



THE IMPACT OF COMMERCIAL HELAWOOD CINEMA ON AUDIENCE SOCIAL AWARENESS: A CASE STUDY OF PASSPORT 2024 FROM A SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE

K.A. Kavishal Rasintha Keeragala

School of Social Work, National Institute of Social Development, Seeduwa, Sri Lanka

Email: kavishalr02@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examines whether and how a commercially successful Sinhala film can raise social awareness among its audience. Using the 2024 film *Passport* (directed by Chris Antony) as a single case study, the research employed a mixed-methods design: a structured questionnaire with 80 viewers immediately after screenings in Negombo and semi-structured interviews with five key stakeholders (director, lead actor, renowned film critic, theatre manager, and a senior government minister). Findings reveal that 71.3% of respondents reported a significant increase in awareness about illegal migration risks, 75% gained new insight into bureaucratic corruption, and 68.8% felt the film changed their perspective on gender-based vulnerabilities faced by female migrants. Qualitative data confirmed that the film's documentary-style realism, authentic location shooting, and strong character development were the primary vehicles for these effects. Although the sample size is modest and limited to one geographic area, the convergence of quantitative and qualitative evidence supports the conclusion that carefully crafted commercial Helawood cinema can function as an effective public-education tool when viewed through a social-work lens. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for social workers, filmmakers, and policy makers.

KEYWORDS: Helawood cinema, social awareness, illegal migration, gender inequality, social learning theory, mixed-methods research, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Sri Lankan commercial cinema – popularly termed “Helawood” – has historically been criticised for prioritising entertainment and box-office revenue over social content (Dissanayake & Gokulsing, 2018; Senevirathne, 2024). However, since the

early 2010s a new wave of commercially viable films has begun tackling serious societal issues such as human trafficking, corruption, domestic violence, and irregular migration while still attracting large audiences (Kariyawasam, 2023). *Passport 2024*, which earned substantial box-office success in late 2024 (National Film Corporation of Sri Lanka, 2024), represents this trend: it is a mainstream action-thriller built around the real-life dangers of illegal migration to Europe.

Despite anecdotal claims that such films “open people’s eyes,” very few empirical studies have measured whether audiences actually become more aware of the depicted issues or whether any attitude change occurs (Rathnayake, 2024; Kariyawasam, 2023). From a social-work perspective this gap is critical, because cinema reaches population segments that formal awareness campaigns rarely touch, especially rural and working-class youth who are most at risk of falling victim to human-trafficking networks (International Organization for Migration, 2023).

The present study therefore asked three concrete questions:

1. To what extent does *Passport 2024* increase viewers’ knowledge and concern about illegal migration, corruption, and gender-specific vulnerabilities?
2. Which cinematic techniques contribute most to audience awareness?
3. How can social workers and community organisations capitalise on such films for preventive education?

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986), particularly the mechanisms of observational learning, vicarious reinforcement, and self-efficacy. When viewers see characters suffer the consequences of unsafe migration or witness successful resistance against corrupt officials, they experience vicarious reinforcement that can alter risk perception and behavioural intention (Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Singhal & Rogers, 2012). This framework has already been applied successfully to Indian popular cinema (Sood et al., 2017; Wang & Singhal, 2016) but rarely to Sri Lankan commercial films (Senevirathne, 2024).

Methodology

Research Design and Setting

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) was used. Quantitative data were collected first to measure awareness change, followed by qualitative interviews to explain the mechanisms.

Participants and Sampling

Quantitative phase: 80 viewers were recruited immediately after screenings of *Passport 2024* at Aqua Lite Cinema, Negombo, between October and December 2024

using Convenience sampling combined with systematic selection at the cinema exit (every third person leaving the hall). Qualitative phase: purposive maximum-variation sampling of five key informants (film director Chris Antony, lead actor Jagath Chamila, critic Bhoopathy Nalin, theatre manager Mohendran Moga, and Prof. HINIDUMA Sunil Senevi – Minister of Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs).

Instruments

The questionnaire contained 28 items (15 demographic/viewing habits, 13 five-point Likert items on awareness and attitude change) adapted from Singhal et al. (2004) and Wang & Singhal (2016) and pre-tested with 20 university students (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.89$). Interviews lasted 45–75 minutes and were fully transcribed.

Data Analysis

Quantitative: descriptive and inferential statistics (SPSS 27). Qualitative: thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2021) using NVivo 14.

Results

Quantitative Findings (n=80)

Table 1

Selected awareness and attitude items (percentage who “agree” or “strongly agree”)

Item	%
This film made me realise how dangerous illegal migration routes are	71.3
I now better understand how government officers exploit migrants	75.0
I learned that women face extra risks when migrating illegally	68.8
The film changed my view about the “Euro Dream”	66.3
I would now advise a friend against using an agent for foreign jobs	62.5
I feel more confident to report corruption if I see it	58.8

Independent-samples t-tests showed no significant gender differences, but university-educated respondents scored significantly higher on all awareness items ($p < 0.01$).

Qualitative Findings

Four major themes emerged:

1. **Documentary-style realism and authenticity:** Both director and critic emphasised the deliberate use of real locations (Katunayake airport, migrant routes in Mannar), non-professional actors playing victims, and actual news

footage. Audiences repeatedly used phrases like “it felt like a real story” and “I know people exactly like that.”

2. **Emotional transportation and identification:** Viewers reported strong parasocial relationships with the female protagonist who is cheated by an agent and sexually exploited. Female respondents in particular said they “cried throughout” and “felt it could happen to my sister.”
3. **Corruption portrayed as systemic rather than individual:** The film shows police, immigration officers, and politicians colluding – a portrayal the Minister interviewee called “uncomfortably accurate.” 75% of respondents agreed this depiction increased their distrust of unchecked state power.
4. **Call for complementary action:** All stakeholders stressed that cinema alone cannot change behaviour; post-screening discussions, social-media campaigns, and community screenings led by NGOs or social workers are needed.

Discussion

The convergence of evidence strongly supports Bandura’s theory in a Sri Lankan commercial-cinema context: realistic portrayals + emotional involvement → increased issue salience → heightened self-efficacy and behavioural intention. The 71.3% who said the film made illegal routes seem dangerous is remarkably close to findings from Indian entertainment-education studies using similar methodology (Sood et al., 2017: 68–74%).

The study’s limitations are acknowledged: the sample is convenience-based and restricted to one cinema in one town; longitudinal data on actual behaviour change are absent; and self-reported awareness may suffer from social-desirability bias. Nevertheless, the consistency across 80 questionnaires and five expert interviews provides reasonable confidence that *Passport 2024* did produce measurable short-term awareness gains.

For social-work practice the implications are clear and actionable:

- Community social workers and NGOs should organise group screenings followed by facilitated discussions (a model already proven effective with Indian films – Singhal & Rogers, 2012).
- Short video clips from the film can be used in pre-departure training programmes run by the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment.
- Film-makers should be encouraged (through tax incentives or awards) to include resource helplines in end credits, as successfully done in India and Mexico.

Conclusion

Commercial Helawood cinema is no longer only “time-pass.” When directors combine entertainment with authentic social content, the medium becomes a powerful, low-cost public-education tool. *Passport 2024* demonstrates that a profitable film can simultaneously entertain and educate, producing statistically and thematically significant increases in audience awareness about illegal migration, corruption, and gender vulnerability. Social workers now have an evidence-based opportunity to partner with the film industry to scale prevention efforts that traditional campaigns struggle to reach.

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