

An Analysis of the Movie “Mukundan Unni Associates” based on Antisocial Personality Traits

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Abstract

The present study explores the portrayal of antisocial personality traits in the Malayalam film Mukundan Unni Associates (2022) using a quantitative content analysis approach. The film depicts the life of Mukundan Unni, an ambitious lawyer whose pursuit of professional success is marked by unethical conduct, manipulation, and emotional detachment. The primary aim of the study was to examine how the protagonist's behavior reflects core features of antisocial personality traits as outlined in the DSM-5. The film was systematically analyzed by identifying and coding key scenes, dialogues, and interpersonal interactions associated with ten psychological variables, including failure to conform to social norms, deceitfulness, lack of empathy, lack of remorse, superficial charm, manipulativeness, reckless disregard for safety, grandiose sense of self, aggressiveness, and rationalization of unethical acts. Frequency and percentage distributions were used to assess the prominence of each trait. Findings revealed that failure to conform to social norms was the most dominant trait, followed by superficial charm and manipulativeness. Emotional deficits such as lack of empathy and remorse were also evident, while overt aggression was minimal, suggesting a high-functioning and covert antisocial profile. The study concludes that the film offers a compelling cinematic representation of antisocial personality traits and demonstrates how socially rewarded success can normalize deviant behavior.

Keywords: Antisocial Personality Traits, Moral Disengagement, Professional Ethics, Aggressiveness, Manipulation, Superficial Charm, Lack Of Empathy.

Introduction

Mukundan Unni Associates is a 2022 dark comedy-drama directed by Abhinav Sunder Nayak. The film features Vineeth Sreenivasan in the lead role, supported by a talented ensemble cast including Suraj Venjaramoodu, Aarsha Chandini Baiju, Tanvi Ram, and Jagadeesh. The narrative follows Mukundan Unni, an ambitious and ethically questionable lawyer who will go to any lengths to succeed, often employing immoral tactics. The film delves into themes such as greed, manipulation, and the repercussions of unrestrained ambition. What sets it apart is its distinct storytelling style, dark humour, and a daring depiction of a protagonist with overtly antisocial traits. Vineeth Sreenivasan received widespread critical acclaim for his compelling portrayal of a character rarely depicted in mainstream

Malayalam cinema, one who is both intriguing and unsettling. The film was lauded for its clever writing, satirical layers, and unconventional narrative structure. It achieved commercial success and was celebrated for boldly venturing into the rarely explored territory of dark comedy in Indian cinema.

Antisocial personality traits are characterized by a persistent pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others. These traits often include deceitfulness, impulsivity, irritability, aggressiveness, consistent irresponsibility, and a lack of remorse for one's actions (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). The hallmark of antisocial traits is a profound lack of empathy and an exploitative interpersonal style. Such individuals often use charm or manipulation to achieve personal gain, showing little concern for the consequences of their actions on others (Blair, 2010). Research also links antisocial traits to impairments in emotional processing, particularly in recognizing fear or distress in others, which may contribute to their callous behavior (Marsh & Blair, 2008). These emotional and cognitive deficits differentiate antisocial traits from mere rule-breaking, or rebelliousness seen in typical adolescence. The presence of antisocial traits is also associated with increased risk-taking and poor long-term planning, which can lead to professional, legal, and interpersonal difficulties. Such individuals may appear confident or charismatic on the surface, but their underlying motivations are often self-serving and harmful to others. When these traits are severe and pervasive, they can significantly disrupt social and occupational functioning, warranting clinical intervention. (Patrick et al., 2009).

Individuals displaying these traits may engage in manipulative or criminal behavior and often fail to conform to social norms. Antisocial tendencies typically emerge in adolescence and may continue into adulthood, forming the basis of antisocial personality disorder (ASPD). Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD) is characterized by a pervasive disregard for and violation of the rights of others, beginning in childhood or early adolescence and continuing into adulthood. According to the DSM-5, individuals with ASPD exhibit at least three of several key behaviors: failure to conform to social norms (such as engaging in acts that could lead to arrest), deceitfulness (through lying or conning others for personal gain), impulsivity, irritability or aggressiveness, reckless disregard for the safety of self or others, consistent irresponsibility in maintaining work or financial obligations, and a lack of remorse for harm caused to others. The disorder is typically diagnosed in individuals who are at least 18 years old, with evidence of conduct disorder emerging before the age of 15. Importantly, the observer should make sure that the occurrence of ASPD behaviors is not exclusively during schizophrenia or bipolar disorder (DSM 5, 2013).

A key feature of ASPD is the central role of deceit and manipulation. Individuals with this disorder often engage in conning or lying for personal gain or pleasure, showing little regard for the feelings or well-being of others. While ASPD is sometimes referred to as psychopathy or sociopathy, the diagnostic criteria focus on behavioral patterns rather than emotional or interpersonal traits. Clinicians diagnosing ASPD often find it useful to gather information from collateral sources such as family members or legal records since individuals with the disorder may downplay or conceal their behaviors. The lifelong pattern of violating societal rules and norms, combined with the absence of remorse or accountability, makes ASPD one of the most challenging personality disorders to treat or manage (DSM 5, 2013).

Mukundan Unni Associates is a dark comedy film that follows the journey of Mukundan Unni, an ambitious lawyer desperate for success. Directed by Abhinav Sunder Nayak, the movie begins with Mukundan Unni, played by Vineeth Sreenivasan, struggling to establish himself in the legal profession. Despite his meticulous nature and relentless pursuit of opportunities, his career is stagnant. Determined

to rise at any cost, he gradually resorts to unethical and morally questionable tactics to get ahead, showcasing a sharp contrast between his outward appearance of professionalism and his inner ruthlessness. As the story unfolds, Mukundan Unni engages in a series of manipulative acts, conning people and using deceit to climb the social and professional ladder. From small lies to more significant legal and moral transgressions, his actions become increasingly bold. His lack of remorse and disregard for the consequences of his actions highlight his morally bankrupt nature. The film paints a grim picture of how ambition, when unchecked by ethics, can lead individuals to make decisions that harm others without a second thought. The dark humour in the film is a crucial element that sets it apart. It balances the grim narrative with moments of irony and satire, offering sharp commentary on societal values. Mukundan Unni's cold, calculating behavior, paired with his seemingly mundane outward persona, makes for a protagonist who is as fascinating as he is unsettling. His interactions with the other characters, especially his peers and colleagues, reveal the lengths to which he will go to outmaneuver those around him. In the end, Mukundan Unni's relentless pursuit of success brings him material gains, but at the cost of his humanity. His transformation from a struggling lawyer to a morally devoid individual serves as a critique of the modern-day obsession with success, fame, and power. Mukundan Unni Associates stands out for its unconventional storytelling, dark comedic elements, and Vineeth Sreenivasan's standout performance in a role that is a departure from his usual characters. The film raises thought-provoking questions about ambition, ethics, and the consequences of self-serving choices in a competitive.

Psychological Variables in the Movie

Failure to Conform to Social Norms

Consistently violating laws and societal expectations is a hallmark of antisocial personality disorder (ASPD). Individuals repeatedly engage in behaviors that warrant arrest or social sanction (APA, 2013). This includes criminal acts such as theft, assault, vandalism, or fraud, often committed without guilt or regard for consequences. Such individuals show a persistent disregard for cultural norms, legal standards, and authority figures. Their behavior is not occasional or impulsive but reflects a chronic pattern that begins in adolescence and often continues into adulthood (Paris, 2005). These actions are frequently driven by a need for stimulation, dominance, or personal gain, even at the cost of others' rights and safety (Hare, 2003).

Deceitfulness

Deceitfulness, as indicated by repeated lying, use of aliases, or conning others for personal profit or pleasure. Can be seen as a tendency to be dishonest in one's interactions with others. This includes repeated lying, use of aliases, or conning others for personal gain. It reflects a disregard for honesty and a manipulative interpersonal style (Hare, 2003). Deceitfulness, as indicated by repeated lying, use of aliases, or conning others for personal profit or pleasure. (APA, 2013).

Aggressiveness

Aggressiveness refers to a pattern of irritability and physical violence, often expressed through repeated fights or assaults, reflecting poor impulse control and a disregard for others' safety (APA, 2013). Studies indicate that such aggression may stem from abnormalities in brain areas like the amygdala and prefrontal cortex, which are responsible for emotion regulation and decision-making (Raine, 2002). Furthermore, they may fail to learn from past consequences, perpetuating a pattern of hostility and violence across social, occupational, and interpersonal domains.

Lack of Remorse

Lack of remorse is defined as an absence of guilt or regret after harming others, often accompanied by rationalization or indifference toward the consequences of one's actions (APA,2013). Lack of remorse is a defining trait of antisocial personality disorder (ASPD), marked by a persistent failure to feel guilt or regret after causing harm to others. Individuals exhibiting this trait often show no emotional reaction to the suffering they inflict, and they may dismiss or rationalize their actions instead of acknowledging faults (APA,2013).

Lack of Empathy

Lack of empathy refers to inability to recognize, understand, or care about the emotions and needs of others. People exhibiting this trait often fail to emotionally respond to others suffering and may view interpersonal relationships as opportunities for exploitation rather than connection (APA,2013). They typically display callousness and indifference toward the feelings of others, which contributes to manipulative and harmful behavior without guilt or concern. Empirical studies suggest that this emotional detachment may be due to deficits in brain regions such as the amygdala and ventromedial prefrontal cortex, which are associated with empathy and moral reasoning (Blair, 2007).

Superficial charm

Superficial charm refers to a glib, insincere, and often charismatic interpersonal style, commonly observed in individuals with psychopathic or antisocial traits. People exhibiting this trait often appear confident, articulate, and socially skilled, but their charm lacks emotional depth or authenticity (Cleckley,1988). This charm is typically used as a tool to manipulate or deceive others, masking underlying callousness and antisocial intentions. While they may initially come across as warm and engaging, these individuals often lack genuine concern for others and use charm strategically to gain trust or advantage (Hare, 2003).

Manipulativeness

Manipulativeness refers to a calculated and exploitative interpersonal style in which individuals use deceit, persuasion, or influence to control others for personal gain. manipulation is often chronic and intentional, serving goals such as dominance, financial benefit, or emotional control (Hare, 2003). These individuals tend to disregard the rights and autonomy of others, viewing people as tools to be used rather than individuals with their own needs and boundaries (APA, 2013).

Reckless disregard for safety or self of others

Reckless disregard for the safety of oneself or others is a prominent behavioral feature in individuals with antisocial personality disorder (ASPD). This trait is characterized by a consistent pattern of engaging in dangerous, high-risk behaviors without concern for potential harm, whether to themselves or those around them (APA,2013). Examples include reckless driving, substance abuse, physical altercations, and irresponsible sexual behavior. Such individuals often minimize or ignore the consequences of their actions, reflecting a broader disregard for social norms and the well-being of others (Black et al., 2010).

Grandiose sense of self

A grandiose sense of self refers to an inflated and unrealistic perception of one's importance, abilities, and superiority over others. This trait is commonly observed in individuals with antisocial or psychopathic tendencies and is often accompanied by arrogance, entitlement, and expectation of special treatment (Hare, 2003). These individuals may exaggerate their achievements, underestimate others, and display contempt for those they perceive as inferior (APA,2013). In psychopathy, grandiosity serves as a

core interpersonal feature that allows the individual to rationalize manipulative, exploitative, or even criminal behavior, under the belief that rules do not apply to them (Patrick et al., 2009). Research suggests that this exaggerated self-view is linked to low empathy and poor emotional regulation, contributing to a lack of remorse and disregard for social norms (Miller et al., 2011).

Rationalizing unethical acts

Rationalizing unethical acts refers to the cognitive process by which individuals justify immoral or socially harmful behaviors in a way that preserves their self-image and reduces feelings of guilt. This is often achieved by minimizing the consequences, blaming the victim, or redefining the behavior as acceptable under the circumstances (Bandura, 1999). This cognitive mechanism enables them to minimize the seriousness of their actions, blame the victim, or reframe harmful conduct as necessary or deserved. In psychopathy and ASPD, such rationalizations support persistent patterns of manipulation, deceit, and exploitation by allowing individuals to ignore the emotional and ethical impact of their behavior (Hare, 2003). This self-serving justification process, known as "moral disengagement," reduces internal conflict and fosters repeated unethical behavior without remorse. (APA, 2013).

Method

Aim

To study Anti-social personality traits portrayed in the movie "Mukundan Unni Associates" directed by Abhinav Sunder Nayak.

Objectives

1. Familiarize with content analysis method of the research
2. To understand how the movie "Mukundan Unni Associates" explores antisocial personality traits.

Sample

The movie "Mukundan Unni Associates" directed by Abhinav Sunder Nayak

Coding scheme

To develop a coding scheme, several coding categories were developed based on the behavior and personality traits of the main character in the film. The categories chosen are failure to conform to social norms, deceitfulness, aggressiveness, lack of remorse, lack of empathy, superficial charm, manipulateness, reckless disregard for the safety of self or others, grandiose sense of self, and rationalizing unethical acts. These categories were selected to systematically identify and analyze antisocial personality traits as reflected through the character's actions, dialogues, and interactions throughout the film.

Procedure

The researcher watched the film "Mukundan Unni Associates". The researcher noted and analyzed the anti-social personality traits portrayed in the film. The researcher made a column based on those anti-social personality traits. watch the film, then familiarize the characteristics of anti-social personality traits. focusing on the protagonist Mukundan Unni's behaviors. Identify key scenes where his traits, such as failure to conform to social norms, deceitfulness, aggressiveness, lack of remorse, lack of empathy, superficial charm, manipulateness, reckless disregard for safety of others, Grandiose sense of self, Rationalizing unethical acts. Develop a coding scheme based on anti-social personality traits and systematically analyze dialogues, behaviors, and interactions with others. Compare these portrayals with psychological literature on anti-social personality traits noting any exaggerations or accuracy. Finally,

interpret the findings, identifying themes and reflecting on how the portrayal aligns with or deviates from clinical realities.

Result and Discussion

Results of content analysis are included in tables. The tables are given below.

Table 1
Psychological Variables and their frequencies in the movie

Sl. No	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
1	Failure to Conform to Social Norms	18	19.14
2	Deceitfulness	9	9.57
3	Aggressiveness	3	3.19
4	Lack of Remorse	7	7.45
5	Lack of Empathy	8	8.51
6	Superficial charm	16	17.02
7	Manipulativeness	13	13.83
8	Reckless disregard for safety or self of others	9	9.57
9	Grandiose sense of self	6	6.38
10	Rationalizing unethical acts	5	5.32

Figure 1

Frequency Distribution of Antisocial Personality Traits Portrayed in Mukundan Unni Associates

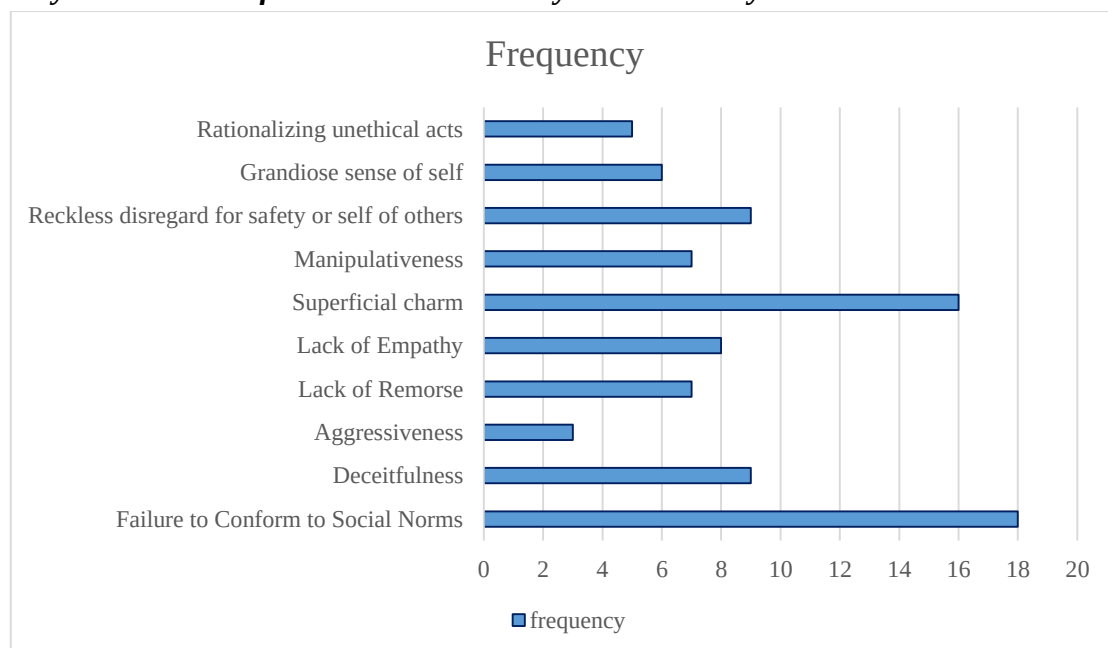


Table 1 shows observed frequency and percentage distribution of ten variables of the movie. These variables include failure to conform to social norms, deceitfulness, aggressiveness, lack of remorse, lack

of empathy, superficial charm, manipulateness, reckless disregard for safety of others, grandiose sense of self, rationalizing unethical acts. Among these the most prominent trait was failure to conform to social Norms, which accounted for 19.14% of the total observed behaviors. This was followed by superficial charm (17.02%), indicating the frequent use of charm and charisma to deceive or manipulate others.

Manipulateness emerged as the third most common trait, representing 13.83% of occurrences. Traits like deceitfulness and reckless disregard for the safety of self or others were each observed in 9.57% of cases, suggesting a strong tendency toward dishonesty and risk-taking behavior. Lack of empathy was recorded in 8.51%, while lack of remorse appeared in 7.45% of instances, reflecting significant emotional and moral detachment. Grandiose sense of Self and rationalizing unethical acts accounted for 6.38% and 5.32% respectively, indicating signs of narcissistic self-perception and justification of unethical behavior. Aggressiveness was the least frequently observed trait, with only 3.19%, suggesting that the character's antisocial behavior was more manipulative and covert rather than physically violent.

In the movie Mukkudhanunni Associates the protagonist Mukundan Unni exhibits pronounced antisocial tendencies. Among the traits observed, the most prominent trait observed is his failure to conform to social norms, demonstrated through repeated legal and ethical violations. The character's repeated disregard for societal rules and ethical conduct stands out strongly. His frequent violations of laws, norms, and social expectations illustrate a consistent failure to conform to one of the core diagnostic features of antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) as defined by the DSM-5 (APA, 2013).

The nonconformity is not impulsive but rather strategic, reflecting calculated choices aimed at personal gain, which aligns with the literature on high-functioning individuals with psychopathic traits (Hare, 2003). Closely accompanying this disregard is the character's use of superficial charm to influence others. feature of the character's manipulation is his superficial charm. He often presents himself as calm, confident, and composed, using social skills to disarm others. This aligns with Cleckley's (1988) notion of the "mask of sanity". Mask of Sanity refers to the superficial charm, intelligence, and normalcy that psychopaths project, which hides their deep emotional deficits and antisocial tendencies. where individuals with psychopathic traits appear socially well-adjusted while hiding a lack of emotional depth. (Cleckley, 1988). His charisma, eloquence, and apparent confidence function as tools for manipulation rather than as expressions of genuine warmth or connection. In the film, this charm is weaponized to disarm and deceive others, gaining trust while pursuing self-serving ends.

The protagonist's interpersonal style also includes frequent manipulative and deceitful behaviors. He engineers outcomes through lies, half-truths, and strategic persuasion, indicating not only a lack of integrity but also a deliberate effort to control those around him. These patterns reflect the manipulateness and deceitfulness described in both ASPD and psychopathy frameworks (Patrick et al., 2009). Manipulateness, another frequently observed trait, which is exhibited through calculated deceit, legal exploitation, and the orchestration of outcomes that benefit him regardless of the harm caused to others.

Deceitfulness is embedded in the character's every move he fabricates narratives, withholds information, and bends truth to suit his objectives. These behaviors are not accidental but are central to his interpersonal style. Supporting this is his frequent use of Bandura's (1999) mechanisms of moral disengagement, such as moral justification, where unethical acts are reframed as strategic or professionally necessary. This helps the character maintain a positive self-image despite causing harm.

emotional traits such as lack of empathy and lack of remorse. The character shows minimal concern for the feelings or well-being of others, even when his actions cause visible harm. This emotional coldness is not accompanied by guilt or reflection, indicating affective deficits common in psychopathy (Blair, 2005).

The character frequently engages in rationalizing unethical acts, a cognitive pattern that Bandura (1999) identifies as part of moral disengagement. Rather than acknowledge wrongdoing, he justifies his behavior through distorted logic, blaming others, minimizing harm, or framing his actions as necessary responses to flawed systems. This cognitive process helps explain how he continues unethical behavior while maintaining a stable, even inflated, self-concept. He does not just hurt others, he rationalizes the harm as necessary, deserved, or inconsequential. Bandura's (1999) theory of moral disengagement helps explain how individuals like this can commit unethical acts without inner conflict by reframing them as justified. Bandura's Theory of Moral Disengagement explains how individuals rationalize unethical or harmful behavior without feeling guilt, allowing them to violate moral standards while still viewing themselves as moral and good people. (Bandura, 1999).

He portrays reckless disregard for the safety of self or others expressed through dangerous legal manipulations, risky strategies, and the willingness to endanger others' lives if it serves his ambitions. This behavior indicates not only impulsivity but also a lack of long-term foresight, a key deficit in individuals with poor emotional regulation and impaired executive functioning. The character also demonstrates a grandiose sense of self, viewing himself as superior, untouchable, and entitled to success at any cost. Grandiose sense of self is also evident. He views himself as superior, entitled, and exceptional, often looking down upon others and dismissing their perspectives.

The narcissistic trait amplifies his antisocial behaviors, as he perceives social norms as beneath him and ethical rules as barriers to be overcome. His sense of superiority legitimizes his harmful actions in his own mind, reinforcing his self-constructed moral framework. This narcissistic trait strengthens his justification for manipulation and control, consistent with research on the overlap between narcissism and psychopathy (Miller et al., 2011). Even in the absence of physical violence, his actions are reckless and harmful, showing disregard for others' safety when it serves his objectives. Such risk-taking behavior, combined with a sense of invincibility, further reflects traits seen in ASPD.

The protagonist's overt aggressiveness is minimal. Rather than using physical force, the character relies on intellect, strategy, and psychological dominance. This supports literature indicating that not all antisocial individuals are violent, many are socially competent, calculated, and covert in their approach to harm (Black et al., 2010). The character's ability to function within professional systems while violating moral boundaries illustrates this high-functioning antisocial profile effectively.

Mukundan Unni Associates presents a compelling and psychologically rich exploration of antisocial personality traits. The protagonist's behavior is not only a display of clinical symptoms but also a window into how antisocial traits can thrive behind charm, intellect, and professionalism. Through strategic manipulation, emotional detachment, and moral disengagement, the film's character embodies a modern, socially integrated manifestation of antisocial pathology making the narrative both disturbing and thought-provoking.

Conclusion

Mukundan Unni Associates is a sharp and unsettling portrayal of ambition untethered by morality, offering deep psychological insight into the traits of antisocial personality. Through the protagonist's

calculated actions, emotional detachment, and manipulative charm, the film effectively captures the cognitive and behavioral patterns associated with antisocial traits, including moral disengagement, lack of empathy, and rationalization of unethical conduct. The narrative not only critiques the ethical compromises often masked behind professional success but also illuminates how societal systems can sometimes enable and even reward such behavior. By framing these traits within the framework of dark comedy, the film compels the viewer to confront the discomfort of watching a protagonist thrive while violating social and moral codes. Ultimately, Mukundan Unni Associates serves as a compelling psychological case study on how charm, intelligence, and ambition when untampered by conscience can evolve into a socially acceptable form of deviance.

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