Impact of movies in generating social awareness

INTRODUCTION

Movies are rollercoaster ride that have the tremendous power to entertain and to teach. They can be a powerful tool to bring about effective social change - true or false? It seems intuitive and logical that a well made film-especially one with a compelling narrative and well-crafted outreach plan would serve as a catalyst to change minds, encourage viewers to change entrenched behaviors, and start inform or reenergize social movements (Diana Barrett and Sheila Leddy, " Assessing Creative Media's Social Impact", Fledging Fund, Dec'08). But another group of people believe that it can be surprisingly difficult to make a firm connection between the power of a film and social change so the social impact of movies needs to be better understood and documented although it is important to note that not all films are intended to be agents of social change, nor should they be. Some are simply lovely moving stories whose primary purpose is to entertain and share a compelling story.

Researchers also believe that even if movies do not intend to contribute to the formation of values, they most assuredly do. By virtue of its interactive nature and arousing content, movies are influencing our values and expectation of reality, regardless of our willingness to be influenced. Although the learning is unintentional, it is just as effective as intentional learning and influences our thoughts and behavior.

The impulse to celebrate the impact of movies is understandable-all that glamour, glitzy visibility and cultural panache (G. Kendrick MacDowell, " Yes, movies affect us, but"). Movies can be seen as a source of diversion in

people's everyday lives. They are loved by one and all, irrespective of gender and age. It cannot be out rightly denied that movies influence us and affect our behavior in some way or another. The impact can be either good or bad.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the link between films and coordinated outreach efforts as change agents. i. e. whether an individual would actually change his opinion after seeing a movie. If yes, then movies are a very powerful medium to fight against the perils of the society.

RESEARCH AVAILABLE

Early studies on impact of movies on people

In 1920's movie exploded as mainstream entertainment as there were no radio or TV set during that period. A lot of researchers believed that movies had impact on attitude and behaviours of people and they launched a series of studies focusing on effect of films. There were 13 studies conducted primarily by Edgar Dale. He studied film content and categorized them into 10 groups. An observation which came out was more than 75% fall into crime, love and sex categories. Interestingly same kind of trend can also probably been seen today. Edgar Dale used census, survey, questionnaires, case studies and personal interviews in his study. It was observed movies caused attitude, emotions, behavioural change in people who were the part of the study.

Herbert Blumer conducted questionnaires and interviews with people to study how watching movies affected their behaviour. Most of the people who were studied believed that they had been influenced by movies in some way (" A brief History of Media Effects Research").

In one of the study, Andrew Butler of Washington University decided to simulate a classroom where films were used as a teaching tool. The accurate version of an historical event was taught to the students and they were also made to watch a movie associated with that event. The movie that was shown contained both accurate and inaccurate information about the historical incidents they depicted. The idea was to see which method led to the most accurate comprehension of the events: teaching or watching a movie. The results were really interesting, when the information in the film and the reading were contradictory - that is, when the film was inaccurate - the students were more likely to recall the film's distorted version and were very confident in their memories, even though they were wrong (Herbert, Wray, " I Learned It at the Movies", Scientific American Mind).

In the last ten years, however, " outreach strategies", have become a central component of movies, spurred by a new generation of producers (Whiteman, David , " The evolving impact of documentary film: sacrifice and the rise of issue-centered outreach (1)"). Thus at the societal level, movies are assumed to play a role in transmitting, maintaining, and reinforcing the societal and cultural consensus. They cultivate images of society by interpreting the world in terms of " what is" " what is important" " what is 'right'" and " what is related to what else." In other words, movies generally show a view of reality (Kane, Harrison D., Taub, Gordon E., Hayes, B. Grant, " Interactive Media and Its Contribution to the Construction and Destruction of Values and Character").

Films affect perceptions that people hold about the world at large and its inhabitants in particular. Even though some people may like to disregard

cinema as only a frivolous means of entertainment and nothing beyond that, one cannot ignore the fact that there have been film makers who have managed to lift veil on a hidden plight. It might be about an injustice to a minority, or the courageous story of change by a single individual, but either way it raises awareness about the issue at hand (Robert Oakes, " Movies Promoting Social Change").

One of the most popular papers on this topic considers the following factors to be important for a movie to make an impact:

Quality of the movie - The movie should have a compelling narrative that can not only engage the viewers but also illustrate complex problems in a lucid manner.

Ability of the film to create awareness about an issue- Awareness is the first step to any kind of social change. Care should be taken to see whether the film could reach people beyond those who already knew and cared about the issue illustrated in the movie.

Public engagement - This implies not only being aware of the issue to taking action on it. To evaluate a film's success in this regard one can look at participation in response to facilitated dialogues, blogs, activity on various social networking sites and participation level in various Actions campaigns that are organized around that issue.

The ultimate objective is the social change. It is a long and complex process, however, in some cases there are key indicators of success. These can be in

the form of legislative or policy changes or a shift in public dialogue or how issues are framed and discussed.

A lot of film makers are making full use of the social power of the internet to drive their social campaigns. Not only are viewers being encouraged to visit and discuss the movie on online forums after having viewed it , but, a lot of filmmakers are also using websites to create a community before the film has been released. This is slowly becoming a critical strategy to deepen the reach and impact of films. Engaging a pre release audience increases their investment in the film and logically increases the likelihood that they will see the film and take some action. The film makers are expanding their digital reach to the likes of Facebook, YouTube, MySpace and Twitter to draw in new and diverse audiences who generally may not have been interested in a movie of that particular genre or issue. (Diana Barrett and Sheila Leddy, " Assessing Creative Media's Social Impact", Fledging Fund, Dec'08)

RESEARCH GAP

The current research available is mainly based on the movies being an effective teaching tool but little research is available on role of movies and their influence on values of an individual to generate social awareness. The little research that is available is based on impact of Hollywood movies (English) which become rather irrelevant as majority of people in India primarily watch Bollywood movies. We came across no article that measures the change in social behaviour of people vis-à-vis a Bollywood movie. This is a research gap which we would like to address by trying to analyze the effect certain Hindi movies had on changing the perception of masses pertaining to particular social issues.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the paper is to understand and analyze the extent to which movies influence people's perception about various social issues. Contributions of factors such as the movie characteristics, movie success in making a movie an effective instrument for generating social awareness will also be analyzed.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

- Hypothesis 1: Movies have a favorable impact in generating social awareness.

- Hypothesis 2: Box office success of a movie is the most effective factor in generating social awareness.

The variables and the metrics for measurement can be listed as:

Concept

Variable

Instruments

Respondent's attributes

Age

Gender

Questionnaire

(closed questions)

Movie Characteristics

Storyline

Questionnaire

Interviews

(Rating Scale - Likert Scale)

Popularity of director

Questionnaire

Interviews

(Rating Scale - Likert Scale)

Popularity of the star cast

Questionnaire

Interviews

(Rating Scale - Likert Scale)

Promotion Done

Questionnaire

Interviews

(Rating Scale)

Success of the movie

Critical Acclaim

Secondary Data

Box Office Success

Secondary Data

Awards Won

Secondary Data

Action

Pre- Post Questionnaire

Impact

Pre- Post Questionnaire

Media publicity

Secondary data

Pre- Post Questionnaire to gauge the level of participation

(Rating Scale)

MODEL

The model links the movie characteristics and success of the movies to the overall social awareness generated. Respondent's attributes consisting of gender acts as the mediator for this model.

The constructs decided for the research are:

- Movie Characteristics: This construct consists of variables such as the storyline of the movie, popularity of the director & star cast and the promotion done for the movie
- Success of the Movie: This construct consists of variables such as critical acclaim, the movie's box office success and the various awards won by the movie
- Social Awareness Generated: This construct consists of certain variables such as the action taken, the impact generated and the media publicity generated due to the movie

Respondents' age and gender are taken as the mediator to analyze whether they have any influence on the success of the movie and consequently the impact generated by it. Both primary and secondary data will be used to measure the various variables used in this research. For the primary data, an online questionnaire will be given to people across different age groups. We plan to survey as many people as possible who are regular movie watchers, regular readers of newspapers, magazines and people who watch television & are exposed to the internet. We will also go through relevant articles and journals from EBSCO and other web sources to carry out a literature review, which would consist of the secondary data. The issues we would be

addressing are patriotism, religious tolerance and women empowerment. We would take 2 movies per issue and study the impact they had. The movies chosen would be differentiated on the basis of the variables we define.

Movie Characteristics

Success of the Movie

Social Awareness Generated

The variables will be measured with the help of the survey floated to the respondents.

The variables will be measured with the help of :

Primary data gathered through a survey floated to the respondents

Secondary data in the form of online research and literature review

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Model Parameters

Movie Characteristics: This parameter consist the characteristics of the movie, various components which define the movie

- Storyline - This component indicates how well the issue has been depicted through the movie's script. The film should have a compelling

narrative that can not only engage the viewers but also illustrate complex problems in a lucid manner.

- Popularity of the Director & Star Cast - The popularity of the director has a major impact on the pre release success and ratings a movie. The more the popularity and fame of the director and the star cast the more will be people talk about it.
- Promotion Done - This component will incorporate the promotional activities undertaken before the release of the movie. The pre-release promotion and publicity of the movie plays a significant role in the revenue generated.

Through our research we will try to analyze how these variables impact the success of a movie and the social awareness generated by it.

Success of the Movie: Different people have different criteria while measuring the success of a movie. For some it is the revenue generated by the movie, for others it comprises of the number of awards the movie has won. The various components which represent a movie's success are listed below.

- Critical Acclaim - Movies are often judged by the reviews from the critics. Many people go to watch a movie only if it has a good critical rating. Word of mouth is usually perceived as more credible and trustworthy, and it is more readily accessible through social networks (Banerjee 1992; Brown and Reingen 1987; Murray 1991).
- Box Office Success - This component refers to the box office revenue generated by a movie. This directly depends on the ticket sales and

the number of people who come to watch the movie. Many people associate the success of a movie with the revenue generated by it.

- Awards Won - The success of a movie also depends on the number of awards won by it. Movies like Ben Hur, Titanic and Lord of The Rings are considered to be one of the most successful movies and each of them won 11 awards at Oscars.

Social Awareness Generated: The ultimate objective is the social change. It is a long and complex process, however, in some cases there are key indicators of success. These can be in the form of legislative or policy changes or a shift in public dialogue or how issues are framed and discussed. One needs to be clear about the kind of social issue that a movie addresses and accordingly set reasonable expectations in respect of impact generated. In this paper we intend to evaluate the social change in the society by the following three variables:

- Action- Under this we look at the short term effect i. e. in terms of the immediate actions taken by the respondents as result of the impact caused by the movie in question.
- Impact- This variable looks at a more long term effect caused by the movie in terms of changes in people's perception, attitude and behavior towards a particular issue or cause.
- Media Publicity- The social awareness generated by the movie can be assessed by the publicity generated in the media about the issue addressed in the movie in terms of talk shows dedicated to it, stars who endorse the issue, forum dedicated for it on social networking sites and articles or papers published in the print media.

In this research paper we intend to study these variables via pre-post questionnaire, where in we will try and gauge the change in the level of activity under all these variables before the respondents saw the movie and after they saw the movie.

Literature Review

Diana Barrett and Sheila Leddy in their paper " Assessing Creative Media's Social Impact" (Fledging Fund, Dec'08) stated that while looking at a movie as having the potential for social impact it is important to move beyond the box office success and look at the overall impact generated. While one looks at the number for people who saw the film, what's more important is how many people understood the issue for which it was made.

It is not reasonable to expect broad social change if there is little awareness of the fact that a problem exists. In some cases, just getting the audience to watch the film and better understand the issue is sufficient. Creating awareness is of prime importance while trying to bring a social change. According to this study the film's promotion and outreach activities play an important role in not only increasing the size of the audience and sales but to use films as vehicles of social change.

The core dimension of impact remains the quality of the film. This basically means that the film should have a compelling narrative that can not only engage the viewers but also illustrate complex problems in a lucid manner. For this measure researchers look at a lot of dimensions such as festival acceptance, theatrical success, online " buzz", international and national DVD sales as well as traditional film reviews and awards.

The next is the ability of the film to create awareness about an issue, as awareness is the first step to any kind of social change. Here the researchers have considered both the audience size as well as the diversity of the audience. It makes an attempt to see whether the film could reach people beyond those who already knew and cared about the issue illustrated in the movie.

A regularly debated question is whether the presence of stars critical to the success of a movie? The industry is full of actors and actresses but it is the ones who are on the top of the pyramid who command the highest payments. There is a lot of academic literature on whether the presence of stars affects the performance of a movie, however, the results have been mixed. Direct and absolute causal relationship has not been established.

Movies are complex creative goods that are the results of teams of creative people working together (Caves 2000). A popular star as a part of a movie is like a source of free advertising for the movie. He/she can help the film maker to garner valuable resources (in this case the audience) for him/her to be able to reach out to the masses to make the presence of his movie felt (Anita Elberse , " The Power of Stars: Do Star Actors Drive the Success of Movies?").

In the arena of new product development, word of mouth (WOM) plays significant roles because building consumer awareness is of vital importance, and consumers need information when deciding whether to purchase a product they do not know well (Mahajan, Muller, and Kerin 1984). Word of mouth is supposed to be more credible and trustworthy, and it is more

readily accessible through social networks (Banerjee 1992; Brown and Reingen 1987; Murray 1991). A McKinsey & Company study found that 67% of the sales of consumer goods are based on WOM (Taylor 2003).

EXPECTED FINDINGS

This research aims to analyze whether movies have a favorable impact in generating social awareness. The literature review shows that people are influence by movies and their behavior and thought process is shaped by what they see on celluloid. Through this paper we want to study how people's thought process, perceptions, attitude and actions change if the movie is successful in generating awareness about a particular social cause.

In addition to this we would also be studying the various factors that determine the success of a movie as contributors to the social impact generated by the movie. In this category our primary focus would lie on finding out whether box office success of a movie is the most effective factor in generating social awareness or not. This is because the box office result of the movie is the most widely known and acknowledge parameter to establish its success.

LIKELY IMPLICATIONS

Likely implications of this research is that if movies can be established as an instrument for creating social change, then they can be used effectively in the future for generating awareness about various social issues and mobilizing the masses for the same. Some of the benefits that are likely to arise as a result of this study are:

- Understand the extent to which the various determinants of success factor influence the social impact generated

- Influence and impact of the star cast, directive and narrative in facilitating the reach of the movie and the issue involved to the audiences in various strata of society

- Analyzing the sustainability of the awareness created among the people

LIMITATIONS

Limitations of this research study would be as follows:

- The respondent's personal bias towards the movie or its related characteristics such as star cast et al. may distort the responses obtained

- There is scope for recency error to occur when respondents are asked to recollect details about the movie characteristics

- The sample taken for study is very small and may not be much diversified as compared to the actual population that watches movies

FUTURE RESEARCH

- Further research may be carried out on a more extensive scale to determine exactly what factors influence the impact of a movie on the people and accordingly an appropriate mix of these factors can be designed to make a movie more effective.

- Specific research may be carried out to determine those issues where movies as a medium of social change are most effective.