timing shows so that the entry, exit, and interval points of two shows did not overlap, and audiences from more than one auditorium did not congregate in the lobby or restrooms at the same time.
- PVR and INOX planned to reduce seating capacity in standard auditoriums by about 30%. However, Multiplex Association of India, in collaboration with FICCI, global cinema standards, issued a notification stating that while families and couples can sit together, one adjacent seat on both their sides will be left empty to account for social distancing.

Strategies adopted by PVR

Since the pandemic has wreaked havoc on the world, cinemas and theatres have suffered greatly. All other industries are returning to pre-crisis levels of activity. Theatres have now begun to open across India, with very strict market COVID precautions. As technology has aided all other markets in adapting to the new normal, it is now playing an important role for theatre owners as well.

- At each stage, technology has reduced human-to-human interaction, making cinemas a safer place to watch movies post-pandemic. PVR, the big name in this domain, has stayed ahead and provided a great viewing experience for its customers by utilising advanced technology.
- PVR has introduced a "JAB Offer" for customers to encourage and thank those who were vaccinated during the nationwide vaccination drive. As part of the promotion, one vaccinated guest will receive a free ticket to select content, as well as a free Food & Beverages Combo with the purchase of another in the first week of reopening.
- Technology has played an important role in creating safer cinemas, and cinemas have implemented technology at all touchpoints of the consumer journey and experience in their theatres. Digital transactions have been enabled through e-wallets to reduce human contact.
- To facilitate paperless movie ticketing and eliminate the need to purchase physical tickets at the box office, tickets can be reserved via the website, mobile app, aggregator website, and mobile apps.
- Customers' phones can be used to scan QR codes to gain access to the cinema. There is no pat-down search,

only Door Frame Metal Detectors (DFMS) for security checks.

- Pre-booking meals via the mobile app also avoid queues and waiting time at the concession counter, and food bills are delivered digitally.
- The menu can be downloaded to the phone, allowing customers to order before they even arrive at the candy bar.
- Payment for food and beverages will be made digitally via Near Field Communication or cash cards available at the cinemas. There is no money and no contact.
- Auditorium door handles are wrapped in anti-microbial disinfectant films.
- Ultraviolet sterilisation cabinets are in place to sanitise food packaging before it is served to the customer.
- The cinemas concentrated on employee vaccination, re-engaging with developers for rental waivers, cost reduction (including payroll costs), liquidity and cash flow management.
- They launched a comprehensive holistic care package to assist employees in weathering the second wave. The package included Covid SOS medicines, vaccination reimbursement for self and dependents, a 24X7 Covid helpline with an on-site response team, oxygen concentrators, doctor on call assistance, hospitalisation and ambulance services, and food deliveries for Covid tested employees.

Strategies by INOX

According to INOX, in the post-pandemic era, consumers relied on brands they can trust. Customers think twice before rushing to any destination after pandemic. It is the responsibility of the INOX staff to provide a safe and happy environment for them. For the time being, these are the two mantras INOX is focusing on.

INOX ran a Safety-First campaign and publicised all of their efforts to keep the cinemas safe and secure. This aided in providing mental relief to their customers. In a cinema, for example, there are more than 60 to 70 touchpoints, and the staff deep clean all of these places regularly.

The next step of safety is innovation, which includes promoting a wide range of alternative content. The multiplex screened a behind-the-scenes film, and the most difficult challenge was screening a film aimed primarily at teenagers who would require parental permission. This was the point at which they had to communicate about safety and allocate manpower to ensure that the measures were carried out. They also hold a lot of National Geographic private screenings, where people can pick up content and watch it in a secure environment. Consumers came up with the idea of private screenings. Besides taking precautions another measure was adopted to keep moviegoers safe. So, it was suggested that consumers can take over the entire auditorium. INOX also significantly reduced the prices. These private screenings are further subdivided into the local initiatives they ran in response to the needs of people in various locations. In Bangalore, for example, INOX ran a campaign romancing the movies. So, two people went to see the movie in the auditorium, and during the intermission, the boy proposed to the girl, so they brought in a cake and the celebration happened. During Durga Puja in Bengal, they attempted to organise Pujo celebrations inside the cinema with screenings of newer films. Many people work from home in the north of the country, in places like Gurgaon.

So, they approached HR and offered to hold sessions in movie theatres where employees who hadn't seen each other in a long time could come together for a motivational session and watch a movie like Chak De. INOX was doing fan screenings with fan groups in Southern India. InOX have also partnered with Yash Raj Films to screen old films that were chosen based on responses from social media polls.

Special shows were organized for Corona Warriors

During COVID-19, the multiplex saw a six-fold increase in INOX's social media following and engagement. They've gotten closer to the audience.

The study found out that among the worst-affected sectors of the Indian economy as a result of the ongoing coronavirus crisis was the movie theatre industry, which was completely shut down since the start of the nationwide lockdown. The cinemas made communication and marketing strategies to gain momentum. As per the interview with PVR, they launched a PVR Care programme to ensure that people feel safe to come back to the cinemas. Also, they used celebrity endorsements to gain the trust of the people. PVR introduced the JAB offer where one vaccinated guest could get another ticket free on select content as well as one F&B Combo free with the purchase of another. PVR rolled out exciting offers as their marketing strategies to gain momentum; they kept their social media active and website as their communication strategy to keep their customers informed. They used email marketing from Marketing Cloud to reach out to our 11 million privileged loyal customer base to communicate their readiness to reopen our cinemas through the PVR Care Films. There was a transition from 'Reactive' to a 'Proactive' Customer Connect with a heart-warming, personalized, 'Dil-Se' welcome touching the emotional chord of their patrons. Thus, a mixture of marketing and communication strategy was used to gain momentum. On the other hand, the interview with INOX also revealed the same; that is, a mixture of communication and marketing strategies was used to gain momentum. According to INOX, they have curated a hygiene initiative called #SafetyFirst, which combines the measures prescribed by the Government authorities and additional measures implemented by them. Besides following the prescribed seating restrictions, the cinemas will be frequently deep cleaned, and disinfection of all customer touchpoints, including entrance, Box-Office, lobbies, auditorium, F&B counters, restrooms and exit gates will be carried out. In an endeavour to provide enhanced hygiene, protocols like a mandatory mask, temperature check, e-tickets, contactless payment & entry and enhanced intake of fresh air have also been implemented. INOX aims to make the entire cinema-viewing experience digitally enabled and touch-free. They have encouraged the use of e-tickets; even guests walking in at the counters before the movie will be issued e-tickets. They also kept their social media accounts active and offered free surprises to all guests with 007 on their mobile numbers. They believe that after a prolonged lull it is time to celebrate brand new and fresh content, and they continue to innovate in this endeavour. In the current times, they have been extremely agile, positive, relevant and transparent on their social media platforms, with an improved sense of timing. Their content on social media may be largely divided into posts about new releases and posts aimed at strengthening the brand. With the customer at the core of all their decisions, they will continue

to innovate on the marketing front and ensure that they remain engaged, aware and loyal. These marketing and communication strategies were used by cinemas to gain momentum, thus proving hypothesis one of this research.

However, even with these constant efforts by multiplexes, the audience was still hesitant to visit the cinemas. The pandemic did not only financially strain the industries but also the common people. After going through a pandemic and almost exhausting their financial resources, people were not ready to spend an enormous amount on a movie ticket. The pandemic brought everything to a halt, and multiplexes saw unforeseen losses due to the year - long lockdowns. Although people were hesitant to return to the big screen, multiplexers' marketing and communication strategies tried to gain the audience's confidence.

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