"Still Watching Cartoons?" Infantilization of Young Anime Fans in India: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Animated content is primarily included in the children's shows category in India. As a result, young adult and adult Indian anime fans are affected by this categorization. To explore their sociocultural experiences in Indian society, fan responses to three questions – posted on Quora, an online question and answer (Q&A) platform – were critically analyzed using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis. The three Quora questions selected for the study were What is it like being an anime fan in India? What is it like to be a manga and anime lover in India? And, why most of the people in India think that anime is for kids? The analysis revealed infantilization of Indian anime fans, mostly young adults or adults. Findings disclosed marginalization of and discrimination against Indian anime fans by the conservative older generation who look at any East Asian popular media from a racially biased lens. Invisibilization, mystification and stereotyping marked the discourse on Indian female anime fans who may not participate extensively in the male-dominated anime fan community on the online fora but consume anime by subversion and negotiated readings.

Keywords: anime fans, critical discourse analysis, Indian fans, India-Japan, infantilization, East Asia

In India, the popularity of Japanese animation series, which are generally known as *anime*, is usually studied in the context of children's shows (Jaggi, 2011; Jaggi, 2014). Its growing affinity among young adults and adults is largely ignored and unexplored by Indian academia. Since animated series are categorized under children's media in India, their impact and effect on teens or adults have not been critically examined, although there exists a subculture of anime fandom in India which mostly has young adults and adults as its members (Business World, 2022). It is worth noticing that with anime being promoted by major OTT platforms like Netflix and Amazon prime video, the size of this fandom is slowly but gradually increasing. This study aims to gain insight into the socio-cultural experiences of Indian anime fans in a society where animation is perceived as meant for children.

Animated Content on Indian Television – A Brief History

Liberalization policies in the 1990s resulted in a massive influx of foreign animated content on Indian television screens. In the pre-liberalization era, there were only a few animated shows that aired on Doordarshan (Indian public service broadcaster), which included *Ghayab Aya*-India's own 2D animation series. During the early1990s, Doordarshan also aired a 3D Indian animation series *Vartamaan* (Kini, 2018). At the same time, privately owned Indian satellite television channels, including Zee TV and Star TV, were launched in India. By the mid-1990s, the duration of foreign animated shows telecasted per week by Doordarshan and privately owned Indian channels was twice and thirteen times the duration of local animated content shown, respectively (Goonasekera, 1998). The foreign animated shows being aired at the time were made in the West, including shows like *He Man, Talespin, Ducktales, Donald Duck, Scooby Doo, Spider Man* and *Tom & Jerry*. In the late 1990s, cartoon channels like Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon arrived in India and catered to the 'children' segment of the audience. These imported animated shows ruled the Indian market till the late 2000s and many other kids' channels were introduced in India during that time, including Disney Channel, Disney XD, Toonami, Sony Yay, Pogo, Hungama etc. The foreign animated shows, like other media content, came under the scrutiny of Indian content regulatory authorities when the Broadcast Content Complaints Council (BCCC)[1] reportedly received many complaints from the parents regarding "objectionable" content being telecasted on children's exclusive channels; "inappropriate behaviour" in these foreign animated shows like parents smoking near children, young boy misbehaving with a girl, became a cause of concern and these shows weren't considered exactly best for "children" (Jha, 2013; Bhatia, 2013). As a result, since the early 2010s, major animated shows currently on air are made in India and are mostly based on India, Indian fables, and mythological characters; examples include *Chhota Bheem, The Little Krishna, Motu aur Patlu, Roll no. 21,* and so forth. However, the fact remains that most Indian millennials spent their childhood with foreign animated content and are generally more accepting towards foreign content. These grown-ups continued consuming Western animation and became ardent fans once exposed to Japanese anime.

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[1] BCCC is an independent self-regulatory body established by the Indian Broadcasting Federation (IBF). It implements self-regulatory guidelines for entertainment content on television channels.

This paper focuses on the transcultural and transnational fandom of a specific form of animation – Japanese anime – instead of the reception of all animated content in India. The following section provides a brief overview of Japanese anime in India to contextualize the reception of transnational media like Anime amongst Indian youth.

Japanese Anime in India – From Past to Present

Animax India

India was first introduced to anime in the early 1990s with *The Jungle Book,* which gained immense popularity among young Indian audiences (India Today, 2020). Since the anime was based on Rudyard Kipling's collection of stories set in an Indian forest and was Hindi-dubbed with characters having Indian names, it was difficult for audiences to realize that it was a Japanese animated series. Then came *Doraemon, Shinchan* and *Ninja Hattori* in the early 2000s, gaining high TRP ratings in the children's TV shows category (Jaggi, 2011; Jaggi, 2014). When *Animax* launched in 2004 in India, it was the only television channel that aired Japanese anime either English-dubbed or subbed. Animax also provided a platform on its website *Animax India* for Indian fans to interact with each other; this is how its official community forum *Animax India Community* came into existence. As stated earlier, since animated shows are generally categorized as children's media in India, Animax that targeted the age-group 15-25 years faced a significant issue with channel-group listings and mainly was clubbed with channels like Cartoon Network, Pogo, Nick etc (Sharan, 2007). Animax ceased broadcasting on regular television in 2017 possibly because of low viewership and lack of advertisers per fan sites (Mahapatra, 2021). Subsequently, Animax India website shut down and the official forum of Animax India Community ceased to exist.

Anime on OTT Platforms and the Return of Animax

Netflix officially entered the Indian market in 2016 with an extensive library of US-based series and movies. With the success of its first anime *Blood of* Zeus in 2020, Netflix decided to widen its anime library to cater to Asian audiences (Mint, 2021). Netflix provides over 200 anime titles to Indian viewers (Goyal, 2019). The YouTube channel *Netflix India* has videos in which famous Indian YouTubers are seen reacting to and promoting anime content (Netflix India, 2020; Netflix India, 2021). Major Indian news websites featured articles for anime recommendations (Arora, 2021; Khan, 2019). The arrival of OTTs played a significant role in re-introducing anime to Indian viewers. Netflix has over 5 million subscribers in India, and its major audience belongs to the age group 15-24, which is 44 per cent of the total viewers (MICA, 2020). This data implies that this age group may have the most anime exposure. It also signifies the presence of anime viewers, mostly teens or adults rather than kids, as assumed in past studies (Jaggi, 2011; Jaggi, 2014). The success of anime on Netflix has prompted other OTT platforms like Disney + Hotstar, and Amazon Prime Video to include anime in their libraries. Besides these OTTs, Crunchyroll, a dedicated anime streaming site recently launched in India after recognizing the growing anime fanbase in India (The Economic Times, 2023a),

and Animax also semi-returned in 2023; however, only via a specific television streaming app- JioTV (The Economic Times, 2023b).

A Scenario of Fandom in India

Whether it is the media portrayal of fans (Shivadas, 2020) or academic studies on major fandoms in India, fans are depicted or analyzed in the context of "the pathological model of fan phenomenon" (Chaturvedi, Singh & Singh, 2020, p. 2). Of the few studies which focused on fan cultures of India, the edited volume *Hero and Hero Worship – Fandom in Modern India* (Chaturvedi, Singh & Singh, 2020) is the only compilation of academic papers to date that offers a glimpse of the Indian fandom scene. According to Chaturvedi, Singh & Singh (2020), four key fandoms exist in India, categorized as *Political Fandom, Sports Fandom, Spiritual Fandom* and *Cinematic Fandom*. Where political fans exhibit a "strong obsession with the rockstar politician" (Chaturvedi, Singh & Singh, 2020, p. 8), spiritual fans are "ignorant" (Chaturvedi, Singh & Singh, 2020, p. 9). Where sports fans reflect "distorted sentimentalism" (Chaturvedi, Singh & Singh, 2020, p. 9), cinematic fandom has a 'solipsistic and narcissist quality' (Chaturvedi, Singh & Singh, 2020, p. 10). Since the domain of Indian fandom is densely populated by these fandoms perceived to have pathological qualities, fans of transnational and transcultural popular media forms like anime are mostly overlooked.

Anime Fandom in India – A Periphery Fandom?

By mobilizing the core/periphery paradigm (Wallerstein, 1974 as cited in Botorić 2021), Botorić (2021) introduced a concept of *periphery fandom*. According to Botorić (2021, p. 13), "periphery fandom refers to a sub-ordinated fan community experience where members are deprived of access to their objects of fandom." The distinction between periphery fandom and core fandom lies in the *accessibility* of and (fandom's) *visibility* to objects of fandom (Botorić, 2021, p. 7). Compared to other global anime fandoms, Indian anime fans have had difficulty accessing anime for decades. If they have become visible to the producers and distributors of anime, they still need to be examined. In the local "scene", the position of Indian anime fandom at the periphery is deliberated because fandoms of politics, religion, cinema, and sports take up the core position. Thus, the peripheral position of Indian anime fandom seems to be twofold. This study then intends to find out whether there is a shift to be observed in the position of this fandom with the rise of OTT platforms in India.

Literature Review

The few Indian studies focused on anime were primarily conducted vis-à-vis content, design, and distribution, but anime fandom and fan culture were less explored. Recently, Rawat (2021) examined the anime and manga reception among Indian youth and argued that "Indian fans are continually negotiating their identities as consumers of Japanese popular culture and their position within Indian society" because of constant "mockery" and criticism (p. 235) and that these fans consider Japanese media products "a means of self-assertion and creation" (p. 239). Contrarily, Jaggi (2011, 2014) studied the Japanese animation content vis-à-vis children's

television in India and found that children "empathize well with the feature characters, themes and plots of anime" (Jaggi, 2014, p. 19) compared to American counterparts and localization of anime through dubbing and marketing strategies "help the young audience identify better with the characters" (Jaggi, 2011, p. 215). In another Indian study, Mayekar & B.S. (2016) designed a pitch for an animated film inspired by Japanese animation style.

Anime fandom outside Japan is explored in terms of fan productivity, social protocols (Lamerichs, 2013), experiences, opinions, values (Chen, 2007), motivations (Armour & Iida, 2016, Reysen et al. 2018), social identification and parasocial relationships (Ramasubramanian & Kornfield, 2012). Like any other fandom, anime fandom is associated with certain stereotypes, for example, fans being socially awkward, lacking social skills, introverted, nerds, and obsessed, among many others (Reysen et al. 2016). Reysen et al. (2016, p. 90) found a "significant discrepancy between non-fan perceptions of anime fans and the actual beliefs and behaviors of anime fans."

What therefore needs to be examined is whether Indian anime fans also experience the stereotypical stigma associated with anime fandom. This study uses Botorić's (2021) concept of *periphery fandom* to analyze the social and cultural experiences of Indian anime fans who use online media to access their objects of fandom and a multitude of social media platforms to gain visibility in the Indian as well as global fandom scene. The research question is formulated as follows: What are the social and cultural experiences of young adult and adult Indian anime fans?

Methodology

Exploratory research design following the constructivist research paradigm was used. The advent of digital media and the rise of social media sites has drastically changed how global fandoms operate. Online media provides numerous opportunities for fans to interact with each other irrespective of their geographical locations. Fans' accessibility to their objects of fandom has become easier as reflected in the case of Indian fans. Thus, online media is considered the research site for this study. The specific social networking site used for this study was Quora, a community of user-generated questions and answers. Quora is one of the top social networking sites in India, with over 215.8 million monthly visits by Indian users (Sannam S4, 2019); India is the second country that sends the most traffic to the quora.com website (SimilarWeb, 2022) and the two largest age groups that make up the major audience of this site are 18-24 and 25-34 years (SimilarWeb, 2022). Another reason why Quora was selected as a research site was because the purpose of the study was to examine the positional shift of fandom if there were any. For that, an understanding of fans' past socio-cultural experiences that were not influenced by the present state of anime in India was required.

The responses to the following three questions posted in Quora were analyzed:

1. What is it like being an anime fan in India?
2. What is it like to be a manga and anime lover in India?

3. Why most of the people in India think that anime is for kids?

There were two hundred and five (205) responses to this question during 2015-2021 on Quora.

Critical discourse analysis is one of the most widely used methods of analysis to examine online fan discourses on social media platforms while investigating a variety of theoretical concepts like misogyny (Redmond, 2021), homophobia (Martins, 2022), cyber-nationalism (Jin, 2021; Zhuang et al. 2022), nativism (Ncube, 2021), symbolic distancing (Yang, 2015) and male gaze (Peng et al., 2022). The aim of critical discourse analysis is

> to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power (Fairclough 1995, p. 132).

Since the aim of the study was to understand the sociocultural experiences of Indian anime fans and their position according to the core/periphery paradigm (Botorić, 2021), which is "ideologically shaped by relations of power", Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis (CDA) model was applied to analyze the text. According to this model, any discourse has three dimensions – the object of analysis (text), the process by which the text is produced and the socio-historical conditions that govern these processes (Janks, 1997, p. 329). To analyze each dimension, a different type of analysis is performed on the text – (a) text analysis (description), (b) processing analysis (interpretation) and (c) social analysis (explanation). In the following section, findings from each type of analysis are discussed.

Research Findings

Text Analysis – Description of the Text

As Janks (1997, p. 335) pointed out, "it is difficult to know what aspect of grammar is going to be most fruitful in the analysis of a particular text"; it was preferred by the researchers to analyze all aspects of grammar and the use of lexical devices in each Quora response by Indian anime fans. This was the first phase of the text analysis. In the second phase, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) – MAXQDA was used to organize the text and visualize the findings from the analysis.

As it is impossible to provide a detailed analysis of all the 205 Quora responses, the researchers limit themselves to briefly illustrating how the text analysis was performed on each Quora response in the Appendix.

(a) Experiences of Indian Anime Fans: Exasperated/Troublesome, Infantilized and Isolated

In their responses to questions on Quora, most of the fans expressed that their experience was troublesome or even exasperating, articulated by using words such as "difficult", "hard", "nightmare", "exhausting", "painful", and "horrible" among others. Of all the respondents, only a few considered their experience pleasant (Figure 1). A detailed analysis of fan experiences is provided in succeeding sub-sections.

Figure 1

Graphical Representation of the Theme – Experiences of Indian Anime Fans
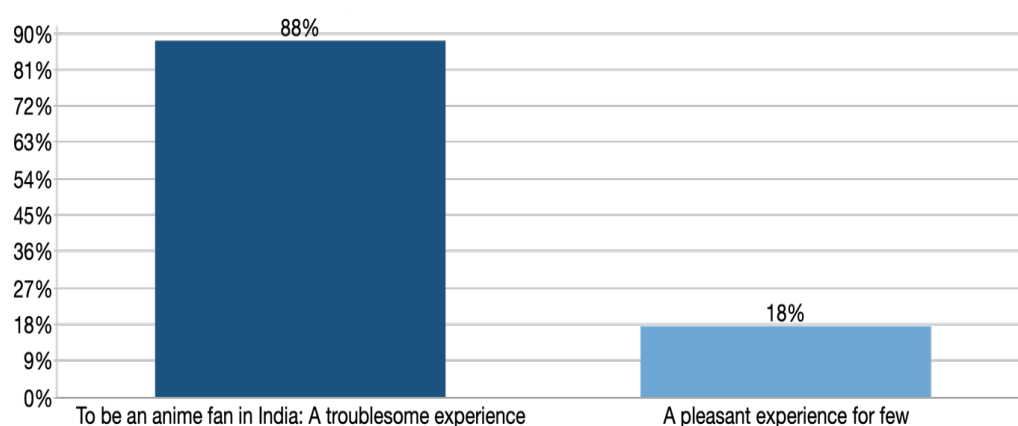
To be an Anime Fan in India: A Troublesome Experience – Indian fans of anime are infantilized, isolated, and stigmatized by society resulting in a challenging experience for fans, specifically for young adults (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Graphical Representation for the Sub-Theme – To be an Anime Fan in India: A Troublesome Experience
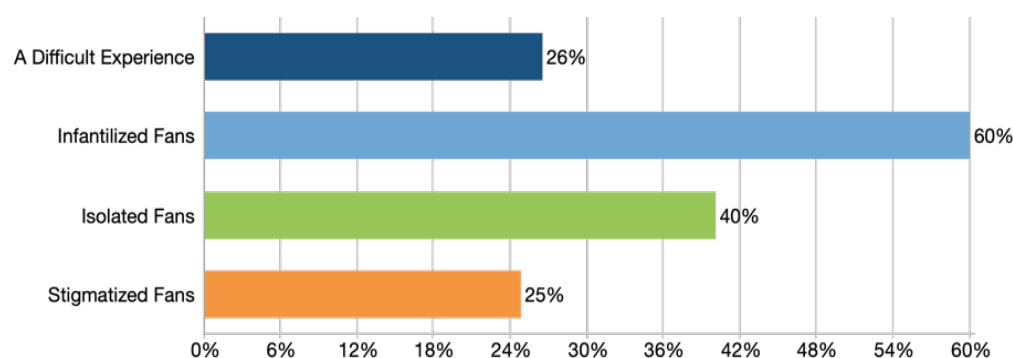

The core frustration that Indian anime fans experience is that they are often a target of infantilization by their parents, relatives and even friends. In 99 per cent of the responses, fans specifically stated that they are often ridiculed and asked to "grow up" by their parents and

peers because "anime is for kids", irrespective of the fact that the fans are already adults (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Infantilized Indian Anime Fans
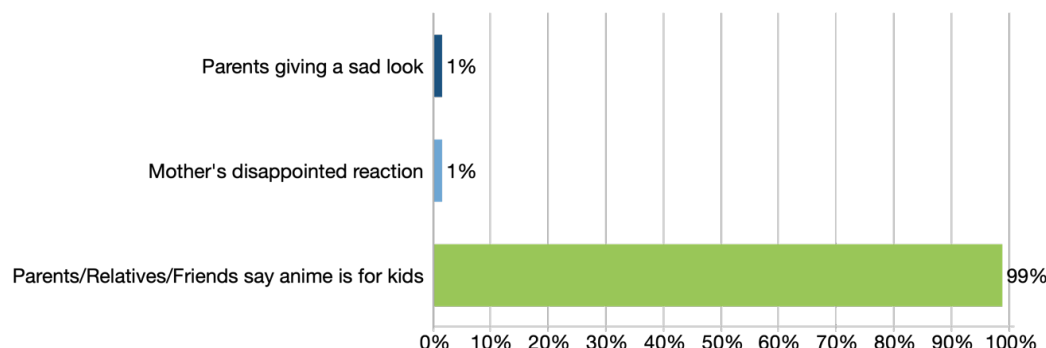
In addition to infantilization, anime fans also experience a feeling of isolation. Most responses affirmed a lack of physical fan communities as the fans are scattered throughout the country (Figure 4). The only mode to communicate with fellow fans is the online communities, especially for fans residing in remote areas. Often stereotyped as introverted, deviant and pervert, anime fans in India are often judged, criticized, and humiliated, leading to stigmatization.

Figure 4

Response Percentage where Indian Fans Mention Feeling of Isolation
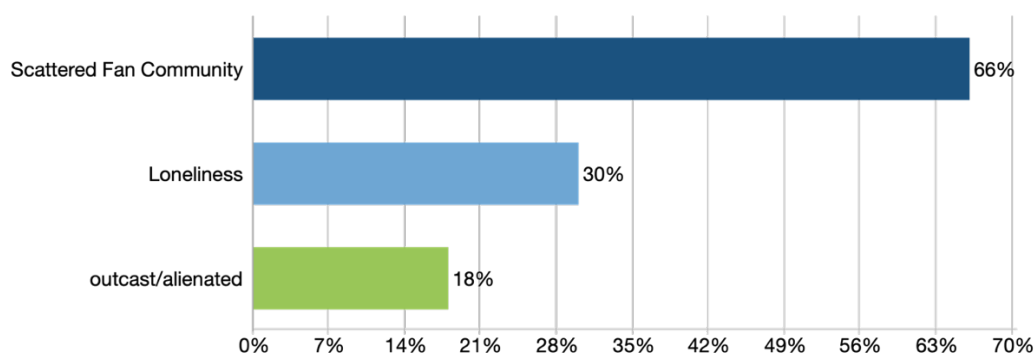
(b) Lack of Resources to Access Anime

Another source of frustration for anime fans is the lack of resources to access their object of fandom, that is, anime and manga in this case. The unavailability of anime on television, manga in bookstores and anime merchandise causes fans to move to online streaming and e-commerce platforms to access these resources. Since the internet services lacked speed a few years back, fans had to wait long hours to stream or download just one episode. Moreover, over-expensive anime merchandise on e-commerce platforms put a dent in the life of already frustrated Indian anime fans.

(c) Anime is Neither Cartoon nor Hentai

A primary discourse that emerged from the fan responses was how emphatically (using capitalized alphabets to emphasize their statements) they stated that anime is neither a cartoon nor a hentai.[2] The annoyance fans experienced when anime is called a cartoon was extremely apparent in the responses, for example, fans frequently used an internet meme of a facepalm gesture or wrote facepalm with asterisks (*facepalm*) to express their disappointment, frustration, embarrassment and at times sarcasm.

> Me: Watching Full Metal Alchemist Brotherhood
> Dad: "Itna Bada hogya aur abhi bhi cartoon dekh RHA h" (Translation: You are an adult but still watching cartoon)
> *facepalm*
> (Bajaj, 2019)

On the other side, fans expressed that if "non-fans" do not call anime a cartoon, then they call it hentai, which anime fans vehemently disagreed with:

> Gosh, my friends were the most irritating people in the world….. they tortured me every day calling anime as cartoon. And the worst part was…they didn't know the difference between HENTAI and Normal ANIME. F###. hentai is porn… .normal animes are animes which normal people watch for their entertainment, relieving their stress, etc. etc…
> (Mohapatra, 2016)

> My friends think that anime is hentai. This was the biggest facepalm moment for me.
> (MR, 2018)

It seems paradoxical that at one end, fans are ridiculed for watching a "cartoon" (which is apparently for kids) and at the other end, they are mocked for watching content that may at times have sexual elements in it. Fans respond to this mockery and criticism by degrading Indian popular media and illustrating their dislike for the native popular culture.

(d) Fans' Aversion to Indian Popular Media

Anime fans strongly distended Indian cartoons, Bollywood movies and daily Indian TV soaps. Because anime is constantly being assumed as cartoons by their family and peers and are supposedly for kids, fans describe how Japanese anime is far superior to Indian cartoons. According to fans, Indian cartoons like Chota Bheem and Motu Patlu are "unworthy", "awful", "rubbish" and "trash".

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[2] Hentai is a type of anime with pornographic content, or simply, pornographic animation.

> Indians tend to believe that anime are no different from cartoons like Chota Bheem, Motu Patlu (I've never watched that awful show after one episode) or any other Indian-produced animation. They fail to realize that anime is often aimed at a larger demographic and comprises of a lot more than some kid eating a ladoo and becoming Superman Jr.
> (Nair, 2018)

Fans' dislike for Bollywood and TV soaps is manifested when they are ridiculed and infantilized for watching anime. On the contrary, when fans are called perverts for watching anime (which sometimes contains sexual elements or sexualized female bodies), they highlight the hypocrisy imbibed in people for favouring western dramas like Game of Thrones, which also contains nudity and graphic content to a certain extreme.

> I get infuriated when they freaking waste their time on Bollywood films like race.
> (Rajoria, 2018)

> India is a place where nagging serials are popular, where big boss and roadies are fan favorite. I just hate them.
> (Bhunia, 2018).

> It is wrong that we watch one piece which is a little sexual in a way but it is okay for people to watch Game of Thrones which contains total graphic scenes.
> (Shrivastava, 2017).

Fans are often demeaned and subjected to prejudices, leading them to explain the qualities of anime that has socially and emotionally helped them. They further express that anime not only serve to their entertainment needs but also plays an essential role in learning life lessons.

(e) Social-Emotional Learning from Anime: Socialization and Pro-Social Behaviors Beyond Learning Japanese language and Culture

CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning) (2016) defines social-emotional learning (SEL) as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions." Anime is not only a source of learning Japanese or Japanese culture but also, a mode through which fans engage in social-emotional learning. Fans shared in their Quora responses, that through anime they learn the importance of relationships, motivation to overcome hurdles in life, manifesting goals, and an understanding of power relations. Case in point is the animation *Naruto*.

> One of the finest creations you can learn about **how important friends are, and when you're in darkness the friend who withstand you is yours true friend**.
> (Jain, 2019)

Watching anime for so long actually made me subconsciously adapt many good things from anime. Well I used to admire Naruto for his friendship. I actually thought it's possible for someone like Misaki from Maid Sama and I turned into why only boys can do even girls can do and I defeated many boys in arm wrestling.
(Vaibhavi, 2018)

Watching DEATH NOTE give you an insight of how a person, who is strong enough to become leader of the world, become most successful person of that generation become a strong investigator who has the ability to think out of box and make world free of evil deed by his intelligence, getting extremely harsh and evil power can change that person into a demon of that generation. It is bitter truth that until you do not have power you think why the powerful people do that, but as you become that powerful you become like them. Power is the source of construction but at the same time it is the source of destruction also.
(Tripathi, 2018)

As many past studies have suggested, learning through anime is not a novel concept, especially not for learning the Japanese language and culture (Ruble & Lysne 2010, Fukunaga 2006, Hamada 2007). However, fans' remarks on anime characters' relatability with real-life situations, problems, and issues, suggest social-emotional learning on a deeper level. In fact, when fans highlight that racially biased lens through which anime is looked at, indicates that fans engage with anime emotionally as well as socially.

(f) Racism against East Asians

It was observed from responses that the older generation (parents and relatives of fans) show racism against East Asians and related media content. The racist remarks included the use of "ching chong" – an ethnic slur used to insult and mock the Chinese language, people, and culture, and a stereotype that everything East Asian must be Chinese.

Uncle: yeh kya mask mein Chinese likha hai? {disgusted look} (Translation: What is this written in Chinese on this mask? {disgusted look})
Me: Nahi ye Chinese nahi hai yeh Japanese hai (Translation: No, this is not Chinese, this is Japanese)
Uncle: dono ek hi sunai deta hai, sab hi "ching chong" lagta hai (Translation: Both sound same, everything is "ching chong").
(Saha, 2021)

Older people's lack of awareness about anime as a Japanese popular media was a common grievance in the fan responses.

(g) Fans' Perceptions of Anime Status in India

Indian anime fans assert that because of a lack of knowledge about anime and the prejudice against animation in India, it is difficult for anime to achieve mainstream status anytime soon despite the huge number of anime viewers in India. Fans regard non-fans, particularly the older generation, as too opinionated vis-à-vis foreign media resulting in a lack of acceptance of anime. And if anytime soon, TV channels start broadcasting anime, it would have to face censorship issues, and according to fans the "Indian censor board is filled with old people (aka boomers) who are not in touch with the current scenario". Apart from this, as per fans, Indians tend to be more accepting towards American or other Western shows than popular media from East Asia, as one fan pointed out: "A lot of it has to do with how detached the Indian subcontinent is from the rest of Asia and how we don't share a lot of culture with them" (Nair, 2018).

Textual analysis of fan responses on Quora reveals the infantilization of Indian teenagers and adults who watch anime because of the continuous dialogue of "cartoon versus anime" between fans and their parents/relatives/friends. The analysis also reveals that Indian anime fans feel frustrated and marginalized in the broader Indian mediascape where local popular media forms like Bollywood, TV soaps, and sports like Cricket, still own the mainstream fandom space. There also exists a strong presence of anti-China sentiment amongst the older generation (of parents, and relatives) and how they associate it with anime, irrespective that anime is a Japanese-produced popular media form. As a result, Indian anime fans are often a target of discrimination.

Processing Analysis – Interpretation

This text is based on from the years 2015-2021. During 2015-2018, the Quora questions gathered the majority of the responses (about 73 per cent) and saw a decline between 2019-2021 (Figure 5). Some contextual factors that may have led to the production of this text will now be discussed.

Figure 5
Percentage of Quora Responses Between 2015-2021
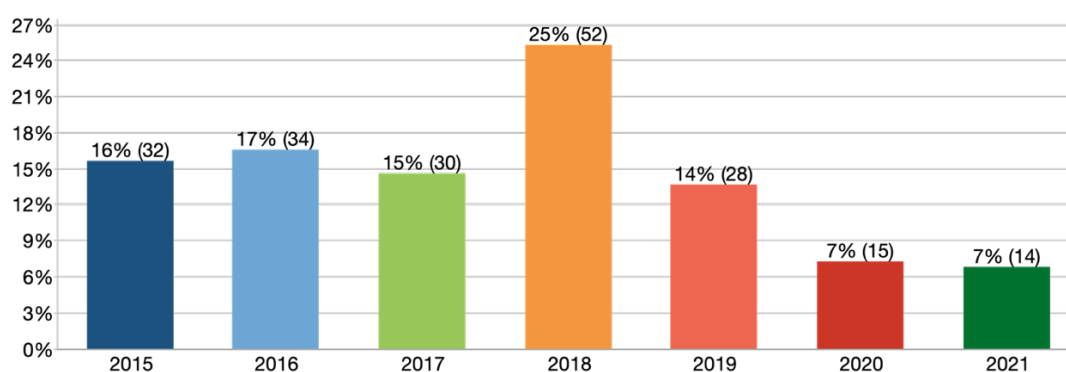
Between the years 2015 and 2018, fans were mainly concerned about the unavailability of Anime on television satellite channels, the lack of anime-related events, and merchandise apart from the constant infantilization by family and friends. As discussed, at the beginning of the paper, Animax India was the primary source of anime consumption on TV which ceased its operation in 2017, thirteen years after its launch. Although Animax India was completely wiped from local cable and DTH services in 2017, it already faced issues with DTH service providers and censorship authorities in India a few years back. In 2012, all DTH services removed the channel as it could not afford the carrier fees and it was only available on local cable services. Later, AnimaxAsia HD was made available by SonyLiv, an Indian OTT service, but in 2020, it too ceased its operation.

Figure 6
Word Cloud for Quora Responses During 2015-2018

The Internet then became the only source for accessing anime; however, that too had its drawbacks at the time. During these years, internet penetration was very low in India, restricted mostly to urban households, with in 2015 only 15 per cent of the population internet subscribers and about 20 per cent in 2018 (ITU 2022). Furthermore, speed of the internet was too slow to stream any audio-visual media content seamlessly. The lack of *accessibility* to anime (both from legal and illegal sources) and *visibility* of Japanese anime production houses were the main sources of fans' frustration and discontentment during this period.

Internet subscribers in India doubled in 2020 (to around 43 per cent of the Indian population (ITU 2022)), and cheap subscriptions offered fans more access to transcultural media like anime, K-pop, K-dramas, and other Asian media content. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic boosted anime and K-drama consumption among Indian audiences because of lockdown-led binge-watching on OTTs. As a result, Netflix expanded its anime library, and over 200 anime titles are available to Indian fans. A few anime movies like *Your Name, Weathering with You,* and *Suzume* were also theatrically released in India. The anime merchandise and manga have become available on e-commerce platforms, and a few local stores; however, the expensive cost remains an issue among fans. Hence, accessibility and visibility are not much discussed as per recently posted Quora responses compared to those posted a few years back.

Figure 7
Word Cloud for Quora Responses in 2021

However, what continued to be discussed is fans' unceasing infantilization by their parents, relatives, and peers. The text analysis highlighted the "cartoon versus anime", "anime is not cartoon" and "cartoon is for kids" discourse still prevalent in online Indian anime communities like Quora. According to a recent survey by JetSynthesys, 83 per cent of Indians prefer Japanese anime over other animated content and across different age groups, millennials and Gen Z are the prime consumers of anime (Business World, 2022). In India, all animated content is primarily classified as children's entertainment, targeted at children between ages 2 and 14 (Rawat, 2021). This classification has resulted in a discourse and belief – a dominant ideology (especially among Gen X and Baby Boomers) – that any kind of animated content, irrespective of theme and genre, is meant for kids. Because of this dominant ideology, the discourse of "cartoon (animation) is for kids" is naturalized in India and as a result, Indian young adult anime fans are infantilized.

Similarly, when fans are not labelled as "kids", they are stereotyped as perverts. Mostly, this happens because of a genre of anime – hentai, available, for instance, on the Pornhub website. According to their statistics, India is the third largest country to access their site, with the age group 18-44 years as the primary users (Yadav, 2020). It is, then, most likely that Indians who

are "non-anime-fans" know about hentai as pornographic animated content and generalize all anime in the hentai category, further indicating a lack of knowledge about other anime categories – *josei, shoujo, shounen, isekai, seinen,* and so forth – with young adults/adults as their target audience.

As discussed earlier, the accessibility of anime and the visibility of Indian anime fans is improved compared to what it was a few years back; however, the discourse that "anime is for kids" and "anime is hentai" persists; the former infantilizes the fans, and the latter stigmatizes them as degenerates. The first case happens because most of the Indian population links anime with children's content. After all, a few anime that are telecasted in India are aired on cartoon channels as per the Indian government policies, and these channels are meant to broadcast only "child-friendly" content, equating anime with "kid-content". It is problematic because anime has a broader category of genres that caters to adult audiences and mostly contain adult themes, including violence, horror, sex, depression, and melancholia. The second discourse looks at anime from the lens of pornographic content exclusively. Again, it is problematic for the same reason as above, as hentai is just one category of anime or, rather, a category of porn.

India has strict regulations for broadcasting content; several regulations like *The Cinematograph Act, 1952* (according to which filmmakers need to obtain certification from the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), and content is often modified or censored after examination) and *The Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995* (which prohibits offensive or obscene content on television channels). With new regulations under *Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021*, OTT platforms and social media content are also regulated. As per these rules, OTT platforms would have to self-classify the content into five age-based categories – U, U/A 7+, U/A 13+, U/A 16+ and A (Adult). For content classified as U/A 13+ or higher, parental locks for content needs to be provided by the OTT platforms. For content classified as A, age verification mechanisms need to be implemented. It is imperative to note that most anime that are being streamed on OTT platforms are classified as U/A 13+, U/A 16+ and A. It is also reported that censored and "sanitized" versions of anime are being shown in India as broadcasters must adhere to Indian regulations (Sayyed, 2023), much to the dissatisfaction of Indian anime fans; only a limited "censored" anime content is available for legal streaming. In summary, Indian anime fans face many problems, including infantilization, stigmatization, limited availability of anime on legal streaming platforms, strict regulations, anime censorship and racism against East Asian popular media forms in India (as discussed in the succeeding section).

Social Analysis- Explanation

Given the collectivist nature of much of Indian society, it is common for young Indian adults to live with their parents and sometimes with extended family, (Chadda & Deb, 2013). According to a recent report, over 80 per cent of young people live with their parents in India (R, 2018). Although recent studies implied that, due to Western influence through movies and pop culture, Indian parents were becoming less controlling and encourage more autonomy in

their children, fan responses on Quora suggest otherwise, that is, parents of these fans continue to show a controlling and less accepting nature towards their childrens' hobbies and activities. The textual analysis reveals that young adult anime fans share an infantilizing relationship with their parents, mainly because of their choice of watching animated content over other activities. The infantilization process occurs when a person is treated like a child, prolonging their infantile state, irrespective of age. Epstein et al. (2022, p.1) defined infantilization as a "form of abuse in which a competent adult or young adult is treated like a child" and suggested fifteen categories of infantilization based on different restrictions posed by parents. The categories of interest here are – Emotional abuse and Restrictions on entertainment. Emotional abuse, in the context of infantilization, occurs when a young adult/adult is often criticized, shouted at, or insulted. Infantilization also happens when restrictions are posed on young adult/adult vis-à-vis their modes of entertainment i.e., limited access to the internet, television, or any media content (Epstein et al., 2022). In Quora responses, fans constantly remarked that parents, relatives (and at times friends as well) ask them to "act their age", "grow up", "you are not a kid" or "stop watching cartoons". It may seem, at first, that parents are not infantilizing these young adults, since they are not treating them as children, instead they are quite conscious that their offspring is a grown-up person. However, in juxtaposition, they are also being criticized, insulted, and humiliated by family and friends, for their choice of entertainment; as a result, being infantilized by them. Numerous studies have suggested that infantilization resulting from psychological or behavioral control has adverse effects on self-esteem (Kakihara et al., 2009), emotional well-being (Wang et al. 2007; Epstein et al., 2022) and formation of personal maturity in youth (Panferov et al., 2021) and that infantilization "generally occurs with populations that lack power" (Epstein et al., 2002, p.1). Anime fans in India lack power and often struggle with power dynamics because, first, they are fans of animated media form, which is stereotyped as children's media and second, their fan object is transnational, transcultural, and a niche popular media form.

While East Asian popular media forms like anime, K-pop and K-drama are gaining wider acceptance among the young generation (Gen Z and millennials) of India, the older generation (Gen X and Baby Boomers) still look at these forms of entertainment through a racially biased lens. Although anime is a Japanese media product and for several decades India has shared a strong relationship with Japan, literacy about Japanese culture and its media forms remains low amongst most Indians. There is a tendency among Indians with low literacy levels to convert multi-cluster East Asia into a single-cluster China. Because of certain ethnic similarities, everything East Asian is (inaccurately) considered Chinese. Since India shares a complex political and economic relationship with China and since 2020 these two countries find themselves in the middle of political tensions, the fans of East Asian popular media are discriminated against, marginalized, and ridiculed, also due to the presence of anti-China sentiment in Indian society.

"Where are You All?"– Mystified Indian Female Anime Fan

A recent study found that since the 1990s, online communities of anime fandom have not been a safe space for women, dominated mostly by male anime fans who, through "negative

networking" established "lasting oppressive online social relationships towards marginalized gender communities in online anime fandom" because of which "women anime fans were ignored, belittled, criticized, harassed, and mystified" (Petit 2022, p.353). In addition to the themes vis-à-vis sociocultural experiences discussed in the preceding sections, a discourse surrounding the "mystification" (Petit, 2022, p. 359) of Indian female anime fans also emerged in this study. It found that whenever a female anime fan commented or responded, other fans were "surprised" as observed from comments like "you won't believe that one [anime fan] of them was a girl", "I met a girl…who turned out to be an Otaku or weeb, I was surprised", "finding girls who see anime is a rarity", and "if you get a girl who watches Anime in India! (One in a Zillion possibility)". A similar question was also posted on Quora, titled, 'Do girls in India watch anime?" which gathered over 20 responses from female anime fans 18-30 years' old who kept emphasizing that "they are not extinct". Although comments addressed at female fans were not malicious, the presence of female anime fans was treated as a "novelty", and they were "mystified" based on the "belief that if they existed, they were an exception to the hegemonic fan identity" (Petit 2022, p. 359). This discourse highlights that although anime fans are often the target of extensive stereotyping, they themselves stereotype fellow fans based on their gender, as a comment suggests – "Mostly girls are into TV drama serials. Really you are an inspiration to other girls". An Indian female already struggles with pervasive gender stereotyping and is treated similarly in online spaces, especially spaces of shared interests; unsurprisingly, they want to remain invisible. The image of an anime fan is stereotyped, and the image of a "female anime fan" is doubly stereotyped.

Despite this and the controversies surrounding anime, from the hyper-sexualization of female bodies to fetishizing underage young girls, objectifying women in the name of "fan service" and promoting sex stereotyping (Bresnahan et al., 2006; Brenner 2007; Zanghellini, 2009; Reysen et al., 2017; Brumfield 2022), Indian female anime fans negotiate with anime characters vis-à-vis identity construction by using strong female anime characters as role models; consistent with what previous studies have reported regarding fans and their identification with anime characters (Napier, 2001; Ramasubramanian & Kornfield, 2012; Ting, 2020). As described by Vaibhavi (2018), she draws inspiration from the female anime character Misaki (to provide a context, Misaki is a character from the anime Maid Sama! who is exceptionally strong, is her class's president and very good at sports) and identify with her leadership attributes. Vaibhavi (2018) incorporated Misaki's skills in her real life and learned about gender equality. This suggests that despite the shortcomings of anime and seemingly male-dominated anime fandom, Indian female fans enjoy anime through negotiated readings and meanings.

Conclusion

This study aimed to provide a glimpse into the world of young adult/adult anime fans in India, a phenomenon not considered worth analyzing before. This gap in the literature reflects the disinterest in exploring subcultures which do not have a mainstream position in India. The digital age has given an opportunity and a space to these transcultural fandoms where they can voice out their opinions, share their experiences and find people with shared interests. These

fans are not acknowledged, had troubled experiences over the past years and are often a target of infantilization and stereotyping. Their constant difficult experiences and "uncommon" interest in anime have aroused a strong distaste for native popular culture. They consider other cultures, in the present case, Japanese culture, to be more relevant. Accessibility and visibility are no longer an issue for these fans in their digitalized world. However, what bothers them is the Indian socio-cultural system and the frequent stigmatization they experience. Where Indian female anime fans are concerned, their issues seem to be twofold, as they are not only stereotyped by non-fans but also mystified by male fans; the issue is culturally rooted in India, where women are expected to follow traditional gender roles in a patriarchal society. Because of toxic technocultures in a male-dominated fandom, Indian female fans prefer a limited presence.

Subcultures are one of the key driving forces for any cultural and media product to survive in a competitive globalized world. For a locally produced media form like Japanese anime to survive in India, it is essential to overcome the social, cultural and racial barriers prevalent in Indian society. Indian anime fandom is slowly but consistently changing its position from the periphery to a more central location; however, it is still far from the mainstream. Unless the racial discrimination against East Asian popular media forms vanishes and Indians become more aware of the distinction between Japan, South Korea, China and other East and Southeast Asian regions, Indian anime fans must keep struggling with the social stigma.

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