Exploring Non-Theatrical Film Viewing in Kerala: A Study of Social Aspects, Viewer Practices, and Reasons for Choosing Non-Traditional Film Experiences

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Abstract

The way films are viewed has changed from being limited to cinema halls. With the rise of new media devices, films can now be watched anywhere and at any time. This study defines watching films outside of a cinema hall, in both domestic and mobile settings, as non-theatrical film viewing. Using an exploratory approach and employing survey and interviews as data collection methods, the study aims to examine various aspects of non-theatrical film viewing in Kerala, including the social aspects, viewer practices, and reasons for choosing non-theatrical viewing over traditional cinema-going.
Keywords: *Film, Media, Film Viewing, Audience, Communication*

Introduction

Film viewing is a constantly evolving social phenomenon, making it an important area of research. With the increasing number of screens in our lives, it's crucial to recognize film viewing and spectatorship beyond just watching films in a cinema hall. For a long time, films were only accessible through cinema halls, but with the advent of television, cable TV, home entertainment systems, and portable devices like smartphones and laptops, the public nature of film viewing has started to shift. This study focuses on this shift by examining non-theatrical film viewing, defined as the act of watching films outside of a cinema hall, in both domestic and mobile settings. Although many people still prefer going to the movies and watching films on a big screen, cinemagoing remains an essential part of film culture. However, this doesn't mean that non-theatrical ways of viewing films and the audiences they attract are secondary to those of cinema halls, especially as the internet and technologies like television and mobile phones become more accessible (Jha, 2021).

Media convergence plays a crucial role in expanding film viewing options. Anne Friedberg (2010) notes that, although the movie screen, television screen, and computer screen are different, they all display the same images. This convergence has caused a shift in film studies, and we can no longer conceptualize cinema and its screens without considering computer screens and digital technologies, as well as television screens and interactive video formats (Friedberg, 2010, p. 440). It's important to note that changes to film viewing occurred before the digital revolution. Friedberg (2010) points out that pre-digital technologies such as the VCR, TV remote control, and cable television greatly impacted the film viewing experience. The convergence of media and the resulting changes in film viewing make our previous understanding of spectatorship obsolete.

The survey conducted as part of the study indicates that people are increasingly using multiple technologies, such as television, DVDs, smartphones/tablets, and personal computers for film viewing. However, the area of non-theatrical film viewing has not been thoroughly studied in India, let alone in Kerala. When it comes to non-theatrical viewing, Kerala offers a valid field of study due to its high media saturation, internet penetration, and digital literacy. With a 56% internet penetration rate, Kerala has the second highest in India. In 2016, Kerala was declared a digital state by President Pranab Mukherjee, and at that time, its digital literacy was 75% (Raghunath, 2021). These factors create a suitable environment for the growth of a non-theatrical film viewing culture. This research seeks to gain an exploratory understanding of non-theatrical film viewing in Kerala.

Changes in Film Viewing

Scholars in media studies and film studies have explored the changes in film viewing and its social implications, with a focus mainly on the West. Sarah Atkinson (2016) calls for a revised framework to understand the constantly evolving circumstances of cinema as a social activity. With the spread of film viewing sites and the changing nature of audiences and spectatorship, understanding cinema spectatorship also requires an understanding of digitally networked citizens. Robert C. Allen (2011) notes the generational shift in the nature of cinema experience, which is now understood as a "textually disintegrated phenomenon" experienced through multiple sites and modalities, resulting in the disintegration of film text.

Home viewing of cinema using televisions and other video technology has also been a focus of study. Barbara Klinger (2008) notes that cinema today has an identity as both a theatrical and non-theatrical medium, projected on televisions and other devices. Through her study of home viewing, Klinger argues that the usual definition of film culture as public should be reevaluated in light of new film viewing practices. She shows that the private realm of homes fosters diverse film cultures, viewing modalities, and pleasures, emphasizing the diversity of film viewing and how it evolves in response to changes in cinema and its spaces.

Researching Film Viewing in India

Studies on film viewing in India have largely focused on traditional modes of cinema going and have used ethnographic and historical methods to understand film audiences and their practices. Ethnographic studies have looked at the interaction between viewers and the images on the screen and the social practices involved in cinema going, while historically-oriented studies have explored the early emergence of cinema, the formation of film audiences, and the spatial dynamics of film viewing patterns (Dass, 2016; Hughes, 1996). Lakshmi Srinivas (2016) conducted an ethnographic study of popular Indian cinema in Bangalore in the 1990s and found that Indian cinemas are sites of both on-screen and off-screen spectacles and that audiences are active, spontaneous and performative. The advent of multiplexes in the 2000s transformed film viewing spaces and Adrian Athique and Douglas Hill (2014) studied the experience of the multiplex audience in India, finding that it has become a symbol of new social values and a public space for the middle-class. Maanvi (2020) explored the practice of viewing films on mobile phones, focusing on women, and found that convenience, economic affordability and comfort were reasons for this practice. She also found that mobile phones serve as storage devices for "comfort films" and that the genre and nature of the film text play a role in how it is viewed.

Objectives

The literature review reveals that the evolving new modes of film viewing in India are an under-researched area. To fill this gap, the study aims to gain a preliminary understanding of non-theatrical film viewing in Kerala. Non-theatrical film viewing is defined as a way of watching films through means other than going to a movie theater. This definition will allow for a comprehensive examination of the film viewing landscape without over-emphasizing any particular mode.

The study has the following specific objectives:
1. To investigate the social aspects involved in non-theatrical film viewing.
2. To examine the practices of non-theatrical film viewers.
3. To determine the reasons why non-theatrical film viewing is a preferred option.

Research Methodology

The study aimed to explore the practice of non-theatrical film viewing in Kerala, India. It was conducted in two phases, starting with an online survey questionnaire and followed by in-depth interviews with selected respondents. The research was done during the COVID-19 pandemic and was limited to a population between the ages of 18 and 30 for ease of access.

The survey was administered to 120 participants and received 106 responses, with a response rate of 88%. The questions were designed to understand the respondents' involvement in non-theatrical film viewing and to identify suitable participants for the in-depth interviews. The survey used simple multiple-choice questions and focused on the respondents' media technologies, viewing patterns, and other activities related to non-theatrical film viewing.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the survey data.

Out of the 106 survey respondents, 80 agreed to participate in an in-depth interview. Three participants were selected for the interview based on their survey responses and were denoted as P1, P2, and P3. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The themes that emerged from the data were presented in the discussion.

Discussion

The study found that non-theatrical film viewing is predominantly an individual activity. Participants prefer to watch films privately, rather than in public settings like movie theaters. The survey data reveals that 76.4% of participants prefer to watch films alone when using OTT platforms or personal devices, such as smartphones or computers. On the other hand, 29.5% prefer to watch with family when viewing films on television, and only 13.3% prefer to watch alone. About 22.9% of participants do not have a preference for how they watch films on television.

This preference for family viewing on television aligns with previous research that has discussed the role of television as a medium that encourages family interaction (Mankekar, 2003). Despite the individualized nature of non-theatrical film viewing, this study raises the question of how it forms a sociality and what social spaces and relationships are involved.

Social Aspects of Non-Theatrical Film Viewing

In the interviews, college is described as a social space that shapes non-theatrical film viewing habits among young people aged 18-30. The study participants reported being introduced to foreign language films, world cinema, and new genres in college, which transformed their film-watching experiences. College provides a peer group for discovering new films and improving film viewing skills, as one participant stated: "I joined college and realized that my knowledge about films was very limited. But through conversations with my friends who had watched many foreign-language films, I started watching a wider variety of films and learning about filmmaking." (P1).

The interviewees highlighted that going to the theater was an important social activity during college, but their film viewing habits mainly improved through non-theatrical means. They viewed classics, world cinema, and other Indian language films non-theatrically and discussed these films with peers. The improvement in film viewing was due to the influence of college friends and interpersonal communication with them.

"Conversations with friends played a crucial role in improving my film viewing habits. My friends recommended films to me and we would discuss them. For instance, I was introduced to the film Tumbaad by a friend. I have a group of film enthusiasts, and we talk about films frequently. I also share my favorite films with my friends by downloading them. After they watch it, we engage in discussions about the film. Films often come up in our casual conversations." (P1)

The significance of friends in non-theatrical film viewing is highlighted by the survey results. 84.9% of the participants reported recommending non-theatrically watched films to their friends, and 81.1% discussed these films with their friends. It's worth mentioning that social media also plays a vital role in film discovery for non-theatrical viewing. 37.7% of the participants said they receive film information solely from social media, while 29.2% receive information from both friends and social media. 15.1% of the participants reported that advertisements, friends, and social media helped them stay updated on films. However, the role of social media in non-theatrical film viewing will not be explored further in this paper.

The social space of college, peer community, and social relations play a crucial role in non-theatrical film viewing practices. One such practice is sharing films using storage devices and peer-to-peer file-sharing apps, which act as a significant distribution network of films and facilitate social relationships among peers. The use of storage devices such as pen drives and SD cards to share films has been a common practice among participants for a long time. However, with the advent of the internet, file sharing through the internet has become another popular method of sharing films. In the survey, 69.8% of the respondents reported that they share films with friends using storage devices and file-sharing apps.

These practices are also reflected in the interview data. The participants shared that they were more involved

in file-sharing during their college and school days. "In my college days and in school, pen drives and SD cards were the main tools to share films. I bought a computer when I was in the tenth standard, and since then, I would borrow films from friends using a pen drive," (P2). The sharing of films often occurs within a friend circle and involves conversations and mutual sharing. "If I know my friend has some interesting films, I'll ask him and take a copy in my pen drive," (P1).

The recurring themes in the interviews, such as the role of friends in discovering and discussing films, and the individualized yet social aspect of non-theatrical film viewing, paint a picture of how it forms a social bond. Although watching films non-theatrically is a private, individual activity, it is deeply rooted in social relationships through discussions, conversations, and film sharing practices. In this way, non-theatrical film viewing facilitates social connections and is in turn facilitated by these connections. This sociality is particularly prominent among college students or recent college graduates, who form close relationships and communities based on their shared experience of non-theatrical film viewing.

Viewer Practices in Non-Theatrical Film Viewing
We have discussed the practices that facilitate non-theatrical film viewing, such as file sharing, and the sociality that facilitates and is created by non-theatrical film viewing. What about the viewer's practices during non-theatrical film viewing?

The interview participants discussed various habits and practices they adopt during non-theatrical film viewing. These include setting the mood, repeat viewing, individual viewing, fast-forwarding, and fragmented and unfragmented viewing. Before watching a film, the participants engage in various preparations, such as setting the mood to replicate the atmosphere of a cinema hall. One participant stated, "I like to watch films in a dark environment, so I turn off the lights in my room. I usually have some snacks with me." (P2).

The participants prefer to watch films alone while viewing films non-theatrically. One participant explains, "when it comes to phone/laptop, I prefer to watch alone. I don't even like extra one person sitting with me to watch a film on my laptop" (P1). Another participant explains why she wants to be alone "I need to be sure that the screen is in a position that only I can view the images. I don't like someone surveilling my screen" (P3). Using fast forwards while watching on a personal device is a habit among the participants, and it varies from person to person. One participant usually uses fast forward while watching boring films, and the other two operate the facility while involved in repeat viewing of films. The consumption of film in a fragmented manner, such as certain scenes, is also a habit among participants in non-theatrical viewing. "I consume some kind of visuals every day it may not be a full film but certain scenes and some part of certain films. I usually watch comedy scenes from YouTube" (P3).

The participants select various devices cautiously to view films. The laptop has been discussed as the preferred personal device to view films non-theatrically. The relatively large screen size of laptops is the reason for preferring laptops over phones. The use of laptops is also related to file sharing using storage devices. The participants often talked about using storage devices such as pen drives to copy films from friends and then view them on laptops. Downloading is also a common practice of accessing films. One participant said that film viewing had increased considerably after getting a laptop. According to the participant, she has "watched movies mainly on my laptop by copying films on Pen drive from friends" (P3).

It is not possible to get a generalisable understanding of the habits and practices of non-theatrical film viewing since it is a highly subjective activity. One common point is that the characteristics of the media technologies facilitate several habits and practices. For example, the preference for viewing films alone in non-theatrical viewing is related to the nature of smartphones and laptops as personal devices, which the participants are not ready to share and are worried about surveillance. Other practices such as fast forwarding, pause, and thereby fragmented viewing of films are also associated with the characteristics of the new media technologies.

Factors Contributing to the Preference of Non-Theatrical Film Viewing
One fundamental question regarding non-theatrical film viewing is why people choose to do so. Some major reasons for preferring non-theatrical film viewing are access to foreign language films, the comfort of private

space, flexibility, and freedom. Easy access to foreign language films is one of the main reasons for preferring non-theatrical film viewing. "If I am a person who goes to the theatre, how can I see an Iranian film and discuss it? Those films do not have a release here. The same is the case for many foreign-language films. So, in that sense, non-theatrical viewing has improved access to films and thereby improved conversations. I believe new media have broadened film viewing space" (P3). Another experience of the participants regarding non-theatrical viewing is that they can express their emotions freely and get emotionally connected to the film more easily while watching films non-theatrically. For an interview participant, the easiness of expressing emotion in a private space was the reason to prefer non-theatrical viewing.

"I feel that watching film privately on my personal devices helps me to feel emotionally attached to the film. I usually cry for an emotional scene when I watch a film on my phone/ laptop, but I won't cry when I am in a theatre because I become aware that people are sitting around me. In that sense, I really like watching films on my phone because it allows me to express my emotions freely" (P1).

The participants expressed various discomfort with viewing films in a theatre. However, it does not mean that they never go to the theatre. The participants prefer theatre-going as a socialising activity mostly with friends, but they are not very fond of the theatre experience. The various discomfort of cinema going ranged from people judging, restrictions by profession, crowd, noise, and so on. One participant expressed how restrictions from family make going to the theatre an uncomfortable option and expresses the gendered dimension of these restrictions. "I believe our opinions form from the experience that we have gone through. A girl going to the cinema was not an easy option in my house, especially if you wanted to go alone. I did not know a single woman from my family who went to the cinema in my childhood. In my 25-year life, I have only seen very few films by going to the theatre" (P3). The planning, booking tickets, and traveling involved in cinema going make it an uncomfortable choice for film viewing.

Conclusion

The study aimed to gain a preliminary understanding of non-theatrical film viewing in Kerala, rather than providing conclusive answers. The results show that non-theatrical film viewing is not an isolated activity, but is deeply intertwined with various social contexts and relationships. The study highlights the impact of peer groups, both online and offline social networks, and personal preferences in shaping non-theatrical film viewing habits and behaviors. The participants' habits and preferences were not solely influenced by the introduction of new media technologies, but also by social relationships.

Non-theatrical film viewing leads to the emergence of new practices and a unique film experience, which is not fully captured by the current understanding of film audiences. The distinction between public and private film viewing becomes blurred in the case of non-theatrical film viewing. This overlap between public and private has implications for spectatorship, which could be further studied in the future.

While non-theatrical film viewing is a convenient and accessible option, it does not necessarily mean that people have stopped going to cinemas. Participants in the study still enjoyed watching films in theaters, but faced several issues, such as convenience, comfort, and access. Despite this, cinema going with friends and family remains a significant social activity. This interplay between non-theatrical film viewing and cinema going highlights the complexity and excitement of film viewing practices.

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