



The Corporate-Wellness Complex in South Indian Cinema: A Critical Analysis of Shankar's I and Mohan Raja's Velaikkaran

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Abstract

This paper examines how contemporary South Indian cinema critiques the modern corporate-wellness complex by deconstructing the intersections of lifestyle marketing, bodily commodification, and predatory consumer manipulation. Focusing on two landmark Tamil films, Shankar's *I* (2015) and Mohan Raja's *Velaikkaran* (2017), we analyse how the multi-billion-dollar fitness, cosmetics, and Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) industries are reframed as spaces of systemic ethical failure. Utilising a Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) methodology, this study evaluates cinematic narratives through the lens of established business frameworks, including Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, Karl Marx's *Commodity Fetishism*, and Kevin Lane Keller's *Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Model*. The analysis explores two primary corporate strategies: first, how the film "*I*" exposes the extraction of brand equity through the exploitation of brand ambassadors and the hyperreal fabrication of the "manufactured body"; and second, how "*Velaikkaran*" deconstructs predatory market segmentation, deceptive product positioning, and the strategic weaponisation of information asymmetry to monetise consumer vulnerability and maternal guilt. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates how regional cinema serves as a sociological mirror for commerce scholars, illustrating the long-term operational risks of corporate ethical myopia and highlighting how the pursuit of short-term profit maximisation can lead to catastrophic brand sabotage, regulatory backlashes, and systemic consumer boycotts.

Keywords: *Corporate Wellness Complex, Marketing Ethics, Information Asymmetry, Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE), Deceptive Positioning, Predatory Market Segmentation, Consumer Vulnerability, Qualitative Content Analysis.*



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1. Introduction: The New Corporate Villain

For decades, mainstream Tamil and Malayalam cinema framed corporate villainy through grand, external socio-economic threats: land grabbing, industrial pollution, or the exploitation of agrarian labour. However, the late capitalism of the 21st century has introduced a more insidious hegemon - the corporate-wellness complex. Health, nutrition, and physical appearance are no longer merely organic biological states; they have been aggressively re-engineered into commercial commodities.

This paper provides a comparative textual and theoretical analysis of two seminal texts that expose this phenomenon: [Shankar's *I* \(2015\)](#) and [Mohan Raja's *Velaikkaran* \(2017\)](#). While *I* approaches the wellness industry through a hyper-stylised, techno-thriller lens focusing on physical aesthetics and body politics, *Velaikkaran* operates as a grounded social drama targeting the deceptive packaging of everyday

nutrition by FMCG conglomerates. Together, these films expose how modern marketing weaponizes consumer aspirations and vulnerabilities, turning the pursuit of health into a self-destructive cycle.

2. The Manufactured Body vs. the Toxic Product: A Theoretical Inquiry

To understand how these films critique the wellness complex, we must explore the tension they depict between authentic human needs and corporate fabrications.

2.1. Body Politics and Hyper reality in "*I*"

In *I*, the protagonist Lingesan transitions from a localised, community-driven space of physical health, a traditional weightlifting gym rooted in raw labour, to the hyper-elite, corporate-sponsored world of media modelling. His body changes from a tool of functional athletic strength into an aesthetic commodity designed to drive sales.



Fig: 1

This transition is best understood through Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*. Baudrillard argues that late capitalism replaces reality with signs and symbols, creating a "hyperreality" where the simulation of a thing becomes more real than the thing itself.

Baudrillardian Shift in *I*: The fitness and beauty industries do not market actual health; they market the sign of health (flawless skin, chiselled abdominal muscles, airbrushed symmetry).

When Lingesan becomes the face of elite brands, his physical self is digitised, edited, and detached from biological reality.

The corporate entities do not care about his actual physical well-being; they care about his viability as a marketing vector.

The tragic turning point of the film, where rivals inject Lingesan with the "H4 Influenza" virus, causing horrific physical deformity, serves as a literal, physical manifestation of corporate violence. The very industry that promised ultimate physical perfection systematically dismantles and deforms his organic biology. His biological destruction mirrors the psychological destruction of the consumer: chasing an unattainable, simulated ideal of wellness ends in the destruction of the authentic self.

2.2. Commodity Fetishism and FMCG Deception in *Velaikkaran*

If *I* deals with the outward aesthetic of wellness, *Velaikkaran* targets its internal, metabolic foundation: the food industry. The film follows Arivu, a youth from a Chennai slum who secures a job as a sales executive for a major FMCG company, Neon Foods, only to discover that the products he sells, specifically health supplements and food items marketed for infants and families, are systematically laced with toxic adulterants to maximise profit margins.

This corporate dynamic perfectly illustrates Karl Marx's concept of Commodity Fetishism. Marx posited that under capitalism, the social relationships and human labour involved in production are obscured; instead,

the final product on the shelf appears as an autonomous, magical object divorced from its origins.

Velaikkaran strips away this fetishism. It explicitly shows how the corporate structure hides the material reality of production:

- **The Labour Contradiction:** The factory workers and sales agents who manufacture and push these "premium health products" are themselves trapped in poverty, unable to afford the very wellness they package.
- **The Corporate Alchemist:** The corporate antagonist, Kasi, views the market through a purely transactional lens, where food is not sustenance but a unit of capital.



Fig: 2

Through Arivu's investigative journey, the film exposes how "health food" is an ideological construct. The product is fetishised as a source of vitality, while its material reality is slow, corporate-sanctioned chemical poisoning.

3. The Semiotics of Advertising and Deceptive Branding

Both filmmakers deploy "text-within-a-text" mechanics, dedicating significant screen time to dismantling the literal mechanics of television advertisements, brand positioning, and consumer psychology.

3.1. Analysing the Internal Ads of *I*

Director Shankar uses hyper-vibrant, high-budget musical sequences and fictional ad campaigns to critique how advertising divorces a product from its material function. We see Lingesan endorsing everything from premium perfumes to protein supplements. The visual grammar of these sequences mimics real-world global luxury marketing: high contrast, exotic

locales, and Eurocentric standards of beauty. The underlying message of these internal ads is clear: the product is empty, but the lifestyle it promises is intoxicating.

When the corporate masters turn on Lingesan, the film subverts these images. The same glossy aesthetic that once elevated him is used to highlight his replacement, demonstrating that in the wellness economy, the human worker is entirely disposable. The brand is eternal; the human body is merely temporary fuel for the marketing machine.

3.2. The Psychology of Consumer Manipulation in *Velaikkaran*

In *Velaikkaran*, the critique of advertising is delivered through a cold, intellectual breakdown of marketing strategies, largely voiced by the corporate strategist Madhavan (played by Fahad Faasil). Madhavan acts as the dark architect of demand creation, explicitly detailing how corporate wellness marketing preys on human vulnerability.

Table: 1

Marketing Vector	Psychological Trigger	Corporate Operational Strategy
Maternal Guilt	Fear of inadequate parenting	Marketing low-nutrient health drinks as "essential for a child's brain development."
Anxiety of Scarcity	Fear of disease and contamination	Rebranding basic agricultural goods (like salt or flour) as "triple-refined" or "fortified" to render raw, natural alternatives unhygienic.
Artificial Demand	The need for identity-based buying	Creating a problem (e.g., "toxins") to sell a proprietary, corporate solution ("detox wellness packages").

The film deconstructs the semiotics of corporate language. Words like organic, natural, herbal, and scientifically proven are stripped of their scientific validity and revealed to be semantic cloaks designed to bypass consumer scepticism.

Madhavan's marketing philosophy demonstrates that the goal of the FMCG wellness complex is not to cure anxiety, but to manufacture it. By convincing the middle and working classes that their traditional diets are unsafe, the corporation creates a permanent dependency on manufactured goods.

4. Socio-Economic Stratification and Class Politics

A critical commonality between *I* and *Velaikkaran* is their exploration of how wellness is stratified by social class. Both films argue that under late capitalism, true health and physical safety have become class privileges, while the working class is forced to bear the biological cost of corporate greed.

4.1. The Subversion of Working-Class Strength in *I*

In *I*, Lingesan's initial ecosystem is the local Pattarai gym, a space populated by

working-class men who view bodybuilding as a collective, organic pursuit. Strength here is built through inexpensive, local diets and mutual support.

When Lingesan is pulled into the corporate wellness sphere, his body is gentrified. He is subjected to strict, expensive chemical regimens and isolated from his community. The corporate executives who manipulate him view his working-class roots with condescension. His subsequent biological fall from a global modelling icon back to a hidden, broken figure symbolises the extraction of working-class vitality by elite commercial entities. The corporation drains his raw physical labour, repackages it to sell products to the masses, and discards his broken physical shell when it is no longer profitable.

4.2. The Spatial and Nutritional Divide in *Velaikkaran*

Velaikkaran builds its entire narrative arc on spatial and economic segregation. The film constantly contrasts the cramped, hyper-dense slums of Chennai with the sterile, glass-walled high-rises of Neon Foods.



This structural divide highlights a deep systemic irony: the slum residents are the ones who physically mix, package, and ship the

premium health foods, yet they are economically barred from consuming unadulterated, safe nutrition. They are forced to buy cheaper, lower-

grade, or corrupted leftovers that cause chronic health issues within their own communities.

Mohan Raja argues that corporate marketing does not just sell food; it enforces a system of biochemical oppression. The wealthy consume pure, authentic wellness, while the working class is fed slow poison disguised as affordable sustenance.

5. Consumer Vulnerability and Marketing Ethics

I and *Velaikkaran* serve as extreme case studies for the breakdown of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and the deployment of predatory marketing mixes. They illustrate how

corporations exploit Information Asymmetry, a market condition where manufacturers possess critical product data (such as toxicity or chemical composition) that is deliberately withheld from the consumer.

5.1. Brand Image Co-Creation and Perceived Value in *I*

In contemporary marketing theory, a brand's value is not just built by the company; it is co-created through the cultural meaning attached to the brand ambassador. In *I*, the FMCG and cosmetics brands exploit Lingesan's raw, authentic public persona to build Brand Equity.

Table: 2

Lingesan's Authentic Body Culture + Corporate Capital ➡ High Perceived Brand Equity

➡ (Consumer Trust Is Exploited)

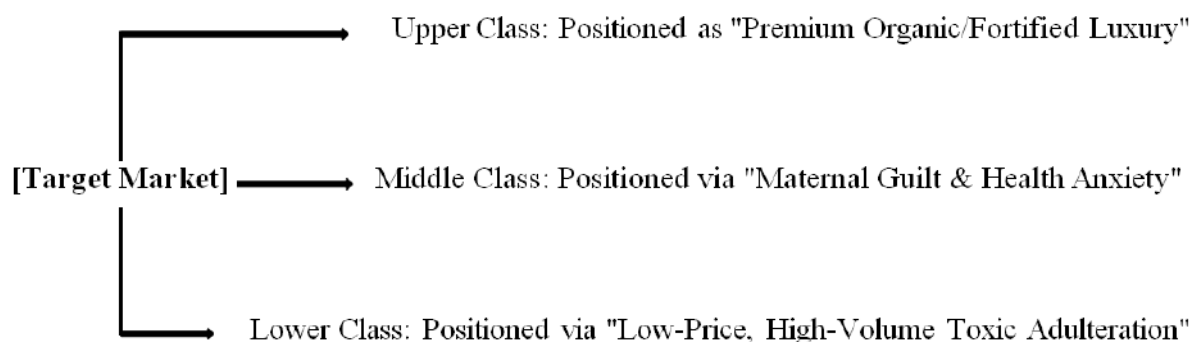
Using Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Model, the study analyses how the corporate entities in the film manipulate the pyramid of consumer brand perception:

- Brand Imagery: The corporate strategists transform Lingesan from a local athlete into a symbol of cosmopolitan luxury. They use his physical form to create a psychological association between their products and social mobility.
- Consumer Judgments: Consumers bypass rational quality assessments because they trust the ambassador's perceived fitness.
- The Ethical Failure: The film highlights a major risk in corporate governance: when a brand ambassador is viewed merely as a disposable asset. When

Lingesan refuses to comply with unethical corporate demands, the executives do not just terminate his contract they orchestrate his physical destruction to protect the artificial brand image they created.

5.2. Deceptive Positioning and Market Segmentation in *Velaikkaran*

Mohan Raja's *Velaikkaran* is an excellent study in Predatory Market Segmentation and Deceptive Positioning. The antagonist, Madhavan, acts as a textbook Marketing Director who uses consumer insights not to satisfy real needs, but to engineer artificial demand through psychological triggers.



This showcases a clear violation of the American Marketing Association (AMA) Code of Ethics, which demands transparency, honesty, and fairness. The film highlights three specific corporate strategies:

- **Exploiting Emotional Vulnerability (Maternal Guilt):** Neon Foods explicitly targets mothers by positioning low-nutrient or adulterated health drinks as essential for child development. In marketing terms, this turns a low-involvement product into a high-anxiety purchase.
- **Artificial Product Differentiation:** The corporation takes basic, unbranded commodities (like salt or flour) and applies minor cosmetic alterations (like whitening agents). They then use aggressive packaging to position them as "triple-refined" or "pure." This justifies a premium price tier while rendering cheaper, raw alternatives unhygienic in the consumer's mind.
- **The Double-Sided Market Portfolio:** The film exposes how a single conglomerate can manage two vastly different product pipelines under different brand names: selling high-priced, clean wellness products to high-income groups, while dumping cheap, chemical-laden, adulterated products onto lower-income communities to drive volume.

6. Conclusion

Shankar's *I* and Mohan Raja's *Velaikkaran* represent a vital turning point in how South Indian cinema engages with corporate hegemony. By moving past the traditional tropes of financial corruption, these films focus on the biological frontier of exploitation. Through the lenses of Baudrillard's hyperreality and Marxist commodity fetishism, they demonstrate that the modern wellness and marketing industries do not preserve life, they colonise it.

Whether it is the physical destruction of the model's body in *I* or the systemic poisoning of the consumer's diet in *Velaikkaran*, these texts warn that when health is subordinated to market logic, the human body itself becomes the ultimate site of corporate extraction. They challenge the audience to look past the glossy aesthetic of the wellness billboard and look closely at the material, socio-economic costs of what we consume and aspire to be.

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