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The Psychological Impact of Colour Usage in Bollywood Upon Audience: Studying Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Works

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Abstract

Colour is found to be one of the most important visual experiences to human beings. When people associate colours to objects and spaces, colour symbolism comes into play, resulting in an emotional impact. A space where the two aspects - colour and emotion - come together is cinema. Movies contain emotional backdrop created by the storyline, the characters, and more; combining that with the aesthetic frames presented to the viewers can result in an overall enhancement of the emotional scaffolding created. In Bollywood, the largest sector of Indian cinema, Filmi music – soundtracks produced especially for the motion picture industry - accounts for 72 percent of the music net revenues generated. The Bollywood musical videos are a colorful feast in themselves, which are used generously by directors. One among such is Sanjay Leela Bhansali; a Bollywood director, producer, screenwriter and music director who is known for his huge set designs, cinematography and overall artistic perspective. This study identifies audience's emotional experience caused due to use of colours in specific songs of Sanjay Leela Bhansali movies. The understanding will take place via analysis of the questionnaire created to gauge emotional reception of the audience upon viewing the musical videos. Due to the powerful nature of colours, it can be predicted that they will play an essential role in emotional enhancement and general entertainment of the music videos. Should this study successfully portray the effective colours usage then directors, cinematographers, production designers, film theorists, film students among other can gain further applicable colour understanding. Thus allowing a more conscious and informed use of colours to better the audience connect with the movies' emotions, ultimately enhancing a visual experience for the viewers.

Keywords: Colours, emotion, Bollywood, filmi, Sanjay Leela Bhansali

Introduction

Colour is found to be one of the most important visual experiences to human beings (Adams & Osgood, 1973). Having said this, it plays an integral role in our lives. Piaget proposed that assimilation is one of the basic methods employed during learning wherein children assimilate new information with existing concepts (Ormrod, 2012). Therefore, forming associations comes naturally. Thus, people associate colours to existing things, objects and spaces, known as colour symbolism, resulting in an emotional impact (Kaya & Epps, 2004). A space where the two aspects - colour and emotion - come together is cinema. Movies contain emotional backdrop created by the storyline, characters, actors, music and more; combining that with the aesthetic frames presented to the viewers can

result in an overall enhancement of the emotional scaffolding created (Plantinga, 2009). In Bollywood, the largest sector of Indian cinema, Filmi music – soundtracks produced especially for the motion picture industry – accounts for 72 percent of the music net revenues generated (Film Federation of India, 2017; Pinglay, 2009). The Bollywood musical videos are a colorful feast in themselves, which are used generously by directors. One among such is Sanjay Leela Bhansali: a Bollywood director, producer, screenwriter, and music director known for his huge set designs, cinematography and overall artistic perspective (Puthor, 2013).

Objectives

There is existing literature on colour and emotions (Goethe, 1810; Goldstein, 1942) when effects of differing colours on the psyche were explored. Soon, also came the understanding of audiovisual tools used to engage audience (Bordwell, 1997). However, there remains a dearth of studies highlighting the visual presentation in Bollywood movies and their effects. This study identifies audience's emotional experience caused due to use of colours in specific songs of Sanjay Leela Bhansali movies. The colours referred to here are those created in the *mise en scène* – that is the overall frame consisting of the lighting, costumes, cinematography, etc. (Bordwell & Thompson, 2003). The understanding takes place via analysis of the interview taken to gauge emotional reception of the audience upon viewing the musical videos. The interview was created following guidelines of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis – a qualitative method used to understand how people make sense of their experiences (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009). As viewing of these movies and songs within them are essential affective experiences lived through (Bordwell, 1991), this method was fit for use.

Research Question

What is the psychological impact of colour usage in Bollywood upon audience, specifically with reference to Sanjay Leela Bhansali's works?

Methodology

Design

The study aims to analyse personal, emotional experiences of the participants as they visually observe the chosen music videos. Although, there are common associations to certain colours, the dualistic nature of interpretation is evident when the same colour is seen positively by some and negatively by others (Davey 1998). Ergo, to justify the subjective nature of the participants' experiences, (IPA) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used. IPA can be explained with hermeneutics and is said to be idiographic in nature. 'Hermeneutics' is the sense making aspect while 'idiographic' showcases the study of individuals, with the latter being prevalent in psychological studies. These encompass the essence of this method because it "focuses on experiences that have left an impact on the subject." (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009). The questions were open-ended with presence of only certain prompts to allow the participants to direct the semi-structured interview, as suggested in the guidelines of IPA (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008) Although, a number of follow-up questions were present in order to gain a detailed mapping of participants' visual experiences. Initially, the aim was to create a questionnaire with Likert scales, however, upon research it was found that there is a lack of scales measuring visual experiences in cinema due to use of colour, given its highly specific nature, and it would also cause the results to be more constraining in nature with too directive questions. Therefore, the IPA method was found to be suitable.

Participants

The study was conducted on five participants (two females, three males) of age group 19 to 24 years as a small group is generally advisable in IPA. A larger group could result in a loss of “potentially subtle inflections of meaning” (Collins & Nicolson, 2002). The convenience sampling method was employed and students from a college in Gandhinagar, Gujarat were selected on the basis of availability and willingness to participate.

Procedure

As most Bollywood films tend to last, on an average, a duration of 2 hours to 2.5 hours, Bhansali's movies were no exception to that. Which was why, instead of specific movie clips, the music videos were focused upon - owing to the fact that Filmi music generates the highest revenues in the industry. There is an abundance of musical numbers in Bhansali movies, as he is the music director himself, and unsurprisingly his first directed movie '*Khamoshi: The Musical*' (IMDb, 1996) was a musical. After having listed nine films directed by Bhansali in chronological order of release date, there were far too many songs to test the subject on. Then, one common element was found - most movies had songs with background dancers, as those allowed better comparison of use of colours in the frame. After filtering out, there were 24 songs and seven movies (one movie only contained instrumental pieces and the other had no large group performances. Thus, they were eliminated). Finally, the odd numbered movies were selected (those with numbers one, three, five and seven) and from those only the odd numbered songs were selected (which were arranged in order of appearance in the respected movies). This left a final number of seven songs to be tested, as listed below:

Movies directed by Bhasali	Year of release	Songs with background dancers
<i>Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam</i>	1999	1. <i>Nimbooda Nimbooda</i> (S1) 2. <i>Kaipochhe</i> (S2)
<i>Saawariya</i>	2007	3. <i>Yoon Shabnami</i> (S3)
<i>Goliyon ki Raasleela Ram-Leela</i>	2013	4. <i>Lahu Munh Lag Gaya</i> (S4) 5. <i>Raam Chahe Leela</i> (S5) 6. <i>Nagada Sang Dhol</i> (S6)
<i>Padmaavat</i>	2018	7. <i>Ghoomar</i> (S7)

Figure 1. The final list of songs selected

The initial questions are used to gain an insight into participants' interest in Bollywood cinema, how important, if at all, do they consider the songs in them, what value do they place on the aesthetics of the videos of those songs, and then finally breaking down their reactions with only these questions after each video;

1. Visually, what appealed/stood out to you in the song?
2. What role, if at all, did the colours play in that?
3. What do you suppose were the emotions of the song?
4. Do you think the emotions matched the colours?

There were several follow up questions asked before and after the above stated questions on the basis of the varied responses given by participants. Only the above questions remained constant because they were used as “prompts” (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). As for the analysis, upon concluding the interviews, the first step is to transcribe them. Then, the themes are identified within the given responses; also showcasing any possible commonality between those themes. Post that, themes are accumulated into clusters to create a structure. The final step is making a list or a table containing these themes, along with any evidence backing those themes. These steps are outlined in the IPA methodology (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009).

Literature Review

Colours and Emotions

Colour exploration has been a fascination since long. Given that we first begin to grasp this vast amount of information offered by the world in a visual manner, it is understood that colours would attract attention of researchers. Back in 1810, Goethe explored in his book *Theory of Colours* the effects of colours on psyche. Herein, he first categorized colours and then gauged their emotional response (for example, he found yellow and like combinations of ‘yellow-red’ or ‘red-yellow’ to elicit feelings of ‘warmth and excitement’). Albert Munsell and Wilhelm Ostwald made major contributions to colorimetry, allowing development of Munsell colour system in 1930s (Kaya & Epps, 2004) and Ostwald colour system in 1942, respectively (Jacobson, 1950). (Elliot, 2015) reviewed the effects of individual colours that were studied wherein it was found that each colour was associated with certain emotions such as red being linked to “attraction, domination, anger and aggression” (Elliot and Niesta, 2008; Stephen et al., 2012; Elliot and Maier, 2014; Wiedemann et al., 2015). Interestingly, there were opposing connotations attached to the same colour. For example, red was seen as “active, strong, and passionate, but on the other hand aggressive, bloody, raging and intense” (Davey 1998) or representing love and romance on one hand, while blood and evil on the other (Kaya & Epps, 2004).

The concepts of concrete and abstract were explored, wherein it was found that people use metaphors for sense-making in the social world (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). In this line of thought, anger is metaphorically referred to as “seeing red,” because anger causes the physical reaction of blood rushing to the face and hence reddening. Positive emotions are described using lightness (with the absence of darkness), so, metaphorically; lightness is seen as “good” while darkness as “bad.” (Elliot, 2015; Kaya & Epps, 2004) This is in line with the findings of (Boyatzis & Varghese, 1994), which showed how light colors like yellow and blue are associated with positive emotions such as happiness and strength while dark colors like blacks and grays evoke negative emotions of sadness and anger. In a fairly recent experiment, (Pravossoudovitch et al. 2014) studied if colours affect emotions implicitly. They focused on red, and wanted to observe any associations with danger. In the experiment, participants had to assign words to safety-related or danger-related categories. The findings were such that words signifying danger were categorized quicker when shown in red, in comparison to gray and green. This could be explained evolutionarily, as red may evoke the natural fight or flight response, resulting due to the emotion ‘fear’ (Mentzel et al., 2017).

Colours and Cinema

Having established the connection between colours and emotion, a platform where this link is best displayed should be explored - cinema. The mise en scène is determined

by a conscious choice of set design, props, costumes worn by the primary characters and those by the secondary ones (Chagnolleau, 2013). Filmmakers used to colour film stocks to filter out certain colours, or highlight specific ones using emulsion or dyeing back in movies of 1800s. This method was especially used to maintain a mood for the audience that was associated to that specific colour (Wirth, 2017). An example for this would be *Schindler's List* (IMDb, 1993) wherein all colours were filtered out and only the red of a little girl's coat is highlighted to evoke a sense of impending death that was to come upon the characters soon in the movie (Sampson, 2017). One important breakthrough in history of colour cinema was in 1926 when Technicolor's dye transfer process allowed a costly but relatively less strenuous process of film colouring (Wirth, 2017). Colour is used generously in modern Western cinema with directors such as Wes Anderson, Tim Burton and Stanley Kubrick, to name a few (Barrance; Sampson, 2017).

Colours and Bhansali

It has been established that colour is a tool well used within the Western cinema. Given India's reputation for being "full of colours" as it is usually in reference to the festival of *Holi* wherein colours play a huge role, it is essential to understand how much this tool has been consciously utilized in Indian cinema; specifically in Bollywood, and more so, how much, by Bhansali, for the sake of this study. Focusing first on the history, sound was welcomed in cinema in 1931 by Ardeshir Irani's *Alam Ara*. It stuck with the audience and thus Indian cinema maintains the use of songs and dance. While colours came about in 1950s and became a "permanent fixture" (Puthor, 2013). Indian cinema has a vast history of successes in black and white films (starting in 1913) (mid-day, 2018) and coloured films too (starting in 1950s) (The Tribune, 2006). However, the conscious usage of colours to establish a certain tone or mood would be the ideal criteria to look into.

Taking Bhansali's works into consideration, it is evident that he dabbled in the use of colours since the beginning of his career as is seen in his second film *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (IMDb, 1999) wherein the female protagonist's character is shown to be carefree and cheerful, as is reflected in her attire with shades of bright blue (especially in the song *Nimbooda Nimbooda* (S1)), yellow and pink. However, as the movie progresses, and the character is bound in a forceful marriage, her clothing switches to "monochromatic shades of whites, blacks and reds," making a shift from a bright to a dull frame (Puthor, 2013). Bhansali also uses colours ironically as seen in two of his works *Devdas* (IMDb, 2002) and *Goliyon ki Raasleela Ram-Leela* (IMDb, 2013) when he dresses the prostitute characters in bridal colours of red, green and gold (Puthor, 2013) throughout the movie in the former and in completely white in latter. In the first case the prostitute is aware that her profession is her only form of bond (much like a marriage is a bond) and she may never get to marry someone. While in the latter, the irony lurks behind the association of 'purity, innocence and hope' that white is associated with (Kaya & Epps, 2004), which the character does not exhibit. Bhansali's progression of colour understanding will be broken down and analyzed in the discussion section of the paper.

Findings

Songs	Interpretations of participants
S1	<p>P1 -Lead stood out; her bright outfit contrasts against dull, pastel background -Bright blue enhanced the festival feel.</p> <p>P2 -Pastels of the background dancers (subtle, don't stand out much)</p>

Songs	Interpretations of participants
	<p>-Lead's blue was in-line with colour palette but still stood out</p> <p>-Celebration conveyed well by the colours</p> <p>P3 -She stood out from other dancers; her outfit was brighter compared to rest</p> <p>P4 -Royal clothing, the family looked rich because there was a lot of gold on edges</p> <p>P5 -Set designing & background dancers were coordinated, the 'light' feel of the song went with the colours</p>
S2	<p>P1 -No one colour stood out on purpose; because no one is central, only festival is focus. Showed in 1st song that he can draw attention with colour, purposefully chose not to do so in 2nd song.</p> <p>P2 -It was outdoor so no artificial lights, but no single colour was in focus; all mellow</p> <p>-Matched fervor of festival and weather</p> <p>-Colours didn't do much, more of acting</p> <p>-Visually I didn't notice much with regards to colour in 2nd song, more in the 1st: more pleasing</p> <p>P3 -Nothing stood out in particular; the song felt stretched. The 1st song was pleasing to look at</p> <p>P4 -Random colours, probably on purpose to keep focus on kite-flying festival</p> <p>P5 -There was attention everywhere, not on one specific thing; mostly sky with kites was focus</p>
S3	<p>P1 -Dreamy feel (faded background)</p> <p>-Song at night, thus colours like white, blue used</p> <p>-Red only in leads' outfits for focus. Overall, set was more coordinated than last film</p> <p>P2 -Pretty & picturesque because very coordinated colours</p> <p>-Main characters stand out (red & black), rest is in whites & blues (because night & <i>Eid</i> festival)</p> <p>P3 -The contrast of white against blue was very pretty, the set was pleasing, the colours were matching the lighting; synchronized</p> <p>-Song was about wooing and admiration, colours matched the time and occasion(<i>Eid</i>)</p> <p>P4 -I am not sure why the leads were in red but it made them stand out against the rest</p> <p>P5 -The whites of the extras were like the moon and they were singing about the moon because of <i>Eid</i></p>
S4	<p>P1 -One color palette in background because <i>Holi</i> festival</p> <p>-Female shown in red to increase attraction; ripeness</p> <p>-They specifically play with dark pink/red to show love, passion</p> <p>P2 -<i>Holi</i>, festival of colours, so colours were used as prop and to portray emotion</p> <p>-The red was used to play with (by the leads), to seduce each other</p> <p>P3 -Seductive, lustful song, so the red adds to it, there was a pattern with colours, the setting was realistically shown with the lighting</p> <p>P4 -Quite a sultry song, even the lyrics hinted at that (blood; red; seduction)</p>

Songs	Interpretations of participants
	P5 -There were colours in the background throughout, gave a hazy feel, which is how it is evident that it's during <i>Holi</i>
S5	<p>P1 -Background dancers & set design in cyan shades to show consistency -Female dancer (prostitute) in white: irony</p> <p>P2 -Setting was evident (brothel) due to bright pinks & greens -Dancer's colours were in contrast</p> <p>P3 -Set felt cluttered, too many colours, maybe because it's a brothel, -Soothing costume which was in contrast with background, I find plain colours seductive which female was supposed to be</p> <p>P4 -I did not like that she was wearing white, black would have been more seducing</p> <p>P5 -The background was very bright, seemed suitable to a brothel</p>
S6	<p>P1 -Red & white; festival colours -Gold on set & some dresses; affluence, power; - In 4&6, same female lead had red; her color. More evident, conscious use of colours</p> <p>P2 -Set is celebratory, but on dark side (even the sky); black & red show seriousness of situation, gave a tense vibe</p> <p>P3 -Evident festive mood, light augmented beauty of set, made the female & male lead stand out with slightly different colours (more evident for male here); costumes were red & white; general caste color palette (cultural element)</p> <p>P4 -There was too much red & white, not sure why, probably showing the general Indian festival colours</p> <p>P5 -Everything matched, except the male lead's blue coat, probably done on purpose</p>
S7	<p>P1 -Something's off about the colours, less saturated, subdued colours; different era feel; something new</p> <p>P2 -Colour were subtle, toned down, camouflaged with set, colours didn't show festivity -Sky seemed gloomy, like some impending doom; it was the tone of the entire film</p> <p>P3 -Set was nice, but all colours were merging & matching too much, I'd rather they stand out; looks royal</p> <p>P4 -There were colours of same nuances, maybe because the movie was gloomy, gave an unsettling feeling; muted colours</p> <p>P5 -There was not much focus on clothes, all were dressed similarly; jewellery-richness</p>
Total	<p>P1 -Grand works that speak volumes -Colour understanding gradually increased</p> <p>P2 -He knows how to make a character stand out; the palettes seem consciously chosen</p> <p>P3 -He uses space well; not just the beauty, fills space well; even authentic outfits that go with the actual culture</p> <p>P4 -I like his visual understanding, but maybe he can be more subtle and less in-</p>

Songs	Interpretations of participants
	the-face P5 -He has visibly improved in his frame setting, but has recently made similar movies, so it's confusing to differentiate

Figure 2. Master list of themes that emerged in all five participants' interpretations.

Discussion

The master list showcased above in Figure 2 was created as per the IPA method, and those will be broken down and analyzed herein. The common element in **S1** is the contrasting effect used by Bhansali. The video contains pastel shades in the background with the female protagonist in a relatively brighter shade of blue, drawing attention to her. One interesting observation stood out by (**P5**) as he drew parallels between the lightness of the colour and the feeling of lightness, "light feel of the song went with the colours." This was pertaining to the theory of metaphorical representations (Boyatzis & Varghese, 1994). There was a visual congruency Bhansali created by keeping all colours in the same palette but only making a few stand out.

(**S2**) from the same movie *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (IMDb, 1999) had a less warm reception. At first, participants compared it to the first song and felt there was no focus on one particular thing and there were too many colours thrown at the viewer ("No one colour stood out," (**P1**) "random colours," (**P4**)). However, while answering, some eventually claimed that it was a conscious choice to not have any one person centralized, instead the entire festival of kite flying, *Uttarayan*, was shown to be enjoyed ("No one colour stood out because festival is in focus" (**P1**)). These portray that having too many colours can allow the eye to be drawn to no single point, instead to study the frame all over. When drawing comparison between (**S1**) and (**S2**), people preferred the first song for a few reasons - one being that (**S2**) was quite lengthy in comparison, (**S2**) also had too many elements and the (**S1**) was found to be visually more pleasant ("The 1st song was pleasing to look at" (**P2**)).

(**S3**) was a song from *Saawariya* (2007), the movie for which the entire set was created in the shades of blue. The song specifically talks about the wait for moon rise as it is the auspicious occasion of *Eid* wherein after seeing the moon celebrations ensue. Going with theme of the occasion and time of the day, the colour palette is in blues, white and a hint of green. As observed by most participants ((**P3**) "white against blue was very pretty", (**P1**) "there is white for moon") the white adorned by the background dancers was a stark contrast against the dark blue of the set, symbolizing the night sky. It was also noticed that out of the many people present in the video (all wearing shades of blue and white) only the leads were in shades of red and black, ensuring they do not get lost in the crowd ("Only red in leads' outfits for focus" (**P1**)). Interestingly, the colour green was not noticed by participants but was present in the background in the form of lights, almost blending with the blue, which was in-line with the (Kaya & Epps, 2004) study claiming "among the intermediate hues, blue-green elicited the highest number of positive responses." The combination was meant to be congruent with the auspicious occasion.

(**S4**) song was also set during a festival, but in this case it was the festival of colours, *Holi*. There was a faded consistency created in the background with similar colour palette (combining only pinks, reds and hints of blue). It shall be noted that there are no dominant colours in *Holi*, it is played with all available colours, but Bhansali tapped into a few. The two songs (**S4** and **S6**) from this movie containing the same pair of leads, showed the female in red ("Female shown in red" (**P1**)) and the male lead in blue ("male lead's blue

coat” (P5)) perhaps associating the colours with those characters, so that the viewer is conditioned to easily spot the characters on screen when they see red and blue. Most participants observed that the leads were shown playing with a dark pink/red shade of colour, which signified “love,” “passion,” “attraction,” “seduction,” and “lustful.” (P1, P2, P3, P4))

The setting of (S5) was in a brothel where the male lead has come to watch a prostitute perform. Herein, most participants noticed the irony of dressing the lead dancer in white as that is generally associated with “purity,” “innocence” and “hope” (Kaya & Epps, 2004) unlike the characteristics of the prostitute as observed by the participants (“Female dancer was in white which was ironic” (P1)). What stood out was the differing interpretation with colour white; while (P3) claimed that plain colours represents seduction for her and the white showed that for the female dancer, on the other hand (P4) felt that black would have represented her character better as opposed to white (“black would have been more seducing.”)

In (S6) participants faced an immediate visual change because the earlier songs (S4, S5, S6) all contained vivid colours, while this one had a washed out feel to it. The cinematographer, Sudeep Chatterjee, of this film, *Padmaavat* (2018), revealed in an interview that the entire movie was so dramatic in itself that they felt the need to purposefully use “muted colours” (Ramnath, 2018). This was noticed by the participants too as they claimed that “something was off,” (P1), “colours were toned down,” (P2) and “everything was merging and matching too much,” (P3)).

Overall, the participants noticed a visibly evident enhancement in the colour usage to create contrast, synchronization, balance and mood. As this study attempts to explore a less known area, the findings can be used by directors, cinematographers, production designers, film theorists, film students among others to gain further applicable colour understanding. This will allow a more conscious and informed use of colours to better the audience connect with the emotions of movies, ultimately enhancing a visual experience for the viewers.

Limitations

This study was conducted in a University in Gujarat, India, with participants between the age group of 19 to 24 years. This shows that the study is limited in representing the general population as the study is very specific to urban, college going students who are of upper-middle class. However, it should be noted that IPA is generally conducted in smaller groups, thus participant choice would not allow representation of much of the population.

Recommendations

This study, although covers a specific area not much explored, could be better conducted by selecting participants, albeit few, from a wider range of locations to ensure better generalization. Despite IPA being conducted with fewer people, if a relatively higher number of participants is selected, such as ten, then a vast age group can be covered.

Conclusion

Colours are powerful tools that can have high psychological impact if used wisely. The past studies linking emotions and colours prove how humans are visually drawn to things in life. Having conducted this study upon the works of Sanjay Leela Bhansali, the findings make it evident that the visuals of mise en scène are more than whims and fancies, because they have conscious thought behind their usage.

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