

# “Aarum Kothichu Pokum”: Stardom, Androgyny, and the Gendered Spectacle in Indian Celebrity Culture

Gouri Gopan and Saraswathy Selvarajan\*

Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, Tamil Nadu 632014, India

(\*Corresponding author's e-mail: [saraswathy.s@vit.ac.in](mailto:saraswathy.s@vit.ac.in))

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## Abstract

This paper addresses a significant gap in South Asian celebrity studies by examining how regional and national male stardom negotiate gender binaries through adorned masculinity in post-liberalization India. While existing scholarship has explored Indian masculinity in cinema, the specific intersection of celebrity culture, gender performativity, and feminized aesthetics across regional-national boundaries remains underexplored. Through comparative visual and textual analysis of media appearances, advertisements, and fashion choices, this study examines Malayalam superstar Mohanlal's strategic deployment of ornamentation within traditional cultural frameworks and Bollywood icon Ranveer Singh's sustained engagement with androgynous fashion practices. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to understand how masculinity is enacted through repeated citations of gender norms, and Richard Dyer's star image framework to analyse how celebrity personas manage cultural contradictions, the study reveals how feminized aesthetics, specifically jewelry, silk fabrics, flamboyant colors, and gestural femininity, are absorbed into masculine performances without undermining star power. This paper addresses a critical gap in Asian celebrity studies by undertaking a close examination of how adornment and feminized aesthetics are differentially adapted within regional and national star structures. The analysis demonstrates that Mohanlal's momentary embrace of ornamentation operates within Kerala's symbolic traditions that protect masculine aura through cultural capital, while Ranveer Singh's continuous flamboyant self-fashioning represents a sustained redefinition of masculine expression within Bollywood's aesthetic economy. Both performances reveal how contemporary Indian masculinity is increasingly stylized and performatively adaptable, expanding acceptable masculine expression while maintaining hegemonic structures. These findings contribute to understanding how celebrity culture mediates evolving gender norms in contemporary India's visual economy.

**Keywords:** Adorned masculinity, Indian celebrity culture, Gender performativity, Androgyny in media, Visual culture in Indian cinema, Malayalam cinema, Bollywood masculinity, Star studies

## Introduction: Stardom, Desire, and Gendered Performance in India

Indian New Wave cinema has historically depicted hegemonic masculinity as a dominant force, legitimizing socio-economic and cultural power dynamics. Filmmakers like Shyam Benegal and Adoor Gopalakrishnan have explored these themes, highlighting the power struggles and class divisions inherent in such portrayals (Halder, 2024). The media and cinematic representations have traditionally upheld these norms, often portraying male protagonists as

embodiments of power and dominance, which are deeply ingrained in the public psyche.

This traditional depiction has often reinforced gender binaries and patriarchal norms. However, contemporary Indian stardom is witnessing a shift, where male stars like Mohanlal and Ranveer Singh are negotiating these binaries through aesthetic and performative excess. This shift is characterized by a blend of traditional gender codes with consumer

spectacle, challenging the conventional notions of masculinity.

The media plays a crucial role in propagating and glamorizing these new forms of masculinity. As Raghav (2020) argues, the consumer spectacle associated with these stars, particularly in the case of Ranveer Singh, involves a deliberate scripting of a 'feminist' masculinity that, while appearing progressive, may still align with dominant cultural ideologies and suppress marginal identities.

While the shift suggests a progressive negotiation of gender binaries, it is essential to critically assess the underlying motivations and implications. The portrayal of 'feminist' masculinity, as seen in Ranveer Singh's media persona, may inadvertently reinforce existing power structures by appropriating feminist ideals without fundamentally challenging the status quo (Raghav, 2020). Additionally, the role of media in shaping these narratives can sometimes perpetuate rather than dismantle traditional gender norms, and thereby highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of masculinity in contemporary Indian cinema. Celebrity bodies serve as dynamic sites for gender negotiation, where the interplay of cultural, social, and media influences shape and redefine gender norms. This negotiation is particularly evident in the context of stardom, where the aesthetics and performances of celebrities are scrutinized and interpreted through various lenses. The regional and national stardoms exhibit distinct approaches to feminized aesthetics, influenced by cultural contexts and media portrayals. Desire, in this framework, is constructed and redirected through the performances and public personas of these celebrities, often mediated by media and consumer culture.

This paper argues that contemporary Indian male stars are expanding the boundaries of masculinity by incorporating feminized aesthetics such as sartorial choices, bodily gestures and symbolic iconography rooted in Indian cultural traditions, into their performative personas. Drawing on visual and cultural analyses of Mohanlal and Ranveer Singh, two culturally distinct but highly visible actors, it explores how adorned masculinity, the incorporation of feminized aesthetics into male star performances, becomes not only desirable but culturally potent. Through a framework of gender performativity and stardom

theory, the paper situates these performances within India's evolving aesthetic economy of masculinity.

The first section examines Mohanlal's jewelry advertisement and its negotiation of tradition and sensuality; the second sections unpacks Ranveer Singh's flamboyant fashion choices as sustained expressions of androgyny and spectacle. The paper concludes with a comparative analysis of how both performances reconfigure gender, desire, and public beauty. The selection of Mohanlal and Ranveer Singh is deliberate as Mohanlal exemplifies regional star economies deeply rooted in cultural conservatism, while Ranveer Singh epitomizes Bollywood's flamboyant, pan-Indian visual culture.

Ranveer Singh exemplifies a departure from traditional masculinity through his eccentric fashion choices and public persona, which are often described as androgynous and subversive of gender norms. His style and performances challenge the normative expectations of male stars in Bollywood, embodying a form of 'metrosexual masculinity', that is less patriarchally structured (Sen, 2022). Mohanlal, recently through the trending AD in discussion, represents a similar shift in the South Indian film industry, where his roles often blend traditional masculinity with nuanced emotional depth, reflecting a broader trend of negotiating gender binaries.

#### Celebrity Bodies and Gender Negotiation

Celebrity bodies are often symbolic sites for gender negotiation, where cultural and social norms are both reinforced and challenged. In South Asia, for instance, the gendered body is a site of negotiation, resistance, and struggle, reflecting broader societal dynamics. The embodiment of femininity and masculinity in celebrity culture is shaped by media representations and public perceptions, which can either conform to or disrupt traditional gender roles. (Chandra, 2024)

Regional and national stardoms differ significantly in their use of feminized aesthetics. In Indian cinema, for example, the portrayal of femininity is both a reflection of local cultural norms and a response to global influences. This duality is evident in the performances of Bollywood heroines, who navigate between traditional Indian womanhood and modern, globalised femininity.

### **Construction and redirection of desire**

Desire is constructed and redirected through celebrity performances, which often serve as sites of consumer engagement and identity formation. The star persona, as seen in Bollywood item numbers, is crafted to evoke specific desires and fantasies, often blurring the lines between the personal and the performative (Mukherjee, 2020). The media plays a crucial role in shaping and redirecting desire, as seen in the strategic use of celebrity images and narratives to create and sustain consumer interest. This is evident in the way media reception discourse influences public perceptions of celebrity bodies and their associated desires.

Thus, the interplay of local and global influences in regional and national stardoms highlights the complexity of feminized aesthetics, where traditional and modern elements coexist and compete. Additionally, the construction and redirection of desire through celebrity performances underscore the power of media and consumer culture in shaping public perceptions and identities. However, it is important to recognize that these dynamics are not uniform and can vary significantly across different cultural and social contexts, reflecting the diverse ways in which gender and desire are negotiated and expressed.

### **Theoretical framework: Performing stardom and gender fluidity**

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Richard Dyer's star theory, both explore the construction and representation of identity, though in different contexts. Butler's work focuses on the performative nature of gender, suggesting that gender identity is not an innate quality but rather an act that is continuously performed within societal norms. Dyer, on the other hand, examines how stars embody cultural contradictions and manage their public personas. This theory proposes that the star is a construction, not a real person, created through various media to be both ordinary and extraordinary. Both theories highlight the fluidity and constructed nature of identity, whether it be gender or stardom, and the potential for subversion and resignification through performance.

### **Gender performativity**

Judith Butler's theory posits that gender is not a stable identity but an ongoing performance. It is

constituted through repeated acts within discursive limits, which means that gender is continuously enacted through behaviours and expressions that align with societal expectations. Butler argues that the repetitive nature of gender performance opens up possibilities for subversion. By altering or parodying these performances, individuals can challenge and potentially change the normative gender constructs. This is evident in practices like drag, which Butler cites as a form of gender parody that disrupts existing power structures (Maclaran, 2017). The concept of citationality in Butler's work refers to the way gender performances cite existing norms and conventions. As Butler (1990) insists, gender parody risks reinscribing the very norms it seeks to subvert, a tension highly visible in Singh's flamboyance.

### **Richard Dyer's theory of stardom**

Dyer describes stars as "structured polysemy". This means that they embody multiple, often contradictory meanings. This allows them to resonate with diverse audiences and reflect cultural contradictions, such as the tension between individualism and conformity. Stardom involves the management of a public persona, which includes maintaining an aura and visibility. This labour is not just about acting but also about how stars present themselves in public and media, crafting an image that aligns with or challenges societal norms. Stars often embody cultural contradictions, serving as sites where societal tensions are played out. This can include issues of race, gender, and class, where stars may simultaneously reinforce and challenge existing stereotypes (Nahm, 2016).

As Dyer (1979) notes, a star's image emerges from both their on-screen roles, which are shaped by directors, scripts, and production teams, and their off-screen appearances, such as interviews, advertisements, and public events. While this study foregrounds their curated public personas, it acknowledges that these personas are in constant dialogue with their cinematic roles.

While Butler's and Dyer's theories focus on different aspects of identity, they both emphasise the performative and constructed nature of identity. Butler's work on gender performativity highlights how gender is an act that can be subverted through performance, while

Dyer's theory of stardom illustrates how stars navigate and embody cultural contradictions. Both theories suggest that identity is not fixed but is instead a site of potential change and resistance. However, it is important to note that while subversion is possible, it is not always straightforward. Performances that aim to subvert norms can sometimes inadvertently reinforce them, highlighting the complex interplay between performance and societal expectations (Nahm, 2016).

The concept of masculinity, as explored by Raewyn Connell and others, is understood as relational, hierarchical, and mutable. In the context of post-liberalization India, this understanding is crucial for analysing the emergence of soft or hybrid masculinities. These forms of masculinity challenge traditional hegemonic norms by incorporating elements that are traditionally seen as non-masculine or even feminine. This shift is particularly evident in Indian media, where visual culture and celebrity aesthetics play a significant role in shaping public perceptions of masculinity.

It is also crucial to distinguish between metrosexual and inclusive masculinities. Coined by Mark Simpson in the mid-1990s, metrosexual masculinity described an urban, consumerist masculinity oriented around grooming and fashion. Inclusive masculinity (Anderson 2009), by contrast, refers to post-homophobic contexts where men can exhibit emotional intimacy and aesthetic fluidity without stigma. This study situates adorned masculinity in dialogue with both these models while emphasizing its culturally specific South Asian inflection.

### **Hegemonic and soft masculinity**

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity is a dominant form that legitimizes men's dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of women and other marginalized ways of being a man. It is not a fixed entity but a dynamic and relational construct that adapts to maintain male dominance (Inhorn, 2012). In post-liberalization India, there is a noticeable shift towards softer or hybrid masculinities, which incorporate traits traditionally associated with femininity or non-hegemonic masculinities. This shift is partly due to the influence of global media and changing socio-economic conditions. Indian media, particularly OTT platforms, have begun to depict a range of masculinities, challenging traditional norms. Shows like "Paatal Lok"

illustrate the hierarchical nature of masculinities and the interplay between different forms of masculinity across class structures (Peter & Raj, 2021).

### **Indian visual culture and celebrity aesthetics**

Indian stars embody divinity, beauty, and aura, which are integral to their celebrity status that influences public perceptions of ideal masculinity, blending traditional and modern elements. Moreover the queer gaze, challenging heteronormative representations and allows for more fluid expressions of gender and sexuality. This queering contributes to the acceptance of hybrid masculinities. Along with the role of ornament and aesthetics in South Indian cultural performances, which often blur the lines between masculine and feminine, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of gender roles (Halder, 2024).

Together, Butler's performativity (gender as repeated acts), Dyer's structured polysemy (stars embodying contradictions), and Connell's hierarchy of masculinities (hegemonic vs hybrid forms) provide an integrated framework for analysing adorned masculinity. This lens shows how acts of feminized adornment are performed, circulated as part of a star's image economy, and situated within shifting hierarchies of Indian masculinities. Connell's hierarchy of masculinities has been critiqued in South Asian Contexts. South Asian masculinities are shaped by a dynamic interplay of traditional ideals, like varna and life stages, colonial influences, and modern socio-economic pressures that emphasize earning, providing, and strategic consumption. These are often reinforced through gendered social relations, including compulsory heterosexuality and homosocial practices, with performance playing a key role in asserting and maintaining masculine status. The text highlights that these shaping forces are complex, often contradictory, and vary across different communities and historical periods. (Osella & Osella, 2006). This study thus builds on those critiques to situate Kerala's conservatism and Bollywood's flamboyance within different but overlapping masculine economies.

Thus, the study of masculinity in post-liberalization India reveals a complex interplay between traditional hegemonic norms and emerging soft or hybrid masculinities. Indian media and visual culture play a crucial role in this transformation, offering new

representations that challenge and redefine what it means to be masculine. While Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity provides a useful framework, it is essential to consider critiques and alternative perspectives that highlight the fluid and relational nature of gender. This ongoing evolution reflects broader social changes and the potential for more inclusive and diverse expressions of masculinity.

### **Case Study I: Mohanlal – Adorning Masculinity in Malayalam Media**

Mohanlal, an iconic Malayalam actor active since the 1980s, has embodied stoic and patriarchal masculinity in films such as *Devasuram* (1993, dir. I. V. Sasi) and *Pulimurugan* (2016, dir. Vysakh). His 2025 'Vinsmera' jewellery advertisement, released across Malayalam television, YouTube, and Instagram, marked a striking departure, presenting him in glorious costume and diamond ornaments.

He embodies a complex persona that intertwines rugged masculinity, familial roles, and nationalist sentiments. His filmography spans diverse roles, from action heroes to patriarchs and tragic figures, reflecting the cultural rootedness in Kerala's conservative Malayali masculinity. As he ages, his relevance in contemporary media continues to be significant, adapting to changing societal norms while maintaining his iconic status. This multifaceted persona is further explored through visual media, such as a jewelry advertisement, where elements like lighting, posture, and costume play crucial roles in conveying his enduring appeal.

Mohanlal's roles often emphasize traditional masculine ideals, such as strength and heroism, which resonate with the Malayali audience's expectations of male protagonists (Krishnan & Balakrishnan, 2023). His portrayal of patriarchs and family-oriented characters aligns with the cultural emphasis on family values and the male householder's role in Kerala (Sooraj et al., 2023). Mohanlal's films even incorporate themes of nationalism, reflecting broader societal values and the cultural identity of Kerala.

The reception to Mohanlal's jewelry advertisement reveals the cultural flexibility afforded to stardom. Social media responses ranged from amused admiration to celebratory pride, with memes and fan edits circulating his adorned image across platforms like

Twitter and YouTube. Far from reading the performance as feminizing in a negative sense, audiences embraced it as a mark of his charisma and range. The tagline "Aarum kothichu pokum" ("Anyone would desire") was echoed and reinterpreted as Mohanlal's enduring ability to command desire, even when adorned in traditionally feminine aesthetics. This reception underscores how adornment, when performed by a beloved male star, is not read as emasculating but rather as a demonstration of cultural fluidity and masculine poise.

Mohanlal's characters often embody the conservative values of Malayali masculinity, which are deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of Kerala. Despite the years he has been a superstar, Mohanlal remains relevant by adapting his roles to reflect contemporary issues while maintaining the core elements of his established persona (Jalarajan, 2024).

### ***Visual analysis of the Jewelry Ad.***

The advertisement uses lighting, posture, and costume to enhance Mohanlal's appeal. Ornate diamonds and silk costumes signify luxury and status, while close-up shots focus on his expressions. His gentle, seductive, and self-aware smile and gaze create a dual sense of desire, both for 'him' and the jewelry, aligning with the tagline "Aarum Kothichu Pokum" (Mini, 2019). The tagline plays on the dual desire for Mohanlal and the jewelry, highlighting his enduring charm and the aspirational quality of the product.

While Mohanlal's persona is deeply rooted in traditional masculinity, it is essential to consider the evolving landscape of Malayalam cinema, which increasingly challenges these norms. Contemporary films are beginning to explore more nuanced representations of masculinity, reflecting broader societal changes and the shifting dynamics of gender roles and sexual orientations (Krishnan & Balakrishnan, 2023). This evolution suggests a gradual move towards more diverse and inclusive portrayals, even as iconic figures like Mohanlal continue to hold significant cultural influence.

The exploration of feminized aura in male fashion, particularly through the use of diamonds and other traditionally feminine gestures, represents a shift from macho minimalism to a more inclusive masculinity. This trend allows for the expression of gestural femininity without compromising charisma, as seen in

the nuanced use of hair style, hand movements, and fabric as gendered signs. The reception of such styles on social media often results in admiration and pride, with memes celebrating this inclusive masculinity. Unlike traditional queer-coding, this phenomenon is perceived as a form of “inclusive masculinity,” where celebrities can transgress gender norms without facing significant backlash.

This performance exemplifies Butler’s notion of citationality: Mohanlal cites Kerala’s ritual and cinematic history of male ornament (from Kathakali’s adorned heroes to classical patriarchal figures), resignifying jewelry as an extension of masculine aura. Dyre’s structured polysemy is also at play, his star image thus accommodates both patriarchal authority and feminized glamour without contradiction, precisely because his long career had accumulated credibility.

#### ***Feminized aura in male fashion***

The use of diamonds and the feminine gestures through the music in male fashion challenges traditional gender norms by incorporating aspects typically associated with femininity, such as sparkle, shyness and elegance, into male attire. This shift is part of a broader trend towards androgyny in fashion, which combines masculine and feminine elements to create a unique style that defies conventional gender stereotypes. As Osella & Osella (2006) document Malayali masculinity historically entwines domestic patriarchy with moral conservatism, Mohanlal’s jewelry ad plays within this framework, temporarily queering it without destabilization. Gestural femininity, as we may call it, including the use of hair, hand movements, emotions reflected, the fabrics used and so on, serves as a form of self-expression and identity construction. These elements are integral to personal style and are used to negotiate and explore gender identity in a way that is both personal and culturally informed.

#### ***Social media reception and cultural framing***

Social media plays a crucial role in the reception of these fashion trends, with fans often expressing admiration and pride through memes and other forms of digital content. This positive reception highlights a shift in cultural attitudes towards gender expression, where traditional boundaries are increasingly blurred (Döring, 2022). The absence of queer-coding in these expressions

of masculinity suggests a broader acceptance of diverse gender identities. Instead of being labelled as queer, these expressions are seen as part of an “inclusive masculinity” that allows for a more fluid understanding of gender roles (Siebler, 2016). While many fan responses celebrated his charisma, some social media users mocked the feminine look, joking on emasculation for embracing femininity. This shows that inclusive masculinity is not universally accepted but contingent on Mohanlal’s established age, reputation, and heterosexual image. A young actor or a social media influencer may not receive the same indulgence, as we can see through several examples of content creators like Riyas Salim.

Celebrities who adopt these styles often do so without facing significant consequences, highlighting their ability to transgress traditional gender norms. This phenomenon underscores the power of celebrity culture in shaping societal attitudes towards gender and identity. The role of male celebrities in promoting gender equality and challenging patriarchal norms further supports this trend. By embracing elements of femininity, these figures contribute to a broader cultural shift towards gender inclusivity (Feasey, 2017).

While the integration of feminine elements into male fashion is celebrated in many circles, it is essential to consider the broader cultural implications. The acceptance of such styles may not be universal, and traditional gender stereotypes continue to exert influence in many areas of society. The persistence of these stereotypes highlights the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the need for continued advocacy and education to challenge entrenched norms (Döring, 2022).

#### **Case Study II: Ranveer Singh – flamboyance, fluidity, and the Bollywood fashion spectacle**

Ranveer Singh, active in Hindi cinema since 2010, is known for hypermasculine roles in *Bajirao Mastani* (2015, dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali) and *Padmaavat* (2018, dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali), even as his off-screen persona disrupts these images through flamboyant, feminized fashion on red carpets and in magazine shoots.

Ranveer Singh’s public persona is a complex amalgamation of chaotic, playful, and sexy elements, constructed through a deliberate blend of aggressive,

comic, romantic, and androgynous traits. This multifaceted star image aligns with luxury fashion, queer-coded aesthetics, and performative energy, reflecting broader cultural and social dynamics in contemporary India. Singh's persona challenges traditional gender norms and embraces a new form of masculinity that resonates with both local and global audiences. This construction is evident in his sartorial choices, public appearances, and the roles he portrays on screen, which collectively contribute to his unique star image.

### *Fashion as performed gender*

Ranveer Singh's fashion choices, such as wearing bright floral pantsuits and 'man-skirts', subvert traditional gender norms and challenge gender binaries, embodying a form of metrosexual masculinity in neoliberal India. His public persona is seen as a site of cultural production, where he negotiates gender and sexuality, often appropriating feminist postures while maintaining traditional power structures (Raghav, 2020). Singh's aesthetics, both on-screen and off-screen, mirror an aesthetics of queerness that defy normative expectations of male stardom in Bollywood, allowing spectators to interpret queerness in non-identitarian ways (Sen, 2022). Singh's association with luxury fashion brands and his flamboyant style contribute to his star image, aligning with the visual consumption trends in the experience economy. His public persona is crafted within a social media-driven ecology, where he represents both local and transnational ideals of masculinity, embodying the neoliberal, transnational upper-class urban Indian male (Gopinath, 2020). The integration of luxury fashion into his persona is part of a broader strategy to shape brand perception and engage consumers, reflecting the intricate layers of meaning in luxury fashion discourse (Kohrs, 2020).

Singh's performative energy is central to his stardom, characterized by uninhibited performances and a rejection of traditional decorum, marking him as potentially "declassé" (Gopinath, 2020). His public persona is a celebration of individuality, connected to consumer culture and democratic capitalism, where he embodies audiences with an affective connection that is powerful in contemporary culture (Marshall, 2015). The construction of his sexualized persona online, through

self-branding and self-promotion, aligns with the neoliberal ideology of empowerment and entrepreneurialism. While Ranveer Singh's public persona is celebrated for its boldness and subversion of traditional norms, it also faces criticism for potentially reinforcing existing power structures. His feminist posturing and appropriation of queer aesthetics may inadvertently maintain the status quo regarding gender, class, and caste identities in Indian society (Raghav, 2020). This duality highlights the complexities and contradictions inherent in constructing a public persona that resonates with diverse audiences. The use of lehengas, skirts, and crop tops at high-profile events such as Filmfare, GQ, and magazine shoots like Elle and Vogue, serves as a powerful statement in the fashion world. These garments, often characterized by bright colors, intricate embroidery, and complementary jewelry, are not just about reclaiming flamboyance but could also be challenging traditional gender norms and binaries in fashion. This visual rhetoric of fluidity is a significant aspect of contemporary fashion, where traditional suiting and menswear are being redefined to include more diverse and inclusive expressions of identity.

The use of bright colours and elaborate embroidery in lehengas and skirts is a nod to traditional Indian attire, which is known for its vibrant and intricate designs. This is a form of reclaiming cultural heritage and flamboyance, which has often been subdued in Western fashion contexts (Chatterjee & Vasek, 2019). Jewelry plays a crucial role in enhancing the overall aesthetic, adding layers of meaning and cultural significance to the attire. This aligns with the idea of using fashion as a storytelling device, as seen in cinema where costumes are used to convey deeper narratives. These repeated sartorial gestures exemplify Butler's citationality where, skirts and sequins signify femininity within a masculine frame. Dyer's structured polysemy explains how Singh sustains contradictions, commercial appeal alongside queer-coded subversion. Connell's hierarchy situates him between hegemonic action-heroes and emergent soft masculinities.

What sets Ranveer Singh's adorned masculinity apart is not merely his willingness to experiment with gendered clothing, but how this experimentation is sustained, intentional, and woven into his brand identity. Unlike momentary gestures, Singh's aesthetic is a long-

term, performative labour, carefully curated across red carpets, ad campaigns, and Instagram posts. His repeated use of skirts, sequins, and elaborate jewelry is not a rejection of masculinity but a redefinition of its expressive range. His body becomes a site of visual play and cultural negotiation, where flamboyance is not ridiculed but transformed into prestige (Boise, 2012). This makes Singh not just a gender-fluid icon but a cultural entrepreneur who capitalizes on androgynous flair to expand what is acceptable within Indian masculinity. His aesthetic labour reveals that in post-liberal Indian celebrity culture, masculinity can embrace spectacle and ornamentation, so long as it is anchored by charisma, control, and symbolic capital.

The adoption of traditionally feminine garments like lehengas and skirts by individuals across the gender spectrum is a reflection of the broader movement towards gender fluidity in fashion. This further echoes a long cinematic tradition of male cross-dressing in Hindi cinema, from comic relief roles in the 1970s to queer-coded villains in the 1990s. His flamboyance both recalls and reworks these tropes, transforming ridicule into prestige. This is part of a historical trend where queer and non-conforming dress practices have challenged societal norms. High-profile events and magazine shoots provide a platform for these expressions, showcasing a shift towards inclusivity and diversity in fashion. While traditional male fashion remains somewhat conservative, there is a noticeable trend towards more fluid and inclusive representations.

### *Visual rhetoric of fluidity*

The visual rhetoric of fluidity is evident in the way these garments are styled and presented. The combination of traditional elements with modern silhouettes and accessories creates a dynamic interplay that challenges conventional fashion norms (Patel & Mishra, 2024). This approach is similar to the use of costumes in films, where clothing is used to signify character development and identity transformation. In Bollywood, for instance, costumes are not just about aesthetics but also about conveying cultural and personal narratives (Chatterjee & Vasek, 2020).

While the use of lehengas, skirts, and crop tops at high-profile events is a powerful statement, it is important to consider the broader context of fashion and identity. The fashion industry, particularly in

mainstream media, still grapples with issues of representation and inclusivity. Despite the progress, traditional beauty standards and gender norms continue to dominate many aspects of fashion, as seen in the persistent stereotypes in magazines like *Vogue* and *GQ* (Curiel et al., 2023). This highlights the ongoing tension between innovation and tradition in the fashion world, where new expressions of identity are constantly negotiating space within established norms.

### *Media ambiguity and queerbaiting*

The media's portrayal of masculinity and queer identities often employs ambiguity as a strategic tool to maintain broad appeal while challenging traditional norms. This approach allows for multiple interpretations, engaging diverse audiences and fostering discussions around gender fluidity and representation. The use of ambiguous debates such as "Is he too flamboyant?", "Champion of non-binary fashion", and "Is it queerbaiting?" exemplifies this strategy, as they provoke curiosity and invite readers to explore deeper meanings. This tactic not only keeps the discourse open-ended but also plays a crucial role in reshaping the concept of masculinity as an elastic term.

Furthermore, the ambiguity in media debates is a deliberate strategy to engage readers by provoking curiosity and encouraging deeper exploration of the content. This technique allows media outlets to attract a wide audience without committing to a specific stance, thus maintaining mass appeal. The use of ambiguous language thus can serve as a pragmatic tool to spark interest and discussion, allowing readers to interpret the content based on their own perspectives and experiences (Chinelo, 2015).

Moreover, Queerbaiting is a media strategy where suggestive queer content is hinted at but not fully realized, often to attract LGBTQ+ audiences without alienating mainstream viewers. This tactic can be seen as both a playful engagement with homoeroticism and a critique of superficial representation (Brennan, 2018). The critique of queerbaiting highlights the tension between the promise of representation and the reality of its execution, often leaving LGBTQ+ audiences feeling misled or exploited (McDermott, 2021).

The concept of masculinity is being redefined through media and fashion, with designers like Alessandro Michele and Glenn Martens challenging

traditional gender norms by promoting gender-fluid and non-binary fashion. These fashion movements question the rigid boundaries of masculinity, offering new possibilities for self-expression and identity that transcend the binary gender framework (Brajato, 2023).

### ***Queerbaiting as performance strategy***

The media's portrayal of queer identities and masculinities reflects broader cultural shifts towards more inclusive and diverse understandings of gender and sexuality. This is evident in the increasing visibility of queer representations in various media forms, which challenge traditional norms and promote acceptance (Poole, 2014). The discourse around LGBTQ+ representation in media is shaped by socio-economic factors, including the influence of mega-franchises and streaming platforms, which prioritize consumer engagement and diversity in representation (Payne, 2024). While the strategic use of ambiguity in media can foster inclusivity and provoke critical discussions, it also risks perpetuating superficial representations that do not fully address the complexities of queer identities. The critique of queerbaiting underscores the need for genuine and meaningful representation that goes beyond mere suggestiveness. As media continues to evolve, it is crucial to balance the use of ambiguity with authentic portrayals that reflect the diverse realities of gender and sexuality.

The evolution of male fashion icons, particularly those who initially faced criticism for effeminacy, reflects a broader cultural shift towards embracing diverse expressions of masculinity. This transformation is evident in the fashion industry's response and the acceptance by younger generations, particularly Gen Z. Initially, conservative voices criticized these fashion-forward male figures, accusing them of effeminacy. However, over time, these individuals have become celebrated as fashion icons, influencing the industry, younger male actors, and Gen Z audiences. This shift is indicative of changing societal norms and the increasing acceptance of gender fluidity in fashion.

### ***Initial pushback and accusations of effeminacy***

Early on, male celebrities who deviated from traditional masculine fashion norms faced significant criticism. They were often accused of effeminacy, reflecting a societal discomfort with non-traditional

expressions of masculinity. This pushback was rooted in entrenched gender norms that dictated specific fashion choices for men and women, with little room for deviation (Bhaduri & Carlton, 2025). Over time, these male figures have been embraced as fashion icons, with their styles becoming normalized and even celebrated. This shift is partly due to the influence of celebrity culture, which has reshaped the fashion system by promoting diverse expressions of identity. Celebrities have become 'Human Fashion Brands,' influencing consumer behaviour and fashion trends. Their endorsement of non-traditional styles has played a crucial role in normalizing these fashion choices.

The fashion industry has responded to this cultural shift by embracing gender-inclusive and emotionally resonant products. Brands are increasingly adopting gender-neutral labelling to align with evolving consumer values and foster inclusivity (Bhaduri & Carlton, 2025). Designers are pushing boundaries, creating daring and innovative fashion trends that challenge traditional gender norms. This has led to a broader acceptance of diverse fashion expressions (Fields, 2017).

### ***Generational shifts and market economies***

Younger male actors are increasingly adopting these fashion-forward styles, influenced by the normalization of diverse expressions of masculinity in the media. Gen Z, known for valuing gender fluidity and inclusivity, has been particularly receptive to these changes. They challenge traditional gender norms and prefer fashion that reflects their individuality and social consciousness (Bhaduri & Carlton, 2025). The spending power of Gen Z, estimated to reach \$4.5 trillion by 2025, makes them a significant target group for fashion brands, further driving the industry towards inclusivity (Shejale, 2023). Yet this acceptance is not universal as conservative audiences often dismiss Singh's fashion as "attention-seeking" or "effeminate". The cultural capital of Bollywood's elite spaces insulates him, but this privilege highlights the class and caste boundaries of fluid masculinity in India.

While the normalization of diverse expressions of masculinity in fashion is widely celebrated, it is essential to recognize that not all segments of society have embraced these changes. Some conservative voices continue to resist these shifts, clinging to

traditional gender norms. However, the growing influence of Gen Z and the fashion industry's adaptation to these changes suggest that the trend towards inclusivity and diversity in fashion is likely to continue. This ongoing evolution reflects broader societal changes and the increasing acceptance of diverse identities and expressions.

### **Comparative analysis: Two masculinities in conversation**

The question explores the contrasting representations of masculinity embodied by Mohanlal in Kerala's cinema and Ranveer Singh in Bollywood. Mohanlal's masculinity is deeply rooted in Kerala's traditional visual grammar, while Ranveer Singh's is characterized by cosmopolitan flamboyance, enabled by Bollywood's aesthetic excess. Unlike Mohanlal's momentary adornment embedded in tradition, Singh's flamboyance is sustained, intentional and globalized, creating a stark contrast in how regional vs national star economies absorb feminized aesthetics. These differences highlight the distinct cultural and cinematic contexts in which these actors operate, with Mohanlal's experiments being momentary and tradition-embedded, and Ranveer's being continuous and performative. This dichotomy reflects broader themes of regional identity and the evolving nature of masculinity in Indian cinema.

#### ***Mohanlal: Rooted masculinity in Kerala***

Mohanlal's performances are deeply embedded in Kerala's traditional and cultural setting, reflecting the state's unique development trajectory and social norms. Kerala's cinema often used to portray the internal biases and contradictions of its society, with family and traditional values playing a significant role in shaping narratives. The visual representation in Malayalam cinema, including Mohanlal's roles, often incorporates elements of Kerala's historical and cultural aesthetics, which are influenced by caste-based art forms and Hindu religious codes. Mohanlal's masculinity is often portrayed within the framework of patriarchal and familial conventions, reflecting a composite construct of subject normality that blends pre-modern belief systems with modern secular norms.

Bollywood often reflects broader Indian socio-political themes, including nationalism and multiculturalism. Ranveer Singh's flamboyant style is

enabled by Bollywood's aesthetic excess, which allows for a more radical and performative expression of masculinity. Bollywood's portrayal of masculinity often aligns with hegemonic ideals, where male protagonists are depicted as powerful and dominant. Unlike Mohanlal's momentary experiments, Ranveer's performances are characterized by continuous and radical experimentation, challenging traditional norms and embracing a cosmopolitan identity that resonates with global audiences.

While Mohanlal and Ranveer Singh represent distinct regional and cultural identities, the broader discourse on masculinity in Indian cinema reveals a complex interplay of tradition and modernity. In Kerala, cinema often challenges patriarchal norms and explores marginalized identities, as seen in films like "Ka Bodyscapes," which problematize traditional masculinity and highlight queer politics (Sooraj & Krishna, 2024). Conversely, Bollywood's narratives frequently reinforce hegemonic masculinity, intertwining it with themes of nationalism and cultural identity, as seen in war films and sports dramas (Radhakrishnan & Ray, 2023). This duality reflects the diverse and evolving nature of masculinity in Indian cinema, shaped by regional, cultural, and socio-political influences.

The concept of cultural capital and its protective role in the context of celebrity status is exemplified by the cases of Mohanlal and Ranveer Singh. Both actors leverage their fame to navigate and perform gender roles from a position of security rather than marginality. This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of cultural capital, which encompasses the attitudes, preferences, and behaviours that confer social advantages. In the case of these celebrities, their cultural capital is amplified by their fame, allowing them to engage in gender play without the risks typically associated with such performances. This protective layer of fame and cultural capital enables them to challenge traditional gender norms while maintaining their societal status.

#### ***Cultural capital and celebrity status***

Cultural capital, as theorized by Bourdieu, includes the non-financial social assets that promote social mobility beyond economic means. Celebrities like Mohanlal and Ranveer Singh possess significant

cultural capital, which is further enhanced by their fame, allowing them to influence cultural norms and perceptions (Richey, 2023). The concept of “attention capital” in celebrity culture underscores how public interest and visibility can be leveraged as a form of capital, providing a protective buffer against societal marginalization (Krieken, 2018).

The security provided by cultural capital allows celebrities to engage in gender play without facing the same societal repercussions as those without such capital. Mohanlal and Ranveer Singh’s performances challenge traditional gender roles, but their established status and reverence in the industry protect them from backlash. This phenomenon is not unique to these actors; it reflects a broader trend where individuals with high cultural capital can subvert norms from a position of safety (Rajagopalan & George, 2024). Fame acts as a form of insulation, providing celebrities with a platform to experiment with identity and gender without the fear of losing status (Richey, 2023).

For Mohanlal, Bourdieu’s cultural capital operates through regional reverence and familial respectability; for Singh, it stems through global fashion markets and social media visibility. Both demonstrate how ‘attention capital’ (van krieken, 2018) protects stars when engaging in gender play. The hypervisibility of celebrities like Ranveer Singh allows them to redefine masculinity in the public eye, contributing to a broader discourse on gender identity. This insulation is a privilege that is not affordable to all, highlighting the intersection of cultural capital and celebrity status in shaping societal norms. While cultural capital and fame provide a protective layer for celebrities to engage in gender play, it is important to recognize that this privilege is not universally accessible. The ability to challenge gender norms without facing marginalization is contingent upon one’s social and cultural capital, which is often unequally distributed. This disparity underscores the need for a more inclusive understanding of cultural capital that accounts for the diverse experiences of individuals across different social strata. The cases of Mohanlal and Ranveer Singh illustrate how cultural capital can be strategically used to navigate and challenge societal norms, but they also highlight the limitations and inequalities inherent in this system.

The concept of desire and the gendered gaze in cinema is a complex interplay of visual representation,

power dynamics, and cultural norms. Mohanlal and Ranveer Singh exemplify how male actors can disrupt traditional associations of ornamentation with femininity and desire. Mohanlal’s portrayal often leans towards a soft seduction that appeals to universal desire within a heterosexual framework, while Ranveer Singh’s performances are characterized by playful ambiguity, allowing for queer interpretations. Both actors challenge the linear associations of ornamentation with femininity and weakness, offering a nuanced understanding of the gaze in cinema.

### *Heterosexual framing and playful ambiguity*

Mohanlal’s roles often embody a form of soft seduction that aligns with universal desire, appealing to a broad audience through a heterosexual lens. His performances typically reinforce traditional masculinity while subtly incorporating elements of ornamentation, which challenges the notion that such elements are inherently feminine or fragile. This approach aligns with the heteronormative gaze, which privileges heterosexuality and often marginalizes non-heteronormative identities.

Ranveer Singh’s performances are marked by a playful ambiguity that opens up space for queer readings, disrupting the traditional male gaze. His use of ornamentation and flamboyant style challenges the binary gender norms and allows for a more inclusive spectatorship, aligning with the concept of the queer gaze as described by McNealy (McNealy, 2021). Singh’s roles often blur the lines between masculinity and femininity, offering a subversive take on the gendered gaze that resonates with queer audiences.

Mulvey’s male gaze positions Mohanlal’s adornment safely within heterosexual desire while Singh’s flamboyance invites queer reading that destabilizes the gaze. Together they show how Indian male stardom negotiates competing visual economies. Both actors challenge the traditional association of ornamentation with femininity and queerness by incorporating these elements into their performances without compromising their masculine appeal. This disruption is significant in the context of the male gaze, which traditionally objectifies and marginalizes the feminine body (Karmakar, 2021). By redefining ornamentation as a tool for expressing diverse forms of masculinity, Mohanlal and Ranveer Singh contribute to

a broader understanding of gender and desire in cinema (Mistri & Dasgupta, 2024).

While Mohanlal and Ranveer Singh offer distinct approaches to the gendered gaze, it is important to consider the broader cultural and cinematic context in which these performances occur. The male gaze, as theorized by Laura Mulvey (1975), continues to dominate visual narratives, often objectifying women and reinforcing patriarchal norms. However, the emergence of the female gaze and queer gaze in cinema provides alternative perspectives that challenge these traditional power dynamics, offering new opportunities for representation and identification. These shifts in cinematic representation reflect broader societal changes and the ongoing struggle for gender equality and inclusivity in media.

The shift from masculinity as an essence to masculinity as a style reflects a broader cultural transformation where traditional gender norms are being redefined. This evolution is characterized by the increasing importance of performance in modern male desirability, where elements such as jewelry, colour, and gesture are integral to a curated masculine identity. This change is evident in various cultural and fashion contexts, highlighting a move towards a more fluid and expressive understanding of masculinity. The following sections explore this transformation in detail.

The historical evolution of menswear has significantly influenced modern perceptions of masculinity. The Victoria and Albert Museum's exhibition, "Fashioning Masculinities: The Art of Menswear," highlighted how menswear has been shaped by cultural and social influences over centuries, emphasizing the role of clothing in the performance of masculinity (Gilligan, 2023). The exhibition demonstrated how historical sartorial symbols, such as intricate lace and opulent embroidery, have long been part of masculine fashion, challenging the notion that flamboyancy is a recent development in menswear (Neal, 2022).

### ***The role of fashion and media***

Fashion functions as a crucial medium through which adorned masculinity becomes visible, legible, and culturally validated. Positioning fashion within the circuits of media spectacle clarifies how the sartorial choices of stars are not isolated gestures but part of a

larger visual economy that produces gendered celebrity identities. Social media platforms play a crucial role in shaping contemporary perspectives on masculinity and dress aesthetics. They provide a space for discussing non-traditional masculinities and promoting identity expression through fashion. The use of jewelry, colour, and gesture in men's fashion is part of a broader trend towards self-fashioning, where individuals curate their identities through clothing and accessories. This practice is supported by exhibitions and scholarly work that explore the intersections of fashion, art, and gender (Bortolotti & Davalli, 2023).

The evolving landscape of masculinity includes a focus on intersectionality and inclusivity, recognizing the diverse experiences and identities within the male gender. This approach challenges traditional hegemonic masculinity ideals and encourages a more inclusive understanding of what it means to be masculine. The exploration of race and masculinity, particularly in the context of hip-hop and rap, highlights the complex interplay between cultural identity and masculine performance (White, 2011). While the shift towards masculinity as a style represents a significant cultural change, it is important to acknowledge the persistence of traditional masculine ideals. Despite the growing acceptance of diverse expressions of masculinity, there remains a tension between new and old paradigms. This tension is evident in the continued representation of traditional masculinity in media and fashion, suggesting that while progress is being made, the journey towards a fully inclusive understanding of masculinity, and gender in general, is ongoing.

### **Conclusion: Toward a fluid spectacle of stardom**

Taken together, Mohanlal and Singh reveal the dual pathways of adorned masculinity in India. One rooted in cultural conservatism that absorbs femininity without destabilization, and another flamboyantly global that transforms femininity into prestige. This juxtaposition shows the limits of adornment as a transformative force, it expands masculinity's repertoire but rarely dismantles hegemonic structures. This transformation is evident in the way the "decorated male body" has become a focal point for consumer desire and gender negotiation, challenging traditional norms and expanding the boundaries of male identity in Indian cinema and media.

Historically, Bollywood heroes embodied hegemonic masculinity, but recent narratives have introduced characters grappling with vulnerabilities such as alopecia and sexual dysfunction, reflecting a broader crisis in traditional masculinity (Jha, 2022). This shift highlights a move towards more nuanced and diverse representations of male characters. The rise of OTT platforms has played a crucial role in challenging traditional portrayals of masculinity. Shows like “Little Things” and “Made in Heaven” present male characters who defy patriarchal stereotypes, offering more relatable and realistic depictions of men. These platforms facilitate a more inclusive representation of masculinity, promoting acceptance of diverse male identities.

These findings complicate Butler’s account of subversion by showing how citationality can reinforce rather than destabilize norms. They extend Dyer’s star theory by demonstrating how contradiction operates differently in regional and national economies. And they situate Connell’s hierarchies within India’s plural masculinities, where adorned performances are enabled by cultural capital of Bourdieu. Ranveer Singh’s fashion sense, characterized by its flamboyance and androgyny, challenges conventional gender norms. His public persona, both on and off-screen, embodies a form of metrosexual masculinity that incorporates feminist elements, thereby subverting traditional gender binaries (Raghav, 2020). Singh’s style choices and public conduct contribute to a broader cultural discourse on gender fluidity and the performance of masculinity. Singh’s stardom is also analysed through the lens of queer theory, which suggests that his aesthetic choices allow for a non-identitarian reading of queerness. This approach challenges normative heterosexual expectations and broadens the scope of how masculinity can be expressed and perceived (Sen, 2022).

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of masculinity. The media’s influence extends to the normalization of new masculine ideals, which are often achieved through consumerism rather than traditional discipline. The discourse on masculinity in India is influenced by global trends, yet it remains deeply rooted in local cultural contexts. The intersection of global and local perspectives creates a complex landscape where multiple masculinities coexist and interact (Dasgupta & Gokulsing, 2013).

Bollywood and other cinematic representations have begun to explore non-dominant constructions of masculinity, reflecting a global crisis in traditional masculine identities. This includes narratives that challenge the conventional attributes of masculinity, such as physical strength and emotional stoicism.

The integration of feminine traits into masculine performances does not necessarily subvert hegemonic masculinity but rather creates an ambivalent and aestheticized form that is commercially potent. This is evident in the way male celebrities incorporate fashion and style elements traditionally associated with femininity, appealing to diverse audience interpretations, including cultural pride and irony (Irshad, 2023). Queer performance strategies in every culture media further illustrate the fluidity of gender identities, challenging the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity and allowing for a broader spectrum of gender expression.

While the incorporation of feminine traits into masculine performances might suggest a shift towards more inclusive gender representations, it is important to consider the persistence of hegemonic masculinity. Despite the aesthetic and commercial evolution of masculinity, the underlying power dynamics and societal structures that privilege certain masculine traits over others remain largely intact. This suggests that while the surface expressions of masculinity may change, the foundational aspects of gender hierarchy continue to exert influence.

The originality of this study lies in theorizing ‘Adorned masculinity’ as a lens for Indian celebrity culture, showing how feminized aesthetics become co-constitutive of masculine stardom. It advances scholarship by bringing regional cinema, the case study of Mohanlal, into dialogue with Bollywood, through that of Ranveer Singh, revealing how gender performances operate across cinematic geographies. Future research could explore female and queer stars’ engagement with ornamentation, comparative analyses across South Asia or ethnographic studies of audience reception, thereby expanding the scope of gendered performance in celebrity culture.

In analysing the adorned masculinities of Mohanlal and Ranveer Singh, this paper has demonstrated how Indian male stardom is reshaping public expressions of gender. These performances

absorb feminized aesthetics, jewelry, softness, flamboyance, not as disruptions, but as extensions of masculine charisma. Whether it is Mohanlal's symbolic invocation of desire or Ranveer Singh's flamboyant, long-term aesthetic curation, both figures reveal how masculinity is increasingly visual, stylized, and performative. Their star personas suggest that Indian masculinity, far from being fixed, is being re-scripted through spectacle and self-fashioning, marking a shift toward a more adorned and affectively flexible gender performance within contemporary cultural economies.

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