

Thesis of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**Children's Television Media Experiences in
Contemporary India: Contextualized in the
Framework of Social, Economic, and
Technological Changes**

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1. Antecedents and objectives of the doctoral dissertation

The relationship between children and media is an interdisciplinary field that has evolved internationally over the past few decades. As a result, the understanding of child audience, childhood and their media experiences has undergone a sea change. Topics that have shaped the agenda for academic discussions range from positive and negative effects of television viewing on children, through children's ability to make informed choices about their media use, the impact of media exposure on their health, discussions about digital use and viewing time to the impact of media on learning. The field of research has grown substantially both in terms of theoretical studies and as regards empirical studies. The usual focus for such studies, however, as observed in Lemish (2022, 10-12), has been western societies. This creates a situation where not much is known about children's media experiences in other parts of the world, including India.

Media engagement experiences are circumscribed by the local context of the audience and the media itself. Therefore, it is imperative to account for the local context while researching the topic of media and children. However, the amount of scholarship concerning children in India and their media experiences is minuscule. This lack of scholarship specific to the Indian region is true in all aspects, from how children engage with media every day to how children are positioned in Indian society.

The contemporary media industry in India has witnessed a rapid and pervasive transformation in its ecosystem over a long period of time. The said media ecosystem includes multiple stakeholders, such as content makers, content distributors, content aggregators, advertisers, media professionals, regulatory bodies, and the audience. Transformation in various aspects can be seen, such as in methods of television content production, distribution, and consumption. One of the most striking changes has taken place in the case of the media ecosystem that focuses on children as the audience. This is especially evident in the case of the audience in the age group of 7 to 12 years from urban middle income households. There are three key interconnected aspects that form the foundation stone of this evolving state of the contemporary media landscape. These aspects relate to the socio-cultural environment, economic development, and policy &

technology changes that have taken place in the country between the 1990s to the present day (Krishnan 73-84; Chaturvedi and Srinivas 83-97).

To understand the emerging media culture surrounding children from urban middle class homes in India, this research examines the contemporary media experiences of children in the age group of 7 to 12 years from this section of society within the framework of socio-cultural, economic, and policy-technology aspects. These aspects have been studied from a position of the interconnectedness between historical events and contemporary trends. Changes on the policy front, such as the implementation of the New Industrial Policy of 1991, served as the starting point of transformation that ensued in the socio-cultural, economic, and technological sphere of life in India. From a socio-cultural and economic standpoint, the rise of the middle class, economic growth, increase in employment opportunities, urbanization, and changes in family structures are some of the key aspects relevant to this discussion (Roy 32-7). The economic growth that occurred in India after the liberalisation of the 1990s created an environment for private industries and a globalised market structure to thrive. It was only in 1991 that the New Economic Policy ushered India into a new world characterised by liberalisation, privatization, and globalisation (Naik et al. 3-6). These changes have a direct relationship with the contemporary media culture in India. The rise in urbanisation, the emergence of a new middle class in urban India, and changes in family structure from a joint family system to a nuclear family system are the key pillars that have been instrumental in shaping the media-engagement experiences for children in contemporary India. Furthermore, technological advancements such as developments in the telecommunication industry, the rise of Internet technology, and innovations in media technology have also been instrumental in ushering in changes in the media ecosystem (Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry 2018, 14).

While the arrival of television and the emergence of the distinct category of children's entertainment are old phenomena in the western world, in India they have emerged relatively recently. Television came to India in 1959 and was monopolized by the government until the early 1990s (Rangarajan 25). Over time, a niche market for children's entertainment has come into existence. It is in

the context of these developments that a new media culture for children in urban areas has emerged. It includes media engagement experiences that are situated in a hybrid model of content distribution and consumption. This hybrid model includes media exposure through cross platform services, which comprise free to air (FTA) content on linear broadcast, paid video on demand (VOD) service, and subscription-based VOD services that use the Internet (Parks, Velkova and Ridder 1-22). Features such as these have changed the location, methodology, and definition of what constitutes media engagement in contemporary India. Foremost, the term television, which was once referred to physical hardware, has now evolved.

Screen experiences that are mobile, location independent and personalised have given birth to individual-specific media rituals (Couldry 4; Hepp 3-4; Livingstone 1). For instance, with the advent of smartphones, watching television has become a location independent activity. With the changes in the size of the viewing device and the availability of the Internet, media can be experienced in a personalised setting, whereas in the past it was typically a family-based activity with everyone watching programs on a television set. In a country like India, which is rooted in the ethos of community and family, a move from communal media experiences to individual-focused experiences points to a burgeoning change in the socio-cultural fabric of the nation. Subsequently, in the case of children in the age group of 7 – 12 years from urban middle class homes, a newfound media culture is emerging as this generation is witnessing a transformation in their media ecosystem that is unprecedented in its pace and methods.

Research objectives

The focus of this work is to arrive at a deeper understanding of the relationship between children and media in contemporary India in a comprehensive manner. This India focused research investigates the experiences of middle-income urban households. To this end, children, content makers, parents/mentors and academic researchers have all been included as essential components of this work. The age group considered for this work is 7–12 years old. An ethnographic study has been used in conjunction with an analysis of existing academic works. The small-scale ethnographic study used for this purpose has considered the experiences of children from Northern

India. For this purpose, this dissertation follows a structure where interconnected aspects are examined as follows:

- This dissertation, at first, illustrates the trajectory of media growth in India and the emergence of the children's entertainment genre.
- This research examines the connection between technological and policy changes that have influenced the consumption behavior and preferences of children from urban middle class homes.
- This work further maps the relationship between changes in socio-cultural and economic aspects that have impacted contemporary media consumption trends, needs and expectations of children from urban middle class homes.
- In the context of the above, the media engagement experience of children from urban middle class homes is studied in conjunction with previous academic works and a field study.

Delimitation of the dissertation topic

The focus of my dissertation is to investigate the spectacular changes visible in the media engagement experiences of children in the age group of 7 to 12 years from urban middle income households. Positioning my enquiry at the intersection of various academic fields and an ethnographic exploratory field study, I have undertaken an analysis of how macro level changes in the country have impacted life for children at the micro level.

Given the state of rapidly evolving media experiences and media ecosystems surrounding children, it has been prudent to approach the work as exploratory research to develop a wider and more comprehensive view on the subject. It is on purpose that no pre-defined thesis was assumed at the start of the work. No definite or absolute conclusions or claims about media being good or bad for children have been made either. I have approached my work from a position of observing how different stakeholders relate to and connect with the media ecosystem. An analysis of these observations and the varying aspects of the media ecosystem and society have been presented in this work.

My prior experience as a media professional and a teacher positions me at the junction of two intersecting worlds that place children as the point of focus. Such a position has given me a deeper understanding of my research topic and enabled easy access to children and media professionals who have been instrumental in this work. Such a position seldom becomes available to researchers solely coming from an academic setting. With the above stated considerations, this research work has been conceptualized as a bridge that brings all stakeholders, such as the audience (children and parents/teachers), content makers and academic researchers, to a common ground to arrive at a comprehensive understanding about the media ecosystem surrounding children in India. This research focuses on a specific respondent group which is children from urban middle class from northern India in the age group of 7 to 12 years. Findings from this small-scale exploratory study present in depth insights about the target audience, with the aim to investigate further. These findings are not a summary of the media experiences of over a billion children in India. As most of the media experts interviewed for this research confirmed that the usual target audience is children from urban North Indian homes, this respondent group was chosen as such.

In total, 643 children participated in the survey questionnaire, 50 children and 10 parents / teachers participated in focus group discussions, 56 children participated in participatory observation, and 7 media experts participated in interviews. In addition, these 20 media experts also shared their insights. In total, 786 individuals participated in this research. This number may appear to be too large for some readers and too small for others to justify findings for an entire nation with a population of over a billion. On the question of program count, in total, children listed 197 programs that they watched. However, only two programs were chosen based on the considerations explained above. Several episodes of these two programs were analysed. Due to the scale of a PhD dissertation, it was not possible to analyse all 197 programs with over 1000 episodes, approximately. While structuring the sampling plan for respondents and the programs, reports from projects such as EU Kids Online, Global Kids Online, and Indian Kids Online were referred. These large-scale projects with large scale funding surveyed 867 children and conducted 228 interviews (Mica 3). These large-scale country-wide studies focused on mixed methods of research, where a large quantity of data was pertinent for analysis,

as they delved into quantitative research as well. In the case of this dissertation, the framework is inclined towards qualitative research, as such, the sampling plan was created in such a way that the number of participants chosen as respondents and the number of episodes chosen from the programs could provide an opportunity for focused analysis instead of making large scale generalizations.

2. Overview of the methods used:

I present an analysis of the contemporary media experiences of children in India by triangulating my findings between literature review, program analysis, and a small-scale ethnographic study. This methodology has helped in arriving at a deeper understanding of aspects relevant to children in India in connection with media. For the purposes of this work, I have contextualized these discussions in the framework of social, economic, and technological changes. The interconnectedness found in historical perspectives about various subjects has provided an India-specific context for understanding the contemporary trends in children's media culture. To arrive at a better understanding of the media experiences of children, I have also analyzed two popular programs, which are:

- a) *Chhota Bheem*: a cartoon program created in India.
- b) *Doraemon*: a Japanese cartoon program that is localized for the Indian audience.

I have used ethnography, surveys, interviews, group discussion, analysis, participatory observation, and literature review as I found them to be the most logical methods. While children and their perspectives remain at the center of this work, the perspectives of parents and media professionals have been incorporated to triangulate the findings from three different stakeholders (children, parents/mentors and media makers). This methodology has been chosen since parents and content makers are also parts of the media ecosystem that children inhabit, and adding their perspectives in addition to those of children has helped in bringing forth comprehensive research findings.

3. The new academic results of the dissertation

It was found that the changes in the socio-cultural, economic, and technological spheres of life in India have had a significant impact on the media experiences of children. This finding has been attained through an in-depth review of various types of interdisciplinary research about India as well as the analysis derived from the field work. A new media culture surrounding middle-class children has emerged in India over the last two decades. This culture is characterised by hybrid media experiences, with exposure to and engagement with content through broadcast as well as Internet television. Children in contemporary India engage with media on the go, making older concepts of appointment viewing redundant. Internet-enabled television services provide children with options to interact with content and also a higher degree of agency over their experiences. At the same time, these new habits of consuming media content pose significant difficulties for parents concerned with protecting their children from mature content.

The break-up of joint family systems has given rise to nuclear families in conjunction with the rise of a new middle class, which has changed the traditional social systems of India to a large extent. This has resulted in higher dependence among children on devices and media. Children rely on media to learn and acquire life skills that are not taught in schools. As found during various stages of field work, children have the ability to engage with content intelligently, while they also possess the ability to ascertain that not everything they see in the media is true.

One of the key findings from the ethnographic research relates to children's understanding of gender representation and their perceptions of characters and stereotypes. Through the analysis of focus group discussions conducted in 2018 and 2022, it became clear that children did not perceive the characters based on gender affiliation alone. Children analysed the traits of the characters they saw on screen, and irrespective of whether they were male or female, they could find parallels in their own lives (Focus Group Discussion 2018). Though the discussion on the aspect of gender representation is extremely deep rooted and guided by inherent social practices, the finding that children could distinguish between physical and mental power as

displayed by characters on screen fills gaps in our understanding of children and their media experiences in India.

During program analysis and discussions with children, it was found that children recognized male and female characters as having different types of strength. For instance, in *Chhota Bheem*, Bheem is considered to have physical strength, while mental strength is attributed to Chuttki. The program showcases that Bheem often relies on Chuttki's ideas. Bheem continues to play the lead character in the program, but the value of Chuttki is not diminished in comparison to Bheem. Children highlighted during discussions that the difference in strength types did not make Bheem better than Chuttki as characters. The character of Chuttki was also described as 'smart' and 'mentally strong'. Chuttki's attributes of being caring and kind did not have a negative connotation for children in the respondent group.

Aspects of representation remain a critical object of debate concerning content being offered to children. Content makers interviewed for this research confirmed that they continue to push the agenda of equitable representation and changes in representation of stereotypical gender norms. However, it was also observed that discussions about gender representation on screen have a direct relationship with the revenue generation mechanism. In cases where streaming services or broadcasters do not support changes in traditional methods of representation that project women as helpless and men as strong, such content finds it difficult to get distribution avenues. Therefore, content makers tend to strike a delicate balance between pushing the agenda of a more balanced representation of women and not hurting the sentiments of the public or the advertisers. For instance, programs with LGBTQ themes do not find adequate acceptance on mainstream television for children in India. This further indicates that the concerns about representation are inseparable from the economic considerations of profit and loss attached to them.

Findings from this research have indicated that, even if the overarching themes relating to the topic of media and children are similar across countries, the specifics that inform the research are greatly different between various parts of the world. It is hoped that my dissertation, especially the findings from field work, will pave the way for further enquiry as envisioned in any exploratory research.

Conference Papers and workshops:

- **19th Feb 2024:** “Successive Learnings: Entering the Territory of Indie Animation” participation at conference lecture at **European Film Market Industry Session conference** organized by **Berlin Film Festival**, Berlin, Germany.
- **16th – 19th October 2023:** “Media Mastermind Keynotes,” attendance at **MIPCOM conference**, Cannes, France.
- **25th April 2023:** “The Art of Personal Expression in the Business of Storytelling”, presentation at **Film and Media Exchange Conference 2023**, Stuttgart, Germany.
- **27th May 2021:** “Workshop on Crafting Qualitative Evidence for Impact,” participation in **ICA Pre Conference**, organized by International Communication Association, online.
- **22nd April 2021:** “Project AWeSome’s Spring Webinar: Adolescents and Social Media Studying Person-Specific Effects: From Design to Theoretical Implications.” participation in workshop organized by **University of Amsterdam**, online.
- **19th March 2021:** “Screen Experiences of Children in India in the wake of COVID 19.” paper presentation at **7th Biennial conference Cultural Texts and Contexts in the English-Speaking World**, organized by University of Oradea, Romania.
- **18th Feb 2021:** “Project AweSome’s Webinar Series: Adolescents and Social Media: Introducing a Person-Specific Susceptibility Perspective.” workshop by **University of Amsterdam**.
- **10th Dec 2020:** “Diversity and inclusion in the European audiovisual industries: both on and off-screen.” Participation in conference organized by the **European Audiovisual Observatory**.
- **14th Sept 2020:** “Content Evolution Exchange 2020.” Participation in conference organized by **NATPE Streaming Plus**, USA.
- **25th Feb 2020:** “The Streaming Revolution.” Participation in conference organized by **European Film Market, Berlinale Series Market Conference 2020** and **Berlin International Film Festival**.
- **6th Dec 2019:** “Exploration of identity and gender in the physical and the cinematic digital world.” paper presentation at conference, **New Media & Challenges for AI, Identity and Culture, 2019**, National Art Gallery, Vilnius, Lithuania
- **13th Sept 2019:** “From Broadcast Television to the Personalised Web: An Indian Ethnographic Study” paper presentation at

conference, **International Broadcasting Convention Conference 2019**, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

• **26th – 28th Sept, 2019**: “Multicultural Content In A Seamless World: a Perspective On Children’s Media In India,” paper presented and session chair at **4th International Conference on Communication and Media Studies 2019**, Bonn, Germany.

• **17th April 2019**: “The Rise of Media Content as a Community Builder and Destroyer: a Case Study of Children’s Media Consumption in India” paper presented at **7th International Conference on Comparative Media Studies in Today’s World**, 2019, St. Petersburg University, St. Petersburg, Russia

• **8th - 12th April 2019**: “The Artist as Protagonist: Real and Reel artist in the Cultural Market place of Contemporary Indian Cinema.” Paper presented at **PhD Forum at Salzburg Easter Festival 2019** organized by Universität Salzburg, Austria

• **11th – 13th Feb 2019**: “An Indian Perspective on Localized Content for Children in a Globalized World” paper presented at **2nd International Conference on Asian Congress for Media and Communication**, 2019, Visva Bharathi, Shantiniketan, India

• **24th Oct 2018**: “MIL as “stoplights” in cities: Meaning-making in entertainment”, paper presented at **UNESCO Global Media and Information Literacy Week 2018**, Lithuania.

• **26th Oct 2018**: “Multicultural Content in a Seamless World: A Perspective on Children's Media in India.” Paper presented at the **10th International Moscow Readings Conference 2018**, organized by Faculty of Journalism, Lomonosov Moscow State University.

• **31st May 2018 to 1st June 2018**: “The Virtual Child: Indian Children in Virtual and Geographical Spaces” paper presented at **11th Central and Eastern European Communication and Media Conference 2018**, Szeged, Hungary

• **8th- 14th November 2017**: “Animation-Gaming-Special Effects in Children's Films” paper presented at the **20th International Children's Film Festival conference 2017**, organized by The Children's Film Society of India and Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of India.

• **8th- 14th November 2017**: “Fantasy and Humor in Children's Films” session chair at the **20th International Children's Film Festival conference 2017**, organized by The Children's Film Society of India and Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of India.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Foreign language Hungarian book chapters (1)

1. **Hooda, N.:** The Virtual Child: Indian Children in Virtual and Geographical Spaces.
In: Communicative Space - Political Space : 11th Central and Eastern European Communication and Media Conference, 2018. Eds.: Gergő Mátyus, Imre Merkovity, Norbert Molnár, Judit Stumpf, Péter Bence, Szabó Palócz Orsolya, Iurisperitux Kiadó, Szeged, 95-102, 2020. ISBN: 9786156268044

Foreign language international book chapters (2)

2. **Hooda, N.:** From Broadcast Television to the Personalised Web: An Indian Ethnographic Study.
In: Conference proceedings of: IBC 2019, Amsterdam. Ed.: Paul Entwistle, Institution of Engineering and Technology, London, [Közlésre elfogadva], 1-10, 2022, (IBC Conference Proceedings)
3. **Hooda, N.:** An Indian Perspective on Localized Content for Children in a Globalized World.
In: Cultural Texts and Contexts in the English Speaking World : (VI) New Perspectives. Ed.: Teodor Mateoc, Editura Universităţii din Oradea, Oradea, 130-141, 2019. ISBN: 9786061020720

Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (1)

4. **Hooda, N.:** The Media Rich and Media Poor Children of India.
Emerging Trends in Development Research. 25 (1-2), 53-55, 2018. ISSN: 0972-9445.





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Foreign language conference proceedings (1)

5. **Hooda, N.:** The Rise of Media Content as a Community Builder and Destroyer: a Case Study of Children's Media Consumption in India.

In: 7th International Conference on Comparative Media Studies in Today's World. Ed.:

Boguslawa Dobek-Ostrowska, Michal Glowacki, Peter Lang, Bern, [Közlésre elfogadva], 1-20, 2021, (Studies in Communication and Politics)

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the iDEa Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

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