

“The Advent of the Indian web-series Industry : Filling a void for the Youth”

(A Research Paper under the New Media domain of Marketing Management)

Ms. Mudita Mishra

Assistant Professor,

Symbiosis Institute of Media & Communication, Symbiosis International University, Pune
E-mail : mudita.mishra@simc.edu, Contact No.: +91-99500-24884

INTRODUCTION

The concept of web television series is a relatively new one in the entertainment sector. Although the western audiences have been privy to it since more than a decade now, India has more recently seen the rise of the same. The growing popularity of original Indian web series from the now established names like The Viral Fever and others in the last five years points to the uncovering of a new segment in the Indian entertainment industry. And this segment caters to a very specific target audience- the young Indians- who find that there has always been a dearth of interesting programmes to watch on the television. While this audience had known only to turn towards western entertainment to satiate its need to watch a variety of creative content, much unlike the saas-bahu sagas that typically run on the Indian television, many small time online entertainers like the one mentioned above sought to address this problem. Now, these once-small online web series creators and producers have made it big, and are creating headlines around the world with their smartly crafted content for audiences in the 15 years to 35 years of age category. This paper explores the advent of this youngest, yet still immensely popular, member of the Indian entertainment industry.

Entertainment is crucial to human existence. All work and no play would make anyone a dull 'boy'. The original old adage has a valid point; probably that is why, consciously or otherwise, all of relieve ourselves from the work that burdens us each day to indulge in a source of entertainment. And more often than not, we sit in front of the idiot-box, so aptly named by us, but which still continues to enjoy the attention of thousands and thousands of households across our nation.

While the run of traditional Indian television shows has been great on the small screen, quite a number of the college going students, young adults, and people in their thirties in India have switched their loyalties to a lot of American television series that are no longer restricted to airing only in the United States. In fact, as the accessibility of a number of western television channels increases to the Indian audiences, the youth are favouring them over the Indian television content, which despite a few commendable efforts, has had the same recipe in its daily soaps cauldrons for decades now.

While there have been no in depth studies to correctly predict the percentage of young Indian population stepping over desi television, the trend has been noticed by many. In some interesting media reports and articles, not only the common youth of this country but the daily soap actors themselves voice their opinions in favour of 'English' TV series.

Not surprisingly, in an article uploaded on the 'TV News' section of Times of India in 2014, many Indian TV actors who were interviewed were of the opinion that Indian television content had deteriorated and had become repetitive, that they themselves did not watch Indian TV serials, and finally that they preferred watching American TV series for their sheer originality and creativity. (<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/tv/news/hindi/Indian-TV-actors-watch-anything-but-desi-shows/articleshow/38480261.cms>)

In fact, a report around the same time on Mid-day.com discussed the increasing popularity of American TV shows in India, and some of the comments in response were more about why certain American TV shows had been skipped from the list of popular shows, and not a contradiction of the idea of the report! (<http://www.mid-day.com/articles/16-american-tv-shows-with-loyal-fan-base-in-india/15112054>)

Again, the emphasis in this article as well was on the Indian youth who had grown tired of having nothing to watch on Indian television. And that, very importantly, **brings us specifically to the topic being discussed here:** The shift of Indian youth as viewers from television towards online web series and other digital content, once the online Indian video content industry came into play.

It cannot be simpler than this: the flux that both mediums are seeing in favour of internet platforms is clearly due to the lack of any good Indian television series catering to this target audience. There is nothing to capture the interest of this group on the traditional media. This is where the emerging Indian web-series industry comes in, which claims that they are now filling up this void for their nation's youth who want to see something they want and are interested in.

SECONDARY DATA SOURCES

Sufficient research literature on the subject is not available, this still being a nascent field of research. However, some interesting reports and articles do provide the necessary secondary data on the advent and performance of online Indian web-series.

As reported earlier this year by Live Mint (e-paper), the digital entertainment company, The Viral Fever's web series 'TVF Pitchers' became the most popular mini-series in the world in 2015 with Internet Movie Database (IMDb) rating of 9.7 out of 10!

This report went on to highlight a list of some more web-series to watch out for in 2016 that were already creating a mark in the digital world.

(<http://www.livemint.com/Consumer/ILZGYMU99juJe78tnKrOEP/Eight-Indian-web-series-to-watch-out-for.html>)

In another significant article uploaded on the Hindustan Times webpage last year entitled, 'Indian audiences welcome web series with open arms, it talks about the much acclaimed achievement of above mentioned TVF Pitchers worldwide, while discussing the foray into this new industry by new comers such as The Viral Fever, Scoopwhoop, Pechkas Pictures, alongside veterans such as Yash Raj Films (for the series 'Man's world').

(<http://www.hindustantimes.com/tv/web-series-the-next-big-thing-on-the-internet/story-ZvJqoSdi3ZqtszsZrGMRKL.html>)

The article notes that all these up and coming web series are very well shot - the camera work and quality is great, the actors refined, and converse in a mix of English and Hindi around real life issues that the youth comes across in today's times.

Prithwish Barman, who heads the video team at ScoopWhoop Talkies, says, "Except for live events and sports, the audience that is online is not really interested in TV anymore."

Another interesting point that Ashish Patil, Vice President YRF Films made in the above interview was that with the bandwidth getting better and smart phones becoming more and more accessible, the potential in the market has never looked better. So, although the idea has been around in the west for almost a decade and a half, with some of the best and awarded series available on Netflix Originals (like House of Cards and Arrested Development) as web series, India has also seen tremendous growth in the video content available on platforms such as YouTube, or on individual content creating websites (like TVF Play App and website) in the last five years.

Among the many informal discussions taking place on websites such as quora.com, young viewers discuss why they dislike the current Indian TV content - the primary reason being the keywords of 'saas-bahu' dramas and similar ideas still occupying that space in its entirety. On the other hand, the issues covered in these web

series largely target the young crowd, from teenagers to millennials, covering topics as mundane (or interesting) as life of a college student, to making ones parents tech savvy (TVF), to the melodrama between bachelors and landlords (BB ki Vines) to gender sensitisation (Man's world, YRF) to rights of LGBT communities (The Other love story, Roopa Rao). The last one had nominated for the NYC Web Fest in October, and was leading with six nominations, while competing with many global internet series entries (as uploaded on Times on India webpage on October 22, 2016).

(<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/tv/news/hindi/Indian-web-series-on-a-lesbian-tale-gets-highest-nominations-at-NYC-Web-Fest/articleshow/54978579.cms>)

Another brilliant example of the growing popularity of 'serials' on the internet is the revival of the Shah Rukh Khan starrer 'Darr' as another Indian web series.

'Y-Films, the youth films division of Indian studio Yash Raj Films (YRF) is rebooting 1993 hit "Darr" as a five-part web series titled "Darr 2.0", reported variety.com in August this year. (<http://variety.com/2016/digital/asia/shah-rukh-khan-film-darr-indian-web-series-1201847582/>)

Clearly, the 'youth films division' of the giants Yash Raj Films is also of the view that the youth have shifted to online content from television, and that is where most of the hit web series are appearing to make the best of it, by making sequels to series, and consistently churning out fresh content, keeping with the tastes of young viewers.

THE VIRAL FEVER: A CASE IN POINT

As noted earlier, there is not enough research that has been done in the context of Indian web-series, and in light of this, exploratory research is the apt research design to be followed, in order to understand the areas under this new phenomenon better. It would be helpful in gaining an understanding of existing views and opinions of one of the top online content creators in India (TVF), as well as the reasons for the sudden coming-of-age of internet based video content in India. It could further provide insights into problems, if any, and help in developing hypotheses for any future quantitative research.

An important thing to note is that the entry of such online content as is being discussed was the turning point for this new industry. It was only after the online 'product' was served that the consumers (the target viewers) realised they had a need for the same. Before this happened, the young audience was only gorging on the American TV content on their laptops. Such a latent need scenario is quite an interesting example in teaching students about how organisations (read marketers) can present such products to satiate needs that the consumers might themselves be not consciously demanding.

THE VIRAL FEVER (TVF)

Arunabh Kumar is the founder of The Viral Fever, popularly known as TVF, the top online video content creating company today. A 33 years old enterprising man, who is the alumnus of IIT Kharagpur, Arunabh has dabbled in varied roles, from being a research consultant in the US Air Force in Mumbai, to assisting Farah Kahan as assisted director for Om Shanti Om.

He established TVF in 2010, which has so far collaborated with over 40 brands like Lenovo, Head & Shoulders, Flipkart, Pond's, Ola, Duracell and Kingfisher and many others. TVF enjoys a subscriber base of around 1.75 million viewers. TVF offers to its viewers a wide variety of shows (sixteen shows, out of which nine are TVF originals and seven are curated content). TVF began with showcasing itself on You Tube, and now in addition to that, it also airs its shows on TVF Play, a mobile app, that has been installed over three lakh times, across android and iOS devices, so far. They also have their own independent website on which the same options are available for the viewers. (source: http://www.afaqs.com/interviews/index.html?id=496_

VDigital-video-is-brutal-Arunabh-Kumar-The-Viral-Fever)

TVF uses the tagline, 'It's not on TV, it's on TVF' to position itself. Very clearly, they have the sole intention of providing digital content for youth to watch online, vis-a-vis the television content.

In an interview to afaqs! In April this year, Arunabh clearly defined the beginnings of this new industry, of which he is the pioneer in a sense, and more importantly, how and why they define their target audience as young people.

When asked as to how they categorised their **target audience** in midst of the huge crowd of viewers in India, this is what he had to say:

“Progressive young Indians, like those sitting here (note- interview location was at The Bagel Shop, a funky little eatery, with an Americanised menu, at Carter Road, Bandra, Mumbai). Nobody here is really waiting for the next episode of Diya Aur Bati Hum (hit TV show on Star Plus) but they've all seen Game of Thrones and Friends. We don't have India-centric shows like that.

*In 2010-11, when I asked people (meaning viewers between 14 to 34 years of age, as the Editor of afaqs! Ashwini Gangal later notes) what their last 'television memory' is, it was either a match or news. **The entire generation had stopped watching fiction-scripted programmes on TV. I realised TV had completely alienated our generation. They're more bothered about the 100 million housewives, and the rural crowd, who watch their shows.***

TVF has a lot of fans in Tier II cities. Our content is desi, country, massy and not very elite. We have fans in places like Jaipur, Surat, Ahmedabad, Nashik, Pilani, Vellore... in fact, we are least recognised in Mumbai.”

The above statements make for a hard hitting reality; Arunabh realised that nobody was catering to the young crowd who were not really interested in the daily soaps which were running on Indian television. Infact, the reason why TVF started in the first place was because MTV rejected an idea from Arunabh to start a youth centric show on the channel, which would offer contemporary content suited to young tastes. He also recounted how he suggested to the channel, with the aid of supporting data in form of figures and flowcharts, the amount of money, space and time they would be able to save by using DSLR cameras. But his ideas were either not appreciated, or not understood by the channel. That is when he decided to '...build an online MTV for India'.

The fact that this online market, discovered by chance in India, is going strong and is here to stay is supported by the news report that in February this year, TVF raised USD 10 million (Rs. 66 crore) from Tiger Global, an investment firm that reportedly picked up 25 per cent stake in the company.

However, no matter how inviting this market looks with its unfathomed potential, it is still a difficult business to be in. As Arunabh put it in his interview, the digital space does not guarantee returns on huge investments done on making great series (unlike television, where certain investment with certain marketing would result in a certain, defined, output); viewers may as simply only sample the online content, but not become long term loyal followers.

Having discussed about the kind of content and the target audience aimed at on this platform, one does eventually wonder about the business models of these new ventures. For TVF, Arunabh says that brand sponsorship is their main revenue source. They focus on working with around ten odd brands during one year, integrating them with their series, while simultaneously coming up with catchphrases and taglines for the brand, while promoting them extensively in their content by clever integration. And as the founder puts it, they charge much less than any advertising agency, while being sure that the brand integration/marketing efforts would not miss the viewers' eye, as is very much the possibility in television commercials.

A very powerful way in which he sums up the essence of this market is this: *“Nowadays, many people are doing away with the TV; they watch everything on the laptop. The shift from TV to online is something to be cognizant of. People don't want appointment viewing. They want to be able to watch things whenever they want. And they want to be able to choose what they watch. The screen no longer decides what you watch.”*

This thought process is not just restricted to the founder. Amit Golani, who is the director of TVF Pitchers (the show that created history by garnering the highest IMDb ratings last year) says that nobody is interested in watching TV anymore. In an interview with NDTV, (corresponding article for which was published on gadgets.ndtv.com in August last year) Golani said that young people are not favouring the melodramatic Indian TV shows. They are willingly moving online to watch videos there.

(<http://gadgets.ndtv.com/tv/features/indias-best-new-ideas-for-television-are-moving-to-youtube-727900>)

Golani reiterates what Arunabh Kumar said. He enforces that TVF was founded around 2009-10, because "Indian youth didn't have anything to watch on TV."

A very significant statement that he made is worth considering and thinking upon. He said that the Indian television industry, sadly, thinks of its audiences a little too 'dumb' to understand and appreciate shows like the ones TVF is currently producing. Needless to say, the traditional industry is caught in a rut, processing the same kind of content over and over again. It may sound rhetoric now after so much discussion, but he too felt that there was a “mismatch between what the youngsters wanted to watch and what was being aired between Indian TV.”

The idea for TVF Pitchers (a series around new start ups) suddenly became prominent in 2012 in the wake of the entrepreneurial success of many companies like Flipkart and others at that time, says Golani. That was the time when Kingfisher approached them with a sponsorship. TVF presented their idea to them and that's how their show went through.

Again, Amit Golani describes the struggles in their business model. You Tube as a platform takes a cut of around 45% from the producers. Since TVF relies on brand associations, they worked hard for acquiring sponsorship from Kingfisher for Pitchers, and from Commonfloor for Permanent Roommates..

Golani talks about the numbers in this case. "Not even five percent of our revenue comes from YouTube. Most of it comes from brand associations. YouTube is not a company platform. It's a platform for individuals with channels." An important point worth noting.

Golani explained how the absence of restrictions online is one of the main reasons for them creating original shows for the Web. "Litigation issues are a big problem. Some TV channels won't let you say Facebook on the air. Monetarily also it makes no sense for us, so there is no point in going to TV." He summed up.

CONCLUSION

The points that one can take away from the above discussion are many. The content here was limited to understanding the views of the stakeholders in TVF. There are about a dozen more online content creators in India, each a case study on its own. Nevertheless, as a first step towards understanding this new market and industry, one can identify the following key points:

One, the internet video content has definitely become 'the new age TV' for a majority of young, educated viewers in India (the proof currently being the immense progress made and investments bagged by such content creators in India).

Two, this is a great opportunity to target young crowd on this new platform with enormous potential, not only for the content creators and aggregators, but also for marketers in exploring new advertising and marketing opportunities other than conventional TV commercials interspersed between TV serials.

Three, it is worth thinking, even though it is way too early, about how can this target group be extended, or other target groups be identified, such as older generations; can content be created for other groups as well? Would they be willing to watch content tailored for them on-the-go, with digitisation being the magic word these days?

Four, and very importantly, television is still caught in its inertia of making similar kinds of programmes for same categories of audiences; they have not yet significantly diversified into other niche content for audiences of different ages and tastes. Indian television has only remained a mass medium of production of similar products. It is high time they follow a creative and detailed segmentation, targeting and positioning process for identifying correct audience of viewers, and listen to the new age content ideas as well.

Is the Indian television industry listening?

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