Table of Contents

Notes on Contributors

Article 1: Drama at Disney: A Thematic Analysis of Creative Worker Identity Negotiation and Identification in the Documentary *Waking Sleeping Beauty*

Dr Angelique Nairn is a senior lecturer in the Public Relations Department within the School of Communication Studies for the Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand. As a graduate of the Bachelor of Communication Studies program, she went on to complete a BCS Honours (first class) and her PhD. The focus of her thesis was on how organisational communications construct the identities of members. Dr Nairn is currently working on multiple research projects from explorations of morality in television programming, to how organisations encourage identification in their external communications, to the experiences of work among creative people. She recently co-edited the book "Multidisciplinary perspectives on women, voice, and agency," and regularly publishes in the fields of identity, creative industries, intercultural communication, popular culture and public relations.

Justin Matthews is a lecturer in the Digital Communication Department within the School of Communication Studies for the Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand. He teaches across the discipline of digital communication and media. This followed after an extended career in the commercial sector while being extensively engaged as a digital producer and strategist. His research is primarily focused across the area of user interfaces and experiences, future studies, narrative design and game studies. He is currently completing a PhD exploring speculative user interface designs from science fiction moving-images and their relationship to contemporary technology experiences.

Article 2: Humour and the Margins: Stand-Up Comedy and Caste in India

Madhavi Shivaprasad is a PhD scholar at the Advanced Centre for Women's Studies, School of Development Studies, with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India. Her doctoral dissertation explores the discourses of gender and sexuality being constructed within and around the Indian stand-up comedy industry. She explores the potential of stand-up comedy as a liminal space between feminist activism and entertainment, where activism can also be expressed as entertainment. Her research focus on disability, media and communication, humour studies, gender and sexuality studies. She has formerly worked as an English lecturer at Mount Carmel College, Bangalore, India. She has also worked as a freelance journalist for national newspapers in India.

Article 3: Selected Bollywood Films as Sites of LGBTQ Contestation, Assertion and Cultural Disruption

Dr Sumati is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, PG Govt. College for Girls-11, Chandigarh, affiliated with the Panjab University, Chandigarh, India. Her research area lies at the intersection of mythology, literature and media. She has published a book titled *Bharati Mukherjee: Myths and Epiphanic Moments*. She has also completed a research project titled *Archetypes: From Mythology to Films to Life,* granted by University Grants Commission, India.

Article 4: Promoting Gender Reassignment Surgical Service in Thailand among International Transgenders

Dr Puntarika Rawikul, is a lecturer at the International College of King Mongkut's University of Technology North Bangkok (KMUTNB), Bangkok, Thailand and teaches and conducts research in the field of marketing. Her research interest is focused on integrated marketing communication and healthcare marketing, as well as digital transformation in media and customer insights, especially in the LGBT context. Moreover, she also takes responsibility for the public relations of the college.

Dr Wichian Lattipongpun is a lecturer at the Graduate School of Communication Arts and Management Innovation of National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), Bangkok, Thailand. He teaches and conducts research in the fields of communication studies and arts management. His work focusses particularly on the understanding of how various types of communication are originated and managed in terms of creative communication.

Editor's Introduction

The *IAFOR Journal of Media, Communication and Film* (JMCF) is associated with IAFOR's *MediAsia*, *FilmAsia* and *EuroMedia* annual conferences. JMCF is committed to publishing peer-reviewed scholarship that explores the relationship between society, film and media – including new and digital media, as well as to giving a voice to scholars whose work explores hitherto unexamined aspects of contemporary media and visual culture.

This year, the Journal welcomes a number of additions to our editorial board. Timothy Pollock from Osaka Kyoiku University and Hagoromo University of International Studies is our new Associate Editor, while Dr Alexander Klemm, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang, Thailand, joins Dr James Rowlins as Assistant Editor.

This seventh issue features contributions from multiple disciplines and nations from around the globe and is the result of an open call for articles. As such, there is no overriding theme. Rather, individual scholars reflect on the function of media texts and the creative industry on social, commercial, and individual levels. We are particularly pleased to support the work of doctoral candidates and early career researchers, who comprise the majority of the authors in this issue.

The issue opens with Angelique Nairn and Justin Matthews' reflection on the identity of the creative worker in the documentary "Drama at Disney: A thematic analysis of creative worker identity negotiation and identification in the documentary *Waking Sleeping Beauty*". Exploring the types of worker identities expressed in the film, Nairn and Matthews argue that creatives negotiate their identities in response to external pressures from their employers and during changes in management styles; balancing both intrinsic motivations and extrinsic employment conditions.

The following two articles examine art forms in the Indian context for their ability to comment on contemporary Indian social issues. In "Humour and the Margins: Stand-up comedy and caste in India", Madhavi Shivaprasad examines the personas of high-profile stand-up comedians in India and highlights how, despite indications of awareness of the issues of privilege and discrimination associated with caste, the comedians nonetheless reinforce rather than challenge existing caste systems.

Questioning dominant social norms is also the focus of Sumati's article, "Selected Bollywood Films as Sites of LGBTQ Contestation, Assertion and Cultural Disruption", an exploration of a number of Bollywood films that Sumati argues, reflect the shifting discourse and broader acceptance of LGBTQ identities in Indian society.

Finally, Puntarika Rawikul and Wichian Lattipongpun in their article, "Promoting Gender Reassignment Surgical Service in Thailand among International Transgenders" explore the motivation for transgender persons to seek gender reassignment. They highlight a number of factors influencing decisions to undergo surgery ranging from economic to socio-cultural and local advertising regulations.

Dr Celia Lam
Editor
August 10, 2020

Drama at Disney: A Thematic Analysis of Creative Worker Identity Negotiation and Identification in the Documentary *Waking Sleeping Beauty*

Angelique Nairn, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand
Justin Matthews, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

Abstract

Work in creative organizations is often completed under intense working conditions. Due to the nature of the industry sector, creative workers must manage and deal with a range of factors related to their daily activities. These include multiple projects, tight deadlines and shifting schedules, to produce creative outputs that may have limited success in the marketplace. Despite the intensity of the work, the drive to create sets up conditions where creatives will self-exploit to meet work demands due to strong intrinsic motivations. This behaviour can leave creative workers susceptible to exploitation by employers because they offer a space for creative people to get resources and projects that meet these powerful intrinsic needs. To that end, creative people come to negotiate who they are within the constraints imposed by the work they do, and for this reason, we sought to thematically analyze the documentary *Waking Sleeping Beauty* (Hahn, 2009) to consider the intentional and unintentional construction of creative worker identity. We found that the identities of creatives could be categorized according to four themes: Creatives as passionate and/or exploited; Creatives as transformational, Creatives as subordinates, and Creatives as resistors. These themes revealed how animators negotiated their identities at a time when Disney Animation was experiencing several upheavals and suggested that identification with Disney could have both advantages and disadvantages for creative workers. The broader consideration from the themes alludes to a need to consider how to best provide for the creative worker while still capitalizing on the business needs of the creative economy.

Keywords: animation, creative identity, Disney, identification

Introduction

Work in the creative industries is often project-based, with tight deadlines, exploitation of workers for commercial gain, and no guarantee that the final creative product will be a success in the marketplace (Bridgstock, 2008; Caves, 2000; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2009). Yet creative people accept or abide by these conditions and pressures to fulfill their intrinsic motivations (Amabile & Mueller, 2007). The impact on their identities, however, can be problematic with scholars arguing that these conditions are responsible for pushing creative people to subordinate their private and personal aspects of life to their jobs (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004) and in extreme circumstances, to become addicted to work (Rowlands & Handy, 2012). The purpose of this article, then, is to explore the documentary *Waking Sleeping Beauty* (Hahn, 2009) for evidence of intentional and unintentional construction of worker identity, with particular attention paid to the identification process. The significance of exploring the construction of worker identity in *Waking Sleeping Beauty* lies in its focus on the Disney company. As one of the most successful global corporations, Disney's approach to management and creative projects could be replicated, and therefore can set standards for employees that favor certain working conditions for creative people. Furthermore, the documentary captures the working practices of creative people before a creative economy was advocated, suggesting the insights from the documentary may assist in determining how the identities of creative workers and the conditions of creative employment may have developed and perhaps even have evolved.

To explore the identity implications experienced by creative workers, we thematically analyzed the documentary *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, directed by former Disney animator Don Hahn and produced by former Vice President of Animation, Peter Schneider (Farber, 2009). *Waking Sleeping Beauty* chronicles the highs and lows experienced by the Disney animation studio from 1984 to 1994 (Hahn, 2009; Farber, 2009; Macaulay, 2010). In an interview for the film, Hahn and Schneider discuss how the documentary was an opportunity to tell their story (Macaulay, 2010). Although the tumultuous relationships of the executive management team have been well documented elsewhere (see Stewart, 2005 for an account of the "DisneyWar"), Schneider wanted the documentary to "capture amidst all the drama … the joy that exists while you are making a creative project. I wanted to capture the extraordinary joy of that period of time as well as the personal drama" (Macaulay, 2010). Featured in the film are Michael Eisner (CEO and Chairman), Frank Wells (Chief Operating Officer), Jeffrey Katzenberg (Head of Film Division), Roy Disney (President of Disney Animation), Peter Schneider as well as numerous animators and contractors (Macaulay, 2010).

The film itself includes archival footage, interviews with those working at Disney at the time, news footage, and footage from animation films produced across the ten years of the documentary. The film, then, offers viewers a glimpse into how employees working at the company interpreted how they felt, what they believed, and how they navigated situations at a time of crisis, and later, euphoria (Hahn, 2009). In essence, the film demonstrates how individuals working for Disney were able to negotiate their own identities, and how they acquired a sense of self by acting within a social structure (Brown, 2017). That is, the employees are encouraged to engage in identity work where they construct the story of that time. It allows them to distance themselves from traits or attributes that they deem unflattering or threatening, adopt resources to assign labels to the self and finally, reflect on perceptions held by others (Beech, et al., 2012). Therefore, we were able to analyze a myriad of perspectives on the situations in Disney Animation to consider the identities forged and the identifications that were lost or maintained.

Literature Review

Identity, Identification, and Disidentification

Generally speaking, identities are the self-meanings used to sustain individuality (Parekh, 2009; Stets & Burke, 2000). Identities include the "core beliefs, assumptions, values, attitudes, preferences, decisional premises, gestures, habits and rules" (Scott, et al., 1998, p. 303) that people adopt and it is these distinctive traits that help individuals establish a sense of uniqueness (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Stereotypically, creative people have been considered intelligent, immature, aware and receptive, independent, autonomous, flexible, introverted, self-confident, unconventional, and asocial (Bain, 2005; Beir, 1995). In other words, their sense of 'uniqueness' hinges on their intrinsic drive and need to be free. Accordingly, it also requires a degree of identity work to "… establish an identity in their estimation and in the eyes of others" (Beech, et al., 2012, p. 40). People develop their identities by evaluating the responses and perceptions of others (Stets & Burke, 2000). For example, Brooks and Daniluk (1998) found that visual artists look to their peers for recognition, acceptance, and support and when these were experienced, the artists felt more comfortable and satisfied with their creative work. Of course, some exceptions find fulfillment in their own understandings, such as a writer in Day's (2002, p. 133) research who remarked: "I don't need other people's validation. I know what I am." However, more often than not, identity negotiation comes from individuals surrounding themselves with like-minded others who support and augment one another's identities (Swann, et al., 2000).

In developing their identities, people can look to identify with organizations to experience feelings of belonging and esteem (Hogg, et al., 2017; Karanika-Murray, et al., 2015; Miscenko & Day, 2016). Identification occurs when individuals define their self-concepts in-line with their memberships of particular social categories, such as employing organizations. Accordingly, when people perceive commonalities with a social category, they will internalize aspects of the organization into their self-definition (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Brown, 2017; Dutton, et al., 1994; Karanika-Murray, et al., 2015; Miscenko & Day, 2016; Scott, et al., 1998), such as ethical and value-laden premises (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985; Lee, et al., 2015). By choosing to identify with certain social categories and organizations, individuals develop in-group affiliations that naturally construct other categories and organizations as out-groups (Hogg, et al., 2017; Tajfel, 1982). These in-group/out-group distinctions allow individuals to establish positive distinctiveness and are not problematic until in-group members engage in practices of favoritism and bias that elevate the status of their own group above that of the out-group (Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel, 1982). For example, when creative people perceive that only like-minded others understand their work, they subordinate employers and clients. Such in-group bias perhaps accounts for some of the tension that exists between Creatives and Suits in the creative workplace (Hackley & Kover, 2007).

By identifying with an organization, individuals adapt their behavior to the needs of the organization, which can guide individuals' thinking and behavior (Scott, et al., 1998) and predispose individuals to conforming and committing to organizational expectations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Lee, et al., 2015). For example, in the case of creative people, identification creates direction that wards off procrastination (Bilton, 2007) and creates expectations that can be challenged to generate even more creativity (Adarves-Yorno, et al., 2007). The influence of the organization over the creative person's identity can lead to greater productivity and on a personal level help creative people establish their signature style (Elsbach, 2009). Identification can be mutually beneficial for both parties: the creative person is afforded guidelines and resources to pursue their creative impulses, while the organization benefits financially from the

creative work that is produced. However, identification with an organization may not always be a positive experience (Ashforth, 2016). In some cases, people identifying with an organization can come to feel "shame, disgrace and embarrassment" (Dutton, et al., 1994, p. 242), which can eventually turn to disidentification.

Disidentification is a cognitive state entered by individuals who, having compared and contrasted the social situation, become disaffected from a previously valued in-group and begin to perceive it as an out-group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ashforth, et al., 2008; Ashforth, 2016; Parekh, 2009). Those who disidentify will overlook any perceived similarities they may previously have had with the organization and will instead focus on the negative defining characteristics of the organization, such as conflicting values, visions, and cultures. For example, when creative organizations privilege profit maximization over creative and artistic pursuits, Creatives may become frustrated and dissatisfied to the point that they leave the organization or make their displeasure known (Powell, 2007). People might engage in sarcasm, cynicism, striking and sabotaging others (Clegg, et al., 2008), and creative people, in particular, will opt to frame creative products as separate from the self or blame others for undesirable decisions or outcomes (Elsbach & Dukerich, 2016). As Hackley and Kover (2007, p. 75) argue, Creatives will "create a semi-permanent state of marginalisation", if necessary, to express "their resentment at the internal structures…and the overbearing influence of management ideologies." For creative people then, maintaining their standards of creativity, autonomy and professional integrity (Elsbach & Flynn, 2013) can prompt defining the self "…as *not* having the same attributes or principles that he or she believes define the organization" (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004, p. 3).

Conditions that Impact Creative Work
Work on creative projects can be characterized as being driven by a Creative's desire for fulfilling intrinsic motivations (Amabile & Mueller, 2007; Reid, et al., 2016). That is, rather than working to make money, gain a promotion, or achieve a level of stability (Bridgestock, 2005), a creative person will engage in creative projects to pursue a personal creative vision (Amabile & Mueller, 2007; Reid, et al. 2016). As Beir (1995, p. 501 *emphasis in the original*) attests, creative people "…work for three things: first, the *fun* of being part of the creation itself. Second, *admiration*, especially from their peers. Third, the excitement *and glory* of taking part in a successful creation," which can mean they will sacrifice private and personal aspects of their lives to ensure focus is centered on creative work. For some creative people, this intrinsic drive means postponing personal developments such as starting a family (Taylor & Littleton, 2012), while for others, it can mean embracing the stereotypical, romantic image of the artist who staves off real connections. For instance, Eikof and Haunschild (2006) found that creative people would not invest in material possessions and established loose ties with others, so that they could move around to follow their creative passions and place their attention on their creative work. In other words, creative people prefer to work autonomously and need the freedom to take risks and pursue new ideas (Moultrie & Young, 2009), even if that means subordinating the private self in favor of the professional self.

The need to create – sometimes referred to as a calling – may produce creative work that is a manifestation of Creatives' core values and ways of being (Andriopoulos & Gotsi, 2001). For example, a visual artist explained that she had a "deep 'passion' for her work and said that she would feel 'slightly ill' if she was not performing" (Brooks & Daniluk, 1998, p. 254), while writers felt that the stories in their books were a means of grappling with their own life problems (Day, 2002). Creative people become emotionally and personally tied to their work and their passion, which can produce over-identification to the point that the creative vision

becomes an obsession or addiction (Gotsi, et al., 2010; Rowlands & Handy, 2012). Having salient creative identities and rejecting a work-life balance in favor of engaging in creative work can produce counter-productive behavior. For example, as one Creative expresses, ". . . at the same time it [too much emphasis on artistic expression] can be very stressful and it can lead to burn out. It can lead to very emotional, angry people at times, and I'm sure that has a negative effect on creativity" (Gotsi, et al., 2010, p. 788). In essence, creative people can impede the success of their creative vision and work because they sacrifice other roles and relational identities that would produce alternative frames of reference (Parkeh, 2009) and are predisposed to over-identify with their creative role to the point that over-familiarization and over-specialization occur, stifling creativity (Bilton, 2007).

Of course, being driven by an intrinsic need to create can cause tensions in creative organizations. Unlike creative people, administrators and managers or Suits tend to favor extrinsic motivations, which sees a clashing of ideologies that can manifest in a hostile work environment (Beir, 1995; Bilton, 2007). At the very least, Creatives and Suits find themselves separated by "mutual suspicion, defensiveness, and culturally-embedded assumptions and values" (Bilton, 2007, p. 1), which perhaps accounts for why creative people believe non-creatives do not truly understand and appreciate their creative products and look to peer recognition for validation (Powell, 2007). The tension between Suits and Creatives is exacerbated when creative people are expected to develop high-quality products under intense working constraints (Gil & Spiller, 2007). In essence, to keep costs down, Suits will expect creative people to work long hours (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2009) to tight deadlines and budgets. However, such circumstances can limit creativity in favor of meeting market demand and the creative organization's pragmatic needs (Gil & Spiller, 2007). It falls to the creative people, then, to navigate the tension between being creative and making money, as competition for jobs in creative organizations is intense (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2009) and Creatives may be replaced if they do not conform to organizational needs.

Adding to the tensions that both Creatives and Suits experience in undertaking creative work is the uncertain demand that characterizes creative products (Caves, 2000). Uncertain demand refers to how creative products are considered experience goods, meaning how audiences respond to creative products, in this case animated movies, is entirely subjective (Caves, 2000). Creative projects require a lot of upfront investment and are not guaranteed success, which perhaps explains why organizations place undue constraints on creative workers and prefer to produce standardized products (Huws, 2010; Peterson & Anand, 2004). These working conditions, coupled with the innate need to define the self, are central concerns within creative workplaces. Our exploration of identity construction and processes of identification in *Waking Sleeping Beauty* can reveal insights into how creative people navigate the creative workplace and their roles within it.

Method

Thematic Analysis (TA) is a methodology and type of analysis within the umbrella of qualitative analysis. TA provides a process for "identifying, analyzing, and reporting (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). The method allows a researcher a process to identify common topics or themes present in a data set or media artefact (such as a television show or film). These themes are generated by coding large quantities of data into small but meaningful units that form the basis for identifying patterns. Insight is gathered, because the method requires unpacking the data in detail, rather than relying on simple descriptions. According to

Ibrahim (2012, p. 40) thematic analysis is considered an appropriate method for determining "the relationships between concepts" and whether they are "replicated" within the data.

Thematic analysis was conducted by watching the documentary multiple times, to identify patterns, trends, keywords, and ideas before establishing codes. These codes, or basic segments of the data, were perceived to be "interesting features" or key understandings (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87) that were initially quite broad, but through rigorous comparison and assessing the compatibility of codes (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006) were able to be reduced to those themes discussed in the data analysis to follow.

The documentary revealed four key themes: *Creatives as passionate and/or exploited; Creatives as transformational; Creatives as subordinate, and Creatives as resistors. Creatives as passionate and /or exploited* was comprised of sub-themes such as fulfilling the creative vision, working long hours, sacrificing for the job, having fun at work, rewards, and motivations. The culmination of these subthemes led us to determine that creative people were passionate about the company and the work being done and wanted to retain their place at Disney despite unfavorable and exploitative working conditions. The theme *Creatives as transformational* included sub-themes such as aura, inspiration, equality, servant leadership, creativity as key, personal change, and investment. Often these sub-themes accompanied narratives about particular leaders, and in most instances, led followers to alter their behavior to emulate and support the leaders' visions. *Creatives as Subordinate* incorporated sub-themes such as money v. creativity, transactions, reprimand and punishment, emotional upheaval, and dissatisfaction. Finally, our fourth theme, *Creatives as Resistors,* was made up of sub-themes such as rebellious activity, unflattering depictions of peers, and conflict.

Analysis and Discussion

Work in creative organizations can impact how individuals negotiate their creative identities (Beech, et al., 2012). Although driven by intrinsic motivations, the confines of an organization can reorient creatives to fulfilling commercial goals, which can see workers conforming to the needs of an organization, sometimes at the expense of creativity (Eikof & Haunschild, 2007). For those working in the Disney Animation Studio from 1984 to1994, identification with the company would see them producing award-winning films, but in fraught and sometimes emotionally and physically jarring circumstances.

Theme 1: Creatives as Passionate and/or Exploited

Throughout the documentary, it became clear that creative people were willing to work "around the clock" (Hahn, 2009, 00:44:21-22) because they were "living the dream" (Hahn, 2009, 01:05:03-01:05:05). Such evidence of their passion and commitment to the work was made clear when Hahn referred to how, as part of the animation marathon of making one film a year, the animators ended up spending "more time with each other than we did with our families" (Hahn, 2009, 00:55:13-16). As the success of animated movies grew, the animators were pushing themselves, as Hahn put it "trying to top ourselves" (Hahn, 2009, 01:04:32-33), because the rewards increased, and credit ensued. The drive to do better and make a name for themselves both as animators and individuals suggests that the animators held salient creative identities, which were elevated in the hierarchy of individual identities. Continually privileging one identity over another can lead to over-identification and a degree of self-exploitation (Gotsi, et al., 2010; Rowlands & Handy, 2012). These aspects demonstrate that the animators identified with Disney and the movie projects to the point that productivity increased, and they were willing to invest more to see the films come to fruition (Powell, 2007).

It was clear in *Waking Sleeping Beauty* that the animators were willing to push themselves to get work done to the point that "everybody was spread too thin" (Hahn, 2009, 01:05:53-55). In fact, in a meeting held by Katzenberg with the animators, they discussed how they could not have a family because of the pressure they were under to complete the films and that some animators had developed carpal tunnel syndrome in response to the pressure to make many animated films in short timeframes. Animator Glen Keane describes how his hands would shake making it difficult to hold a coffee cup because he had been "animating the whole night before" (Hahn, 2009, 01:04:04-06). While making the movie *Rescuers Down Under* (USA, 1990), animators took to sleeping on pellets on the floor because the new computer system had to be regularly monitored and that meant there was no time to go home if the project was to be finished on time and to a reasonable quality. Essentially, the animators were working irregular hours trying to get everything completed, and in so doing demonstrated a commitment to the project. Furthermore, the process was being overseen by Schneider who always wanted to know if the new computer system they were trialing was working, and that added to the pressure felt by the animation team. As expressed by Hahn in the documentary "the deadlines and quotas never stopped" (Hahn, 2009, 00:44:27-29), and "the work was intense, the hours long" (Hahn, 2009, 00:54:50-55). Creative people will work when they are inspired and struggle with maintaining a healthy balance between work and home (Bain, 2005; Rowlands & Handy, 2012). However, the suggestion from the documentary is that the workload, not the inspiration, was requiring the creative people to sacrifice their personal needs in favor of professional requirements. Although the Creatives may have been passionate and committed, it is clear that a degree of exploitation is observable.

The animators were not just engaged in their own exploitation but were also overtly and covertly exploited by Disney management. In *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, animators were forced to abide by the dictates of the leadership for fear of losing their jobs. For example, both Jeffrey Katzenberg and Peter Schneider fired people who were "belligerent" (Hahn, 2009, 00:26:22-23), and Katzenberg regularly made decisions that pushed the animators to work harder and faster. To make *Beauty and the Beast* (USA, 1991) the animators had to not only start again when Katzenberg scraped the first six months of work, they were also tasked with developing a film with a budget and a schedule that Hahn describes as "cut way, way back" (Hahn, 2009, 00:45:54-56). The exploitation of the animators appeared to be financially motivated, because as Katzenberg and Eisner varyingly attest "more titles" would mean that Disney could do "better financially" (Hahn, 2009, 00:43:01-04). The fact that animation "cost a fortune to create" (Hahn, 2009, 00:27:17-18), with any one film needing "half a million frames" (Hahn, 2009, 00:27:29-36) and costing upwards of 10 million USD to make, it was unsurprising that money-making was a key agenda of the managers at Disney.

Disney is first and foremost a business, and those running the organization typified the Suit mentality of needing a return on investment and extrinsic rewards to ensure the continuation of the organization (Beir, 1995; Bilton, 2007). However, the toll of needing to return a profit was felt primarily by the animators who regularly had "cold dinners" and forfeited "nights away from family" (Hahn, 2009, 01:05:01-03). Yet despite the fraught work conditions, creative people continued to push themselves to make the films, which can perhaps be explained by the fact that when individuals identify with an organization, they will submit to that organization's juristic power and organizational control (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985).

The analysis shows that the animators were passionate about their work. Their passion and investment in the organization were eventually rewarded with the company winning awards, having box office success, and investing in new creative partnerships and resources. In these

ways, the creative people were able to experience the "fun," "admiration" and "glory" (Beir, 1995, p. 501) fundamental to creative drive and fulfilling a creative vision. According to Lee (1971), worker identification and commitment to an organization are maintained as rewards and status increase. Although not typical of creative people who prefer intrinsic motivations (Amabile & Mueller, 2007; Reid et al., 2016), these extrinsic motivations, such as credit and a brand-new building, did keep creative people focused and tied to the animation projects. Once commitment with an organization is established and individuals strongly identify with the organization, this dedication will remain "relatively stable and enduring" (Gautam et al, 2004, p. 305) despite personal costs.

Theme 2: Creatives as Transformers
The second theme identified in *Waking Sleeping Beauty* is Creatives as transformers. In the documentary, there were several instances where creative leaders were able to empower their colleagues and give meaning to the creative work, which stimulated the creative process and transformed the creative projects and environment. For example, when Peter Schneider was hired to run the animation department, he believed his first objective was to "change the culture before it changed me" (Hahn, 2009, 00:22:57-58) because it was clear that the company had lost its identity and needed to be altered to "make great films" again (Hahn, 2009, 00:24:04-06). He revolutionized the creative process by taking everything apart, bringing in motivational speakers, and challenging animators to defend their creative ideas. Successful leaders often embody the prototypical characteristics that define the organization and the work they do (van Knippenberg & van Kleef, 2016) and in this instance, Schneider's focus on the creativity rather than commercial benefits likely endeared the creative people to him and assisted in forging a collective identity that bound the animators together. In many ways, Schneider embodied the traits of transformational leadership by reinforcing the company vision of making great films and thus moving stereotypically driven creative people to work together for the common good (Andriopoulos & Gotsi, 2001). The transformational approach can be seen to energize an organization (Clapham, 2000), and in this case, many animators felt like they were "on a freight train leaving the station at light-speed" (Hahn, 2009, 00:23:27-30), they had to get on board to reap the benefits of the change.

Schneider was not the only transformational leader identified in *Waking Sleeping Beauty*. Howard Ashman, a composer with a background in musical theatre, was hired to help inject creativity into the musical numbers of animation films. He was described as a "real genius at work" (Hahn, 2009, 00:38:27-32), and he had "an amazing influence on everybody" (Hahn, 2009, 00:51:29-00:51:31). His influence is notable in the making of *The Little Mermaid* (USA, 1989), as his development of the song "Part of your world" inspired animator Glen Keane to feel compelled to draw Ariel: "I have to do Ariel, I can feel it in my heart" (Hahn, 2009, 00:40:55-59). Therefore, Ashman was able to transform projects by relying on his expertise and relatability. According to Mumford, et al. (2002), leaders with proven expertise can guide and influence others because their superior knowledge and proven ability can, as Lunenburg (2012, p. 6) points out, "…lead to enthusiastic and unquestioning trust, compliance, loyalty, and commitment from subordinates." In other words, the animators trusted Ashman because of his theatre background and understanding of the creative process and deferred to him since he was likable and respected. This trust and respect, coupled with participative safety (West, 1990; Pirola-Merlo & Mann, 2004) is perhaps what prompted Keane to feel comfortable in becoming personally and emotionally tied to the work (Bain, 2005) and especially to the creation of Ariel.

Not all the transformational leaders remained transformational throughout the creative process nor were they always successful in creating unity and conformity within the teams. The directors of *Beauty and the Beast* found Ashman to be intimidating and, at times, difficult to work with because he preferred his ideas over others. In one such incident, Ashman yelled at the directors for rejecting his idea to have a "little beast boy" (Hahn, 2009, 00:49:18-19) in the prologue of the movie. Elsbach and Flynn (2013) found that creative people who offer creative ideas do so to affirm their own identities. When those creative ideas are not validated by their peers, the lack of support might produce uncertainty and defensive behaviors in people looking to preserve their self-concepts. Ashman's transformational approach, then, was not always appreciated or conducive to collegiality, suggesting that leadership is context-dependent, and the creative process requires give and take (Mainemelis, et al., 2015). Similarly, another transformational leader, Don Bluth was according to Hahn, seen by some of the animators as "charismatic" (Hahn, 2009, 00:06:20-21) and the "messiah of animation," while others viewed Bluth as "just another Walt wannabe" (00:06:27-31). Again, this example is evidence that some leaders and some leadership styles can be polarizing as much as they can be transformative.

Research on the creative industries has found that the preferred leadership style for managing creative people is transformational leadership because it encourages creativity and innovation (Bass, 1990; Pieterse, van Knippenberg, Schippers & Stam, 2010). An effective transformational leader will motivate others, ensure individuals are concerned with the common goals of the organization over their own interests, and will role model the ideal behaviors expected of those they are working alongside (Pieterse, et al., 2010). Should this approach empower employees, then creativity will be high. Both Schneider and Ashman typified transformational leadership by enforcing the vision of the company, that "animation is the heart" (Hahn, 2009, 00:01:42-44) of Disney, and bringing people together through a common bond of making great films. They shared common ground with the animators because they advocated for creativity, which is in line with Creatives' attitudes and behaviors (Amabile & Mueller, 2007; Reid, et al., 2016), and is perhaps the reason why they were well regarded and two of the most influential leaders identified in the documentary.

Although it is clear that the animators identified with the Disney corporation, they could be said to identify with these key transformational figures as well. Communicating and interacting with like-minded others, such as Schneider and Ashman, could be why individuals opted to identify with the organization. These peers embody the prototypical characteristics that animators appreciated and respected (Lunenburg, 2012), such as creative skills and expertise, which may account for why they were so influential in the creative process.

Theme 3: Creatives as Subordinates
The third theme identified in the documentary was labeled "Creatives as subordinate" and captured the clear hierarchical decision-making process that takes place in an organization such as Disney Studios. For example, when making the film *The Black Cauldron*, Katzenberg determined that the movie was too dark and unlikely to be well-received in the creative marketplace. As the head of the film division and boss of the animators, Katzenberg demanded that the film was brought to an edit bay where he was "gonna show you how you edit an animated movie," despite being advised by the creative workers that "you can't just edit an animated movie" (Hahn, 2009, 00:16:11-28). In another example, Katzenberg informed the animators that he was "interested in the Bank of America Awards," which was the "worst thing to tell a room full of artists" (Hahn, 2009, 00:21:24-31) because the latter were motivated by intrinsic desires and felt their motivations were no longer taking precedence. Finally, the subordination of the Creatives was evident in their relocation to a "gutted wretch of a building"

(Hahn, 2009, 00:19:05-07). The physical relocation of the animators typifies the in-group/out-group distinction because removing them from the Disney lot reinforced that the animators were the distinctive and unfavorable other. Katzenberg's decision to hold 6 am meetings on weekdays and 8 am meetings on Sundays was further evidence of the animators' subordination. As Roy Disney laments, it was "such a total sign of disrespect for a lot of talented people working their asses off for you" (Hahn, 2009, 00:20:53-58). According to Rogers, Corley, and Ashforth (2017), showing workers respect and responding to their needs can enhance creativity and increase the likelihood of them identifying with their leader. In this case, however, Katzenberg did the opposite, which was demoralizing and cemented the sentiment that creativity was less important to the Disney studio at the time.

According to Caves (2000), market-orientation and commercial drive are often preferred over creativity, which inevitably constructs creative people as part of a transaction, where their inputs are dictated according to managerial requirements. The push to treat Creatives as part of a transaction is typical of those embodying the prototypical characteristics of Suits (Thompson, et al., 2007). Transactional leadership entails clarifying project expectations, the close monitoring of employee behaviors, and correcting situations that arise and prove problematic (Bass, 1990; et al., 2010). Such a leadership style inevitably advances the predilections of the leader and perhaps explains why Katzenberg's approaches placed importance on commercial imperatives as opposed to creativity and innovation. Furthermore, his leadership style could impact on how valued the employees felt, with Wrzesniewski, Dutton, and Debebe (2003, p. 127) arguing that a "close coupling between the way others make employees feel about the value of their work and how they feel valued as individuals" happens through engaging in organizational life.

For Suits, creativity is seen as one of many inputs in the production process (Thompson et al., 2007), which perhaps explains why Eisner wanted to "put a box around all of this creativity" (Hahn, 2009, 00:34:06-10) and Katzenberg felt cutting a musical number from *The Little Mermaid* based on early audience responses, were appropriate and desired courses of action. Whether they intended to or not, both Eisner and Katzenberg reaffirmed the in-group/out-group or Suits versus Creatives distinctions stereotypical of the creative industries. By engaging in in-group favoritism they subordinated the out-group (Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel, 1982), which perhaps accounts for the reason why the creative people resented managerial intervention in their work or came to perceive that they were the "step-child" (Hahn, 2009, 00:31:42-43) in the Disney company.

From the analysis, we determined that the Disney corporation held firm to a centralized management structure that naturally subordinated the needs of the creative people. That is, a commercial agenda overlaid all creative activity, which reaffirmed distinctions between the Suits and Creatives. It is not surprising that concerns over the company's finances were given precedence, after all, Disney is a business and without a steady profit, the ability to reinvest in new animation stories would be difficult. What was unexpected, however, was that generally speaking the animators accepted the commercial goals of the organization. According to Eikhof and Haunschild (2007), when creative people are externally rewarded with, for example, a brand-new building or received higher salaries and bonuses like they were at Disney, the intrinsic motivations can be supplemented. Additionally, Elsbach and Flynn (2013) found that creative people are conscious of the pragmatic needs of an organization and can switch between being creative and being business-focused as and when required. Therefore, the subordination of the creative people was not an entirely unwelcome or negative occurrence, but rather an occasional necessity to ensure the organization's survival.

Interestingly, the move to a creative industries agenda has seen the desires of creative people elevated above those of management (Davis & Scase, 2000). In their research, Davis and Scase (2000, p. 87) cite the experience of a manager to emphasize this shift: "[Y]ou have to understand that I have a kind of stable of thoroughbreds here and if I treated them like junior accountants, they'd all tell me to piss off…" Yet it is clear in *Waking Sleeping Beauty* that the animators were not as highly prized and instead, chose to conform to managerial requirements to be rewarded and to alleviate feelings of fear. They often abided by Katzenberg's requests to avoid "negative undesirable consequences… if they do not comply" (Raven, 1992, p. 2). Therefore, Katzenberg's transactional leadership approach, which emphasized the power and wisdom of the leader (Jung, et al., 2009), inevitably impacted on the Creatives' motivations and subordinated them in the Disney hierarchy.

Theme 4: Creatives as Resistors
The final and smaller of the four themes, Creatives as resistors, demonstrated that although Creatives might have been subordinate, that did not stop them rebelling in times of inequity and frustration. For example, when the animators were told in a memo by Roy Disney that they were to be relocated to a derelict building to make way for the live-action stars, the "emotionally under my desk" (Hahn, 2009, 00:19:19-20) animators refused to do any work and instead, re-enacted the entire *Apocalypse Now* film. In another instance, the animators were again informed in a memo that the title of their film *Basil of Baker Street* would be renamed *Basil the Great Mouse Detective* (USA, 1986) as per the requests of both Schneider and the marketing department. To ensure their displeasure was known, the animators wrote and circulated a fake memo that undermined Schneider's integrity, slashed Schneider's tyres and drew unflattering caricatures of him. Aside from establishing in-groups and out-groups, where management and the marketing department were considered the unfavorable other, these examples reinforce the stereotype that creative people are disinclined to support the corporate culture (Beir, 1995; Hackley & Kover, 2007; Torr, 2008) when they sense a loss of independence and freedom (Hardy & Phillips, 2004).

The analysis of the documentary revealed that although the animators would generally abide by the managers' dictates, they did not always feel the sense of belonging and esteem that comes with identification. Identification comes from having a commonality of beliefs: a person associates with an organization that validates their self-concept and possesses characteristics that are deemed favorable and enhancing (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1982). At times in the documentary, it was clear that the attitudes and beliefs of the animators and those of the people governing them were not congruent, which could have prompted some self-questioning and unease. The few instances of rebellion can perhaps be explained by Peretti and O'Connor (1989) who argue that when a person's sense of self is strong and held with conviction, they will reject and defend against any external attributions that threaten the individual's self-concept.

Resistance occurs when individuals perceive personal injustices that have taken place and is seen as necessary to maintain professional integrity (Hackley & Kover, 2007). As Elsbach and Flynn (2013) found, creative people prefer their own standards and want to have control over their projects, so the decisions of Roy Disney and Schneider to act on behalf of the animators could have been construed as a threat to the animators' self-concepts and professional understandings. In such circumstances, it is not uncommon for people to resist by striking, engaging in-jokes and sarcasm, sabotaging others, and acting in other insubordinate ways (Clegg, et al., 2008), particularly if these same individuals are grappling with disidentification. Kreiner and Ashforth (2007) have identified that when individuals oppose elements of an

organization, in this case, organizational dictates, the negative attitudes, and feelings towards the organization will see workers become cynical and alienate themselves to maintain feelings of self-esteem and self-worth. Therefore, the Creatives of Disney Animation did not always trust or respect the actions of management if it was seen as a personal affront to their creative identities.

Conclusion

Structures of power can push people to act in ways that favor an organization at great personal expense (Huws, 2007). For example, throughout the documentary creative people were hired and fired according to the commercial needs of the business, they were pushed to work to excess to meet management goals of producing multiple projects within tight timelines, and they were instructed on what they could do and where they could work, including in a derelict building. Many of the animators remained with the company despite their despondency and frustrations. By identifying with an organization, individuals adapt their behavior to the needs of the organization, which can guide individuals' thinking and behavior (Scott, et al., 1998) and predispose individuals to conforming and committing to organizational expectations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Lee, et al., 2015). Identification, then, leads to individuals orientating their behavior to meet organizational demands (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985), even if that entails a degree of exploitation, provided these individuals are in some way rewarded (Tompkins & Cheney, 1987).

Being part of a success story, despite having reservations and concerns about the company, may explain why the animators stayed with Disney, even though they experienced some less favorable working conditions. When an organization is perceived favorably by others, it can increase the likelihood of identification happening because individuals want to be affiliated with the organization to experience self-enhancement and self-esteem (Dutton, et al., 1994). It may even account for why the animators ultimately over-identified with the work to the point they were willing to make sacrifices to ensure they experienced personal satisfaction and the organization had creative and financial success. When creative people over-identify with their work they "can become completely consumed by work and thereby lose a sense of individual identity" (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004, p. 2). Other markers of identity, such as family and friends, are lost or subordinated in favor of the psychological rewards that come from manifesting their creative visions. In other words, creative people will self-exploit and in extreme situations, become prima donnas (Gotsi, et al., 2010) or addicted to work (Rowlands & Handy, 2012), to experience creative freedom (Cohen, 2012) and the social validation of working in prestigious industries (Bridgstock, 2008; Caves, 2000; Cohen, 2012), such as Disney animation.

A lot of the stories in *Waking Sleeping Beauty* are accounts of interactions with others. Ashman helped Keane understand his creative potential, Katzenberg challenged creative people to understand the pragmatic needs of a business, and Schneider inspired the workers to find common ground and bond with one another. These all contributed to the ways creative people appeared to see themselves, stimulating the development of our four themes, and pointing to how identity development and identification does not happen in a vacuum. However, the insights from the documentary suggest that not much has changed since the 1980s around the development of creative identities and the working conditions encountered by creative people. Compared with recent scholarship, the suggestion is that the animators of the past and the creative workers of today, are expected to flourish under tight schedules, conflicting creative and commercial commitments, and stringent management ill-equipped to understand the needs

of workers in the creative economy. Therefore, our research suggests the need for more consideration to be placed on how best to provide for creative workers by management, policymakers, and scholars looking to capitalize on the creative economy.

Admittedly, there are a couple of limitations to this article. The first is that the analysis is of a documentary. The focus on a singular media artefact means that themes identified and explored within this study are limited to this singular lens and particularly the constructed views of Hahn as the documentary maker. Secondly, this documentary was made twenty years prior. Accordingly, stories will have changed, emotions will have been reinterpreted, and identity negotiation will have taken effect. The documentary, then, is a snapshot in time, however, themes from our data analysis centering on creative identity and identification continue to have relevancy, as many of the working conditions evident in the documentary continue to exist in the creative industries today. To offset these limitations, interviews with current animators working at Disney would permit an evaluation of how much has changed in terms of working conditions, and how animators describe their creative identities in a contemporary context.

References

Adarves-Yorno, I., Postmes, T., & Haslam, S. A. (2007). Creative innovation or crazy irrelevance? The contribution of groups norms and social identity to creative behavior. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 43*(3), 410–416. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2006.02.013

Amabile, T. M. & Mueller, J. S. (2007). Studying creativity, its processes, and its antecedents: An exploration of the componential theory of creativity. In J. Zhou & C. Shalley (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational creativity*, (pp. 31–62). *Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.*

Andriopoulos, C., & Gotsi, M. (2001). 'Living' the corporate identity: Case studies from the creative industry. *Corporate Reputation Review, 4*(2), 144–154. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1540139

Ashforth, B. E. (2016). Distinguished scholar invited essay: Exploring identity and identification in organizations: Time for some course corrections. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 23*(4), 361–373. https://doi.org/10.1177/15490151816.667897.

Ashforth, B. E., Harrison, S. H., & Corley, K .G. (2008). Identification in organizations: An examination of four fundamental questions. *Journal of Management, 34*(3), 325–374. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206308316059.

Ashforth, B. E., & Mael, F. (1989). Social identity theory and the organization. *The Academy of Management Review, 14*(1), 20–39. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.2307/258189

Bain, A. L. (2005). Constructing an artistic identity. *Work, Employment and Society, 19*(1), 25–46. https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017005051280.

Bass, B. M. (1999). From transactional to transformational leadership: Learning to share the vision. *Organizational Dynamics, 18*(3), 19-31. doi: 10.1016/0090-2616(90)90061-S.

Beech, N., Gilmore, C., Cochrane, E., & Greig, G. (2012). Identity work as a response to tensions: A re-narration in opera rehearsals. *Scandinavian Journal of Management, 28,* 39–47. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2011.12.005

Beir, J. R. (1995). Managing creatives: Our creative workers will excel if we let them. *Vital Speeches of the Day, 61*(6), 501–503.

Bilton, C. (2007). *Management and creativity: from creative industries to creative management*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, UK: Open University Press.

Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bridgstock, R. S. (2008). 'Follow your bliss' or 'show me the money'? Career orientations, career management competence and career success in Australian creative workers. Electronic paper. Australian Policy Online. Available at http://apo.org.au/node/14938

Brooks, G. S. & Daniluk, J. C. (1998). Creative labors: The lives and careers of women artists. *The Career Development Quarterly, 46,* 216–261. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.1998.tb00699.x

Brown, A. D. (2017). Identity work and organizational identification. *International Journal of Management Reviews, 19*(3), 296–317. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12152.

Caves, R. E. (2000). *Creative industries: Contracts between art and commerce.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Clapham, M. M. (2000). Employee creativity: The role leadership. *Academy of Management Perspectives, 14*(3), 138–139. https://doi.org/10.5465/ame.2000.4474568

Cohen, N. S. (2012). Cultural work as a site of struggle: Freelancers and exploitation. *Triple C, Cognition, Communication, Co-operation, 10*(2), 141–155. https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v10i2.384

Clegg, S., Kornberger, M., & Pitsis, T. (2008) *Managing & organizations* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage

Davis, H., & Scase, R. (2000). *Managing creativity: The dynamics of work and organization.* Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Day, S. X. (2002). "Make it uglier. Make it hurt. Make it real": Narrative construction of the creative writer's identity. *Creativity Research Journal, 14*(1), 127–136. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326934CRJ1401_10

Dutton, J. E., Dukerich, J.M., & Harquail, C.V. (1994). Organizational images and member identification. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 39*(2), 239–263. https://doi.org/10.2307/2393235

Eikhof, D. R. & Haunschild, A. (2006). Lifestyle meets market. Bohemian entrepreneurs in creative industries. *Creativity and Innovation Management*, 15(3), 234–241. https://doi.org/1467-8691.2006.00392.x.

Eikhof, D. R. & Haunschild, A. (2007). For art's sake! Artistic and economic logics in creative production. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 28,* 523–538. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.462

Elsbach, K. D. (2009). Identity affirmation through 'signature style': A study of toy car designers. *Human Relations, 62*(7), 1041–1072. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726709335538

Elsbach, K. D., & Dukerich, J. M. (2016). The undesired self. In M.G. Pratt, M. Schultz, B. E. Ashforth and D. Ravasi (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of organizational identity,* (pp. 257–275). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Elsbach, K. D., & Flynn, F. J. (2013). Creative collaboration and the self-concept: A study of toy car designers. *Journal of Management Studies, 50*(4), 515–544. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12024

Farber, S. (2009, October 10). Waking sleeping beauty – Film review. *The Hollywood Reporter.* https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/waking-sleeping-beauty-film-review-93493

Gautam, T., Van Dick, R., & Wagner, U. (2004). Organizational identification and organizational commitment: Distinct aspects of two related concepts. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology, 7,* 301–315 https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-839X.2004.00150.x.

Gil, R. & Spiller, P. T. (2007). The organizational dimensions of creativity: Motion picture production. *California Management Review, 50*(1), 243–260. https://doi.org/10.2307/41166426

Gotsi, M., Andriopulos, C., Lewis, M.W., & Ingram, A. E. (2010). Managing creatives: Paradoxical approaches to identity regulation. *Human Relations, 63*(6), 781–805. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726709342929

Hackley, C., & Kover, A. J. (2007). The trouble with creatives: Negotiating creative identity in advertising agencies. *International Journal of Advertising, 26*(1), 63–78.

Hahn, D. (Director). (2009). *Waking sleeping beauty* [Motion Picture]. United States of America: Stone Circle Pictures. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2007.11072996

Hardy, C. & Phillips, N. (2004). Discourse and power. In D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Oswick and L. Putnam (Eds), *The SAGE handbook of organisational discourse.* London, England: Sage, 299–316.

Hesmondhalgh, D., & Baker, S. (2010). A very complicated version of freedom: Conditions and experiences of creative labour in three cultural industries. *Poetics, 38,* 4-20. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2009.10.001.

Hogg, M. A., Abrams, D., & Brewer, M. B. (2017). Social identity: The role of self in group processes and intergroup relations. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 20*(5), 570–581 https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430217690909.

Huws, U. (2007). The spark in the engine: creative workers in a global economy. *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation, 1*(1), 1–12. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/workorgalaboglob.1.1.0001

Huws, U. (2010). Expression and expropriation: The dialectics of autonomy and control in creative labour. *Ephermera: Theory & Politics in Organization, 10*(3/4), 504-521. http://www.ephemerajournal.org/

Ibrahim, A.M. (2012). *Thematic analysis: a critical review of its process and evaluation*. Croatia: Zagreb.

Jung, D., Yammarino, F.J. & Lee, J.K. (2009). Moderating role of subordinates' attitudes on transformational leadership and effectiveness: A multi-cultural and multi-level perspective. *The Leadership Quarterly, 20*(4), 586–603. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2009.04.011.

Karanika-Murray, M., Duncan, N., Pontes, H. M., & Griffiths, M. D. (2015). Organizational identification, work engagement, and job satisfaction. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 30*(8), 1019–1033. https://doi.org/10.1108/JMP-11-2013-0359.

Kreiner, G. E., & Ashforth, B. E. (2004). Evidence towards an expanded model of organizational   identification. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 25*(1), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.234

Lee, S. M. (1971). An empirical analysis of organizational identification. *Academy of Management Journal, 14,* 213–226. https://doi.org/10.2307/255308

Lee, E. S., Park, T. Y., & Koo, B. (2015). Identifying organizational identification as a basis for attitudes and behaviors: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin 141*(5), 1049–1080. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000012.

Lunenburg, F. C. (2012). Power and leadership: An influence process. *International Journal of Management Business, and Administration, 15*(1), 1–9.

Macaulay, S. (2010, March 26). Don Hahn, Peter Schneider on waking sleeping beauty. *Filmmaker Magazine.* https://filmmakermagazine.com/6347-don-hahn-peter-schneider-of-waking-sleeping-beauty-by-scott-macaulay/#.XK_vM5MzZPM

Mainemelis, B., Kark, R., & Epitropaki, O. (2015). Creative leadership: A multi-context conceptualization. *Academy of Management Annals, 9*(1), 393–482. https://doi.org/10.1080/19416520.2015.1024502.

Marx, K. (1852/1978). The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. In R.C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader,* (2nd ed.), New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

Moultrie, J. & Young, A. (2009). Exploratory study of organizational creativity in creative organizations. *Creativity and Innovation Management, 18,* 299–314. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8691.2009.00536.x

Parekh, B. (2009). Logic of identity. *Politics, Philosophy & Economics, 8*(3), 267–284. https://doi.org/10.1111/10.1177/1470594X09105387

Peterson, R. A., & Anand, N. (2004). The production of culture perspective. *Annual Review of Sociology, 30,* 331–334. https://doi.org/10.1111/10.1146/annurev.soc.30.012703.110557

Peretti, P. O., & O'Connor, P. (1989). Effects of incongruence between the perceived self and the ideal self on emotional stability of stripteasers. *Social Behavior and Personality, 17*(1), 81–92. http://dx.doi.org/10.2224/sbp.1989.17.1.81.

Pieterse, A. N., van Knippenberg, D., Schippers, M. & Stam, D. (2010). Transformational and transactional leadership an innovative behavior: The moderating role of psychological empowerment. *Journal of Organizational Behavior,31,* 609–623. https://doi.org/10.1111/10.1002/job.650.

Pirola-Merlo, A., & Mann, L. (2004). The relationship between individual creativity and team creativity: Aggregating across people and team. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 25*(2), 235–257. https://doi.org/10.1111/10.1002/job.240.

Powell, S. (2007). Organizational marketing, identity and the creative brand. *Brand Management, 15*(1), 41–56. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bm.2550109

Raven, B. H. (1992). A power/interaction model of interpersonal influence: French and Raven thirty years later. *Journal of Social Behavior & Personality, 7*(2), 217–244.

Reid, A., Petocz, P., & Bennett, D. (2016). Is creative work sustainable? Understanding identity, motivation, and worth. *Australian Journal of Career Development, 25*(1), 33–41. https://doi.org/10.1177/1038416216637089

Rogers, K. M., Corley, K. G, & Ashforth, B. E. (2017). Seeing more than orange: Organizational respect and positive identity transformation in a prison context. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 62*(2), 219-269. https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839216678842

Rowlands, L., & Handy, J. (2012). An addictive environment: New Zealand film production workers' subjective experiences of project-based labour. *Human Relations, 65*(5), 657–680. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726711431494.

Scott, C.R., Corman, S.R., & Cheney, G. (1998). Development of structurational model of identification in the organization. *Communication Theory, 8*(3), 298–336. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.1998.tb00223.x

Sluss, D. M., & Ashforth, B. E. (2007). Relational identity and identification: Defining ourselves through work relationships. *Academy of Management Review, 32*(1), 9–32. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2007.23463672

Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J. (2000). Identity theory and social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 63*(3), 224–237. https://doi.org/10.2307/2695870

Stewart, J. B. (2005). *Disney War.* New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Swann Jr, W. B., Milton, L. P., & Polzer, J. P. (2000). Should we create a niche or fall in line? Identity   negotiation and small group effectiveness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 79*(2), 238-250. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.2.238

Tajfel, H. (1982). Social psychology of intergroup relations. *Annual Review of Psychology, 33,* 1–39. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.ps.33.020182.000245.

Taylor, S. & Littleton, K. (2012). *Contemporary identities of creativity and creative work.* London, UK: Routledge.

Tompkins, P. K., & Cheney, G. (1985). Communication and unobtrusive control in contemporary organizations. In R.D. McPhee and P.K. Tompkins (Eds.), *Organizational communication: Traditional themes and new directions* (179–210). Beverly Hills, California: SAGE Publications.

van Knippenberg, D. & van Kleef, G. A. (2016). Leadership and affect: Moving the hearts and minds of followers. *Academy of Management Annals, 10*(1), 799–84. https://doi.org/10.1080/19416520.2016.1160515.

West, M. A. (1990). The social psychology of innovation in groups. In M. A. West, & J. L. Farr (Eds.), *Innovation and creativity at work: Psychological and organizational strategies* (101–122). Chichester: Wiley.

Wrzesniewski, A., Dutton, J. E. & Debebe, D. (2003). Interpersonal sensemaking and the meaning of work. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 25*, 93–135. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0191-3085(03)25003-6.

Corresponding author: Angelique Nairn
Contact email: angelique.nairn@aut.ac.nz

Humour and the Margins: Stand-Up Comedy and Caste in India

Madhavi Shivaprasad, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India

Abstract

Stand-up comedy as an art form has been known as one of the most powerful forms of expression to speak truth to power. In India, political satire as stand-up is highly popular. However, there is a serious gap in recognising and critiquing social hierarchies, particularly the Indian caste system. Most comedians, including the women who are known as strong critics of patriarchal structures within Indian society and the comedy industry in India, do not see the lack of representation of a Dalit voice in the industry as a structural problem. When caste is specifically named in the routines performed by them, all of them incidentally are a reference to their upper-caste identities in a non-ironical manner. Through critical discourse analysis, the article analyses stand-up comedy videos by these comedians online videos, as well as other non-humorous critiques they have offered on other platforms such as social media in order to understand the implications of these references. The article argues that these narratives reflect the general dominant caste discourse that the upper-caste comedians are a part of and also reconstitute the same by reiterating their own locations within the caste system. Finally it reflects on the significance of humour and particularly stand-up comedy to effect change. Recognising that humour and laughter are social activities also means to acknowledge that they hold potential to break existing stereotypes. How and under what conditions would that become possible?

Keywords: caste hierarchy, caste system, Dalit humour, humour, India, stand-up comedy

Introduction

Stand-up comedy has been one of the most popular ways for artists to speak truth to power. Hannah Gadsby's Netflix special *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette* (Parry, 2018), particularly redefined the way satire and political critique could be expressed through the medium of stand-up comedy. In India, comedians themselves have hailed the stand-up comedy industry as "one of the most progressive" entertainment fields (Film Companion, 2017). As Subin Paul (2017) notes, Indian stand-up comedy and its potential to critique social structures and inequalities becomes particularly important because freedom of speech, particularly of journalists, is being heavily curtailed in India owing to the political climate. However, the comedy industry is not as "intersectional" as it is purported to be because of the existing structural barriers in the industry (Sahoo & Das, 2018).

Very few academic studies have been conducted on stand-up comedy in India, with Paul (2017) and Sahoo and Das (2018) some of the few to reflect on the topic. Even within the existing studies the articulation of caste[1] locations by Indian comedians or the lack of it has not been sufficiently explored thus far. This article aims to fill in that gap. It focuses on how caste locations of the comedians construct an exclusivity within the industry that mirrors the pervasive caste exclusion in the larger society. Through a close reading of a few comedians' performances, the article argues that the comedy scene in India is largely upper-caste. Due to this, the jokes that populate contemporary online and live spaces of comic performance only foreground upper-caste experiences, which in turn reinforces caste hierarchies, perpetuating discrimination.

Stand-Up Comedy, Caste and Humour in India

To trace the beginnings of stand-up comedy in India through official sources is difficult. Since there are only a few studies on Indian stand-up comedy, historicising its beginnings will always remain partial, and specific to traditional cultural spaces. The current form adapted in India, is a solo performance of jokes on stage by a comedian in front of an audience, usually in a public space like a cafe, a comedy club or a bar.[2] Different regional sources trace the beginnings of traditional stand-up differently. Some cite Kerala's *chakyar koothu* as the earliest form (Naidu 2016; Narayanan, 2018); while others cite televised comedic debate shows that still continue to air in regional entertainment channels (Raghu, 2016).

The current form of stand-up comedy is about a decade old having started with the establishment of The Comedy Store in 2009 in Mumbai. Beginning with hosting exclusively British comedians, the club began to encourage local talent a little while later. Apart from this, the Hindi stand-up comedy reality show, *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge* (TGILC) in 2005 and launch of YouTube in India in 2008 also contributed to increasing the popularity of the art form (Gupta, 2014; Being Indian, 2015). The launch of YouTube meant Indian audiences were introduced to Indo-Canadian stand-up comedian Russel Peters. These two events paved the way for comedian Vir Das to popularise live stand-up in India after having performed for a few years in the US himself. While TGILC familiarised Indian audiences with

---

[1] A form of social stratification exclusive to India mainly Hindus although the caste system has also been known to be practiced by people of other faiths as well. According to this, Hindu society is divided into four varnas, viz., Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants) and Shudras (labourers). Outside of the four-fold varna system are the "antyajas" or Untouchables who are today variously identified as Dalit or Bahujan.

[2] The kind of venues chosen to perform stand-up has also changed over time, with several comedians experimenting performing at people's homes, at parties, and currently, with the Covid-19 pandemic, even on Zoom.

live stand-up in Hindi, Peters and Vir Das popularised the form in English. Currently, the popularity of live comedy has spread from English and Hindi to other languages (Bhatt, 2018; Ramakrishnan, 2019; Datta, 2019).

A cursory glance at online event-booking websites[3] reveals two things: there are at least 50-80 comedy shows listed in the metropolitan cities; the prices of all these shows, including open mics are not always affordable.[4] For the first few years, comedians are not paid for any of their performances as most are open mics. Therefore, they have to ensure that they have alternative sources of income, through part-time or full-time jobs. Therefore, the socio-economic status of the comedians getting into the field becomes important. The primary factor determining the comics' socio-economic status turns out to be their caste locations. Almost all the comedians are upper-caste and middle/upper-class, affording them both the economic and cultural capital required to sustain themselves within the industry. The pervasiveness of casteist humour is thus inevitable.

Hindutva and Brahminism: The Contemporary Manifestations of Casteism
The caste system in India is a form of endogamous social stratification. Jatis or castes are "endogamous hereditary groups" classified into four categories based on occupation (*varnas*): Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders) and Shudras (labourers) (Gurusamy, 2013, p. 6). Others outside the four-fold caste system were treated as untouchables. They were also segregated geographically from the "upper- castes" and had to live outside the village (Gurusamy, 2013, p. 5). Generally, the caste system has been associated with Hinduism, but it is pervasive throughout all religions in the Indian social system (see Bama, 2000; Ahmad, 2010). The term Dalit was used by anti-caste leaders such as Jotirao Phule to refer to the untouchables. The terms "Depressed Classes" and "Untouchables" have been used by leaders like B.R. Ambedkar in several of his published speeches as these were the official terms that had been assigned to Dalits (see Valmiki, 2003, p. xviii; Ambedkar, 2014, for a more detailed explanation of the political terms used by anti-caste leaders and activists today). Casteism pervades Indian social life deeply and is present in educational institutions, medical establishments (Thomas, Srinivasan, & Jesani, 2016) or the news media (Oxfam and Newslaundry, 2019). Casteism is an inevitable reality that affects the marginalsed castes in India.

Caste discrimination in India continues to be relevant and in practice even in the seemingly more "modern" and "progressive" times because it has reinvented itself with time and according to context. Casteism is not something one sees being practiced only among orthodox Brahmin families. Even individuals who have been actively involved in other "progressive" social movements have been noted to exhibit varying degrees of casteism. Gail Omvedt points out that while these movements emphasised "anti-communalism", they did little to question the underlying caste hegemonies that led to the dominance of Hinduism in the first place (Omvedt, 2006, p. 3). The continuous "rebranding" of casteism in India has been attributed to various rigorous attempts at reinforcing Hindu nationalism or Hindutva (equating being Hindu to the idea of being "Indian") through different strategies, the latest of them being performance of "apolitics" or the targeting of seemingly "neutral" or "indigenous" activities by the ruling parties to give the impression that their appeal is "universal" (Omvedt, 2006, p. 8; Reddy, 2018).

---

[3] Insider.in and Bookmyshow.com are the two most used online booking websites in India.

[4] Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, these shows have now moved exclusively online, offering viewers a chance to watch them live on video-calling platforms like Zoom. The prices of the shows also vary accordingly.

Studying Caste and Humour

Few academic studies have explored the link between caste and humour in India. However, many journalists and critics have noted the significant absence of caste critique in Indian popular culture. Casteist humour is not new; since the time that comedy in television and cinema has existed. Studies around the representation of caste or other forms of marginalisation in films and television point out how most Indian characters, as well as Hindi film actors on the screen are invariably upper class and upper-caste, to the extent that it has become the unchallenged norm (A. Deshpande, 2007). Tejaswini Ganti (2012), in her study on Hindi cinema traces the nationalistic origins of Indian cinema and how deeply entrenched within the Hindu ethos it was. In addition, she extensively talks about the insistence of popular actors from the industry in maintaining the facade of being from a "good family indexing an amalgam of caste and class status, educational level, occupational identity, and gendered norms of behavioral compartment and propriety" (p. 47).

Waghmore (2016) notes that humour has become one of the primary forms in which the "practice of untouchability is fast modernising and humour serves as a means to practice the (in)correctness of caste" (p. 158). He argues that "humour that is understood as anti-Hindu is a matter of 'unlaughter'[5] for the mainstream" (p. 156). According to Waghmore, the reaction of unlaughter "exposes the vernacular nature of Hindu modernity and the limits of Dalit accommodation" (p. 155). He adds that a study of humour helps understand the "normalisation of caste exclusion despite the institutionalisation of anti-caste sentiments as a modern Hindu sentiment" (p. 158). That is, humour at the margins "challenges Hindu prejudice and *unsettles the coherence of the modern Hindu universe*" (Waghmore, 2016, p. 174, Emphasis added). This results in disallowing any form of anti-caste humour from proliferating beyond vernacular confines. This disallowance is not simply a matter of taking away one's freedom of expression but as an important defense mechanism against pain, to "acknowledge suffering as a given and still find moments to dive into the pleasures of joy through unbounded laughter" (Yengde, 2019, p. 56). For Waghmore, the disallowance of Dalit humour misses the point because "humour and laughter in Dalit movements thus are less intended to caste disparagement and are largely about setting new standards in which a critique of popular culture and ideas of purity and pollution is possible" (Waghmore, 2016, pp. 174–75). Yengde differs on the point of the intention of disparagement of Brahmins when he argues that:

> Dalits who critique Brahmins and the Brahminical order not only express their emotions but also emphasize their individual superiority over the perpetrators of repression. Through this act, they create a shared space of solidarity amongst Dalits who have a similar view of Brahmins. A significant community spirit is created around the humour that contributes to the development of a narrative that views things from the bottom up. (2019, p. 57)

Casteist humour, however, is rampant and allowed to proliferate unchallenged. One of the most common tropes of eliciting laughter is that of the "lazy maid."[6] Comedian Sumukhi Suresh is even known for her character 'Parvati Bai', an online persona she created of a "sassy" Indian

---

[5] A term coined by Michael Billig which indicates "a significant absence of laughter when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded" (2005, p. 192).

[6] In 2019, web content creator The Viral Fever's sister concern Girliyapa, which makes "women-centric" content, released a musical sketch intended to be a "spoof" of the trailer for the Hindi film *Gully Boy*. The video shows a so-called "empowered" bai (maid) who answers back to her employer, the upper-caste, working woman, insisting that she will continue to come "late" and be "lazy" (Girliyapa, 2019).

maid (D. Ghosh, 2017). Critics of such content point out the frequency with which casteist slurs as well as remarks on the sexuality of female domestic workers are paraded as humour (Alagarsamy, 2019; Rajrah, 2019). Indian domestic workers are a part of the unorganised sector that exposes them to various vulnerabilities: job precarity, exploitation of labour, low wages, the perpetual threat of sexual exploitation, etc. In addition, there is a complete lack of access to structures of redressal. However, makers of such content give little thought to how much they are responsible for further perpetuating the very institutions they seemingly intend to criticise. It is possible for such humour to become a trope on the internet because of the inherent imbalance of power on which it is based, as journalist Simple Rajrah notes:

> accidental casteism is still casteism... The irritable kaamwali [domestic worker] aunty, the expressionless chaukidaar (security guard) who refuses to salute everyone, the patriarchal makeup didi, the crass, unskilled but arrogant autowala [auto rickshaw driver] are tropes that have been circulating in the comedy industry for way too long to be considered accidental slips by the privileged-but-well-meaning 'content' creators. (Rajrah, 2019)

But the validity of the criticism relies on whether the comedy content is "punching up" or "punching down" where the former indicates making fun of people who are more powerful than you and the latter targets the marginalised, as Alagarsamy points out:

> nothing that elicits laughs at the expense of someone who neither consents to nor can afford to be the butt of it, should be considered a joke. As for caricatures, they can be for entertainment or be political. When a bunch of upper caste creators and actors get together to make a caricature out of a vulnerable, marginalised community – it is innately political. And the politics of [such content] harms the people who are already at the bottom (2019).

It is unsurprising therefore to see content like the *Kapil Sharma Show*[7] – that bases itself on mocking marginalised communities – as one of the highest-rated, most popular comedy shows on Indian television. Kapil Sharma himself is one of the highest paid stand-up comics in the country today. Journalist Rajashree Gandhi points out that most of the privileged male comics in the country feel "unquestionably entitled to the audience's laughter." Noting that the sexist nature of Kapil Sharma's show has been pointed out many times, Gandhi suggests "it is his caste privilege that shields him from any controversy or backlash. Any criticism of his show would be incomplete without the criticism of his brand, of which being a Brahmin is a big, understated part." She further explores how his "humble background" as the son of a constable, "a small-town, North-Indian, fair Brahmin man who had neither dynasty nor reservations, but only used 'pure' talent to gain success through reality shows" was what made him the most-adored comedian (Gandhi, 2018).

Both Waghmore (2016) and Rajashree Gandhi (2018) see the nexus of caste and gender as crucial in building what Waghmore terms the "standard humour" in India which involves making fun of "women, homosexuals, fat and dark people" (the Kapil Sharma Show features a cis-man dressed as an overweight, old woman who is also an alcoholic and invariably harasses male guests in the guise of being their "fan") (Waghmore 2016, p. 159). Waghmore elaborates that this kind of standard humour "reinforces and recycles" dominant Hindu views and values around caste through an important form of language use: regional language abuses.

---

[7] An Indian Hindi sketch comedy and celebrity talk show hosted by former stand-up comedian Kapil Sharma.

He uses the examples of caste-based abuses and phrases in Marathi that are the basis of humour for the upper-castes derived from systematic, consistent insults to Dalits. Caste names of Dalits become swear words for upper-caste people to insult each other (2016, p. 159).

Methodology

Humour theories have developed quite a significant body of work in the last four or five decades. As Jason Rutter (1997) notes, most humour theories we read about today, derive their ideas from three primary "classical theories": superiority, incongruity, and relief (p. 8). Superiority theory suggests that any form of laughter requires someone to be the joker and the other to be the target of the joke. That is, someone is always being laughed *at* (Rutter, 1997, p. 9). Incongruity theory suggests that humour arises out of the recognition of the element of surprise in the joke. The surprise originates from connecting two seemingly unrelated subjects together (Carrell, 2008, p. 303). The relief theory posits that humour, and laughter in particular, facilitates release or relief in the person laughing at the joke, something that would perhaps otherwise have caused stress or may not have been socially sanctioned (2008, p. 309).

Scholars agree that humour is a social act (Farb, 1981; Kuipers, 2008). Highlighting the social function of humour, Peter Farb notes that humour relieves tension in a socially sanctioned way, reinforcing societal structures as one group laughs at another. This, in turn, leads to the creation of an in-group while simultaneously excluding other people who are not part of the group; it also facilitates communication as it allows people to "say by laughter what cannot be said in words" (1981, pp. 763–767). When upper-caste comedians reference their caste on stage, they assume at least some complicity by the audiences which is why they are able to make the audiences laugh. Thus, the comedians assume a "superior" position and create a virtual, ephemeral in-group with these audience members for the duration of the performance. The jokes performed may not necessarily be aimed at disparagement of marginalised castes and classes, but simply reiterate some of the characteristics of being upper-caste. However, the joke and the resultant laughter as such builds "solidarity among the members of the group that laughs" while promoting "antagonism" toward the "outsiders" (Farb, 1981, p. 766). Here, the outsiders (marginalised castes) are literally *outside* the room, both by design and circumstance. Incongruity, Rutter explains, refers to the experience when:

> two or more objects are presented through a single concept, the concept then becomes applied to both objects and the objects become similar. However, as the joke progresses, it becomes apparent that the concept only applies to one of the objects and the difference between them becomes apparent (1997, pp. 18–19).

This article argues that to be able to "get" the joke and laugh at it involves being privy to all the social and cultural symbols that the joke presents. This indicates a prior access to certain kinds of cultural capital accessible to only a few privileged in the society: in this case, upper-caste comedians.

To demonstrate these ideas, the article analyses the contexts in which comedians talk about (their) caste by analysing their stand-up comedy videos available online. While stand-up is primarily a live form of comedy, it is not possible to analyse the content of the jokes that are performed during these shows without jeopardising copyright issues. Scholars in the past have analysed the different aspects of a live comedy performance. Many factors including the venue

(Lockyer, 2015), the act of performance of the jokes[8], and the propensity of the audiences to find the jokes humorous contribute to the success of the comedy set (Rutter, 1997; Schwarz, 2009). However, as Billig notes, reactions to humour can be diverse (2005, p. 178) and hard to map. Videos uploaded online provide a more concrete textual reference from which to draw inferences. Most of the videos are edited versions of longer performances that have been tried out several times before the comedian decided to release them to the public. Therefore, this article works with the assumption that the uploaded video is the "best" version of the joke at the time according to the comedian. This article focuses on the comedian per se because it is their social location within the context of the Indian stand-up industry that is being studied. The audience is seen in relation to the comedian's own perception or reading of the crowd in the room. That is, the comedian makes the particular joke in that manner because they *assume* complicity or backlash from audiences.

The main reason that this article focuses on upper-caste comedians' caste humour narratives is because of the relative dearth of comedians from marginalised castes performing on stage at the same scale. One comedian in particular, Deepika Mhatre, who performs in Hindi, has become quite popular since 2018 (Aditi Mittal, 2018). Much of her content is aimed at ridiculing the "madams" in whose homes she works as a domestic help. However, she neither names her own caste, nor does she identify her own analysis as a caste critique. The layers of discrimination she deals with in her narrative are still constructed as that those arising from class disparity rather than caste. Delving into the implications of such an action by her would make an interesting study, which is beyond the scope of this article.

Not being aware of Mhatre's caste location, any form of analysis of her own understanding of caste through her stand up performances would be unhelpful. Additionally, as Dalit feminist scholar Sunaina Arya has noted, there has been a trend within Indian academia studying caste discrimination, to make Dalits and Bahujans as "objects" of study for their insights into caste discrimination (2019. p. 225). This study therefore is an attempt to turn the gaze inward-to understand the various ways in which humour perpetuates existing social inequalities by studying upper-caste comedy narratives.

Some of the comedians analysed here switch between Hindi and English in their comedy routines. In this case, the text has been translated into English by the researcher, along with indications of the original language. Only sections with explicit reference to caste have been reproduced in the article. Caste references in some of the videos are disjointed and nonlinear. In such a case, only the section where the reference to caste has been made, is reproduced. Pauses and laughter are indicated within square brackets while parts of the monologue that have been skipped are indicated with ellipses.

In addition to analysing text from the stand-up routines, other manifestations of caste references by comedians, such as interviews and social media posts have also been analysed in order to provide a more nuanced analysis of the caste structures at play. The comedians analysed in this paper have grown quite popular and are now household names. Their public personas and actions very clearly stem from, and have a bearing on, the kind of comic they are perceived to be. Hence, a critical discourse analysis of caste narratives by comedians has been attempted (Van Dijk, 2001; Fairclough, 2013).

---

[8] Many other factors including race (Daube 2010; Antoine 2016), gender (Sheppard, 1985; Boyle, 2015) and sexuality (Reed, 2011; Mizejewski, 2014) of the performer factor into the success of the performance. Consequently, the manner in which the performers present themselves through their attire influences how the audiences perceive them and their jokes (Greenbaum, 1999; Bolsover, 2015; Filani, 2015).

How Stand-Up Comedians Talk about Caste
This section explores how caste manifests in upper-caste comedians' narratives. All the stand-up comedians referenced in this article are, by their own admission, upper-caste. There is a pervasive reference to one's identity as a Brahmin in most of these comedians' sets to signify different aspects of occupying the caste position. Some comedians attempt a caste critique, but fail to do so due to their own caste locations and lived experiences. Those that do attempt a thorough self-examination of their caste privilege are few.

In Their Stand-Up Routines: The Pervasive "Brahmin" Reference
As a self-explanatory identity marker. Comedian Rahul Subramanian jokes about his failure to explain to a Pakistani Muslim why he was vegetarian, simply mentioning that he is "Brahmin." When the other person still did not understand, he fumbles: [In Hindi] "I said to him we have this (struggling to find the right words)… caste [trails off] to which the other person replied, "oh, your Shia-Sunni? He understood me!" [Laughter] (Subramanian, 2016, 0:44). In making this joke, Subramianian means to indicate the "similarities" between him and the Pakistani Muslim because he was able to relate to Subramanian in his own way. However, Subramanian draws a false parallel between the sectarian conflicts between Shias and Sunnis in Pakistan and the caste system. The Shia-Sunni sectarianism is one of the most well-known intra-Muslim conflicts globally, not particularly restricted to Pakistan (Finnbogason et al., 2019). Both theological dogmas and capitalisation on the same by political leaders have led to furthering the Shia-Sunni divide (Finnbogason et al., 2019, p. 30). This is unlike the Indian caste system where the reasons for Brahmin domination are not and never have been theological per se, since there has never been a "religious" text like the Quran or Bible to ever exist for what we know as Hinduism today (see Gail Omvedt 2006; Ambedkar, 2014 for a detailed analysis of Hinduism as a colonial, and later Brahmin construct in India). The justification for Brahmin dominance over Dalits, on the other hand, is based on the concept of purity vs. pollution that has justified blatant human rights violations with regard to the Dalits in India for centuries see Guru & Sarukkai, 2012 for an extended sociological and philosophical discussion on the idea of purity and pollution). Coming to the specifics of the conflict in Pakistan, the Shia-Sunni divide is more recent, aggravated primarily by geopolitical transactions (Zaman, 1998; Abbas, 2010; Rizvi, 2016).

This joke by Subramanian succeeds because of a) his assumption that the audience understands the relationship between vegetarianism and Brahminism; and b) they have a vague idea of the Shia-Sunni conflict as being rooted in domination and suppression too. Laughter by the audience also indicates agreement with the vibe he sends out through his joke.

Another comic, Prasad Bhat, casually mentions his caste while explaining his career choice as an artist: "it's really hard being an artist, especially when you come from a Brahmin family like mine" (Prasad Bhat, 2019, 04:31). In making the joke, Prasad Bhat relies on the audience's familiarity with the orthodox caste expectations among Brahmin families to land his joke. He indicates further that his deviation from his family's, and hence caste, expectations of his career was forgiven mainly because his elder brother had already done so by being a "genius … research scientist in New Zealand" (2019, 4:42).

Bhat's "deviation" therefore was not necessarily a subversion or conscious challenge to caste hierarchies but seems to be a mere accident owing to being the second-born. Moreover, it is also because he comes from a place of privilege (in the form of having cultural capital as a Brahmin, and cis-male), that he is able to pursue off-beat careers with only a little resistance.

Consistent assertion of the "minority" status of the Brahmins. Comedian Sundeep Rao speaks of his caste as being a "disability" in one of his videos (Rao has a disability himself; he is partially visually impaired[9]). His joke includes asking the caste composition of the audience and inviting all the "brahmins in the house" to a "caste party" where they neither drink, nor smoke, but only "read religious books like the *Ramayana*" which he refers to as "fifty shades of pray" (Rao, 2014).

Sneha Suhas, a Maharashtrian Brahmin[10] comic who primarily performs in English, recounts a conversation she had with her mother in this short clip:

> [Her mother says] 'Sneha, I think we should get you an MBA'. I was like, Ma, thanks for the offer but I don't think I want to do an MBA. She was like "Why?" I was like, "Ma, we come from this *minority* community which doesn't have a reservation. [she's asked to explain the comment by her mum] Brahmins are 5% of the population. 50% of the seats are reserved against us, Ma!...." We are genetically lazy people. My ancestors, they didn't want to be merchants, businessmen, warriors, skilled labourers— they decided to pray for a living! (Evam Standup Tamasha, 2017, 1:47; Emphasis added)

This victimhood narrative that is constructed around the upper-caste identities today is not new. Much of the discourse supporting the caste system today revolves around how the Brahmins are the "new minority" and therefore should be given their due. Not just in comedic routines, but the upper-caste narrative around maintenance of caste hierarchy has been to assert that they are the "real" minorities. Several comic strips and memes have been created to construct this brand of victimhood where the "meritorious" upper-caste person – who gets where they are due to hard work and personal merit – is unable to reap benefits of getting a subsidised or free education because the people eligible for reservations are "stealing their seats/jobs/opportunities" (Sampath, 2014; Mannathukkaren, 2016; Akbar, 2017). This upper-caste narrative, we find, also holds State sanction as the Modi government introduced a new policy of having 10% quota in January 2019, introducing the category "economically weaker sections" particularly aimed at upper-caste communities.

This move has been criticised as "completely overturning" the original intent of the reservation policy in the Constitution. The quota system was meant to address social inequalities that would still be faced by ex-untouchables because of historic discrimination. However, by emphasising on the economic aspect of discrimination, the State "avoided" addressing caste and acknowledging that the reservation policy was meant to end caste monopoly (Omvedt, 1990). It also successfully secured the votes of upper-caste voters in the 2020 elections (Kumar & Gupta, 2019).

The point being made here is that invariably each of these comedians have grown up with these ideals and have internalised some parts of the same. All these comedians draw upon and also in some sense reinforce some of the stereotypes about Brahmins that exist: traditionally, Brahmins were the only ones allowed to have any kind of education, primarily of religious texts such as the two Indian epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* apart from other scriptures. Sneha Suhas and Sundeep Rao reiterate the stereotype of being ritually devoted to god while Prasad Bhat draws from the stereotype about Brahmins and their privilege of being able to

---

[9] A term he uses himself to refer to his eye condition on stage caused by juvenile macular degeneration.

[10] Brahmins originally from the state of Maharashtra.

access education not available for most people. Therefore, implying that being an artist is not compatible with the intellectualism generally associated with the Brahmins. Causes of this internalisation may be many. A few that are evident here however, as noted earlier, the pervasive Hindutva narrative that punctuates all aspects of Indian life, including popular culture, mainly films (Murty, 2009; S. Kumar, 2013), television and news channels (Sen, 2011; S. Kumar, 2005). The overwhelming presence of upper-caste characters on television or films, whether it be in TV series or a multitude of TV adaptations of mythological stories, has gone unquestioned. Brahminness of protagonists in any form of entertainment has been taken for granted. Thus, while comedians name their caste, they do not feel the need to explain such identification.

The effects of this internalisation can also be seen clearly in the legislative decisions taken by the Indian state. Although there may be an irreverent tone in some of their narratives while poking fun at the Brahmin stereotypes, this disparagement or self-deprecation succeeds in being humorous because of the shared sense of superiority with the audience. Both Sundeep Rao and Sneha Suhas refer to their caste identities as "disability" or "minorities" indicating that there is a sense of neglected victimhood in their identities. It seems from their narrative that the tenets they have to follow (prayers, not eating non-veg food, not drinking) are oppressive to them and therefore is nothing to be celebrated. Rao and Suhas were clearly talking to an Indian audience directly and therefore did not have to explain to them what it meant. However, as Subramanian tries to tell the Pakistani man what caste system is, he fails. In this case, the lack of language to define caste comes from a lack of necessity to understand it. When one reaps benefits from a system, while they recognise that it has no logical meaning whatsoever, they do not need to find the right vocabulary whether in the vernacular language or in English. The invocation of caste here happens in a situation of discomfort. However, this is not caused by something oppressive. It is just an inconvenience. The point is that caste is named or made fun of not to point out the flaws within it leading to caste discrimination, but to talk about those flaws as simple inconveniences rather than systemic phenomena which might have dire consequences for the person experiencing discrimination as a result of it.

Tokenistic Caste Critiques
As opportunistic reactions. In January 2020, comedian Kunal Kamra shared a video on Twitter of him confronting the news anchor Arnab Goswami[11] for unethical reporting about the suicide of Rohith Vemula, a PhD student at the University of Hyderabad. Goswami, who had earlier reported that the university should be held responsible for his death in 2016, completely changed track and reports instead that "there is no proof" that Vemula was indeed mistreated because of his caste location (Verma, 2020). In addition, he also insisted that he is not Dalit as he claims because his father was an upper-caste person.

Kamra tweets through his public handle that he "did this for [his] hero. [he] did this for Rohith" (Kamra, 2019). He even shares a video to prove the same. The result of this "heckling" as most media called it, was that he was banned from not just the flight he was on, but four other airlines including the one owned by the government: Air India (The Wire Staff, 2020). For the purpose of the article, I will not delve into the manner in which the issue of his flight ban was debated in the news as well as social media (Scroll Staff, 2020). However, I focus on the statement he makes about how he "did this for Rohith." As Shubhangani Jain (2019) points out, Kamra's engagement with caste either in his stand-up comedy or on his podcast where he features

---

[11] Formerly, he was the editor-in chief of Times Now. Currently he runs the news channel Republic TV.

politicians from different parties as well as student leaders, is that he does not engage with caste to critique it.

In an episode of his podcast *Shut Up Ya Kunal* (Kamra, 2017), Kamra argues how reservations should be on economic basis forgetting the vast discourse around caste and the very roots of affirmative action. He might not ideologically subscribe to casteism, sexism, etc., but he chooses not to complicate the discourse around reservations or development; his very lack of effort revealing his privileges (Jain, 2019, pp. 47–48).

Media sociologist Ravikant Kisana calls this declaration of motivation behind Kamra's action as "strange." Kisana elaborates that in the entire body of Kamra's work,

> there is no public record of engagement with the Ambedkarite Students' Association…with no public engagement with the ideas of Mahatma Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar…and with barely any attempt at amplifying the voices of Bahujan scholars and activists, Kamra's new declaration needs to be scrutinized (2020).

Kisana sees this as a larger "mainstream Savarna" project of appropriation of "Rohith as a student martyr and icon to be pitched against the Hindutva forces" (Kisana, 2020).

Kisana rightly points out that icons such as Ambedkar and Rohith are selectively celebrated, and their ideologies repurposed to suit the Left liberal goal of mobilising forces to defeat fascism; and any "mobilisation that does not align with the Left is acting against its own interest and splitting the unity of the resistance" (2020). For instance, they will use the "constitutionalism of Dr Ambedkar. But strangely forget … the radicalism of his proposals for the annihilation of caste" (Kisana, 2020). Similarly, Rohith is acceptable within the Leftist fold only as a student martyr while scores of other students in similar marginalised positions are ignored by them (Kisana, 2020).

Lack of intersectionality. Comedian Sumukhi Suresh was invited to a panel discussion moderated by comedian Sanjay Rajoura where he asks her to comment on the lack of Dalit presence in the stand-up industry. He further comments that even while female comedians speak of feminism, "their intersectionality is problematic" (Bridge Talks, 2018, 12:47) as they use Dalit and other lower-caste identities names as slurs to insult each other, as Waghmore pointed out above. Suresh's response to the same was: "Using my gender, or my caste, if I am stopping someone, a Dalit man or a woman, that is where the problem starts" (Bridge Talks, 2018, 13:41). This demonstrates a lack of understanding of systemic barriers that prevent a person from accessing opportunities that are otherwise available to everyone. Suresh has created a brand for herself by basing some of her most popular characters on people from marginalised social groups such as the maid. But the fact that Suresh is unaware of the stereotypes she is perpetuating as a result begs some room for self-reflexivity, particularly because it is in the context of humour and laughter. Suresh here is also alluding to the "merit" argument that is often used to argue against caste-based reservations (Shah, 1993; Ilaiah, 2006). Her implication seems to be that while she has achieved all that she has out of her own hard work, she could not possibly be hindering another person's growth.

In her special, *Don't Tell Amma* (Don't Tell Mother), Sumukhi Suresh talks about her caste identity (as a Hindu Brahmin). In the context of explaining how her family was poor, she talks about how her family would insist on participating at the Rotary Club blood donation camps:

> If we are donating blood, we might as well take it and sell it. You know how much I'll get for O+ve Brahmin blood? [cheering and hoots in the crowd] That's right. In fact, my plan was, go to Rotary Club, take any blood and sell it as Brahmin blood. It's the same, anyway. Just more delusion in Brahmin blood. We're like, here take, some more delusion, some more [gesturing as if she's giving away something]. Casteism? We started it, come on! [less enthusiastic cheering] (A. Ghosh, 2019, 00:19:13).

Suresh seems to have gained some perspective on casteism in India. However, simply introducing the idea of (hypothetically) selling "Brahmin blood" in the joke seems to imply her also ascribing to the casteist basis of why it is more "valuable" than other kinds of blood and her benefitting from it. Even her next line about Brahmins being the most "delusional" is also ambiguous in its potential for critique. Delusional about what? The premise is not explored enough except when she says, casteism was invented by Brahmins.

It is interesting also to note the audience's reaction to when she speaks of the value of Brahmin blood. In contrast, there are fewer laughs and hoots, when she talks about the "Brahmin delusion." The audience that identified with the previous joke suddenly becomes self-conscious of the fact that she was also calling out the casteism involved in it. Even though her perspective may not be critical enough, just a little bit of mirroring of one's attitudes being reflected through the comedians' jokes is enough to make them uncomfortable.

Caste Critiques of the Stand-Up Industry Attempted Through Comedy
Few stand-up comedians in India today really manage to critique caste actively in any form. Primary among them is Sanjay Rajoura. Much of his stand-up involves being self-deprecatory in that he makes fun of his privileged background: being a cis-male, Jaat (another upper caste identity common in the northern parts of India) comedian. He has also written much around the lack of self-conscious critique in the audience, as well as among the comics themselves. Sanjay Rajoura is also part of the satire troupe Aisi Taisi Democracy, along with singer Rahul Ram and fellow comedian Varun Grover, that is known for scathing critiques of the present Modi government through stand-up comedy and music.

One of the jokes that he has made public where he critiques caste privilege is when he says; "Only two Brahmins have been hung since Independence. The first one for killing Mahatma Gandhi. If you are Brahmin, you would have to kill a Mahatma to get a death sentence" (Rajoura, 2019).

A YouTube channel calling itself *Temple Monkeys* makes satirical videos critiquing discriminatory structures while foregrounding caste in them (2019). One of their episodes called "Sit-Down Comedy" tackles the upper-caste dominance within the comedy circuit, focusing particularly on the Tamil scene:

> The video speaks of the caste network within the field which enables people from certain communities to get more opportunities than others, as is the case in other professions, too. Added to this is the constant reiterations of caste identity that punctuate several of these stand-up shows in the city, in the name of comedy and "cultural" references (TNM Staff, 2019).

It becomes evident through the two instances above, that the comedy industry has started to become self-reflexive of its upper-caste exclusivity. These instances, though only two of a strong critique particularly by upper-caste comedians themselves need to be acknowledged.

Though they may not do much in terms of exponentially transforming the industry and making it more self-aware, these critiques are indicative of the fact that self-reflection is possible, and much needed for the industry at the present moment. Through the three primary themes of analysis, it becomes evident that the stand-up comedy industry is a microcosm of the larger society. Stand-up comedians featured here are well-known, having been on the scene almost as soon as the craft started to gain popularity in India. As such, these comedians also hold much appeal with audiences across the country.

Conclusion

This article explored the differences in the humorous caste narratives performed by Indian stand-up comedians based on their individual caste locations. It demonstrated, through textual analysis of their standup comedy clips, that one of the most prominent castes that finds visibility in the narratives is that of the Brahmin, the uppermost among the caste hierarchy. With slight differences, most of the comedians draw from common stereotypes about being Brahmin. This is done not in an ironic sense, to indicate the history of caste discrimination that Brahmins and other upper castes have perpetuated, but to create a sense of community amongst the members of the caste by highlighting traits commonly associated with them.

Those comedians who do intend to point out the discriminatory nature of the caste system, fail inexorably by offering tokenistic and reactive responses that seem to last only until the current news item is making the rounds, as was indicated through the example of Kunal Kamra. Non-humourous caste critiques by Indian comedians such as Kunal Kamra also indicate the privilege the upper-caste Hindus have of not needing to historicise their own engagement with the anti-caste movement before appropriating Dalit, anti-caste voices as their icons and claiming to fight for them in a one-time gimmicky fashion. This becomes problematic primarily because of the image they then build of themselves in the media as the "liberal saviours" that do not need to justify their own locations in order to stand representative of a "good cause." Despite being issued an unjustifiable ban by four airline companies, the fact still remains that Kamra's overall image remains unaffected as does his privilege as an upper-caste Hindu who can and has survived backlash both in a personal as well as professional capacity. Other comedians like Sumukhi Suresh fail to recognise the intersectionality between gender and caste, even as they champion feminist ideals in their stand-up content.

Comedians like Sanjay Rajoura are making honest and consistent efforts to call out all forms of social inequality through their comedy. This demonstrates the possibility of being able to perform successful comedy even without resorting to making old, tired stereotypes as jokes. However, most comedians refrain from exploring that space or lack the perspective to do so. This lack is particularly worrying because these comedians are now public figures, their celebrity nature almost similar to that of a film actor. While this assumption of the comedy industry as being one of the most progressive was broken after the #MeToo Movement broke out in India, breaking many a male comedian's career (Pathak, 2019), the upper-caste domination in the industry still remains unquestioned. With audiences seeking validation for their beliefs through laughter, they have also begun looking up to particular comedians for their brand of humour, and consequently world-views. The danger lies in the possibility that discriminatory attitudes get sanctioned and reinforced, particularly through the guise of humour, where "nothing is serious anyway."

References

Abbas, H. (2010). Shiism and sectarian conflict in Pakistan: Identity politics, Iranian influence, and tit-for-tat violence. *Occasional Paper Series*, CTC West Point, USA. humanitarianlibrary.org

Aditi M. (2018, March 1). *Bad girls with Aditi Mittal| Ep 2| Deepika Mhatre* [Video]. YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZddcQEtV9Gc

Ahmad, I. (2009). Can there be a category called Dalit Muslims? In K. Hall (Ed.) *Studies in inequality and social justice* (pp. 64–81). Meerut: Archana.

Akbar, P. (2017, April 20). *Caste lives on, and on*. Aeon. Retrieved February 8, 2019, from https://aeon.co/essays/how-india-deludes-itself-that-caste-discrimination-is-dead.

Alagarsamy, H. (2019, February 4). *Gully Bai: The Asli Labour Class And Casteism*. Feminism in India. https://feminisminindia.com/2019/02/04/gully-bai-girliyapa-classism-casteism/

Amazon Prime Video India. (2019, May 7). Bijli बिजली - *Sejal Bhat | Comicstaan | Amazon Prime Video* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=muFpagL9LAM

Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). *Annihilation of caste: The annotated critical edition* (S. Anand, Ed.). Navayana. (Original work published 1936)

Antoine, K. (2016). 'Pushing the Edge' of Race and Gender Hegemonies through Stand-up Comedy: Performing Slavery as Anti-racist Critique. *Etnofoor, 28*(1), 35–54. www.jstor.org/stable/43823941

Arya, S. (2020). Dalit or Brahmanical patriarchy? Rethinking Indian feminism. *Caste: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion, 1*(1). https://doi.org/10.26812/caste.v1i1.54

Bama (2012). Karukku (2nd ed.) (L. Holmström, Trans.). Oxford University Press. (Originally published 1992)

Being Indian. (2015, February 5). *Tanmay Bhat || Varun Grover || Vir Das - I AM OFFENDED* [Video]. YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swozBbWMzNQ

Bhat, P. (2019, June 10). *North Indians, smokers & Brahmins | Stand-up comedy by Prasad Bhat* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9LKnJ0RQXA&list=PLeqy6QywhzckiThQizI0PNUN1pRTisNMu&index=13

Bhatt, S. (2018, April 1). How regional stand-up comedy is going mainstream. *The Economic Times*. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/laughter-is-a-state-subject/articleshow/63560695.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

Billig, M. (2005). *Laughter and ridicule: Towards a social critique of humour*. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage.

Bridge Talks. (2018, April 2). *Queen of comedy: Satire by women, for women at The Bridge 2018* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjEiBR_56Go

Bolsolver, N. (2015) *Costume and cross-dressing in stand-up comedy.* [Master of Arts by Research thesis, University of Kent], https://kar.kent.ac.uk/id/eprint/52927

Boyle, B. (2015). Take me seriously. Now laugh at me! How gender influences the creation of contemporary physical comedy. *Comedy Studies, 6*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2015.1028167

Carrell, A. (2008). Historical views of humour. In V. Raskin (Ed.), *Primer of Humor Research* (pp. 303–332). Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Datta, S. (2019, December 11). Stand-up comedian Suhas Navaratna says humour is different in one's mother tongue. *The Hindu*. https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/theatre/kannada-humour/article30267126.ece

Daube, M. (2010). *Laughter in revolt: Race, ethnicity, and identity in the construction of stand-up comedy* [Doctoral Dissertation, Stanford University]. ProQuest.

Deshpande, A. (2007). Indian cinema and the bourgeois nation state. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *42*(50), 95–103. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40277057

Desmond, E. 1995). The insurgency in Kashmir (1989–1991), *Contemporary South Asia*, *4*(1), 5–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/09584939508719748

Evam Standup Tamasha. (2017, June 13). *BDSM and higher studies- Stand-up comedy by Sneha Suhas*. YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gp2u2EVZNe0

Farb, P. (1981). Speaking seriously about humor. *The Massachusetts Review, 22*(4), 760–776. Retrieved August 5, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/25089220

Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. New York: Routledge.

Filani, I. (2015). Discourse types in stand-up comedy performances: an example of Nigerian stand-up comedy. *The European Journal of Humour Research, 3*(1), 41–60. https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2015.3.1.filani

Film Companion. (2017, February 22). *Stand-up comedians Adda: Part 2* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Rv1gcJk0cQ&t=596s

Finnbogason, D., Larsson, G. & Svensson, I., (2019) Is Shia-Sunni violence on the rise? Exploring new data on intra-Muslim organised violence 1989-2017, *Civil Wars*, *21*(1), 25–53. https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2019.1595881

Gandhi, R. (2018, April 10). *The laughter challenge is on us: How the dominance of upper-caste men affects our consumption of comedy*. Firstpost: https://www.firstpost.com/living/the-laughter-challenge-is-on-us-how-dominance-of-upper-caste-men-affects-our-consumption-of-comedy-4420795.html

Ganti, T. (2012). *Producing Bollywood. Inside the contemporary Hindi film industry*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Ghosh, A. (Director). (2019). *Don't tell Amma* [Stand-up comedy special]. Amazon Prime Video. https://www.primevideo.com/detail/Sumukhi-Suresh-Don-t-Tell-Amma/0QX4PM9307ZF3KI848HSNL4R73

Ghosh, D. (2017, December 20). *'Pushpavalli' creator Sumukhi Suresh: 'I am way funnier than my character'*. Scroll.in. https://scroll.in/reel/861609/pushpavalli-creator-sumukhi-suresh-i-am-way-funnier-than-my-character

Girliyapa. (2019, January 12). *Gully Bai | Gully Boy spoof feat. Manju & dependent artists | Girliyapa unoriginals* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vRl6vbVPJQ&t=78s

Greenbaum, A. (1999). Stand-up comedy as rhetorical argument: An investigation of comic culture. *Humor-International Journal of Humor Research*, *12*(1), 33–46. https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.1999.12.1.33

Gupta, N. (2014). Dropping the mic. *The Sunday Guardian*. http://www.sunday-guardian.com/artbeat/dropping-the-mic.

Guru, G. and Saurkkai, S. (2012). *The Cracked mirror: And Indian debate on experience and theory*. Oxford University Press: New Delhi.

Gurusamy, S. (2013). Dalit empowerment in India. Chennai: MJP Publishers.

Ilaiah, K. (2006). Merit of reservations. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41(24), 2447–2449. www.jstor.org/stable/4418348

Jain, S. (April 2019). *Seema Par Khade Jawaan Vaapis Aagaye Hain: Subversive stand-up comedy speaks back to the Indian nation* [Unpublished Master's Thesis]. Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre. Savitribai Phule Pune University

Kamra, Kunal. [kunalkamra88]. (2020, January 29). I did this for my hero. I did it for Rohith [Tweet]. https://twitter.com/kunalkamra88/status/1222109025812320257

Kisana, R. (2020, February 24). *Who does Rohith belong to?* Round Table India. http://roundtableindia.co.in.

Kumar, S. (2013). Constructing the Nation's Enemy: Hindutva, popular culture and the Muslim 'other'in Bollywood cinema. *Third World Quarterly*, 34(3), 458–469. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.785340

Kumar, S., & Gupta, P. (2019, January 16). *The electoral math behind the upper caste quota*. Livemint. https://www.livemint.com/Politics/Cln8sIq9rLMGgkF81IUZnN/The-electoral-math-behind-the-upper-caste-quota.html

Kumar, S. (2005). *Gandhi meets primetime: Globalization and nationalism in Indian television*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Lockyer, S. (2015). Performance, expectation, interaction, and intimacy: On the opportunities and limitations of srena dtand-up comedy for comedians and audiences. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *48*(3), 586–603. https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12285

Mannathukkaren, N. (2016, February 6). Being the privileged. *The Hindu*. https://www.thehindu.com/features/magazine/caste-oppression-is-systemic-and-every-one-of-us-participates-in-it-knowingly-or-unknowingly/article8202947.ece

Mizejewski, L. (2014). *Pretty/funny: Women comedians and body politics*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Murty, M. (2009) Representing Hindutva: Nation, religion and masculinity in Indian popular cinema, 1990 to 2003, *Popular Communication*, *7*(4), 267–281. https://doi.org/10.1080/15405700903211898

Naidu, J. (2016, November 9). Traditional stand-up comedy. *Deccan Chronicle*. https://www.deccanchronicle.com/entertainment/theatre/091116/traditional-stand-up-comedy.html

Narayanan, S. (2018, June 4). *From Chakyar Koothu to troll pages, satire is an evergreen love of Malayalis*. The News Minute. https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/chakyar-koothu-troll-pages-satire-evergreen-love-malayalis-82438

Omvedt, G. (1990). Twice-born riot against democracy, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 25 (39), 2195–2201. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4396810

Omvedt, G. (2006). Introduction. In Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions: The Anti-caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity* (pp 1–6). New Delhi: Orient Longman.

Oxfam and Newslaundry (2019). [Report] *Who Tells Our Stories Matters: Representation of marginalised caste groups in Indian Newsrooms*. New Delhi.

Parry, M. (Director) (2018). *Nanette* [Stand-up comedy special]. Netflix. https://www.netflix.com/title/80233611

Pathak, A. (2019, June 2). Woke to broke: The stunning rise and fall of AIB. Huffington Post. https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/aib-tanmay-bhat-rohan-joshi-collapse_in_5cf38febe4b0e8085e3b5060

Paul, S. (2017). A new public sphere? English-language stand-up comedy in India. *Contemporary South Asia*, *25*(2), 121–135. https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2017.1321618

Raghu, S. (2016, October 29). India hit by new laughter wave. *The New Indian Express*. https://www.newindianexpress.com/magazine/2016/oct/29/india-hit-by-new-laughter-wave-1532144--5.html

Rajoura, S. (2019, September 25). Comedy that lacks a punch. *The Hindu*. https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/comedy-that-lacks-a-punch/article29501845.ece

Rajrah, S. (2019, February 4). *Gully Bai's casual casteism: A comedy video laughed at the marginalised — and reaffirmed prejudice*. Firstpost: https://www.firstpost.com/living/gully-bais-casual-casteism-a-comedy-video-laughed-at-the-marginalised-and-reaffirmed-prejudice-5999941.html

Ramakrishnan, S (2019, August 20). How Tamil stand-up comedy is gaining popularity in state. *Indian Express*. https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chennai/tamil-stand-up-comedy-comes-of-age-5921044/

Rao, S. [soapyrao]. (2014, September 17). *Brahman, blind and confused: Soapyrao standup comedy!* [Video]. YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YoFtcuwE07c

Reed, J (2011). Sexual outlaws: Queer in a funny way. *Women's Studies*. *40*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2011.585590

Reddy, D. S. (2018), What is neo- about neo-Hindutva? *Contemporary South Asia*, 26(4), 483–490. https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2018.1548009

Rizvi, U. H. (2019, June 11). *The rising threat against Shia Muslims in Pakistan*. The Wire: https://thewire.in/politics/the-rising-threat-against-shia-muslims-in-pakistan

Rutter, J. (1997) *Stand-up as interaction: performance and audience in comedy venues* [Doctoral Dissertation, Salford University]. University of Salford Institutional Repository.

Sahoo, S., & Das, R. (2018). Is English stand-up comedy in India intersectional? *Language in India*, *18*(9). pdfs.semanticscholar.org

Sampath, G. (2014, December 2). *Is untouchability the problem or is it caste?* Livemint. https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/nWYl4rBUM18n6VtSL8uVeK/Is-untouchability-the-problem-or-is-it-caste.html

Scroll Staff. (2020, January 29). *Should Kunal Kamra have heckled Arnab Goswami on a flight? Twitter is conflicted*. Scroll.in. https://scroll.in/article/951464/should-kunal-kamra-have-heckled-arnab-goswami-on-a-flight-twitter-is-conflicted

Sen, S. (2011). *Nationalisms and popular aesthetics post 1992 print and television advertisements* [Doctoral Dissertation, Jadavpur University]. Shodhganga.

Sawhney, C. (2019). Internally displaced Kashmiri Pandits: Negotiation and access to cultural capital, South Asia: *Journal of South Asian Studies*, *42:6*, 1062–1077. https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2019.1670412

Schwarz, J. (2009). *Linguistic aspects of verbal humor in stand-up comedy* [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Saarland]. Der Wissenschaftsserver der Universität des Saarlandes.

Shah, G. (1993). Of reservation, merit and distributive justice. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *28*(15), 633–635. www.jstor.org/stable/4399578.

Sheppard, A. (1985). Funny women: Social change and audience response to female comedians. Empirical Studies of the Arts, *3*(2), 179–195. https://doi.org/10.2190/6F5G-6L8U-VH7M-NQCB

Subramanian, R. [Randum Chikibum]. (2016, November 3). *India and Pakistan | Stand up Comedy by Rahul Subramanian* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4x6qSuFovI

Suhasini, L. (2019, May 8). Stand up comedians from J&K talks about the struggles with a humourous touch. *Pune Mirror*. https://punemirror.indiatimes.com/others/sunday-read/the-funny-thing-ab-out-kashmir/articleshow/69181363.cms

Temple Monkeys. (2019, February 13). *Sit Down Comedy | Temple Monkeys* [Video]. YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Spwjho7Zhlg

The Wire Staff. (2020, February 2). *Banned by four domestic airlines, Kunal Kamra hops on to a Vistara flight*. The Wire. https://thewire.in/politics/kunal-kamra-indigo-no-fly-list-vistara

TNM Staff. (2019, February 15). *Watch: Tamil YouTube channel Temple Monkeys satirises caste pride in standup comedy*. The News Minute: https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/watch-tamil-youtube-channel-temple-monkeys-satirises-caste-pride-standup-comedy-96763

Thomas, G., Srinivasan, S., & Jesani, A. (2016). Reservations and medical education. *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics, 3*(3), 82. https://ijme.in/articles/reservations-and-medical-education/

Tribune News Service (2020, July 27). Restore special status: Kashmiri Pandits. *The Tribune*. https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/j-k/restore-special-status-kashmiri-pandits-118887.

Valmiki, O. P. (2003). *Joothan: A Dalit's life* (Mukherjee, A.P., Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.

Van Dijk, T. A. (2001). Critical discourse analysis. In D. Tannen, D. Schiffrin & H. Hamilton (Eds.) *The handbook of discourse analysis*, pp. 349–371. Oxford: Blackwell.

Verma, R. [Official PeeingHuman]. (2020, January 30). *Inhuman hypocrisy of Arnab Goswami on Rohith Vemula's suicide* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HEmQfmJ6qk

Waghmore, S. (2016). Challenging normalised exclusion: Humour and hopeful rationality in Dalit politics. In H. Gorringe, R. Jeffrey, & S. Waghmore (Eds.), *From Margins to Mainstream: Institutionalising Minorities in South Asia* (pp. 153–177). New Delhi: Sage.

Yengde, S. (2019). *Caste matters*. New Delhi: Penguin Random House India.

Yengde, S. (2019, August 8). *In the politically impotent Indian comedy scene, Dalit humour is a class apart*. Quartz: https://qz.com/india/1683712/the-viral-fever-aib-twtw-cant-match-dalit-political-humour/

Zaman, M. (1998). Sectarianism in Pakistan: The radicalization of Shi'i and Sunni identities. *Modern Asian Studies*, 32(3), 689–716. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X98003217

Corresponding author: Madhavi Shivaprasad
Contact email: shivaprasad.madhavi@gmail.com

Selected Bollywood Films as Sites of LGBTQ Contestation, Assertion and Cultural Disruption

Sumati, PG Govt. College for Girls, India

Abstract:

Films function both as forms of cultural production as well as systems of representation and in those capacities, they are reflective of both; the basic patterns of production and the relational patterns in the society they project. Moreover, they have the potential to contribute to cultural economy and ecology. This article investigates the Indian experience through films from outcry against the film *Fire* (1996) to the discomforting accommodation of *Aligarh* (2015) and from the coming of age reception of *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019) to the applausive responses to *Shubh Mangal Jyada Savdhan* (2020) in the context of the queer movement in India. It tracks the progressive curve of the LGBTQ discourse in reality and through a number of films. Looking at the matrix of films, the theoretical concept of conflict, along with Stuart Hall's concept of Representation and Reception provide the framework of the discussion. Although acknowledging the problems of resistance and conflict, the article emphasizes the constitutive power of the media, especially when the currently visible mass culture, with its global, virtual outreach and leverage of the easily available platforms/spaces has subverted top-down discourses. The article ends with a hope that it will soon turn into a new normal and political inclusivity will expand and extend to all aspects of culture, thereby addressing the issues of under-representation and evolving vision in relation to a highly gendered society.

Keywords: conflict, culture, films, gender, heteronormative, representation, sexuality

Introduction: The Challenge of Decoding a Culture and Films

Setting out to understand any social phenomenon in India demands delving into the complexities of a multi-layered social system. It is like an ethnographical study which needs a panoramic view of social groups and careful navigation of the intersectional and inter-categorical mapping of phenomena that occur. This entails understanding of all those intersecting fields and the nature of their interaction with that phenomenon. Along with the political, economic, and religious aspects/systems articulated in the India context, the bearing of various categories within those systems like race, class, caste and gender also require study.

However, attempts at understanding and evaluating a society within the parameters of well-defined labels of race, class, gender, religion, political orientation that it is broadly identified with, risks failure because applying these categorical lenses is like using the dichroic mirror whereby minor but crucial nuances of that society are blocked from view.

Such is the context of sexual and gender minorities in India. To understand their problems and demand for rights, representation and social reception is to understand the gender dynamics in Indian cultural history. Historically traced, these minorities in India were socially acknowledged, though not mainstreamed. Devdatt Pattnaik (2018) and Namita Singh Malik (2017) assert that ancient textual references convey the inclusive co-existence of all, and that wayward sexual behaviour was taken to be sinful rather than illegal. In fact, some architectural and scriptural evidence confirm the prevalence of homosexual behaviour too. However, social backlash and ostracizing due to the so called sinful activities in hierarchically organized classificatory Indian society cannot be ruled out. One of the most visible categories, Hizra/Kinnar/Aravani (eunuchs), skilled at song and dance, were linked with mythological beings called Kinnar. Considered to be non-functional reproductively and sexually desire-neutral, they were confined within their own marked communities and provided patronage by the heterosexual community within that framework only. Their condition ranged from being spiritually respectable to being sexually exploited. Later, under British colonial rule in 1861, the homosexual community came under the sweeping scope of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code which criminalized 'unnatural' sexual relations. Having already been socially closeted, these minority groups faced further marginalisation. They were consequently deprived of the right to exercise their natural will and were rendered vulnerable to administrative and communal exploitation.

After more than a century of absence in the Indian political discourse the movement for LGBTQ rights was initiated by AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA), an activist movement in 1991. It has taken years of legal fight consisting of dismissal and hope by Non-Government Organisations like Naz Foundation, Voices Against 377, and some high profile figures who identified as homosexual such as award winning choreographer and Bharatnatyam dancer Navtej Singh Johar; celebrity chef Ritu Dalmia; hoteliers Aman Nath and Keshav Suri; historian and restorer of Indian architectural ruins, Ashok Row Kavi, journalist; and the first Indian to come out as gay. From being a purely academic issue to an issue of public interest, LGBTQ activism has come of age in the Indian legal corridors and has apparently won the battle after the Supreme Court passed the historical judgement in the case of Navtej Singh Jauhar vs. Union of India on 6 September 2018, which decriminalized Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). The judgement declared sexual orientation to be natural, and the rights to love, privacy, dignity, and equality to be integral. It legally

sanctioned the rights of the LGBTQ community, with discrimination and resistance liable for conviction. Significantly, it stressed:

> re-imagination of the order of nature as being not about the prohibition of non-procreative sex, but instead about the limits imposed by the structures such as gender, caste, religion and community makes the right love not just a separate battle for LGBT individuals, but a battle for all. (The Hindu, 2018, p. 42)

Acknowledging the stigmatizing social manifestations of the discriminatory legal provisions within the homogenous heteronormative framework, the judgement also directed the State-regulated media to be "pluralistic and non-discriminatory in respect of issues of sexual orientation and gender identity" (The Hindu, 2018, p. 87). The writers of this judgement critiqued the closeting, silencing and criminalizing of sexual and gender minorities, mainly due to Section 377 introduced by the colonial regime in India. This is what Janet Staiger (1992) terms "a comparative historical analysis …" that work through the "complex cultural, social and political context structuring what specific group of people did" (p.7) and give both the governing and governed a kind of historical balance sheet on the treatment of the LGBTQ community. Moreover, it makes the role of media crucial in mobilizing the society towards increasing openness and acceptance.

Any single, linear theoretical perspective or any linear representation falls short of evaluating a problem comprehensively from all perspectives. Consequently, an ethnographical inquiry into a culture becomes imminent. However, the proposition of grasping a culture in its entirety remains elusive unless supported by mechanisms that can help us do so. The way films bring life to life makes them that mechanism. Films serve as "records of cultural and social history" and "global forms of culture" (Thorburn, 2013). In fact, they are like the mass produced open sources of a culture which people can access easily, process conveniently and interpret individually. What is more important is that in their audio-visual-kinetic narrative formats, they get people's attention and keep it engaged more for the content, for what they offer, than what goes into their production.

From here arises the question of whether the cinematic narratives, in their representational capacity, facilitate the constitution of identity of the marginalized and minorities and transform the privileged worldviews?

This article explores how filmmakers have attempted to uncover the lid for the specifically oriented masses to see, get shocked and come to terms with the new normal of sexuality. The criminalization of homosexuality in the form of Section 377 was a colonial residue with all its toxic effects on the LGBTQ community. The article inquires whether filmmakers, with their films as the tools of representation or encoded reality, have been successful in amplifying the muted voices of this section of Indian society.

LGBTQ Representations in Indian Films

In the Indian context, films as catalytic representations have been occasionally politicized or subject to controversies. Whether films reflect or subvert and critique societal norms, it can be argued that films and activism are interconnected. Karl Marx's reflections on early society still holds true for contemporary Indian society: "In the earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold

gradation of social rank" (2008, p.14). Notably, gradations of biases run proportionate to such gradation of ranks and these biases never remain fixed in time and place.

Historically speaking, gender representation in Bollywood films has consistently, demonstrated a normalized pattern of exclusion wherein gender narratives that deviate from the norm are omitted, ostracised, ridiculed or demonised. Until recently, the agency of non-binary people was relatively silenced both through social structures and their soft cultural productions. This accounts for the funny, derogatory and insignificant presence of eunuchs, transgender and gay characters in mainstream Bollywood films. Other categories of the LGBTQ community are not represented at all. There have been a number of popular films wherein the protagonist use cross-dressing as a ruse, like *Bluff master* (1963), *Rafoo chakkar* (1975), *Lawaaris* (1981), Khiladi (1992), *Raja babu* (1994) *Auntie no.1* (1998), *Double dhamaal (2007)*, *Humshakals* (2014), to name a few popular titles. The representation of eunuchs and transpersons is marked with extremes of either villainy or benignity. For instance, Maharani as a scheming transgender running brothel in *Sadak* (1991), or Lazza Shankar Pandey as a fanatical child abductor and murderer in *Sangharsh* (1999) are representative of villainous characterisations. While benign characterisations include Tiku, a kind and sacrificial father figure in *Tamanna* (1997) and Munnibai, a brave and dependable but ill-fated transperson leader in *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008). Films like *Kal ho na ho* (2003) and *Dostana* (2008) represent mock-homosexual characters whereas the likes of *Raja Hindustani* (1996), *Partner* (2007), *Student of the Year* (2012), *Grand masti* (2013) and *Housefull 4* (2019) show gays in peripheral roles to serve as "comical relief" (Rawal, 2020).

In the early 1990s, a disruptive phenomenon in the form of the gay rights movement occurred which caused a sub culture to emerge, a supposedly base and deviant one that challenged the attitudes of the conservative mainstream. Against the backdrop of protests and Gay Pride parades, there have been attempts to portray the fear, anxiety, struggle, constraints and insecurity of closeted homosexuals by directors like Madhur Bhandarkar (*Page 3*, 2005; *Fashion*, 2008; *Heroine*, 2012), Karan Johar (*Ajeeb Dastan Hai Ye* in the anthology film *Bombay Talkies*, 2013; *Kapoor & Sons*, 2016), Onir (*My brother Nikhil*; 2005; *I am*, 2010), wherein), Anurag Basu (*Life in a Metro*, 2007), Farhan Akhtar (*Honeymoon travels*, 2007), Abhshek Chaubey (*Dedh ishqiya*, 2014) and Shonali Bose (*Margarita with a Straw*, 2014). Although these films were produced featuring queer centric themes that represented the anguish and pain of coming out and living with its disconcerting complexities, they could not succeed in orienting the masses across stereotypical binaries and boundaries.

Previous research examining the representation of the LGBTQ community in Bollywood films highlight the challenges and subversive potential of films as a site of LGBTQ discourse. Bhugra et al (2015) find the portrayal of gay characters in Hindi films to be negative and deconstructs historical and cultural backgrounds to contextualise these negative representations. Sen (2012) takes stock of the mainstream and alternative cinema's representation of sexual minorities in films produced till the year 2010 and finds the latter to be more responsible and realistic in their approach to these minorities. Sujata Moorti (2000) examines the reaction to *Fire* in terms of a subversion of the director's "authorial intention to draw attention to the oppressive conditions of Indian women's lives [that] was subverted by nationalist modes of thinking developed during colonialism" (p. 1), whereas Radu A. Davidescu studies *Fire* as a revolutionary queer film against the backdrop of a hetero-patriarchal Indian socio-cultural landscape. Sabharwal and Singh et al (2017) offer a study of *Aligarh* and find it a well-made, meaningful film but short of an appeal that could be a dialogue setter for gay rights. However, Mehak Srivastava (2016) and Pooja and Rekha

(2018) study the contribution of Bollywood films in advancing the cause of the LGBTQ community in India through examining selected films, including *Fire* (1996) and *Aligarh* (2015), and conclude that they indicate a positive shift in the LGBTQ representation and have been able to initiate a change of perspective, though their reach remains limited. Pushpinder Kaur (2017) makes some important observation regarding Indian cinema's role in the production of meaning of queer. She finds that stereotypical representation of queer in Indian films relegate them to either being "comic relief" or a "side story" (p. 5). The discussion in this article is situated within the context of this previous research, and further explores how films, as form of non-state regulated media, engaged with discourses of LGBTQ rights to empower LGBTQ communities. It charts the Indian journey through its LGBTQ movement in the last three decades through four mainstream films, *Fire* (Mehta, D., 1996)*, Aligarh* (Mehta, H., 2015)*, Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (Dhar, 2019) and *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (Kewalya, 2020)*,* which centre on homosexual protagonists and garnered mass response across communities.

Overview of Films

Fire (1996)

Directed by Deepa Mehta, *Fire* features two sisters-in-law in a parochially patriarchal setting, in which their dominant husbands dictate their lives. These men represent the ostensibly considerate normative agencies who exercise will over their own desires but control the desires of their wives and thereby forcing them to be relational and functional according to their system. Radha, is the older sister-in-law. Her desire for compassion, passion and love are muted and thwarted by the self-inflicted celibacy and altruism of her husband. Sita is the younger of the two women. Her husband loves another woman and the best he offers to do for Sita is impregnate her so as to keep her occupied. She articulates her discomfort with the binding power of traditions. Both women find their desires fulfilled in each other; Radha's old school's guilt and fear are assuaged by the radically free-spirited Sita. When their relationship is discovered, Radha confronts her husband and leaves the house with Sita, with the vision of a life together.

This movie received applause outside India but was met with nation-wide violent demonstrations and vandalism, and death threats to the lead female actors. This reaction forced an unofficial ban on its screening on account of its depiction of the 'unnatural' and 'immoral' sexual relation between two females. The controversy and the reactionary activities of the "state sponsored hooliganism" prompted Mahesh Bhatt, another filmmaker, to call it a "cultural emergency" (Raval & Madhu, 1998). Reaction to the film also garnered media attention, with *BBC News* running a story titled "Hindu militants stage lesbian film attacks" (1998). In response, the Supreme Court issued directions to the government to ensure safe screening of the film. Massive support from activists, artists and many civil rights groups compelled the then Prime minister, Home Minister and a few Members of Parliament from the ruling party to condemn the violent protesters. In the support rallies, placards written with 'I am Indian and I am lesbian' were seen for the first time in India.

Aligarh (2015)

Written by Apurva Asrani, a famous filmmaker and scriptwriter who identifies as gay, the next milestone came in the form of the film *Aligarh*: an adaptation of a homosexual Indian university professor's real-life story portraying the agony, loneliness and helplessness of a gay elderly academic and poet who had to face humiliation, expulsion, persecution and mortal isolation for being gay. The narrative (and real life events) is situated within a well-

acclaimed academic space, a university. The film highlights the deeply ingrained cultural prejudices of the society at large and exposes the politicized academic environment. Dr. Shrinivas Ramchandra Siras was an award winning short story writer, an established professor and the Head of the Department of Modern Indian Languages at Aligarh Muslim University. He became the victim of a sting operation by the local media while engaged in intercourse with a male rickshaw puller in his bedroom in February 2010. While the rickshaw puller was subjected to police brutality, Siras was defamed, humiliated, ostracized, persecuted and suspended on grounds of this 'immoral' behaviour and for putting the ethos of the university in danger due to his sexual orientation. He challenged his suspension in court and was given justice in terms of being reinstated to his job and campus residence. However, his mysterious death (ruled a suicide) in his room after around three months of the incident challenges the notion that justice was achieved. Although a post mortem revealed the presence of poison, the lack of indications that he consumed any substances himself and the arrest (and later release) of a number of suspects raises continuing questions over the cause of death.

Aligarh was also greatly appreciated at different Film festivals abroad though it faced backlash from fringe groups in India and was not allowed to be screened in Aligarh City as it would have defamed the city because of its treatment of homosexuality. The Censor Board gave its trailer an "A" certificate, that is, unsuitable for children. The word "homosexual" was beeped out when broadcast on National TV. Regardless, the film was praised in Bollywood and by viewers who called it "a milestone" and "a courageous" film, with "the power of messaging" (Eros Now, 2016b); it can certainly be said to have been well received.

Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga (2019)

Amid such a progressive discursive landscape, Gazal Dhaliwal, a lesbian writer, wrote the story of a girl's alternative sexuality and her experiences in her loving but conservative home. In 2019, this story was adapted into the landmark film *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (When I Saw a Girl It Seemed Like), hereafter referred to as *EKDTAL*.

Sweety, the protagonist does not dare to reveal her truth of being different from others to her grandmother and her father due to childhood experiences in which she was teased and ostracized, and saw her gay friend harassed by other students, including her brother. Her brother calls her sexual orientation a "disease" and asks her to get rid of it as it destroys the family's reputation (Dhar, 2019). An accidental meeting with a script writer, Sahil Mirza, proves to be a turning point in Sweety's story. His romantic pursuance of Sweety forces her to come out to him. He decides to help her and convinces the whole family (except the brother) to prepare a play featuring a lesbian couple as a new advertising format for their clothing line. They object to the idea of staging a lesbian couple but the prospect of people relishing the comic depiction of such people makes them agree. However, the tempo rises when the brother discovers the plan and reveals the 'dirty' truth which he had been hiding to "protect" Sweety and the family, and the father orders the cancellation of the play. However, Sweety stands firm, and questions the so called 'normal' of her brother and tells her father that the play needs to be staged to represent every confused, lonely and scared child like her. The father, in an emotionally disoriented state at hearing her mention her childhood, goes back home and reads her diary and discovers her psychological trauma of being othered. When the play begins with Sahil professing his deep love for a girl, the audience cheers and encourages him. When the lovers are revealed to be two girls, they react angrily at the 'filth' and 'nonsense' and start leaving the hall. The father arrives and finds Sweety as one of the protagonists describing her situation as "repressed, suffocated, and trapped

inside …[her]self" (Dhar, 2019), exhorting her father to let her "out", and cowering in fear of the self-styled culture-keepers "offering punishment like banishment, forceful marriage with boys or…killing" (Dhar, 2019). At this juncture, the father charges at the attacking actors and talks about the naturalness of same-sex love and the futility of force to change it. He then assures Sweety of his love and care and asks her to live the way she wants. The brother goes away offended while the rest accept and embrace Sweety and her partner. The film's portrayal of a lesbian couple was well received and it didn't face any protest.

Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan (2020)

In *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* (hereafter *SMZS*), two male lovers, Kartik and Aman work and live together in Delhi, with Aman still in the closet. Their relationship is revealed while they are on the train No. 0377 with Aman's extended family to attend the wedding of his cousin, Rajni. Shankar Tripathi, Aman's father and an agriculture scientist, is nauseated seeing them kissing each other. Their dance and kiss at the wedding shocks the crowd of relatives and the wedding is called off. The fight to reform Aman starts. His ritual reincarnation is performed despite his protestations, his partner is scolded, forced to leave the place and beaten on coming back. Finally, he is emotionally blackmailed into agreeing to marry a girl. However, the turning point comes when the prospective bride runs away with the family's jewellery to be with her boyfriend. Kartik tries taking her place in the ceremony but is first exposed and then forced to confront everyone. Finally, with the legal debate on Section 377 of IPC going on in the background, the family shows acceptance and stands up for them when the police charge them of the crime of homosexuality. The father shears off the patriarchal garb and is seen dropping the couple off at the railway station on a motorbike which, after some resistance, he lets Kartik ride – a symbolic gesture of allowing them to decide the course of their life. *SMZS* was widely appreciated in India though it was banned in UAE for its homosexual theme.

Discussion

Stuart Hall (1973) refers to the practice of abjection and othering those who do not identify with the dominant cultural meanings thus:

> There remains a dominant cultural order, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested…the different areas of social life appear to be mapped out into connotative domains of dominant or preferred meanings. New, problematic or troubling things and events, which breach our expectancies and run counter to our common-sense constructs', to our 'taken-for-granted knowledge of social structures, must be assigned to their connotational domains before they can be said to 'make sense': and the most common way of 'mapping them' is to assign the new within some domain or other of the existing 'maps of problematic social reality'. (p. 394)

Seen in this context, these films reveal the operation of what Althusser calls ideological state apparatuses in society to keep it culturally, religiously, socially and legally in line with hegemony. The narratives in these films are encoded with the signs of systematic gender profiling by heteropatriarchy in homes and heteronormativity in society. The only reason for the society to turn against them is their sexual orientation which gets problematized. These films attempt to create space for the sexual-gender minorities to push the boundaries of their assigned domain and contest the dominant order and meanings in ways mostly similar to any other struggle for rights. The older forms of representation were either stereotypical or exclusive in their efforts to highlight the predicament of the LGBTQ community. The four

films under discussion here form a different representational range which marks a shift in gendered representation in mainstream cinema vis-a-vis the multidimensional configurations of sexuality. The analysis of these films brings out some key sites which these films engage to contest and subvert the practices of stereotypical signification through representation.

Hall (1997a) asserts that one of the most effective strategies to counter the older poetics and politics of stereotypes is:

> to occupy the very terrain which has been saturated by fixed and closed representation and to try to use the stereotypes and turn the stereotypes in a sense against themselves; to open up, in other words, the very practice of representation itself – as a practice … The very act of opening up the practice by which these closures of imagery have been presented requires one to go into the power of the stereotype itself and begin to…subvert, open and expose it from inside. (p. 21)

The events in the films are understood in reference to this representational strategy. These films have subverted the forms of representation in the first place by accessing the ruling representational system of Indian cinema and locating the authentic LGBTQ voices therein and bringing their stories out of the closet of art house cinema to the hubs of commercial cinema with popular mainstream actors as their protagonists. What Sandip Roy, a writer, journalist and radio host says about *SMZS* articulates the pride involved in such subversion: "I am thankful because it's no small thing to watch gay characters appear larger than life on a screen before you without cringing and hoping that no one sees them in you when the lights come on" (2020). Thus, they claim their narrative by entering into "a struggle over representation" and accessing a higher position of power (Hall, 1997b, p. 274).

These four films present a trajectory of such subversion of representational forms, starting from *Fire*, building momentum in *Aligarh* and *ELKDTAL* and consolidating the position in *SMZS*. The signifying practices and institutional agencies like family, law, media, religion that are harnessed by the dominant culture have been similarly utilized to make "the stereotypes work against themselves" (Hall, 1997b, p. 274). Through the image of a hegemonic family with heavily polarized opinions and rituals and recorded episodes of Ramayana series in the name of media, *Fire* serves as a launch pad to facilitate a contextualized debate on LGBTQ rights which becomes more multidimensional in latter films.

Family
The centrality of family, a space where the play of gender politics manifests itself starkly is underscored in all the films. Family honour in India mainly hinges on confirmation with dominant meanings. The question asked by Aman's uncle to Kartik, "Son, by the way, are your parents aware of this [his gayness]" (Kewalya, 2020), acts like the sword of Damocles for anyone stepping out of the boundaries (sexual or gendered) as they risk eviction, disownment or even murder. The family also risks being maligned, ostracized with detrimental impacts on other children within the family. These films present a trajectory of evolution in bringing the family to the centre of a gender neutral discourse. In *Fire,* the family as a hegemonic unit is so deeply internalized in Radha and Sita that support is unimaginable. In *Aligarh*, the absence of family support accentuates Siras's loneliness; mentioning the only link with the family, his nephew, brightens his face.

The next step comes from *ELKDTAL*, where the agency of family is evoked for the first time, albeit with help from outside. Non-hegemonic notions of sexuality are processed through a stereotypical family unit. Yet the outcome is not to rupture the institution of family, but to find accommodation within it by appealing to the high emotional quotient of its parental figure. *SMZS* functions like a mock-heroic film and trivializes the absurdity of an orthodox family. Kartik is aware of the importance of familial support and wants to calmly claim it, fighting a transformational battle with them: "There is a lot of power in the taunts of a joint family […] the fight with family is the biggest and the most dangerous of all the fights" (Kewalya, 2020). The viewers get so immersed that when Aman gives up, they want him to fight. Sandip Roy lauds the film for cleverly "making the family, not the gay couple, the butt of jokes" (2020). Thus, the role of families has been redefined through these LGBTQ narratives.

Religion

As for religion, Max Weber saw it as "a source for dynamic social change" (1971, p.xxxi) through the process of rationalization which at a higher and more complex level of cultural order leads to a sense of confinement. However, the same concept of rationalization has the potency of "processes of change and breakthrough" (p. xxxiv). In the manner of suggesting a remapping of the concept of rationalization, religion is in fact made into the safe haven of LGTBQ identities in the form of structures like a Dargah and a Gurudwara in both *Fire* and *ELKDTAL* respectively. The Dargah of Sufi saint Hazarat Nizamuddin Aulia, an embodiment of love and plurality is projected as a space, which is 'public' by nature, to help Radha and Sita negotiate their future path. In *ELKDTAL*, Sweety chooses to disclose her sexual orientation to Sahil in a Gurudwara, an embodiment of equality and all-inclusiveness. No intervention of any religious agent is shown in both the films. Rather, they seem to strategically point towards understanding the essence of religion which, in any form, does not support subjecting humans to a "hierarchy of control" (Weber, 1971, p. xxxii). Siras' statement in *Aligarh* that "religion is not a thing to be understood: start thinking and faith goes away" (H. Mehta, 2015) is a subtle subversion of the dominantly held belief about the absolute truths of culturally constructed and socially appropriated religion.

In *SMZS,* the genetically modified (GM) black cauliflower produced by Shankar Tripathi, the Hindu Brahmin scientist, is used as a metaphor for the religious interventions in modifying a person's being to fit the hegemonic definitions of a cultured and civilized person. The damaging results of such forcible attacks on nature are made prominent by the angry protests of farmers who had bought GM seeds and feel cheated because of losses incurred due to the worm-infected cauliflowers. The normative power of rituals is also challenged when Shankar Tripathi depends on religion to restore his son's 'natural' sexuality by performing a ritual of rebirth into a new person with a "natural", straight sexual orientation. The films therefore challenge the dominance of religion through protagonists who, demonstrating an understanding of the basic tenets of religious beliefs, co-opt and subvert mechanisms such as rituals to strengthen their discursive position.

Media and Law

Hall notes that the "hegemonic and discursive power" stereotyping "operates as much through culture, the production of knowledge, imagery and representation, as through other means" (1997b, p. 263). Both media and law are crucial in the wider determination, dissemination and validation of the dominant order of a culture. In *Aligarh,* the agency of media and law has been redirected at the dominant code itself. It offers a template for recoding the stereotypical image of media as a sensationalizing and polarising agency into an

empathetic and responsible 'watchdog of the Indian constitution'. The unlawful intrusion of the journalists in Siras' bedroom and the random language of Deepu's editor who calls Siras' case a sex scandal, are exposed through a conscientious journalist, Deepu, who works hard to report the truth of the event and facilitate justice and dignity for Siras. The devastation caused by media's playing into the hands of power stands widely visible against the emancipatory results of ethical journalism. In the film, Mehta makes Deepu the medium through which to receive and decode Siras' condition and position. Taking some artistic liberties, the film portrays Deepu Sebastian and Anand Grover (Siras's lawyer) as multifaceted characters who don't term Siras' case a "sex scandal", but a breach of privacy. Rather than enacting discriminatory practices, they embody broader and evolved interpretations of them.

The prosecution lawyer, with an authoritative conviction, spells out the right of the society or an institution "to filter its members" as per the parameters of its "collective morality". *Aligarh* frees law from the trappings of hegemony by transcoding such stereotypes through Grover. Highlighting "inclusiveness" as the underlined tenet of the Indian constitution, he provides the right articulation and interpretation of rights and morality. He dismisses society's right to interfere in an individual's privacy and stresses on constitutional limitations on morality:

> Morality is open to interpretation. Those who are vegan might consider meat-eaters immoral. Married people might consider divorcees immoral. What is the limit of morality? If someone strays out of one's moral boundaries, should he be punished? Because if that is the case, then every citizen of this country should be in prison for violating someone else's moral boundaries. (H. Mehta, 2015)

Grover serves as a new metaphor for revisiting the legal practices in India, differentiating the fluid and non-fluid concepts in law, removing anachronistic laws and upholding the true spirit of the constitution to avoid misinterpretations and misjudgements.

Representation matters and the filmmakers of these films have made it crucial for LGBTQ community also. Siras' discomfort in the courtroom, on the campus and in the neighbourhood is contrasted with his comfort, cheerfulness, openness in the party where he accompanies Grover's assistant lawyer, invited and hailed by people who had represented him by signing on his petition- artists, poets, and civilians including LGBTQ activists.

By placing the playwright Sahil in the centre of the debate, *ELKDTAL* accentuates the role of such representational systems for LGBTQ community. The affective power of the play staged by Sahil is instrumental in the positive transformation of Sweety's father. In the closing credits, Kuhu is seen mouthing a "thank you" to him for staging a catalytic intervention through the play. He helps the whole family, except the brother, come out of their own closets, locked by gender norms.

A new tool of the subversive representational strategy is witnessed in *ELKDTAL* and *SMZS.* They employ the tropes of the popular Hindi romantic films and weave a homosexual story with them. The act of naming *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* after the first line of a famous romantic song from a romantic comedy, *1942: a Love Story* (1994) is revealing of this attempt. The 1994 film features a heterosexual love story and romantic song associates love with every blissful phenomenon in nature. The title of *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* translates in English as "be extra aware of marriage", and is a cautionary call to question the fixed notion of marriage as a heterosexual union. This film uses and transcodes the tropes of

mainstream romances: two lovers having to fight family opposition, a conflict between social norms and individual choice, emotionally charged interactions and finally, a happy ending. Kartik heroically guards his love and challenges a single minded cultural discourse on sex and gender. Holding a loudspeaker and wearing gay pride symbols (an inverted pink triangle tattoo and a rainbow flag) he calls Aman's father "very sick", and suffering from "homophobia" (Kewalya, 2020). Later, Sitting agitated at the railway after being forced out by Aman's father, he rewords the popular Jack and Jill rhyme, replaces 'Jill' with 'Johny' and sings it aloud, repeatedly. Such appropriation catches the viewer unawares and arrests attention forcing them to consider the changed reality of their narratives. By opening up the gender bracketed narratives, it expands them to accommodate diverse expressions of love across the spectrum of sexuality and gender.

Language

Power sustains by controlling the verbal repertoire and by setting the conditions for its configuration. Recognizing this, these films tend to seize this tactic and reconfigure the available repertoire in terms of giving voice to the LGBTQ experience, thus reinforcing the importance of having their own grammar and rhetoric of representation. *Fire* forced open a dialogue and a debate around the hitherto taboo subject of sexuality and its non-normative nature by igniting a search for linguistic inventory to describe Sita and Radha's state of being in response to Sita's resentment at the lack of linguistic tools of articulation: "There is no word in our language that can describe us, how we feel for each other" (D. Mehta, 1996). In *Aligarh,* Siras feels the lack of language to describe the beauty of same-sax love and struggles to define his love in abstract terms: "a beautiful word … "like a poem, emotional, an uncontrollable urge". He has a problem with having it expressed in just "three words" (H. Mehta, 2015), and making it sound like a dirty word.

However, language as a strategic tool of the politics of representation has been very effectively secured to defeat the reductionist and essentialist intent of stereotypes in these films. The Aristotelian concept of rhetoric is recalled in the manner in which these films employ dialogic rhetoric as an "an interactive means of discovering meaning through language" (Ede, 1982). The films demonstrate the importance of rhetoric in both public and private spaces.

In *Fire,* Sita jolts Radha out of her numbing comfort zone on the day of the *Karwachauth* fast which is observed by wives for the long life of their husband. She says: "Isn't it amazing we're so marked by customs and rituals? Somebody just has to press my button, this button marked tradition and I start responding like a trained monkey. Do I shock you?" Radha replies, "Yes" (D. Mehta, 1996). Later, the discourse of enlightenment by controlling desires, roots of evil, is pulled apart through a short but impassioned argument from Radha:

> Listen, I did not live when devoid of desire, and how many desires have risen in me! And hear out those desires. I desire to live. I desire Sita. I desire her affection, her emotions, her love. My desire is to live! (D. Mehta, 1996)

In *Aligarh*, the sensuousness of the metaphors in Siras's poetry not only offers an insight into the passionate heart and high-spiritedness of this otherwise demure and despondent person but reveals his predicament too:

> Oh beloved moon, fear not the dons that separate us
> For we must meet again when the world goes to sleep

> In the light of the day I am unseen […]
> We will touch as shadows touch
> Becoming one in the midnight sun. (H. Mehta, 2015)

In *ELKDTAL,* along with the persuasive composition of the monologue rendered by Sweety in the staged play, direct rhetorical questions convey the intent behind them which overrides the preconceived notions of the listener. They serve to challenge the age old fixed meanings and silences:

> Why do all people think only in one direction? Is it compulsory that I should fall in love with a boy only? Why did you (God) make me like this? […] If you don't consider yourself normal, how will others accept you? Is there anyone who will stand by you? (Dhar, 2019)

The subtlety of a simple interaction is impactful enough to send the hearer into self-reflection.

SMZS has abundantly made used as an apparatus of rhetoric as retorts to the ignorance, irrationality and extremities of the controlling codes of dominant culture. While on way to the railway station with Kartik, Aman's uncle asks him: "When did you decide to become this (*ye* in hindi)" (Kewalya, 2020). Aman vocalizes the word for him and says, "it's not called '*ye*'(this), it's called gay" and retorts: "When did *you* decide that you will not 'become' gay" (Kewalya, 2020)? The uncle pauses to think and reflects on the naturalness of his sexuality and says: "There is a point" (Kewalya, 2020). Desperate to make his parents understand and accept his truth, Aman hits at their dual perspective on love vis-à-vis its constructed and biological composition: "Your Oxytocin is love, my Oxytocin is disease!" (Kewalya, 2020). In the end, when a reference to Supreme Court's hearing on Section 377 is made, Shankar Tripathi reacts, "Will the Supreme Court take all the decisions now" (Kewalya, 2020)? The intent of the question regarding a lack of reasonable thinking about personal choices on love and partnership is not lost on the viewer.

Additionally, these films offer a novel idea which promises to be a breakthrough in the LGBTQ debate. Convinced that normalizing of homosexual love is the first step towards mainstreaming queer issues, they locate the primary site which can be engaged to mitigate the problems of LGBTQ persons; they subtly hint at the need for sex/gender education for children and engaging them in LGBT discussions. In *Aligarh,* Siras credits his closeness with the children of his brothers to the non-judgemental nature of children. In *ELKDTAL,* a little girl is shown attentively watching the play and wiping her tears at the end. This is an issue that needs serious attention to get the future generations differentiate the socially constructed reality from the biological one.

Finally, the discussion can be concluded with the observation that the protagonists in the above discussed films do not overturn the hegemonic structures of the society and remain more or less within the larger heteronormative frameworks. These films provide an insider's view into Indian psyches and households to reflect on the question of justice to LGBTQ persons and create advocacy for them. The widespread popularity, media attention, and worldwide recognition and awards received by the films is instrumental to bringing LGBTQ discourse into the mainstream.

Conclusion: Films as Potential Sites of Conflict Demonstration and Resolution

As Hall notes, representation is dialogic and sustained by "the presence of shared cultural codes, which cannot guarantee that meanings will remain stable forever" (1997b, p.10). The above critique of the four homosexuality-centred films chart the journey that such dialogue has covered till now, with regard to LGBTQ identities in India. From *Fire to SMZS*, huge positive perspectival shifts in Indian society regarding homosexuality get reflected in these films. The LGBTQ representation in the mainstream films which have started to be co-created by LGBTQ persons is significant for the LGBTQ rights movement. These films are unique in being conversation starters to debate winners to influencers to take the cause further. By using their representational potency, future films on homosexuality may take the rights movement by subverting the stereotypes of marriage and parenting too.

The discussion shows that the rich language of the film medium, with its mass appeal and extended possibilities of inclusive vocabulary are a powerful source and site where a meaningful battle can be fought and the reference frames of subversion can be sought. Representation in these films has been found to be constitutive of the LGBTQ persons' identity on par with heterosexual identities. These films provide an insider's view into Indian psyches and households to reflect on the question of justice to this gender demography and create advocacy for them. They serve as amplifiers to make the LGBTQ issues heard, understood and valued. They touch that deep cultural nerve in a transformational manner and have helped Indian culture evolve with their disruptive strategies. The analysis of these films ends with the observation that they have provided the LGBTQ movement with transformative potentials to enable it to maneuverer within the narrow hegemonic sensibilities of the socio-political system. These films represent the progressive stages in the LGBTQ struggle and have become reference points for advancing the real world debate on sex and gender to a new level.

References

BBC News (1998, December 3). Hindu militants stage lesbian film attacks. *BBC News.* http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/227273.stm

Davidescu, R. A. (2009, April 10). *Culture, sexuality and politics in Deepa Mehta's* Fire. Radu A Davidescu. http://www.radudavidescu.com/2009/08/culture-sexuality-and-politics-in-deepa.html

Dhar, C. H. (Director). (2019). *Ek ladki ko dekha toh aisa laga* [Film]. Vinod Chopra Films.

Ede, L., & Lunsford, A. (1982). On Distinctions between Classical and Modern Rhetoric. *Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication.* Educational Resources Information Centre. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED220866.pdf

Hall, S. (1973 [2007]). Encoding and Decoding in the Television discourse. In A. Gray, J. Campbell, M. Erickson, S. Hanson, & H. Wood (eds.), *CCCS selected working papers vol. 2* (pp. 386–398). Routledge.

Hall, S. (1997a). Representation and the Media. In S. Jhally (Host), *Representation and the Media Open University* [Lecture] Media Education Foundation, Northampton, United States. https://www.mediaed.org/transcripts/Stuart-Hall-Representation-and-the-Media-Transcript.pdf.

Hall, S. (Ed.). (1997b). *Representation: Cultural representation and signifying practices.* Sage.

Kaur, P (2017). Queer Hindi cinema: A study on understanding LGBT identities. *International journal for innovative research in multidisciplinary field*, *3*(3), 1–6. https://www.ijirmf.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/201703001.pdf

Kewalya, H. (Director). (2020). *Shubh mangal zyada saavdhan* [Film]. Colour Yellow Production.

Malik, N. S. (2017). *Homosexuality: Debating issues in the light of Indian legal and social system an analytical research.* [Doctoral dissertation, Mewar University]. Shodhganga@INFLIBNET Centre.

Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2008). *The Communist Manifesto*. Wordsworth Editions Limited.

Mehta, D. (Director). (1996). *Fire* [Film]. Kaleidoscope Entertainment.

Mehta, H. (Director). (2015). *Aligarh* [Film]. Eros Entertainment.

Moorti, S. 2000. Inflamed passions: Fire, the woman question, and the policing of cultural borders. *Genders, 32.* Retrieved August 7, 2020 from https://cdn.atria.nl/ezines/web/GendersPresenting/2004/No40/genders/g32_moorti.html

Pattnaik, D. (2018, August 9). *What do Manusmriti and Dharmashastra have to say about homosexuality?* Qurius. https://qrius.com/what-do-manusmriti-and-dharmashastra-have-to-say-about-homosexuality/

Raval. S. & Madhu J. (1998, December 21). Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* creates a furore. *Indiatoday.com*. https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/society-the-arts/films/story/19981221-controversial-film-fire-is-sent-back-to-censor-board-matter-taken-to-court-827561-1998-12-21

Roy, S. (2020. February 27). The Family values of shubh mangal zyada saavdhan. *Livemint.com.* www.livemint.com/opinion/columns/the-family-values-of-shubh-mangal-saavdhan-11582777968004.html

Staiger, J. (1992). Film, reception and cultural studies. *The Centennial Review*, *36*(1), 89–104.

Thehindu.com. (2018, September 6). Full text of Supreme Court's verdict on Section 377 on September 6, 2018. *Thehindu.com.* https://www.thehindu.com/news/resources/full-text-of-supreme-courts-verdic-on-section-377-on-september-6-2018/article24880713.ecemp

Thorburn, D. (2013, March 17). *Film as global and cultural form; Montage, mise en scene* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/r67dVaGtBGA

Weber, Max. (1971). *Sociology of religion*. Methuen.

Corresponding author: Sumati
Contact email: sumati05@gmail.com

Promoting Gender Reassignment Surgical Service in Thailand among International Transgenders

Puntarika Rawikul
National Institute of Development Administration, Bangkok, Thailand

Wichian Lattipongpun
National Institute of Development Administration, Bangkok, Thailand

Abstract

Undergoing gender reassignment surgery in Thailand is a significant decision for individuals within the transgender community internationally. The objective of this research is to examine the key communication factors that influence the decision-making process of international transgender persons wishing to undergo gender reassignment surgery in Thailand. This investigation employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Data was collected from the distribution of 530 close-ended questionnaires and 20 in-depth interviews. The study found that there are several advantages to undergoing surgery in Thailand: 1) Thailand is highly regarded for its expert surgeons as well as modern medical equipment and instruments, 2) the cost for the surgery in Thailand is economical and 3) Thailand is a convenient location to visit. Nevertheless, financial difficulty, insufficient information and health issues are concerns that complicate and delay the decision-making process of transgendered persons seeking reassignment surgery. The surgeons are the most important influencer for transgenders' decision making in this case. Therefore, testimony, accreditation and educational background, surgical techniques in addition to reasonable cost should be highlighted in the marketing communication between transgenders and gender reassignment surgical service providers. These features should be brought to light among key stakeholders and strategically communicated by relevant Thai authorities.

Keywords: communication, healthcare, gender reassignment surgery, marketing, marketing transgender

Introduction

Thailand is world-renowned for gender reassignment surgery services among the transgender community. However, the significant decision to undergo surgery is a difficult one to make; the factors influencing decision making processes are therefore worth exploring. In 1978, Dr Preecha Tiewtranon, MD, became the first plastic surgeon to offer sex-change surgery for a transwoman in Thailand. Over time, he developed his surgical techniques and taught his methods to a new generation of Thai surgeons, so more of those suffering from gender dysphoria could change their gender and find greater happiness in life. Now, Thai surgeons conducting these procedures are some of the most respected among physicians worldwide (Sittinew, n.d.). Today, Thailand has emerged as a leader in gender reassignment surgery for a number of reasons including comfort and convenience. Not only can Thai surgery provide customers with a body that performs the most naturally for the new gender, but it also costs much less compared to the service offered in other countries ("Thai doctors don't daydream," 2013). Sex-change surgery for a transwoman in Western countries costs about USD 46,361 – USD 62,827 and USD 123,676 – USD 154,578 for a transman. However, in Thailand, the costs average around USD 3,710 – USD 4,636 for a transwoman and USD 12,368 – USD 15,459 for a transman ("Thailand: the land of sex reassignment," 2012).

The Thai Medical Council enacted regulations and a code of conduct for professional transgender medical treatment in 2009 to prepare for future expansion ("Cosmetic surgery grows," 2012). Recent changes have suggested that society has also become more accepting ("Cosmetic surgery grows," 2012). For example, Ayotollah Ruhollah Khimeini, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, stated that sex reassignment surgery could be performed (Amili, 2011). Furthermore, the Miss Universe Pageant changed its rules to allow transwomen to enter the competition in 2018 (Poonpiriya, 2018). This has resulted in more persons deciding to have gender reassignment procedures conducted in Thailand. This number does not only include Thais, but also individuals from the USA, Australia, Europe, China, South Korea, Japan and citizens of ASEAN member countries. Currently, gender reassignment surgery services in Thailand have been developing steadily at a rate of 10 percent annually ("Thailand becoming a world-class medical center," 2016). According to statistics provided by Yanhee Hospital, during the past three to four years, over 600 men have undergone sex-change surgery to become women while over 400 women have undergone the procedures to become men. Of these individuals, approximately fifty percent were Thai and fifty percent foreigners. These figures help to show how Thailand has become a world leader in gender reassignment procedures, particularly in sex-change surgery, because Thailand is the only country in Asia where sex-change surgery can be performed for both transwomen and transmen in the same hospital ("Cosmetic surgery grows," 2012).

Developing Thailand to be the world leader of gender reassignment surgery services is very feasible, but to achieve this, Thailand must develop marketing strategies that best target individuals and provide them with the correct information. Although this health service industry has become more accepted, little research is conducted on transsexuals in Thailand. In a search for data conducted for this research, no studies were found dealing with transmen nor studies on any link between transgender persons and the gender reassignment health services industry, creating a large gap in this field of knowledge. A survey conducted in 2015 showed that only 116 health studies of transsexuals had been conducted worldwide (Asia Pacific Transgender Network, 2015) as displayed in a map showing the distribution of the research in Figure 1.

Figure 3.1: Map of the Distribution of Studies in Global Transgender Health
(n = 116 quantitative studies from 2008–2014)

1

2–5

60+

No data

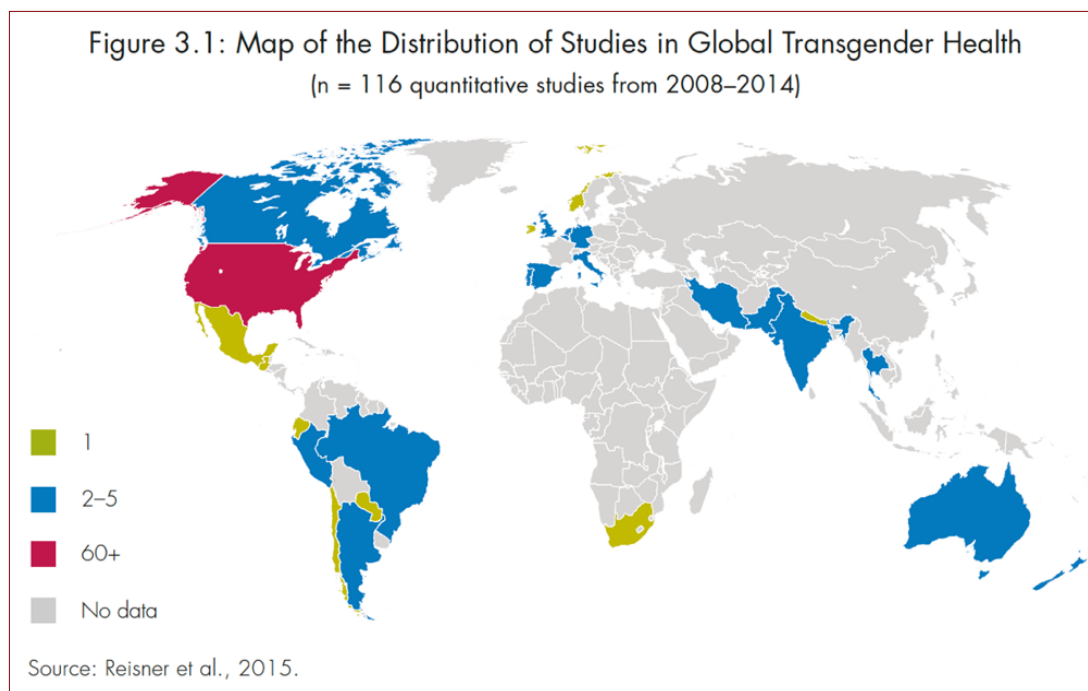Source: Reisner et al., 2015.

Figure 1: Map showing the distribution of research on Global Transgender Health

Thus, this research was conducted to fill the research gap by examining the key communication factors that influence transgender persons to decide to utilize gender reassignment surgical services in Thailand.

Literature Review

Regarding previous studies, decision making is the toughest issue among the transgender community considering gender reassignment surgery. For the purposes of this study, gender reassignment surgery includes procedures such as breast augmentation for a transwoman, breast reduction for a transman as well as facial reconstruction or surgery on other organs of the face and/or body to make the body and face appear more like the transitioned gender (Asia Pacific Transgender Network, 2015). Philip Kotler (2003) explained that consumer behavior is divided into five stages: 1) Need Arousal or Problem Recognition, 2) Information Search, 3) Evaluation of Alternatives, 4) Purchase Decision and 5) Post Purchase Behavior. For example, people suffering from gender dysphoria start with the need to undergo sex-change surgery and other procedures might also be required surgical intervention. From there, they will search for available information to evaluate and make their decision to choose the most suitable place to receive the service. After completion of the surgical processes, they can reflect on the decision and evaluate its worthiness. The step of evaluation of alternatives and making the decision are complex and influenced by the notions such as quality, cost, and speed of the service, and other factors.

When it comes to evaluation of service alternatives, Kapil Jekishan (2017) introduced the notion of, Good, Cheap, Fast, but You Can Pick Only Two. When faced with service quality, cheap service price, and fast service, consumers are likely to choose two: 1) Good and Cheap, Won't be Fast, 2) Fast and Good, Won't be Cheap, 3) Fast and Cheap, Won't be Good. Whatever the case, consumers usually give the greatest importance to quality. If service providers say that quality will be decreased when a consumer chooses speed and low price,

consumers will focus on quality first (Jekishan, 2017). However, due to the fact that the overall costs for gender reassignment surgery is quite high compared to consumers' cost of living, price becomes a major factor in decision making even though quality of the services is the most important.

Piyaluk Potiwan's 2011 doctoral thesis, *Social Movement of the Transgender,* indicates that one of the driving forces behind transgender persons is socio-economic status among transgender persons. Differing access to financial resources leads to discriminant problems for transgender persons who have undergone gender reassignment surgery and those who have not had the opportunity to do so. This research provides a basis for analyzing the links between social contexts and gender reassignment surgery, particularly socio-economic status, which can be a major factor that can affect the selection of gender reassignment surgery. This may turn out to be a positive situation for Thailand, which as noted by Jitlada Maneerat (2010) is advantageously situated for medical tourism as the cost for cosmetic surgery is much more economical compared to Western countries. Individuals interested in these services can travel to Thailand easily. The country has advanced medical equipment and a wide selection of tourist destinations. Maneerat argues that Thailand is suitable to become a hub with the quality, reasonable cost, and convenience. However, notes that advertising remains a weak point (Maneerat, 2010).

Thailand's advertising and promotion are inferior to those of neighboring countries such as South Korea, and the Thai Medical Council's code of ethics sets restrictions on advertising as physicians are not allowed to produce advertising similar to that of other products (Maneerat, 2010). The research points out that the development of marketing communication management for the cosmetic surgery service industry is needed. A major weakness is a lack of marketing communication to attract and persuade target consumers in the step of searching for information that connects to alternative evaluation and purchase intention.

After evaluating alternatives, the consumer will determine their purchase intention for the service. There can then be other factors that could affect their purchase such as social factors such as others in their social group not accepting their decision. There could also be anticipated situational factors, for instance, the consumer loses their job or a user they know tells them the service is not good. Any of these can affect the final purchase decision (Kotler, 2003). For this case, undergoing a major surgery requires strong physical and mental health, as well as encouragement. Research conducted by Nuntaya Kongprapun (2016) with transwomen noted quality of life to be important factors related to gender reassignment. Transwomen focused on four areas of quality of life: 1) Physical Conditions: they would be physically weak due to a lack of exercise and rest as well as long-term hormone treatments, 2) Mental Conditions: they would feel disappointed and worry about their family and profession, and face both health and personal problems, 3) Social Relationships: they would not be accepted or given the same opportunities by society and could not be themselves and 4) Environment: they would face economic hardship and live in poor conditions. Their family would not accept them as a transgender. These research results can be applied in the analysis of the links between social contexts and gender reassignment surgery, particularly the physical and mental health issues transgender persons face and their inability to receive gender reassignment surgery.

These above concepts and related research have been applied in the assessment and analysis of service buying decision processes. This study builds on the previous research to investigate the communication factors influencing transgender persons' decision to utilize gender reassignment surgical services in Thailand.

Research Methodology

The methodology consists of two parts: 1) Quantitative research and 2) Qualitative research. Each method is explained in detail as follows:

The quantitative approach employed a survey research method in which a close-ended questionnaire was distributed through a website, http://www.cmcgrst.com, to enable online data collection. The questionnaire was also distributed as a hard copy among transwomen and transmen interested in gender reassignment surgery, both Thai and foreign. An initial sample of 400 participants was targeted, with a total of 530 respondents submitting questionnaires.

The qualitative approach employed a semi-structured in-depth interview format with the design of open-ended questions. The sample included 20 transgender persons interested in gender reassignment surgery for transwomen and transmen, both Thai and foreign. Finally, 16 transwomen and four transmen from Thailand, Japan, the U.S.A. and Spain participated in the research.

For the data analysis, the coding in the quantitative part was uploaded to the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) program to acquire statistical results, such as frequency distribution and percentage. The recordings of the in-depth interviews were first transcribed and then checked. The qualitative research findings were then inserted with the quantitative research findings under the same topic headings. The results were next written as a descriptive report after which they were summarized, analyzed, and discussed based on the related concepts and research objective.

Results and Discussion

Results provided insights into the decision making for the transgender community considering undergo the surgery in Thailand. Specifically, we noted that the evaluation of alternatives is the third phase in the service buying decision process during which service users apply the following factors: 1) the skill of surgeons, 2) service fees and 3) supplementary service quality respectively. It should be noted that during the information gathering process, information about physicians and surgeons is less available to service users due to restrictions on advertising while it remains the most important information in their evaluation of alternatives and decision making. Factors affecting service users' evaluation of alternatives to decide on whether to undergo gender reassignment can be analyzed using the concept of Good, Cheap, Fast, but You Can Pick Only Two by Kapil Jekishan (2017). The three factors considered while evaluating service are: 1) quality, 2) price and 3) speed, but a customer can only choose two of these. Therefore, quality and efficiency of surgical service are the most significant concerns of a potential service user rather than costs and surgical procedures.

When a potential service user is considering gender reassignment surgery and health services, if money is not a concern, they will choose to receive services from the most famous and skilled surgeon, even if the cost of surgery is higher. Supplementary services are another influential factor that will build a positive impression. If the service user has a limited budget, they will first consider price and then choose a physician, or surgeon, with the best reputation and skill they can afford. Thus, if the service user has substantial capital, they will select a private sanatorium where the charges will be high. If their capital is limited, they will choose a government sanatorium, where the waiting queue can be quite long as is presented in figure 2.
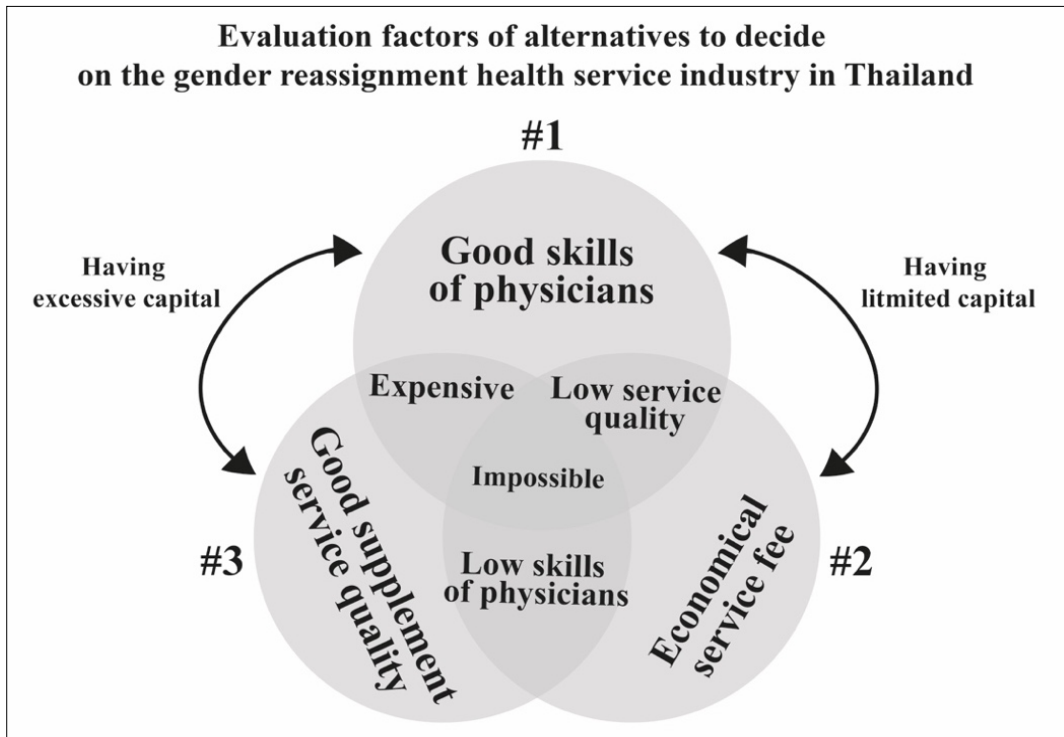
Figure 2: Evaluation factors of alternatives to decide on
the gender reassignment health service industry in Thailand

Decision making to undergo surgery is the fourth stage in the service buying decision process. Service users who participated in this research and who had already undergone gender reassignment surgery in Thailand made up the largest group of participants, followed by those who had decided to have the surgery in Thailand, after which came those still uncertain and, finally, those who decided not to have the surgery in Thailand. The percentages are presented in Figure 3.
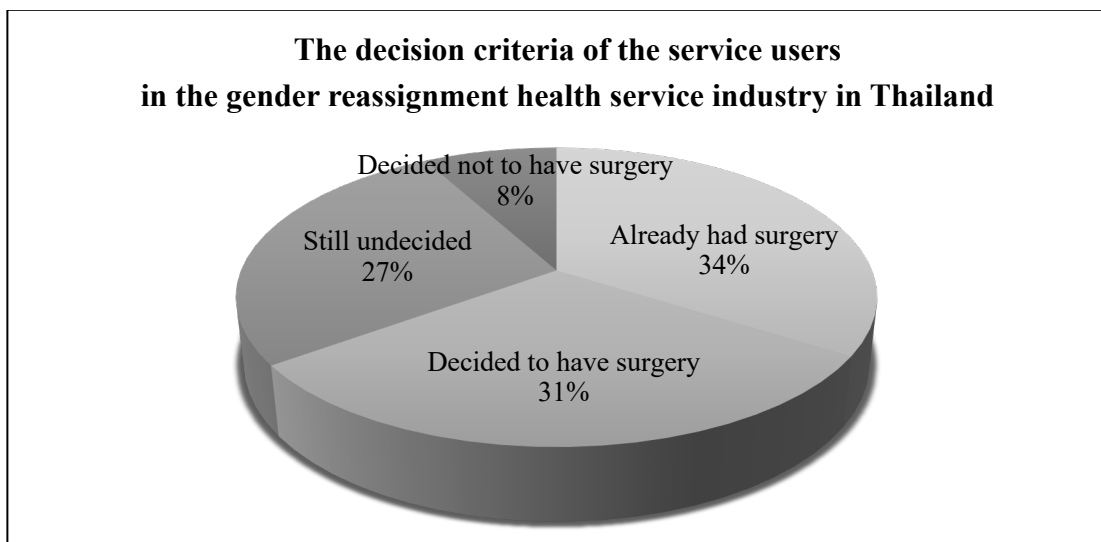

Figure 3: The decision criteria of the service users in the gender reassignment health service industry in Thailand

The first reasons why service users will choose to undergo gender reassignment surgery in Thailand is that Thailand has expert physicians and surgeons as well as modern medical equipment and instruments; second is that the costs for the surgery and health services in Thailand are economical and third is that Thailand is a convenient location to visit, which is in agreement with the research of Jitlada Maneerat (2010) who found that Thailand's image includes its high potential for medical tourism. The cost of cosmetic surgery is also much more reasonable in Thailand when compared to countries in the West. Furthermore, it is convenient to travel to and from Thailand, and the country has advanced medical equipment and technology.

On the other hand, the first reason that causes service users to feel uncertain about undergoing gender reassignment procedures in Thailand is insufficient capital. This is in agreement with the research of Piyaluk Potiwan (2011), who found that the roots of problems faced by transgender persons are economic and social. There is a tendency to encounter class division, similar to discrimination, between those who can undergo gender reassignment and those who are unable to.

The next influential factor is that individuals feel there is insufficient information to make a decision. Jitlada Maneerat (2010) similarly found that the Medical Code of Ethics of the Thai Medical Council set limits on advertising, which did not allow physicians or sanatoriums to advertise their services. The third reason is health limitations, which are in agreement with the research of Nuntaya Kongpraphun (2016), who found that transwomen face problems in their quality of life as they suffer from chronic illness or are weak physically due to hard work or long-term hormone treatments.

This research notably revealed that when a service user does decide to undergo surgery with a specific surgeon, they will make an appointment to consult them and plan their surgery at a sanatorium. Others associated with a service user's decision making include physicians, family members, partners, and close transgender friends, with physicians being the most influential. Philip Kotler (2003) also notes the above-mentioned factors when considering: 1) social factors, in this case surgery, based on the opinions and agreement of family members, a partner and friends of the service user and 2) anticipated situation factors, i.e., the requirement of physical strength and good health to undergo gender reassignment surgery as the most important concerns. The selected physician or surgeon will then be responsible for informing the service user of potential risks or side effects that can occur from surgery or treatments. If a surgeon feels the service user is a good candidate for surgery and they are willing to take the risk, there is a high probability the service user will decide to undergo surgery. If the surgeon feels that the surgery is unwise because of serious dangers and refuses to proceed, the service user will feel unable to disregard the physician's opinion, even with family, partner and friends' support for this endeavor. Therefore, the physician does have the greatest influence in such cases.

Conclusion

Since 2002, the Thai government has promoted a policy of making Thailand the health center for Asia (Bureau of Sanatorium and Art of Healing, 2009). The gender reassignment health service industry falls under the medical services business sector of Thailand, and this policy provides opportunities to advance with its potential, particularly with the growing acceptance of transsexuals. The Thai Medical Council also enacted regulations and a code of conduct for such professional transgender medical treatment in 2009 to prepare for future expansion

("Cosmetic surgery grows," 2012). There are several aspects that are further needed to be addressed and clarified in the gender reassignment service communication in order to affirm transgenders' confidence in decision making for undergoing the gender reassignment surgery process in Thailand.

First, to promote the gender reassignment surgical service in Thailand among international transgenders, service providers are recommended to disseminate all comprehensive information, including content that provides medical information and facts as well as information about their sanatorium, physicians and surgeons. Second, when it comes to content concerning physicians and surgeons, it is better to focus more on academic information that service users can access easily to build trust, or faith, in their surgeons, for example, attractive pictures of the results of surgery they conducted with explanations of the techniques employed. Presenting the results of physicians' research would also be highly appreciated and could therefore encourage potential service users' decisions. Third, featuring reasonable prices would reduce concerns about service fees as this would help to build a strong brand image for Thailand as the major destination for gender reassignment surgical services alongside its already well-established national image as a tourist paradise. Finally, not only are transgender persons, those with direct experience and well-known influencers related to gender reassignment surgery, vital for marketing communication, but so too are Thai physicians and surgeons who can best answer questions and therefore build trust.

Acknowledgments

References

Amili, C. (2011). *The Rahfidoh leader APPROVES sex reassignment surgery!*
http://islamic-dialectic.blogspot.com/2011/04/blog-post.html. (In Thai)

Asia Pacific Transgender Network. (2015). *Blueprint for the provision of comprehensive care for trans people and trans communities*. Washington, DC: Futures Group.

Bureau of Sanatorium and Art of Healing. (2009). History of bureau of sanatorium and art of healing. http://mrdhss.moph.go.th/mrd/Contents_History.php (In Thai)

Cosmetic Surgery Grows 300%. Many trans teenagers interested in sex reassignment surgery. (2012, December 12). *Siam Turakij*.
http://www.siamturakij.com/home/news/display_news.php?news_id=413370741 (In Thai)

Jekishan, K. (2017.) *Good, cheap, or fast service –Which two do you pick?* Retrieved from http://kapiljekishan.com/good-cheap-or-fast-service-which-two-do-youpick/

Kongprapan, N. (2016). *A development of quality of life of male to female transgender by acceptance and commitment group therapy* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Burapha University, Chonburi. (In Thai)

Kotler, P. (2003). *Marketing management* (11th ed.). New York: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Maneerat, J. (2010). *A study of the image of plastic surgical services in Thailand: A case Study of foreign tourists in Bangkok* (Unpublished master's thesis). Naresuan University, Phitsanulok. (In Thai)

Poonpiriya, P. (2018). *Angela ponce: First transwoman contestant in miss universe pageant*. https://thestandard.co/angela-ponce-first-transwoman-in-miss-universe/ (In Thai)

Potiwan, P. (2011). *Social movement of the transgender* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen. (In Thai)

Sittinew, G. (n.d.). Sex change surgery, life of a woman in a man's body. *Sarakadee Magazine*. (In Thai)

Thai doctors don't daydream: Thailand can become world-class surgical center. (2013, October 24). *Manager Online*.
http://www.manager.co.th/daily/viewnews.aspx?NewsID=9560000133306. (In Thai)

Thailand becoming a world-class medical center for sex reassignment and breast augmentation surgery. Bangkok Hospital and Yanhee Hospital focus on foreign user market. (2016, September 27). *Prachachart Turakij Online*. May 16, 2018 https://www.prachachat.net/news_detail.php?newsid=147486145 (In Thai)

Thailand: The land of sex reassignment: Yenhee Hospital serves many clients. (2012, April 2). *Prachachart Turakij Online*.
https://www.prachachat.net/news_detail.php?newsid=1333328975 (In Thai)

Thailand, sex reassignment surgery center. (2011, March 10). *Manager Online*.
http://www.manager.co.th/iBizChannel/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9540000030956 (In Thai)

Corresponding author: Puntarika Rawikul, Wichian Lattipongpun
Contact email: p.rawikul@gmail.com, are.hong@gmail.com

the iafor
journal of media, communication & film