

Beyond Big Budgets: A Case Study of Spiritual Storytelling, Audience Engagement, and Word-of-Mouth Growth in the Gujarati Film *Laalo*

Hardik Patel

Department of Mechanical Engineering, Venus College, Gandhinagar, India

Abstract

Contemporary film economics frequently assumes that financial scale—comprising high production budgets, extensive pre-release marketing, and mainstream star power—is a strict prerequisite for commercial viability. This exploratory case study examines the atypical trajectory of the regional Gujarati film *Laalo – Krishna Sada Sahaayate* (released in October 2025), which transitioned from a modest reported opening to substantial box-office collections. Investigating documentation across dated trade reporting and industry analysis, this paper explores the structural and psychological mechanisms that may underlie its growth. By integrating foundational theories of word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) diffusion, narrative transportation, customer satisfaction, social proof, and entrepreneurial marketing, the study proposes an analytical framework for evaluating how culturally anchored narratives can align with audience referral networks. Rather than asserting definitive causation from secondary observations, this paper introduces a transparent, reproducible evidence-validation register to distinguish verified trade documentation from theoretical hypotheses. It explicitly addresses reporting discrepancies regarding production and distribution expenditures, conducts a systematic comparative analysis alongside *Kantara* and *The Kashmir Files*, and evaluates five critical boundary conditions—including reverse causality, distribution supply effects, and selection bias—while formulating five testable research propositions for future empirical verification.

Keywords: Word-of-Mouth, Sleeper Hit, Regional Cinema, Narrative Transportation, Diffusion of Innovations, Social Proof, Box-Office Performance, Case Study Methodology.

1. Introduction

The global film industry operates within a high-risk economic environment characterized by escalating promotional expenditures and compressed theatrical windows. Traditional industry paradigms suggest that a motion picture requires substantial upfront financial investment to generate the market awareness necessary to secure theatrical occupancy. However, occasional statistical outliers challenge this assumption by demonstrating sustained commercial longevity following quiet theatrical introductions.

The regional Gujarati film *Laalo – Krishna Sada Sahaayate* (released in October 2025) presents a notable empirical case for examining resource-constrained media diffusion. Opening with reported first-day box-office collections of approximately ₹5 lakh, the film subsequently achieved substantial financial returns over an extended theatrical run, with trade publications reporting cumulative worldwide gross figures reaching approximately ₹101 crore by early December 2025 (*The Times of India*, 2025; *The Indian Express*, 2025).

Rather than attributing this trajectory to a single unverified variable or claiming that word-of-mouth is a novel discovery, this paper investigates the contextual interplay between spiritual narrative themes, localized cultural meanings, interpersonal communication, and theatrical distribution dynamics within regional Indian cinema. Crucially, because secondary trade data cannot independently isolate psychological causation, this study distinguishes between documented market observations and theoretical mechanisms. In doing so, it provides a rigorous methodological template for analyzing sleeper hits under conditions of incomplete public data.

2. Background and Problem Statement

Mainstream entertainment markets are heavily influenced by the "attention economy," wherein major studios allocate substantial capital to secure pre-release visibility across saturated media channels. For regional cinemas operating with constrained initial capital, competing directly on advertising volume is financially unviable.

Laalo emerged during a period of shifting consumer demand in Indian regional cinema, wherein audiences increasingly displayed an appetite for culturally anchored narratives (*India Today*, 2025). However, publicly reported figures regarding the film's financial inputs vary across journalistic sources. Certain trade reports cite an approximate baseline production budget of ₹50 lakh (*The Times of India*, 2025), whereas broader analytical reports discuss aggregate financial allocations—potentially incorporating post-release print, publicity, and expanded distribution scaling—ranging much higher (*The Indian Express*, 2025). This paper explicitly preserves these reporting discrepancies as analytical data points rather than averaging them or presenting unverified financial metrics as audited facts.

The core analytical problem addressed in this study is two-fold:

1. **Substantive:** How does a regional cultural product with constrained initial market visibility generate cumulative audience engagement over time?
2. **Methodological:** How can researchers rigorously evaluate the plausible mechanisms of organic diffusion—such as spiritual storytelling and interpersonal advocacy—using secondary trade documentation while accounting for confounding structural factors such as screen expansion and reverse causality?

3. Literature Review

3.1 Word-of-Mouth Marketing and Feedback Dynamics

Interpersonal communication plays a foundational role in consumer decision-making under conditions of quality uncertainty. In an empirical analysis of motion picture performance, Liu (2006) demonstrated that word-of-mouth (WOM) volume—rather than valence alone—exerts significant explanatory power over box-office revenue, operating throughout both pre-release and post-release theatrical windows. Extending this inquiry to digital environments, Duan, Gu, and Whinston (2008) established that online word-of-mouth involves a critical endogenous feedback loop: WOM both drives and is driven by box-office sales. Consequently, elevated user discussions serve not merely as an exogenous cause of ticket sales, but also as an outcome of expanding viewership. Furthermore, Godes and Mayzlin (2004) demonstrated that the dispersion of online conversations across diverse communities serves as a critical metric for measuring how interpersonal communication spreads information about unfamiliar cultural products.

3.2 Diffusion of Innovations and Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM)

The dissemination of cultural products across social systems can be structured through Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovations theory, which examines how an unfamiliar product or idea is communicated through specific channels over time among members of a social system. Within this framework, early adopters perform a vital bridging function, reducing uncertainty for subsequent, more risk-averse segments of the population (the early and late majority). In contemporary markets, Baek, Oh, Yang, and Ahn (2017) observe that electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) on social media platforms interacts with box-office revenues by reducing consumer search friction and accelerating the visibility of niche releases across networked communities.

3.3 Customer Satisfaction and Recommendation Behavior

A critical theoretical distinction exists between experiencing satisfaction with a product and actively recommending it to peers. Anderson (1998) established an asymmetric, non-linear utility relationship between customer satisfaction and word-of-mouth activity, noting that while dissatisfied customers frequently engage in negative WOM, satisfied customers do not automatically generate positive referrals unless specific motivational thresholds are crossed. For a viewer to transition from passive satisfaction to active advocacy, the act of sharing must offer perceived social utility, identity expression, or interpersonal value within their social network (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004).

3.4 Narrative Transportation and Emotional Immersion

Grounded in narrative processing theory, Green and Brock (2000) conceptualized *narrative transportation* as an integrative psychological state wherein an individual becomes absorbed into a story world through a convergence of attention, imagery, and feelings. Their experimental findings indicate that high levels of

narrative transportation reduce critical counter-arguing and foster story-consistent beliefs and positive evaluations of protagonists. While transportation theory provides a robust psychological foundation for investigating how spiritual or moral narratives engage viewers, its presence in a specific theatrical audience must be treated as a testable mechanism rather than an assumed outcome of commercial success.

3.5 Social Proof, Trust, and Perceived Authenticity

Under conditions of incomplete product information, individuals frequently rely on the observed actions and endorsements of peers—a behavioral heuristic defined as social proof (Cialdini, 2007). In media consumption, consumer trust is closely tied to perceived source credibility. Recommendations originating from familial networks, community peers, or organic cultural discourse frequently encounter lower psychological resistance than paid corporate advertising, which consumers often discount as persuasive commercial intent.

3.6 Resource Efficiency and Entrepreneurial Marketing

In resource-constrained environments, entrepreneurial marketing theory emphasizes interactive, network-driven growth strategies over capital-intensive mass broadcasting (Stokes, 2000). Rather than relying on top-down promotional campaigns, resource-constrained ventures often rely on incremental market penetration, leveraging core product resonance and word-of-mouth referral loops among highly aligned niche audiences before scaling distribution outward.

4. Research Gap

While extensive scholarship examines box-office forecasting, studio-driven marketing, and Hollywood-centric eWOM dynamics (Duan et al., 2008; Liu, 2006), empirical case studies investigating regional Indian cinema remain comparatively sparse. Specifically, limited academic literature addresses how spiritual narrative themes interact with localized community diffusion and theatrical supply constraints in the Gujarati film market. Furthermore, existing industry case studies frequently conflate journalistic reporting with causal proof. This paper addresses both gaps by synthesizing established marketing and communication theories with a transparent, reproducible evidence-validation framework applied to *Laalo – Krishna Sada Sahaayate*.

5. Research Objectives and Questions

Primary Objective

To evaluate how a regional film with reported resource constraints achieved sustained commercial longevity, distinguishing between documented trade observations and theoretical hypotheses regarding narrative resonance, emotional engagement, and word-of-mouth diffusion.

Supporting Research Questions

1. What does documented, dated trade evidence establish regarding the theatrical trajectory and financial parameters of *Laalo*, and where do reporting discrepancies exist?
2. How can narrative transportation and cultural alignment be framed as testable mechanisms for explaining audience engagement in spiritual regional cinema?
3. How do interpersonal networks, eWOM, and theatrical screen availability interact—and potentially confound one another—during the diffusion of a sleeper hit?
4. What theoretical factors distinguish passive audience satisfaction from active recommendation behavior (Anderson, 1998)?
5. What alternative explanations and boundary conditions (e.g., reverse causality, distribution supply, selection bias) must be accounted for when interpreting the film's commercial performance?
6. How can complex philosophical themes within a narrative, such as *karma* and personal responsibility, be analyzed in relation to audience reception without making unscientific causal assertions?
7. What transferable strategic propositions can resource-constrained organizations across cinema, technology, education, and leadership derive from this case?

6. Methodology: Evidence Collection, Source Validation, and Analytical Procedure

6.1 Research Design

Following Yin's (2018) case-study methodology, this paper adopts an exploratory single-case design supplemented by comparative cross-case synthesis. *Laalo – Krishna Sada Sahaayate* was selected as an *extreme/unusual case* (Yin, 2018) due to the exceptional divergence between its reported opening-day collection and its reported cumulative worldwide gross. Because this study relies on secondary documentation rather than primary audience psychometrics or proprietary distributor ledgers, all causal pathways are strictly evaluated as analytical propositions rather than verified experimental proofs.

6.2 Source Hierarchy and Selection Criteria

To prevent the conflation of journalistic estimates with audited financial records, sources collected between October 2025 and December 2025 were stratified into a four-tier evidentiary hierarchy:

1. **Tier 1 (Primary/Official Records):** Audited distributor financial disclosures, official censor/exhibitor logs, or direct verified statements from production principals (Note: largely unavailable in the public domain for this case).
2. **Tier 2 (Attributed Trade & National Media Reporting):** Reputable national and regional publications (*The Indian Express*, *The Times of India*, *India Today*) providing dated box-office tracking or attributed industry estimates.
3. **Tier 3 (Corroborative Secondary Reporting):** Secondary articles that synthesize trade figures. In accordance with triangulation best practices (Yin, 2018), two publications repeating the same underlying trade estimate are recorded as a single source of evidence rather than independent confirmations.
4. **Tier 4 (Public Discourse Indicators):** Publicly visible user reviews and social commentary, utilized strictly to observe thematic framing rather than to verify financial metrics.

6.3 Reproducible Analytical and Coding Procedure

To ensure methodological transparency, the secondary corpus was gathered using structured search queries ("Laalo" AND "box office", "Laalo Krishna Sada Sahaayate" AND "budget", "Laalo" AND "Gujarati cinema") across major Indian news archives covering October 1, 2025, to December 31, 2025.

Rather than claiming unverified primary thematic coding, a structured **Documented Claim and Thematic Protocol** was applied to the retrieved journalistic texts across four explicit coding categories:

- **Category A (Financial & Commercial Metrics):** Explicit monetary figures, screen counts, and temporal milestones.
- **Category B (Promotional & Distribution Logistics):** Statements regarding pre-release publicity, regional release footprints, and subsequent theatrical expansion.
- **Category C (Narrative & Cultural Framing):** Journalistic descriptions of the film's spiritual themes, moral structure (*karma*), and cultural milieu.
- **Category D (Attribution of Growth):** Mechanisms cited by trade analysts to explain audience turnout (e.g., family attendance, word-of-mouth referrals).

Contradictory figures (such as diverging budget estimates) were preserved in full rather than harmonized, and assigned confidence ratings based on source specificity and corroboration.

6.4 Claim-Level Evidence Register

Table 1 provides the complete evidence register anchoring this study, separating raw reported data from analytical interpretation.

Table 1: Claim-Level Evidence Validation Register for *Laalo – Krishna Sada Sahaayate*

Claim ID	Specific Claim / Observation	Source & Publication Date	Reporting Period	Evidence Type	Independent Corroboration	Confidence & Analytical Rationale
F01	Theatrical release occurred in October 2025.	<i>The Times of India</i> (Dec 2, 2025); <i>India Today</i> (Dec 11, 2025)	October 2025	Reported Trade Fact	High (Multiple publications)	High: Consistently documented across all regional and national media sources.
F02	Opening-day collection was approximately ₹5 lakh.	<i>The Times of India</i> (Dec 2, 2025)	Opening Day (Oct 2025)	Reported Trade Estimate	Moderate (Repeated in secondary reports)	Moderate: Standard trade estimate; not an independently audited exhibitor ledger.
F03	Production budget estimated at approximately ₹50 lakh.	<i>The Times of India</i> (Dec 2, 2025)	Pre-release production	Reported Trade Estimate	Low / Contested (See F04)	Low/Moderate: Represents baseline production estimate; conflicts with broader cost reports.
F04	Broader cost/budget parameters cited at higher scales (e.g., ₹1.0–1.2 crore+ or broader commercial figures).	<i>The Indian Express</i> (2025)	Full production & release cycle	Analytical Trade Report	Unresolved variance with F03	Unresolved: Likely reflects differences between raw production costs and print/publicity/expansion costs.
F05	Cumulative worldwide gross reached approximately ₹101 crore.	<i>The Times of India</i> (Dec 2, 2025); <i>The Indian Express</i> (2025)	Oct 2025 – Early Dec 2025	Reported Trade Milestone	Moderate (Cross-reported in trade press)	Moderate: Dated to early December 2025; treated as reported gross rather than net audited profit.
F06	Scale of pre-release marketing expenditure was minimal.	<i>The Times of India</i> (Dec 2, 2025); <i>India Today</i> (Dec 11, 2025)	Pre-release window (Oct 2025)	Journalistic Observation	Low (Absence of evidence)	Low/Qualified: Sources note a quiet release, but exact promotional expenditure is not publicly audited.
F07	Word-of-mouth and spiritual resonance drove sustained theatrical growth.	<i>India Today</i> (Dec 11, 2025); <i>The Indian Express</i> (2025)	Oct – Dec 2025	Journalistic Interpretation	N/A (Causal inference)	Hypothesis Only: Plausible mechanism consistent with trajectory, but requires primary audience data to verify.

7. Case Background and Box-Office Timeline

7.1 Factual Verification and Discrepancy Analysis

Laalo – Krishna Sada Sahaayate entered the theatrical market in October 2025. As documented in the Evidence Register (Table 1), trade reporting indicates an opening-day collection of approximately ₹5 lakh (*The Times of India*, Dec 2, 2025). Over the subsequent eight weeks, trade publications reported an atypical commercial

progression, culminating in reported worldwide gross collections of approximately ₹101 crore by early December 2025 (*The Times of India*, Dec 2, 2025; *The Indian Express*, 2025).

A rigorous examination of the record requires addressing two critical evidentiary gaps:

1. **Budgetary Variance:** While *The Times of India* (Dec 2, 2025) highlights a reported ₹50 lakh budget in its coverage of the film's sleeper-hit status, *The Indian Express* (2025) discusses wider financial figures when examining how the film scaled across major milestones. In motion picture accounting, initial production costs (below-the-line and principal photography) frequently differ substantially from total negative costs once distribution prints, digital cinema packages (DCP), post-release publicity, and revenue-sharing logistics are incorporated. Consequently, this study refers to *Laalo* as operating under *reported initial resource constraints* rather than asserting a single definitive budget figure.
2. **Pre-Release Promotion:** The sources reviewed for this study did not establish the total scale or audited expenditure of pre-release promotion. While trade commentary characterizes the release as lacking high-visibility mainstream campaigns, the absence of reported marketing activity is not definitive proof that zero promotional spending occurred. Therefore, the film's precise ratio of organic versus paid publicity remains uncertain.

7.2 Chronological Box-Office and Diffusion Matrix

Whereas major commercial releases typically exhibit front-loaded box-office curves followed by rapid exponential decay, reported milestones for *Laalo* suggest a back-loaded trajectory. However, because secondary journalistic articles report aggregate milestones rather than complete, audited weekly exhibitor series, Table 2 structures the verifiable chronology while explicitly demarcating unverified weekly cells that require proprietary data in future research.

Table 2: Chronological Box-Office and Diffusion Matrix for *Laalo*

Theatrical Period	Reported Gross Collection	Screen / Show Allocation	Audience Discussion Indicators	Evidentiary Source & Status
Opening Day (Oct 2025)	Approx. ₹5 lakh (Reported)	Limited regional allocation (Exact screen count unverified in secondary press)	Minimal pre-release baseline visibility	<i>The Times of India</i> (Dec 2, 2025) — Reported Estimate
Opening Weekend	[Unverified in public secondary sources — requires raw exhibitor logs]	[To be verified via distributor records]	[Requires historical timestamped social media scraping]	Data Gap Identified (Avoids unsubstantiated interpolation)
Weeks 2–4	[Unverified weekly breakdown — documented qualitatively as upward momentum]	Gradual regional expansion reported qualitatively	Trade press notes emerging community and family referrals	<i>India Today</i> (Dec 11, 2025) — Qualitative Trajectory Only
Later Theatrical Run (Weeks 5–7)	[Unverified weekly series]	Expanded domestic and international diaspora screenings	Increased mainstream trade media coverage of the film's run	<i>The Indian Express</i> (2025) — Qualitative Trajectory Only
Reported Milestone (As of Dec 2, 2025)	Approx. ₹101 crore worldwide gross (Reported)	Broad theatrical footprint across Gujarat, rest of India, and overseas markets	High volume of retrospective media analysis and public commentary	<i>The Times of India</i> (Dec 2, 2025); <i>The Indian Express</i> (2025) — Dated Reported Milestone

Methodological Note on Visualisation and Supply-Demand Endogeneity: To move from this milestone matrix to a continuous weekly line graph, future empirical studies must secure weekly distributor gross logs alongside weekly screen counts. Crucially, increased screen availability can itself drive revenue growth, while growing

audience demand simultaneously incentivizes exhibitors to add showtimes. Because supply expansion and audience demand reinforce one another, the direction of causality across Weeks 2 through 7 must be econometrically disentangled rather than assumed.

8. Findings and Analytical Discussion

8.1 Evaluating the Mechanics of Organic Diffusion

The reported transition of *Laalo* from an opening-day figure of approximately ₹5 lakh to a reported ₹101 crore worldwide gross raises the theoretical possibility that early viewers played a bridging role in subsequent audience discovery (Rogers, 2003). Within diffusion theory, early adopters evaluate an unfamiliar product and transmit signals to risk-averse peers. However, because the available secondary sources do not measure viewer expectations prior to ticket purchase or classify actual audience members into psychometric adopter categories, early-adopter dynamics must be framed as a plausible theoretical alignment rather than a demonstrated empirical fact.

8.2 Bridging Satisfaction, Narrative Transportation, and Recommendation

As established by Anderson (1998), consumer satisfaction does not automatically guarantee word-of-mouth referrals. Even when a viewer experiences deep narrative transportation—becoming emotionally immersed in the story world (Green & Brock, 2000)—translating private enjoyment into public advocacy requires social and expressive utility (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004).

In the case of *Laalo*, the film's spiritual narrative centering on Lord Krishna (*Krishna Sada Sahaayate*) and themes of moral accountability (*karma*) provide a theoretical basis for investigating whether shared cultural meanings lowered the social friction of recommendation. Within family and community networks in Gujarat and the Indian diaspora, endorsing a spiritually anchored narrative may offer expressive alignment with collective values. Nevertheless, establishing that spiritual storytelling directly caused interpersonal recommendations would require primary audience interviews, survey psychometrics, or systematic content analysis of dated viewer reviews.

8.3 Philosophical Themes (*Karma*) as Cultural Meaning vs. Causal Mechanism

A distinctive feature of *Laalo* is its thematic engagement with *karma*—focusing on individual actions, ethical responsibility, trust, and consequences. In analyzing this dimension for management and communication scholarship, it is essential to separate *cultural reception* from *commercial determinism*. Philosophical themes of *karma* and spiritual faith appear to have provided an accessible moral vocabulary through which audiences interpreted the narrative. However, from an empirical standpoint, moral or spiritual rectitude within a script does not automatically produce box-office rewards. Rather, *karma* functioned as a culturally proximate narrative frame that resonated with the target demographic's existing belief systems, potentially enhancing perceived personal relevance.

9. Comparative Case Analysis

To evaluate the boundary conditions of resource-constrained and word-of-mouth-driven cinema, Table 3 systematically compares *Laalo* against two prominent Indian sleeper hits—*Kantara* (2022) and *The Kashmir Files* (2022)—across five standardized analytical dimensions.

Table 3: Systematic Cross-Case Comparison of Indian Sleeper Hits

Analytical Dimension	<i>Laalo – Krishna Sada Sahaayate</i> (2025)	<i>Kantara</i> (2022)	<i>The Kashmir Files</i> (2022)
1. Initial Market & Resource Conditions	Regional Gujarati market; reported ₹50 lakh baseline production budget (with broader cost estimates cited); minimal reported pre-release visibility.	Regional Kannada market initially; backed by an established major regional studio (Hombale Films) with mid-tier production	Hindi-language market; modest budget (~₹15–25 crore reported); limited initial screen count (~630 screens) before rapid scaling.

		scale (~₹16 crore reported).	
2. Core Narrative & Thematic Framing	Devotional spirituality, everyday moral accountability (<i>karma</i>), divine grace, and emotional solace.	Indigenous folk traditions (<i>Bhoota Kola</i>), ancestral land conflict, visceral sensory and mythic spectacle.	Historical trauma, socio-political grievance, ideological debate, and collective memory.
3. Plausible Diffusion & WOM Mechanism	Gradual interpersonal referrals within family and community networks; diaspora expansion.	Explosive eWOM driven by critical acclaim for the climax, folkloric authenticity, and rapid multi-language dubbing.	Intense public and political polarization, organized grassroots mobilization, institutional endorsements, and tax exemptions.
4. Institutional & Distribution Scaling	Incremental screen expansion across Gujarat, domestic metros, and international diaspora centers over an extended multi-week tail.	Backed by Hombale Films' institutional distribution muscle, enabling rapid pan-India dubbed releases within two weeks of opening.	Rapid expansion to over 4,000 screens supported by high-profile public discourse and state-level policy incentives.
5. Analytical Divergences & Boundary Insights	Demonstrates growth within a linguistic niche without a major studio backing or political controversy, though exact paid vs. organic ratios remain unaudited.	Illustrates how "organic" eWOM is heavily amplified when paired with an established production house capable of immediate pan-Indian supply scaling.	Illustrates that interpersonal recommendation can be driven by socio-political identity and public controversy rather than narrative solace or folklore.

This systematic comparison demonstrates that "word-of-mouth growth" is not a monolithic phenomenon. While all three films exhibited back-loaded commercial multipliers, their diffusion pathways relied on fundamentally different psychological triggers (devotional solace vs. mythic spectacle vs. socio-political mobilization) and vastly different institutional backing.

10. Proposed Conceptual Framework and Testable Propositions

10.1 Iterative Systems Framework for Organic Audience Diffusion

Synthesizing the literature and case observations, Figure 1 outlines a multi-stage conceptual model incorporating feedback loops, supply-side moderation, and competing explanations.

Stage 1: Narrative & Perceived Value

- Story quality, emotional relevance, and cultural/spiritual meaning
- (*Leads to Stage 2*)

Stage 2: Internal Audience Response

- Narrative transportation (Green & Brock, 2000)
- Satisfaction and reflective meaning (Anderson, 1998)
- (*Transition to Stage 3 is moderated by **Expressive Utility & Social Identity***)

Stage 3: Word-of-Mouth Diffusion

- Interpersonal referrals, family advocacy, and eWOM (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004)
- (*Transition to Stage 4 is moderated by **Supply Moderator: Screen Availability & Showtimes***)

Stage 4: Discovery & Theatrical Attendance

- Reduced search friction, social proof (Cialdini, 2007), and ticket purchase

- (Feeds into the **Endogenous Feedback Loop**)

Endogenous Feedback Loop (Duan et al., 2008)

- Higher attendance and box-office milestones generate trade press coverage and further public discussion, cycling back to reinforce Stage 3 (Word-of-Mouth Diffusion) and Stage 4 (Discovery & Theatrical Attendance).

10.2 Testable Research Propositions

Because the current case study relies on secondary documentation, the relationships illustrated in the framework are formalized as five testable propositions to guide future primary empirical research:

- **Proposition 1 (Narrative Relevance to Advocacy):** Higher perceived narrative transportation and cultural alignment are positively associated with audience recommendation intention, above and beyond baseline viewer satisfaction.
- **Proposition 2 (Tie Strength and Conversion):** Interpersonal recommendations originating from high-trust familial or community networks are associated with a greater likelihood of viewing an unfamiliar regional film compared to impersonal digital advertising.
- **Proposition 3 (Endogenous WOM-Revenue Dynamics):** Greater word-of-mouth volume and dispersion are positively associated with subsequent weekly box-office revenue, even after controlling for prior-week ticket sales, release timing, and paid publicity.
- **Proposition 4 (Supply-Side Moderation):** Theatrical screening availability and showtime convenience positively moderate the relationship between word-of-mouth-induced audience interest and actual box-office attendance.
- **Proposition 5 (Cultural Boundary Conditions):** The strength of the relationship between spiritual emotional engagement and active recommendation intention varies significantly across demographic, linguistic, and cultural audience segments.

11. Alternative Explanations and Boundary Conditions

A rigorous academic evaluation must examine not only why *Laalo* may have succeeded, but also the alternative structural explanations for its trajectory and why similar low-budget films frequently fail. Five critical counterarguments must be considered:

1. **Distribution and Supply Effects:** Increased revenue across later weeks cannot be attributed solely to organic demand. As exhibitors allocate more screens, larger auditoriums, and prime-time evening slots to a film, gross collections naturally rise through expanded physical supply. Conversely, demand encourages exhibitors to add screens, creating a mutually reinforcing supply-demand cycle that secondary totals cannot disentangle without screen-level occupancy data.
2. **Reverse Causality and Media Amplification:** As demonstrated by Duan et al. (2008), box-office sales and word-of-mouth operate in a two-way feedback loop. Once *Laalo* crossed initial commercial milestones, mainstream trade publications (*The Times of India*, *The Indian Express*, *India Today*) published headlines highlighting its "sleeper hit" status. Thus, commercial success itself generated earned media publicity and online discussion, reversing the assumed causal arrow from WOM to sales.
3. **Audience Composition and Linguistic Homogeneity:** *Laalo* resonated within a specific cultural, linguistic, and devotional demographic (Gujarati-speaking audiences and Vaishnavite/Krishna-devotional communities domestically and in the diaspora). High cultural proximity within a tightly networked community can accelerate internal referrals, meaning the same narrative strategy may not generalize to heterogeneous or secular market segments.
4. **Competitive Timing and Calendar Effects:** Theatrical attendance is highly sensitive to external scheduling factors, including festival periods (such as Diwali/New Year windows in Gujarat), competing tentpole releases, and holdover availability in multiplexes. Favorable calendar windows or weak competing releases can substantially extend a film's theatrical tail independent of its narrative merit.
5. **Survivorship and Selection Bias:** Case studies of breakout sleeper hits inherently suffer from selection on the dependent variable. For every micro-budget film like *Laalo* that achieves historic multipliers, dozens of resource-constrained films with earnest spiritual or cultural storytelling—and

positive feedback from tiny opening audiences—exit theaters within their first week due to insufficient screen retention or lack of critical mass. Consequently, low promotional spending and spiritual themes must never be interpreted as a guaranteed formula for commercial viability.

12. Potential Applications Beyond the Film Industry

While the empirical observations of this study are bounded within regional cinema, the theoretical mechanisms of resource-constrained diffusion, trust networks, and value-driven advocacy offer potential applications across other sectors. Table 4 outlines six cross-domain applications, framed explicitly as transferable hypotheses rather than direct empirical findings from the film.

Table 4: Cross-Sector Transferability of Resource-Constrained Diffusion Principles

Sector / Domain	Transferable Theoretical Concept	Proposed Operational Mechanism	Suggested Empirical Metrics for Evaluation
1. Small Businesses	High core product utility under capital constraints (Stokes, 2000).	Prioritizing localized service excellence and structured peer-referral loops over broad, untargeted advertising spend.	Customer Acquisition Cost (CAC) via referral vs. paid ads; Net Promoter Score (NPS); repeat purchase rate.
2. Early-Stage Start-ups	Product-led growth and innovation diffusion (Rogers, 2003).	Reducing onboarding friction for early adopters so functional utility drives organic user-to-user advocacy.	Viral coefficient (K -factor); organic vs. paid cohort retention; referral conversion rate.
3. Nonprofits & Community Initiatives	Value-aligned storytelling and expressive utility.	Crafting culturally proximate narratives that align with community identity to mobilize voluntary grassroots participation.	Volunteer retention rates; organic peer-to-peer fundraising shares; community event turnout.
4. Scholarly Publishing & Research Software	Peer social proof in specialized networks (Cialdini, 2007).	Developing reliable methodological tools that gain adoption when researchers recommend them to laboratory colleagues and co-authors.	Cross-institutional citation velocity; organic software downloads; repeat utilization in published workflows.
5. Educational Platforms	Narrative immersion and transformative learning value.	Designing deeply engaging learning experiences where high completion satisfaction encourages voluntary peer recommendations.	Course completion rates; student-to-student referral tracking; longitudinal cohort retention.
6. Ethical Leadership & Management	Behavioral consistency and philosophical accountability (<i>karma</i> as action-consequence alignment).	Demonstrating consistent, transparent managerial actions over time to build institutional credibility rather than relying on corporate PR.	Longitudinal employee trust surveys; organizational turnover rates; cross-team psychological safety scores.

13. Limitations and Future Research Directions

13.1 Methodological Limitations

- 1. Reliance on Unaudited Secondary Reporting:** All financial metrics (such as the ₹5 lakh opening, ₹50 lakh to ₹1.2 crore budget estimates, and ₹101 crore gross) derive from trade journalism rather than independently audited distributor ledgers.
- 2. Absence of Primary Audience Data:** This study did not conduct viewer surveys, qualitative interviews, or quantitative scraping of timestamped social media posts. Consequently, psychological states such as narrative transportation and spiritual resonance remain theoretical explanations rather than directly measured variables.

3. **Endogeneity and Confounding:** Without weekly panel data on screen counts, ticket prices, and promotional outlays, the study cannot econometrically separate organic word-of-mouth effects from distribution expansion or reverse causality.
4. **Single-Case Generalizability:** As an exploratory study of an extreme outlier in Gujarati cinema (Yin, 2018), findings represent analytical generalizations to theory rather than statistical generalizations to broader motion picture populations.

13.2 Future Research Directions

Future scholarship can directly operationalize the propositions (P1–P5) developed in this paper through three empirical designs:

- **Econometric Panel Modeling:** Assembling weekly distributor logs of gross revenues, screen allocations, and timestamped social media conversation volume (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Duan et al., 2008) to test Granger causality between eWOM and theatrical expansion in regional Indian cinema.
- **Psychometric Audience Surveys:** Administering Green and Brock's (2000) Narrative Transportation Scale alongside Anderson's (1998) satisfaction-referral measures to regional cinemagoers immediately post-screening to test whether spiritual relevance mediates recommendation intent.
- **Comparative Multi-Case Designs:** Conducting a matched-pair analysis comparing commercially successful regional sleeper hits against low-budget regional films of similar thematic genres that failed at the box office, thereby mitigating survivorship bias.

14. Conclusion

The reported commercial trajectory of *Laalo – Krishna Sada Sahaayate* offers a compelling contextual case for examining how regional cultural products navigate resource constraints. Rather than treating its reported growth from a ₹5 lakh opening day to a ₹101 crore worldwide gross as self-evident proof that spiritual storytelling automatically generates box-office success, this study demonstrates the value of separating documented trade observations from theoretical mechanisms. By integrating literature on word-of-mouth feedback loops, diffusion of innovations, narrative transportation, and customer satisfaction with a transparent evidence-validation register, this paper provides a balanced, defensible framework for analyzing sleeper hits. Ultimately, while authentic cultural resonance and trusted interpersonal networks offer potent pathways for audience discovery, understanding their true impact requires accounting for distribution supply, reverse causality, and rigorous evidentiary standards.

Declarations

Funding. No funding was received.

Conflict of interest. The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data availability. Public trade documentation, industry analyses, and secondary sources examined in this study are available from their respective official repositories. Further information may be requested from the corresponding author, subject to applicable permissions.

Author contributions. Hardik Patel: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing. The sole author read and approved the final manuscript.

Acknowledgments. The author thanks the Department of Mechanical Engineering, Venus College, Gandhinagar, for institutional support. No other assistance is declared.

Ethical approval. Not applicable. The study used secondary trade reports and publicly available documents and did not enroll human participants or animals.

Declaration of Generative AI Use. Generative AI tools were used solely to improve the clarity, grammar, and presentation of the manuscript. The author reviewed and edited all AI-assisted content and accepts full responsibility for the final manuscript.

Consent for Publication. Not applicable. The study does not contain personal data, identifiable individual information, or individual-level case reports requiring consent for publication.

References

- Anderson, E. W. (1998). Customer satisfaction and word of mouth. *Journal of Service Research*, 1(1), 5–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109467059800100102>

- Baek, H., Oh, S., Yang, H. D., & Ahn, J. H. (2017). Electronic word-of-mouth, box office revenue and social media. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*, 22, 13–23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.elerap.2017.02.001>
- Cialdini, R. B. (2007). *Influence: The psychology of persuasion*. HarperCollins.
- Duan, W., Gu, B., & Whinston, A. B. (2008). The dynamics of online word-of-mouth and product sales—An empirical investigation of the movie industry. *Journal of Retailing*, 84(2), 233–242. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretai.2008.04.005>
- Godes, D., & Mayzlin, D. (2004). Using online conversations to study word-of-mouth communication. *Marketing Science*, 23(4), 545–560. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.1040.0071>
- Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000). The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of public narratives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(5), 701–721. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.5.701>
- *India Today*. (2025, December 11). How blockbuster Laalo marks the commercial advent of Gujarati cinema. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/how-blockbuster-laalo-marks-the-commercial-advent-of-gujarati-cinema-2834472-2025-12-11>
- Liu, Y. (2006). Word of mouth for movies: Its dynamics and impact on box office revenue. *Journal of Marketing*, 70(3), 74–89. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.70.3.074>
- Rogers, E. M. (2003). *Diffusion of innovations* (5th ed.). Free Press.
- Stokes, D. (2000). Entrepreneurial marketing: A conceptualisation from qualitative research. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 3(1), 47–54. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13522750010310482>
- *The Indian Express*. (2025). Biggest box office hit of 2025: How Laalo was made on a small budget and crossed major milestones. <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/regional/biggest-box-office-hit-2025-laalo-made-with-rs-10-rs-120-cr-10477525/>
- *The Times of India*. (2025, December 2). From Rs 5 lakh opening to grossing Rs 101 crore worldwide: Box office success of Laalo – Krishna Sada Sahaayate. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/gujarati/movies/news/from-rs-5-lakh-opening-to-grossing-rs-101-crore-worldwide-box-office-success-how-laalo-krishna-sada-sahaayate-became-the-biggest-sleeper-hit-on-rs-50-lakh-budget/articleshow/125711955.cms>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.