



Marketing Strategies in Lokesh Kanagaraj's Films: An Analysis of Master, Leo, and Coolie

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Abstract: This paper sets out to test whether a director's branding or auteur status builds audience trust, and to what extent casting decisions built around stardom shape how audiences consume a film. Master represents how two star-figures enable inciting other audiences. Leo represents how tactics of ambiguity produce profitable chaos in the minds of the audience which in turn leads to unforced promotions. Coolie represents how the director could maintain the trust of the audience by focusing on all that is expected by the viewers. Drawing on a qualitative, observation-based approach conducted over an extended period, the study reads these three blockbusters as a connected case for tracing how Kanagaraj's marketing has evolved.

Keywords: Star theory; Ambiguity marketing; Participatory culture; Prosumers; Pan-Indian cinema; Trust-based marketing; Tamil cinema marketing

1. Introduction

Between 2019 and 2025, Lokesh Kanagaraj emerged as one of the most influential figures reshaping how Tamil films are marketed and consumed. In Master, 2021, two leading actors, whose fandom is immense, are casted. Leo, 2023 is promoted among the audience with another speculation that the film is influenced by Lokesh Cinematic Universe (LCU) while it is not. Coolie, 2025 is examined to justify how he uses prominent stardom from other film industries to make it a pan-Indian film.

To interrogate these shifts in Tamil film marketing, this study adopts a longitudinal, observation-based qualitative approach. Master, Leo, and Coolie form the core filmography examined, with each title tracing a distinct turn in Kanagaraj's promotional strategy. Master represents how two star-figures enable inciting other audiences. Leo represents how tactics of ambiguity produce profitable chaos in the minds of the audience which in turn leads to unforced promotions. Coolie represents how the director could maintain the trust of the audience by focusing on all that is expected by the viewers.

Master is one of the complex plots where both the hero and villain were given equal power. This type of balancing the importance between two talented actors with stardom. Leo is marketed through anticipation that this might fall under “LCU”, while the film is not extravagant through its plot, various minute details in the cinematography and the casting gained the support of the audience. In Coolie, the marketing strategies plummeted a little because of the trust-based anticipation among the viewers. These three consecutive films are studied and observed to find how each film's narrative or theme or scene functions as strategy for marketing.

Star theory (or star phenomenon) was proposed by Richard Dyer in 1979 in his influential book, Stars. According to Richard Dyer (1979) in films and media studies, stars are created for financial gain, marketed to audiences to sell movies, music, and merchandise. These people are constructed identities that are marked as influential products who are chosen and consumed by the community. Lokesh Kanagaraj in his consecutive films casts kinds of leading and talented actors who are remarked as stars. In Master, Vijay and Vijay Sethupathi, in Leo Vijay and Sanjay Dutt and Arjun Sarja and in Coolie, Rajini and Nagarjuna. This casting promotes the films without greater



effort. Also the compatibility between the star-actors are examined keenly and meticulously by the director, Lokesh Kanagaraj.

2. Research Problem

At issue in this study is whether a director's own brand or auteur reputation genuinely earns audience trust, and, alongside that, whether casting choices anchored in stardom translate into higher audience consumption.

3. Research Objectives

The primary objectives of the study are:

1. To trace how Tamil cinema's marketing practices have structurally shifted over recent years.
2. To examine how casting of stardom promotes film distribution.
3. To assess the range of strategies Lokesh Kanagaraj deploys to draw audiences toward consuming his films.

4. Literature Review

Allora R Lee (2020) in her work, "Stars as Categories: A look into Richard Dyer's star theory through pop icon Lady Gaga", explains the social phenomenon of "star-system" and how audiences get influenced by the so-called stars in the film industry. According to Lee (2020), "music icons are used as tools to create music" or popular content, like how "film actors are used as tools to produce movies" (p.12). Lady Gaga is a social phenomenon whose fandom is obsessed over her and "consumes what she produces" (Lee, 2020, p.21) and a bridge between parasocial relationships as those with fame and fortune and those without it (Lee, 2020). This idea is comparable to Lokesh Kanagaraj's intellectual act of casting talented renowned actors called "stars". Lee (2020) says that a star is a form of advertising used for the public consumption of products. Similarly, in the movies of Lokesh Kanagaraj, the leading actors who are stars such as Rajinikanth, Vijay, Nagarjuna and Vijay Sethupathi easily become a brand or label used for the public consumption of the film productions. Also, the casts are selected in a scrupulous manner so that they work well onscreen. When the combinations of these actors come together in movie theatres, the fans and audiences celebrate the harmony of these characters. Also, it is proved that Kanagaraj uses this accreditation of star power so that promotional campaigns are relatively easier. Also, unforced promotions take place at a higher level because of the fact that the fans will celebrate and recognise their favourite actors on screen.

Lee's article demonstrates the reach of Star theory across various strands of movie marketing, yet none of the existing scholarship turns this lens toward Lokesh Kanagaraj or reads his promotional choices through it. This gap is what the present study addresses, unpacking Kanagaraj's films through the very framework the literature has left untouched in his case.

5. Theoretical Framework

Star theory by Richard Dyer emphasises that some celebrities with a huge fandom are not just mere individuals but influencing brands or constructed images or idols who are manufactured by media institutions for any promotional gain. According to Dyer (1979), "Stars" (p.17) are something created by the filmmakers and the audience through casting and consumption respectively. Stars are the phenomenon of production, being constructed by the institutions of the film industry made through casting, marketing and publicity. These stars in turn attract the audience for more economical profit and they behave as the tools of capitalism. They are monopolistic in nature (Dyer, 1979).

"Stars were a guarantee, or a promise, against loss on investment and even of profit on it" and "stars were a major portion of a film's budget" (Dyer, 1979, p.11). Hence, these "stars were used to sell films" so that they could stabilise advertising techniques (Dyer, 1979, p.11).



This proves that stardom emerges through the interaction of industrial production and audience consumption while film industries construct stars as economic assets and market stabilizers. Through the audience's identification of their stars and investing emotionally as a fandom collectively, stars are cultural commodities who promote their film products.

In Master, Vijay and Vijay Sethupathi are cast to create anticipation in the minds of the audience. This in itself has become a remarkable advertisement. In Coolie, Rajinikanth, Nagarjuna, Amir Khan, Uppendra and Shoubin were cast to attract audiences from all four languages of South India and from North India. This helped the movie to become a pan-Indian movie. This consistent act of Lokesh Kanagaraj in casting specific “stars” has in itself enabled marketing and promotional distributions. “The success of stardom and stars has been attributed to the manipulation of the marketing” (Dyer, 1979, p.12). This shows how publicity practices shape consumer desire and normalize specific ideals of identity, beauty, and success. Stardom thus operates not merely as market persuasion but as an emotional investment from the film consumers.

Lokesh Kanagaraj not only represents himself as a promotional tool that looks like branding. He also casts talented actors who already hold an honoured status among the public. These celebrities are generally called stars who also act as promotional tools despite the director being bad or unworthy. According to Dyer (1979) in his book Stars states that “Stars are a remarkable social phenomenon” (p.7). “Stars have a privileged position in the definition of social roles and types” (Dyer, 1979, p.8) and these star figures have “real consequences in terms of how people believe” them (Dyer, 1979, p.8). In Kanagaraj's movies, the gist of information that the viewers get from the teasers or title announcements is that these films are of the renowned talented director Lokesh Kanagaraj and that these films are enacted by the star-figures such as Vijay, Rajinikanth and so on. One of the possible advantages for casting talented star-figures is that the film could be made attractive by intertextualising or incorporating other popular, celebrated movie scenes of the respective stars.

6. Research Methodology

This study relies on a qualitative research design, tracing the three blockbusters of Lokesh Kanagaraj through sustained, longitudinal observation. A qualitative lens suits this inquiry precisely because it can capture the texture of audience emotion and reaction to specific promotional moves in ways that quantitative measures, confined to numerical patterns, are not equipped to do.

Primary data for this study is drawn from the three Kanagaraj films released between 2021 and 2025, each viewed on its respective OTT platform and studied for narrative construction, cinematographic choices, and moments of nostalgic scoring, among other markers. Alongside the films themselves, the director's own interviews across platforms such as YouTube are examined to surface the promotional tactics he consciously employs, and the official release materials — first-look posters, teaser trailers, and single-track promos — are read as deliberate marketing artefacts in their own right. Secondary data centres on how influencers generate and circulate content around these films, with influencer posts across social platforms serving as a gauge of engagement patterns. Box-office figures reported on trade sites such as IMDb and Sacnilk are cross-checked for comparative purposes, and hashtag activity on X (formerly Twitter), Threads, and Instagram is tracked as a further indicator of audience reach.

Master is observed to analyse how the film balances leading roles for two star-figures. For the film Leo, 2023, the marketing strategies were built on creating ambiguity among the public for the inclusion of “LCU”. Coolie, 2025 and its selection of casts are explored to see how promotional initiatives can create a pan-Indian movie.



7. Findings and Discussion

7.1 Star Power in Master

In Master, even the title card of the film reveals that there are two prominent colours blue and red that clash with each other. Throughout the entire film, the protagonist Vijay is shown through the shadows of blue and the antagonist Vijay Sethupathi is shown in red shade (Livin Edits, 2024).

In Master, the protagonist Vijay fights against the antagonist Vijay Sethupathi who is the head of drug trafficking. The song titled “Master the blaster”(SonyMusicSouthVEVO, 2022) by Anirudh Ravichandher reflects Kanagaraj's choice of inserting songs in English.

In Master, the casting of Vijay and Vijay Sethupathi was heavily anticipated by the audience to acknowledge how the plot reveals (Sony Music South, 2021). Dyer states that Hollywood production is a capitalist production (1979). Like any other products sold, a produced film is sold to the audience. In the economy of Hollywood, the stars play the vital “role in the manipulation of the audience” (Dyer, 1979, p. 10) which is the Hollywood's market. Dyer (1979) substantiates that any star in a movie holds some intrinsic value in terms of profit either to the film they acted in or to themselves.

7.2 Ambiguity and Speculation in Leo

Leo is similar to Vikram, where the lighting is different in the front and the backgrounds. While the background is dark and black, the front view is mostly in dull yellowish brown which was highlighted using mocobot shots. In Leo, the most prominent camera angles were given through glambot cameras. The mocobot shots enhanced the cinematography in an extraordinary manner (Galatta Plus, 2023). These diverse camera angles prove how Kanagaraj's cinematography can pull the audience into consumption (V2K (Tamil) Photography, 2023).

For instance, fans created memes in social media sites and speculative videos that check whether a film is in the cinematic universe or not. Through these speculative videos and the act of decoding, the audience feels smart when they clear the chaos. This effectively outsources the promotional works from the content creations of the fandom. Hence, the desperate need to pay for promotions are avoided.

In recurring patterns in Leo, the protagonist flees from his own family who are gangsters dealing with tobacco culture. In Leo, the song titled “Karu Karu Karupayi” from Eazhaiyin Sirippil is played when the protagonist fights the person who tries to abuse a woman (Think Tapes, 2023). In Leo and Coolie, the respective English songs, “Ordinary person”(SonyMusicSouthVEVO, 2023) and “I am the danger” (Sun TV, 2025) shows how Kanagaraj is consistent in his style.

7.3 Pan-Indian Casting and Trust in Coolie

Similarly in Coolie, stars from across India are cast. Rajinikanth from Tamil cinema (or Kollywood), Nagarjuna from Telugu cinema (or Tollywood), Uppendra from Kannada cinema, Shoubin from Malayalam cinema (or Mollywood) and as a cameo, Amir Khan from Hindi cinema (or Bollywood) are cast. These star-figures are meticulously assigned a precise role and the narration is moved without disturbances. These techniques of casting handled by Kanagaraj shows how important is the usage of talented famous actors who act as marketing tools for the film promotions.

After this, Kanagaraj repeated his technique again to make a hero introduction for Coolie, 2025 where Rajinikanth's nostalgic journey is captured through computer generations. These moments are worth watching for the fandom communities who celebrate their stars.

In Coolie, the song titled “Loyola College” from Kalluri Vaasal is played when the protagonist fights his enemies. These contrasts where the featured retro songs overlay within the brutal action scenes create peculiar reactions



among the audience. What underlies this technique is nostalgia marketing, a strategy built around evoking a past-oriented experience for the consumer. As Verónica et al. (2022) put it, this approach — often labelled retro marketing — rests on the idea of “tak[ing] advantage of the past in selling products or services” (p.115), and Kanagaraj's use of an old film song at a moment of high tension is a clear instance of that principle at work.

7.4 Audience Engagement and Participatory Culture

One more unique thing that Kanagaraj does with the star-figures is his depiction of the leading actors' title card. This is not just a nominal card but could be called a ‘title glimpse’. In *Leo*, the title glimpse covers the leading actor Vijay's special journey through edits. These are like teasers just to announce the movie's name or an actor's introduction. This was the first step of innovation that Kanagaraj did. After this became a huge success, many other directors used this method for star-figures so that the audience would come to theatres to celebrate the moment. Kanagaraj's innovative hero introduction in *Leo*, 2023 became an antecedent when in *The Greatest of all Time*, 2024 and in *Good Bad Ugly*, 2025, similar kinds of title glimpse were given to the stars Vijay and Ajith Kumar respectively. Dyer (1979) remarks that a star figure is a “nationally-advertised trademark” (p.13) and also he emphasises that the star system is a “pure manipulation” (p.13). This notion proves that the audience are easily manipulated or attracted to consume the film production willingly.

The 1-minute video introduction of Vijay in *Leo* where Vijay's eye is shown in various frames (Pedigree Yeet, 2023) is inspired from Marvel's introduction (Kailash R, 2014). This Marvel themed title glimpse portray how Kanagaraj's adaptation outshines the original and the antecedent.

Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, X (formerly called Twitter), and Threads aid in the production of millions of content creations. After the emergence and growth of social media, the film distributors and promoters do not spend a huge sum of money on advertisements. Instead, the support of social media influencers or film decoders who create theory videos can lead to unforced promotions. Even theorists participate in social media by decoding the cinematographic details (V2K (Tamil) Photography, 2022). It is evident that more than abstract promotional campaigns, these types of videos gain potential viewers who are turned consumers of the film. This act is called “participatory culture”. Henry Jenkins (2009) in the book, *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*, defines participatory culture as something that enables easier artistic expression and civic engagement than in the older times. It is an act of sharing information “by the most experienced” to the novices through creations (p.6). Hence, when social media is involved, people are enthusiastic to share their experienced information to a greater public. This, in turn, provides promotional advantages to the film distribution. Therefore, it is evident that participatory culture directly leads to marketing actions.

Value creation begins at the point where consumers become aware of a film and try to make sense of the messages they are receiving from the filmmakers, film marketers that are mediated by the press and other film consumers. The process ends somewhere after consumption when the consumer makes sense of their experience and draws on this experience to consume the film again, to recommend to others or to move on to a related film. (Kerrigan, 2017, p.8)

This defines how the audience awaits filmmakers and distributors for the news of film releases and that significantly this process ends when the experienced public recommend the film to those who did not consume. This is similar to the films of Lokesh Kanagaraj because the awakened community consumes the movie and with their knowledge, they post vlogs or post decoded videos so that the remaining public get a promotional awareness. Participatory Culture explains how the fandom becomes the true promoters without expecting anything in return. In the era of mass media, the audiences are just spectators who consume the film. After the rise of social media, these spectators are not just consumers but have become prosumers. “Consumers are typically end-users who purchase” products or services whereas “prosumers are more than just customers” who actively participate in



“marketing and distribution” (Golley Slater, 2025). This proves that through participatory culture, the chosen public have become prosumers and then these prosumers aid in film distribution and film promotions.

8. Limitations of the Study

Because this study reads Kanagaraj's marketing strategies for Master, Leo, and Coolie through information sourced online, its conclusions carry an unavoidable layer of interpretation, and with that comes a degree of subjectivity that a purely quantitative measure would not face. The scope is also confined to digital promotional activity; campaigns run through traditional mass media are far harder to trace and document, so the study leans on the marketing that unfolds through technological and digital channels instead. This narrower focus leaves room for future work to take up the traditional-media side of Kanagaraj's promotional practice. Even with these constraints, the approach taken here still yields a coherent and thorough account of how Lokesh Kanagaraj markets his films.

9. Conclusion

This study set out to test whether auteurship builds audience trust and whether casting built on stardom deepens audience consumption. Reading Master, Leo, and Coolie through Star theory, supported by the smaller frameworks of Participatory Culture and Nostalgia Marketing, the analysis shows that Kanagaraj has, over these three films, remade himself from a filmmaker into something closer to a marketable brand — a shift that has left its mark on how Tamil cinema is now promoted.

Furthermore, the strategic casting of established star figures amplifies this trust. From Dyer's Star Theory, the research shows how actors such as Vijay and Rajinikanth operate as symbolic commodities whose presence guarantees anticipation of the audience and box office success. Kanagaraj combines auteurship with stardom to create a dual marketing force, where both director and stars function as promotional tools. This synergy strengthens distribution outcomes and reinforces audience consumption, directly addressing the second research objective.

This aligns with the concept of participatory culture in which audiences evolve from passive spectators into active prosumers who decode narratives and create content through reasoning. These practices effectively outsource marketing to fandom communities, reducing promotional costs while increasing organic visibility.

Taken together, these findings point to Kanagaraj as the face of a newer model of Tamil cinema marketing, one in which star-driven casting and the fandom's own participatory energy work in tandem to drive consumption. In occupying the dual position of creator and commodity, he reshapes what a director's role can mean within today's film economy, showing that auteurship, handled deliberately, can itself become a durable strategy for building trust, sustaining engagement, and securing commercial returns.

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