Understanding user generated animation content from India on YouTube: A netnographic study of 12 Indian animation channels

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Abstract

The reducing digital divide in India has been facilitated with increased access to internet and mobile media at an unprecedented rate. As of December 2020, 95.80% of Indian census villages have mobile network connectivity according to an answer given in the Lok Sabha by the union minister of Telecommunications in 2022. The total internet subscribers in country are 824.89 million with 797.61 million subscribers of wireless internet and 27.28 million subscribers as per the data from March 2022 (TRAI, 2022).

The access to internet has facilitated user generated content across platforms. YouTube, a global online video sharing and social media platform is home to many such creators who have been creating user generated content.

The study focuses on the Indian animation community on the platform through a netnographic approach (Kozinets & Gambetti, 2020). The researchers shortlisted 12 such YouTube channels discovered through their current online presence and YouTube search of combinations of the keywords 'India', 'Indian' and 'Desi' with 'Animators', 'Animations' and 'Cartoons'. The selection criteria for the same was language (either Hindi or English), the channels should have at least 50K subscribers and the creators should be from India.

Since like ethnography, netnographic study goes beyond analysis of content shared in a community online but focus on a variety of methods to delve into deeper meanings and derive narratives from context, immersing into the channels.

The study utilizes three data sources: metrics of the channels, usernames and the content in the videos within the sample. It was found that humour is the common theme across all channels and there is extensive use of expletives in the videos. The usernames are also customized to the three-layered markers of language, culture and geography to establish a local connect with the audience. In the content analysed similar markers were found, establishing how Indian animators have worked on localization of the platform to suit their needs and audience demands. Brand collaborations were also found in many videos, indicating that their reach is being tapped into by corporate entities to reach potential customers too. The study is the first of its kind in analysing user generated animation content from South Asia and contributes to the growing body of literature on platform localization of digital platforms(Mohan & Punathambekar, 2018).

Keywords: Netnography, Indian Animation, YouTube Animation Channels, Localization

Introduction

With evolving affordances of social networking sites focussed on making content generation easier, platforms ranging from Facebook and Instagram to YouTube and Tiktok have all evolved as new destinations for various formats of digital content (Garg, 2021; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Pryde & Prichard, 2022; Rotman et al., 2009).

The formats vary: ranging from short videos lip synced to the latest popular piece of audio to painstakingly curated podcasts. Even small business owners and big brands alike have developed an affinity to showcase and advertise their content on such platforms, owing to their ever-increasing reach and user base(Devereux et al., 2019).

The 2017 introduction of affordable internet in the country; combined with the acceleration in the mobile phone ownership numbers due to the ensuing 2019-20 pandemic, Indians are now accessing internet more than ever before and form one of the largest user bases for various social networking and online platforms across the world(Statista, 2021, 2022b, 2022a, 2023).

Access to technology has been further increased by the shift of various government infrastructure online and a gradual shift to online mode of working and teaching alike(Dhawan, 2020; Mathivanan et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic and the following lockdown brought a sea change in how the world around us works, and confinement to personal spaces translated to an increased dependency on mobile phones and social media.

For instance, a cricketing fan group on WhatsApp transformed itself into a help and support group for the COVID-19 pandemic, domesticating the technology in a way best suited to the situation (Deshbandhu & Sahni, 2022).

While confined within homes was an unimaginably unprecedented experience for many, it also meant that people were spending their time online like never before. The social networking platforms took advantage of this sudden spurt of traffic online, introducing newer forms of

content and larger support for locally produced content for viewers to stay hooked on(Chaturvedi, 2020; *New Instagram Features for Small Business Support (COVID-19) | Instagram for Business*, n.d.).

YouTube, a video sharing and archiving platform is one such big player in the market. From movies to documentaries to music videos, YouTube today is the host to millions of videos, created by experts and amateurs alike, watched for hundreds of billions of hours every year. And with a user base of 467 million users engaging with the popular social video platform, India is the home to the largest number of YouTube viewers which is only followed by the United States at a 246 million users(Statista, 2023).

YouTube videos are curated by channels, which are often handles or profiles of the creators or the organization/ production house/ team there are affiliated to. Viewers can choose to scroll through uploads to categorized playlists of videos created by the channels. Channels are often accompanied by a bio that introduces the work they do and the kind of content they create. The channel metric for determining its popularity is a subscriber count, i.e., the number of viewers which choose to have regular updates about as channel and its new uploads by voluntarily clicking a bell icon in the task panel of any video uploaded by the channel or a button next to its profile picture.

From ASMR(autonomous sensory meridian response) communities creating aesthetical sound videos to try-it-all food journeys to challenges like 'ice bucket' that trend on social media to good old 'Do It Yourself' or DIY crafts videos, the genres of videos archived on YouTube are innumerable and ever expanding.

The Indian animation community has also found its foothold on the platform, creating content that has reached millions of viewers over time. Unlike animation content produced by big production houses with large budgets to dictate the story, these channels are usually run by an

individual creator or a very small team: taking advantage of the opportunity to create and display their work to the outside world.

Snippets of these videos often make to other social media networking sites and WhatsApp to be forwarded among masses. Adapting YouTube to be a platform where their art can be showcased and reach to followers, these creators use a combination of tools, techniques and narratives to get their message across. User generated content is increasingly being encouraged and supported by the algorithm and when it comes in form of locally made animated content with a desi storyline and a language that sounds familiar, there are takers galore.

This paper explores what such Indian creators are sharing on the animation channels and what it translates to in the form of viewership, content and adaptation of the platform for telling stories that are relevant to the users.

Literature review

YouTube's stated mission is to create an online video community, and with a focus on the word community, it is crucial to explore how user generated content takes the concept forward (Rotman et al., 2009).

There are several studies when it comes to animation content on YouTube, but most of it is focussed on education. For instance, studies over time has established YouTube to be a viable platform for not only creating and disseminating educational videos, but have also identified different areas of scientific knowledge that could be potentially be taught through YouTube animation videos(Bello-Bravo et al., 2021).

Works on using animated video content during COVID-19 as an alternate to traditional classroom teaching have also found animation videos to be effective. While one study has studied how a children's publisher in Malaysia shifted to YouTube to cater to its demographic and found takers, the other relies on interviews of children studying from online animated

content on YouTube and experts alike to establish validation of subject experts and media experts(Aishah et al., 2020; Asrori et al., 2021).

In yet another study on use of animated content for public health awareness in Nigeria, it was established that repeated exposure is the key to retention of any message disseminated through animated YouTube videos about health in the selected population (Onuora et al., 2021).

While the studies on animated content of YouTube focuses largely on how it can be used for educational and awareness creation, there is little to no work on how the platform functions as a repository for user generated content, especially since the arrival of high-speed internet connectivity in India post 2016.

While Instagram is home to hundreds of thousands of creators and small businesses, Facebook the home to internet's groups, animators have found their home in YouTube, spending months on end creating ten- to fifteen-minute-long narratives, complete with voiceovers, references from the pop culture and even detailed characters, in an effort to build a community.

This paper addresses the major gap in literature around animation videos on Youtube from the Global South: looking at the user generated content corpus beyond a technologically determinist lens: viewing content as a source of entertainment instead a mode for learning and teaching. The paper looks as animators from India and their content in context of their creators, the elements in the narrative and the tools engaged in telling everyday stories that do not necessarily focus beyond leisure, quite akin to the usage of mobile phones by farmers who were assumed to use it for better farming practices but chose otherwise(Arora, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

The world wide web has been described as a 'mosaic of online regional cultures', with different cultures and narratives intersecting with each other at multiple scales: local, regional, national and global (Wu and Taneja, 2016).

This paper is based on the localization framework: how language, cultural context and narratives all intermingle with each other to form the unique genre of user generated animation content in India. Traditionally, animation movies were multi crore efforts with endlessly long hours invested in creating content that made to the silver screen.

Technology that made creation easier and most importantly dissemination free has led to individual animators step out and present their work. We take the framework introduced by Mohan & Punathambekar (2018) and explore it in context of Indian Animation content created by users through close reading of the videos they make and the statistics of these channels.

The three levels of localization explored are as follows:

1. Language: Dialects, Dictions, and idiomatic phrases
2. Culture: References to local customs, norms, popular culture
3. Geography: Discernible Geographic identity (if any)

Methodology

With a narrativist stance, the authors of this paper recognize the post positivist understanding of digital cultures as something that is not absolute but depending on context and background.

This is why the researchers have opted for netnography as the methodological approach for this study. Netnography, introduced and theorized largely by Kozinets is a set of methods and approaches to study digital cultures. Ranging from content analyses to a close participation in online communities to develop a process of information exchange and reflexivity, netnography takes the multi-faceted approach of ethnography online, where the field is an online community(Kozinets & Gambetti, 2020).

In this case, we have imagined the online community of Indian animators as our field with 12 YouTube channels the chosen area of research. Since all of these are public accounts, the point of entry here was marked with our prior presence as subscribers to the same.

For purposes of this study a total of 12 channels were considered which are named as follows:

1. Mangoboi
2. Karan Animations
3. Puff Talks
4. Swasti Kam
5. The Dominant Side
6. Hard Toonz
7. Not Yor Type
8. Desk Show
9. Animator Bhai
10. Angry Pash
11. Desi Ninja Story
12. RG Bucket List

The following filters were used to shortlist the above channels:

1. Keywords: 'India', 'Indian' and 'Desi' with 'Animators', 'Animations' and 'Cartoons'
2. Language: Hindi and English
3. Subscribes: 50K and above

The metrics of the videos uploaded by these channels were studied between 1.1.2022 and 31.12.2022 for this paper. Two top performing videos in terms of views were analysed for the purposes of this study.

Findings:

Understanding the channels: Metrics Matter

The channels shortlisted for this study have subscribers ranging from 6.66 million to 58,000; with the number of videos posted ranging from 13 to 156.

The average number of video uploads by all the selected channels till April 2022 is 41.49 while the overall combined average view per channel is 19,887,211 (19.8M). Talking about the average subscribers, it is 64,3240.5 (64K), although three channels have more than a million subscribers.

Out of the n=12 channels considered, n=5 channels were started in 2017, n=2 channels each

were started in 2016, 2018 and 2019 respectively and n=1 channel was started in 2020.Out of the n=12 channels considered, n=5 channels were started in 2017, n=2 channels each were started in 2016, 2018 and 2019 respectively and n=1 channel was started in 2020.

Collabs and mentions: The camaraderie of a community

Apart from the metrics, an interesting observation about the videos analysed for this paper is the collaboration or collabs by various animators among each other. Since user generated animation content in YouTube from India is extremely limited, it is interesting to find the creators mentioning each other in the videos and building up on each other's work.

SwastiKam, for instance, features with her character in a video on IDnian School Fights by Karan Animations, in a collaboration with over 30K likes. For the Dominant Side, using Not Your Type and Karan Animations as a part of the narrative is a creative choice, demanded by the narrative which couldn't allowed the real names of the story's protagonists to be revealed. The two other animators collab on the video to give their voice overs and are thanked by the creator in the about section of the video.

On the other hand, the video spoof or parody of First Love is a dedication of sorts to RG Bucket List by creator Desi Ninja Story, who tries to draw from the creator's content to develop a humorous version of the same.

It is interesting to note that since the community of animators from India is miniscule with everyone's work out for others to experience and collaborate with., there is a sense of community among the creators themselves, with a motivation to connect and improve on their work. As it is apparent from the commentary with the credits, many of these creators also have Instagram and other social media presence but showcase their larger body of work on YouTube. It interestingly echoes that in finding common ground as animators from India with narratives starkly different from the Global West and lesser resources at their disposal, these YouTube users have found a sense of community(Rotman et al., 2009).

Brand collaborations

Brand collaborations were also found in n=6 videos, with each promotion woven into the narrative of the videos. Product and service placement is done in the narrative itself to promote brands.

For instance, in a video about life in Kendriya Vidyalaya, creator Desk Show incorporates the promotion of a game 'World of Tanks' while describing their classes' collective addiction for gaming. Similar insertions about audiobook channel from Kuku FM can be found in videos by Swastikam and RG Bucket List.

The creators also add coupon codes for discounts on the products and services offered, incorporating brand mentions and advertisements into the animated videos they are creating for the audiences.

Localizing usernames and bios: The Desi connect

It is interesting to note how vernacular words have been incorporated by the creators in the usernames, with creative licenses used with generosity to create a narrative.

The first instance is the handle Mango Boi, which translates literally to 'Aam Ladka' in Hindi, which in another context means 'common guy'. The channel uses clever wordplay to develop a narrative around its name.

While two creators choose to go with their actual names to name their channel handles, SwastiKam, through her username identifies as a female animator.

The handle HardToonz is a play on Cartoons, replacing the word with a common vernacular, sounding like the original word. Animator Bhai, another such handle, has used a Hindi language term for 'brother' in the handle to create a sense of connect with the username.

The choice of the username by the Indian animator community is an important step in how they have localized the platform of YouTube to suit their needs and build a narrative around

Channel	Joined Date	Number of Subscribers	Number of videos	No of Views
Mangoboi	13.04.2018	283000	86	2,33,62,001
Karan Animations	21.11.12017	180000	78	1,20,32,753
Puff Talks	2.12.2018	271000	68	17.461,041
Swasti Kam	29.03.2017	263000	37	1,78,88,335
The Dominant Side	6.4.2017	58000	56	10,90,774
Hard Toonz	12.01.2017	1,31,00,000	18	9,88,36,848
Not Yor Type	17.07.2017	2850000	49	30,79,91,888
Desk Show	25.9.2019	284000	16	1,12,19,208
Animator Bhai	9.3.2019	179000	60	11.190,945
Angry Pash	7.11.2016	6660000	156	1,079,978,870
Desi Ninja Story	24.6.2020	614000	13	20,25,664
RG Bucket List	15.01.2016	3070000	16	12,82,32,312

Table 1: Channel metrics distribution of the selected Indian Animation Channels

them. The use of wordplay is common and so is the incorporation of Hindi and other vernacular terms in attempts of establishing a connect with the viewers in the long run. The idea is to not just create a username that sticks and is easy to recall, but resonates with the

fans and followers so that they subscribe to the same.

Taking the localization levels into consideration, the bios, or short introductions by the creators, were coded for markers in the following four categories:

1. Language: Dialects, Dictions, and idiomatic phrases
2. Culture: References to local customs, norms
3. Geography: Discernible Geographic identity (if any)

The results for the same are as follows:

Language markers for vernaculars were observed in bios for n=5 videos. Karan Animations, for instance, chooses to write the bio in English but uses short hand language and terms while writing the bio. Terms like 'U' instead of 'You' 'Ur' instead of 'your' and 'Mah' instead of 'my' is used in the bio. These terms have been useded by mobile phone suers in India as a part of short hand developed to write SMS (short messaging service) messages in the pre-internet era. It is an interesting instance of localization of the platform, especially when the actual language being used is English.

In another instance, the script used remains that of English, but the message conveyed is a mixture of Hindi and English alike. SwastiKam, for instance, begins with an introduction in English but switches to a much familiar mixture of Hindi and English, incorporating terms like

'Jugaad' (makeshift arrangements) and 'gareeb' (poor) that not just establishes her localization of the platform's bio feature but also asserts her socio-economic status.

Cultural references are not very apparent in the bios, except for n=2 channels, where the creators refer to two standout cultural cliches. First is the bio of the channel The Dominant Side, where he refers to himself as the 'animator boi'. A misspelt version of the word 'boy', 'boi' emerged from the meme 'Dat Boi' featuring a frog on a unicycle and have now been increasingly used as an alternative to boy. While the cultural reference to the term go back to the use of 'boi' as a term to refer to certain individuals in the LGBTQ community, it's recent connotation is that of inconsequential humour and a meme that made the term popular again(*Dat Boi, Explained - Vox*, n.d.).

In another reference to culture, Hard Toonz channel uses a Hindi language bio to refer to the cultural bias against creative careers that exists in India. In a clear sarcastic tone, the creator uses the channel's bio to criticize the challenges he faces as an animator which can be loosely translated to:

 'How can there be money in animation? So I kind of do a bit of it.. umm… animation'

Since the bios are textual in nature, visual elements of localization could not be identified through the same and geographical markers of any kind were absent in the bios of the channel.

The content: A localization lens on the videos

For the purposes of this paper, the researchers coded the two highest performing videos in terms of the number of likes received by them. The researchers use a deductive approach in studying the videos shortlisted for markers of language, culture, and geography to study the localization of these Indian animation channels.

The readings are qualitative in nature and thematic analysis has been used for understanding of the videos with themes identified based on the markers for localization along with the analytics for videos considered.

Markers of language

The first reference to language comes in a video of *Mango Boi*'s video on his experience as a young boy trying to watch an explicit video on his sister's laptop. The animated video has character's faces shaped as mangoes, but the use of the term 'corn' instead of 'porn' is used as a humorous device to connect with the audiences. The narrative is in Hindi, but there are many puns and jokes teamed with sexual innuendos in the video. There is also a section on the Marathi version of 'Waving Flag', anthem of 2010 Fifa world cup, and how the expletives in them makes it an uncomfortable watch for the protagonist in the video.

In the second video, 'cup of tea' is a classic idiom that is used as a humorous tool to describe how choosing geography as a subject in class 12th was not an ideal decision for the protagonist.

'Geography wasn't my cup of tea… Everyone's cup of tea is different… Someone likes sugar in it and some like cocaine… it's their life!'

Crude humour stands out as a tool for conveying message and language plays a strong role in the same.

In the video NCC by Karan Animations, the language is largely Hindi, but in a section a friend with costly shoes uses a vernacular often associated with Parsi characters in Bollywood films.

'Ye Assi Hazaar ke shoes hai… Tera Ghar Jayenga ismein!'

(These shoes cost 80,000 Rupees. You'll have to sell your home to pay for these)

The video also uses the term 'Rejected Nalle' to caption the rejects in the story where the term is a colloquial Hindi expletive for a 'good for nothing' individual.

In yet another instant, The Dominant Side, in a video uses the term 'Simp', an urban vernacular, used to describe men who pay extra attention to their romantic partner (Ward, 2021). With undertones of toxic masculinity, the largely Westernized term creeps into a Hindi language animation section on YouTube; almost in a blink and miss scene.

Slangs and expletives form a large part of the language markers that stand out in the various attempts by Indian animators on YouTube, although most of them are not sexual in nature. For instance, 'Chugalchotti' is used by HardToonz in a video about sibling rivalry and is a very commonly used term to describe snitching in any form. The language here is definitely a slang, but used as a term of endearment for a younger sibling who cannot seem to keep a secret to herself.

All of the 24 videos analysed for this paper were dubbed in Hindi, with different language markers touching different sections of the audition: humour to relatable phrases to puns that stand out.

Even addresses and expressions like 'Ja Maila', a common Marathi phrase, by Desi Ninja Story create a sense of connect with the audiences. In yet another video by creator Animator Bhai, the stereotypical 'South Indian' character is given all the language markers including the 'aiyyo' to establish their identity.

Markers of Culture

The cultural references in the two videos by Mango Boi begin with the comprehension of Marathi: indicating that he or his family have a connection with the Western coastal state of India, Maharashtra. The second discernible cultural reference comes in the form of 'Parent Call', a traditional practice adopted by schools and educational intuitions in India as a form for reprimanding students.

The video Indian School Fight by Karan animations is littered with cultural references: from WWE format fights used to describe a faceoff between his school rival to a rendition of a title song of a Hindi cartoon 'Main Hu Ghatotkach' to 'Main hu Richie Rich', all indicating familiar anecdotes being incorporated into the narrative to tell a story. The video, in fact seems packed with one reference after another, including a section on his mother's banter with the milk man, and the flow seems to be woven around these references.

The video on NCC experiences by Karan Animations mentions Dahej or Dowry is a very passive way, a social evil that continues to exist in modern India. The current narrative around Dowry being a gifted is thwarted in the narrative when the protagonist, in his imagination writes a letter to his future wife and says:

'The PlayStation is a gift. For dowry, I will take a Maruti!' (translation)

There is also a reference to the NCC belt and its various uses, including using it to save girls from getting harassed on streets and a dark commentary on how it can be used to discipline kids.

Humour as a tool in these videos is dark, problematic and hegemonic in their own way.

It is crucial to mention the two major influences in the videos analysed: pre-existing animation content on Television and Bollywood films. Bollywood scenes are referenced by Indian animators in their videos quite often ranginhg from characters humming popular Bollywood songs to ridiculing Bollywood films through characters.

For instance, in a video on type of students before exams, the creator Not Your Type mentions how some students are exceptionally calm before exams and watch stupid movies: and the scene cuts to the infamous Sooryavansham, known for incessantly repeat telecasts on several Indian television channels and have been the subject of media scrutiny in recent times(Pinkvilla, 2023). In the video on sibling rivalry by Hard Toonz, there are also references

to the trending Nigerian song 'Love Nwantiti' and musician Himesh Reshamiya in his signature nasal voice and mic to the air pose.

Picking from iconic Bollywood moments and instances, these animations use the existing jokes and content and incorporate the same into the narrative for their content for it to be more relatable and localized.

The same is repeated with animation content from Indian television with references to Ben 10, Doreamon, Nobita, Dominatrix watch, Ninja Hatori, Pokemon and Courage The Cowardly Dog among others. While the strylines are different and often parodies of the original content, the highest performing videos studied for this paper have no less than five instances of their mention. A particular video, dedicated to Indian cartoons by Hard Toonz have 285K likes, indicating that the content resonated with the viewers through localization and the context.

Markers of Geography

The videos have very few markers of Geographical location, but a few of them do identify the location from which it is created. Swastikam stands out in this especially, because her highest performing animation video is about rains in Mumbai, establishing an instant connect with the viewers and adding an element of localization.

In yet another video, creator Desk Show identifies that his school went to 'Ramoji Film City' on a bus, establishing his location somewhere near Hyderabad.

These geographical markers help localization of the platform, by allowing the creators an opportunity to establish this origins and hence connect with potential audiences from the same region or affinity to the same.

Discussion

The paper utilizes the netnographic approach to look deeper: with placemaking in the community established through 'subscription' of the channels. The extensive discussion section on the choice of usernames by the animators precedes the thematic analysis of the videos themselves, and adds to the narrative of how using names that resonate help the creators 'localize' the platform to their tastes and the liking of their audience.

The collaborations also come off as a common tactic to be studied in detail in further works.

Coming to the actual themes of language markers, cultural markers and geographical markers that correspond to the theoretical framework engaged in the analysis, it is extremely clear that though humour remains a major tool of expression in all the videos analysed, there is little to no censor on the type of jokes that are part of these videos.

Language is often seen as a conduit of the message and with expletives used at ease and in large volumes, it is evident that the message is anything but educational, which justifies the initial literature gap of studying animation videos from India beyond the context of education.

The videos also echo themes of nostalgia and leisurely play, with fantasy, memories of childhood and even dedications to ither Youtubers and animators emerging as topics for the videos analysed.

The localization framework puts together elements that make certain content relatable and with a combination of language cues bent on the humorous side, cues from popular culture across the past few decades and a few mentions of geographical identity, the animators in India have built a community on YouTube with content customised and localized to their tastes.

While only a handful of these creators have resources at their disposal with one creator even using a simple mobile phone and drawing tablet to create his videos, there is aspiration, dedication, and a narrative of relatable middle-class dreams of being a successful animator.

Future Research

The study is a thematic analysis of the animation content created on YouTube in India and further studies can be done on techniques, quality of the animation and actual challenges faced by the YouTubers through a series of interviews and interactions.

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