

Our Experience: User Research with Indian Youth: Unlearning some paradigms for research in India

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Abstract

The Indian youth segment is of interest to product and service companies primarily due to their large number and disposable income. Usability testing and user research for varied types of products have seen a steep rise in the last decade. However today's youth are very distinct from their processors. Using traditional user research methods appropriate for a high power distance, hierarchical, and masculine society have proved to be ineffective. Usability practitioners have improvised and met these challenges in different ways. The paper aims to provide 10 key insights from our experience about the Indian youth that is distinct from the predecessors and prove to be challenges while conducting user research.

1. Introduction

One of the most popular songs on the Indian airwaves these days is "pappu can't dance sala" bilingual, part descriptive, part narrative with a sprinkling of slang and brand names. This song personifies Indian youth of the moment.

Hai muscular (hai muscular) Hai popular (hai popular)
(he Is Muscular, he is Popular)

Hai muscular, hai popular
(Is Muscular, is Popular)

Spectacular! He's a bachelor (he's a bachelor, he's a bachelor)
(Spectacular, He's a Bachelor)
Pappu ki gadi tez hai, Pappu kudiyon mein craze hai
(Pappu's car is fast, and he's a craze among the girls)

Pappu ki aankein light blue, Pappu dikhta angrezz hai (angrezz hai)

(Pappu's got light blue eyes, and he looks white)

Rado ki ghadi hathon mein, Perfume gucci vala

(his watch is a Rado, while the perfume is a Gucci)

Pappu is the Indian Jack. The 11th card of the suit. The average Joe. The not so strong cup of Indian whisky. The eternal kid of the family. Pappu for generations represented the average Indian youth. Slightly spoilt by their mother, unsure of the future, dependant on their fathers for finances, caught in the strange no mans land between adolescence and adult hood, taught to revere elders and speak when spoken to.

Economic liberalization, infiltration of satellite television and other global trends is changing the socio economic fabric of India. Thus, Pappu learnt to dance, talk Hinglish, picked up an attitude and some economic clout on the way.

The Indian youth are increasingly proving to be every product and service companies dream come true.

Add large numbers, to hunger for anything new, pockets filled with disposable BPO earned salaries, and first taste of economic prosperity. This generation is out there to experiment, spend and spend more.

Some 47% of India's current 1 billion populations are under the age of 20, and teenagers among them number about 160 million. Already, they wield \$2.8 billion worth of discretionary income, and their families spend an additional \$3.7 billion on them every year. By

2015, Indians under 20 will make up 55% of the population--and wield proportionately bigger wallets.

This generation does not represent the 'Typical Indian' user of the yore, the one that most foreign usability practitioners would identify. However they are not a rebel generation or a departure from Indian values. They pride themselves in a unique regional identity and are keen to flaunt it. Unlike their predecessors who were steeped in Indian roots. However were keen to come across as modern and westernized in their outlook during interviews.

Conducting user research with this generation has proved to be both a joy and an eye opening roller coaster ride. Their attitudes and behavior have pushed the boundaries of moderating techniques, data collection formats and some times moderator's nerves. The authors have collated their experience in the last 7 years of end user contact and many more heard from colleagues' into this paper. This paper aims to provide insights to anyone who wants to design or conduct end user data gathering with the Indian youth.

2. Key Insights and Takeaway

The average Indian youth's behavior during user research sessions are a clear departure from the way one expects Indians to behave. This has forced usability practitioners to revisit some of the methods and techniques one uses to capture data.

1. Sampling and user identification of participants: Recruitment for participants for usability tests is fairly straight forward and easy. As young people are everywhere, keen make some money and get their opinion heard. However the young very often are tough to categories into simple socio economic strata or education qualification bands. Depending on the nature of target user one should look deeper into the geographic location of testing and the attitudinal requirements. If one was to profile the youth in India's top 100 educational institutions their backgrounds, attitudes to technology, language usage, interest in music and pop culture etc would be very consistent. However lower down the ladder, the behaviors and interests vary due to greater impact of regional influences. In the same way the larger cities and some smaller urban pockets are

reasonably homogeneous while smaller towns tend to have bigger differences region wise.

If one was to compare Asansol a small town in Bengal to Trichi the same in the south, the kind of difference in opinion, attitudes and behavior is likely to be humongous.

Takeaway: If you are testing only in one or two Indian cities, stick to the large ones, as these areas are likely to give you data that is representative of a reasonably large and urban user base. If you want to test regional variety across the country, avoid metro's, IT and education hubs at all costs. Aim to cover smaller cities with a distinctly regional identity.

2. Explorative attitude: On an average the youth are keen to explore and figure things out. There is a sense of pride at "being good" with technology products. Very often while attempting tasks young users deviate on a tangent to explore the product instead. As this group is fairly good with technology it is noticed that during protocol simulated tasks these users take it upon themselves to complete the task to success. Many feel they are being tested. However if stuck with a particularly unusable piece of design these users are unlikely to blame themselves, like their older counter parts. In most cases they will be very forth right to the blame the manufacturer or the designers.

Takeaway: Contextual inquires and explorative tasks with technology products provide more insights into user behavior. Task based closed bounded sessions help to validate a proposed design. However fail to provide insights about persuasion, emotion, trust issues and the stickiness of a service or concept especially with this user group.

3. Collectivism vs the individual: India is traditionally a fairly collective society. The youth demonstrate more individualism than their parents however they showcase signs of being very collective.

- During recruitment groups of youngsters offer to come to the venue together, even if just one participant is finally asked to attend the session.
- During sessions, often participants provide answers that represent just not him/herself but his entire friend circle or generation. When a question seems tough, often participants want to cross check the details with their friends.

Many give feedbacks based on their prior experience, but they also provide feedbacks based on what they have heard from their friends or their friends' experience.

- They have a tendency to share a lot of their knowledge, especially if the topic is of interest to them. Primarily because their self image is a quotient of how others perceive them. People who know a lot have better standing among friends.
- Most of them view society to be homogenous in their choices and wants. Most individuals consider themselves a prototype youth of their generation. They feel their choices and aspirations are in line with the majority of the population
- Physical self image is a critical part of a young Indian's life. This is a departure from the earlier generations who worked hard to conform in every walk of life. Each one of them would like to have an identity of their own. From hairstyle to branded cloths, from mobile to vehicle, these are a part of their image. For example, most of them do have expensive mobile hand sets. Even though they carry these expensive hand sets most of them go for low-priced or discounted connections from the service providers, as they have to shell out the cost from their own pockets. The youth strive and are happy to showcase their individuality within the comfort zone of being part of a group.

Takeaway:

- During session it is key to stress the fact that users should talk about their personal experience.
- Buddy up sessions or scenarios which appeal to this collective feeling, are very insightful to understand the motivations and group dynamics that come into play while a user makes choices or learns to use a new product.
- Products and solution designed to increase intra group interaction are very successful and find easy acceptance. At the same time services which highlight their individuality are in demand.

4. Attitudes towards the camera. The culture of performance vs. discomfort and mistrust of the medium. Video cameras in the past have been a massive impediment in conducting user research in India. The cameras represented the establishment or the quintessential big brother etc. Most Indians would be extremely formal and staccato in their behavior, very much in the lines of the formal stodgy presenters one watched on state run television programs.

The youth today put up a very different show for the camera. More in lines of the nonchalant exhibitionism one views on youth centric television channels and reality shows. Some young female participants were slightly wary of the video cameras, primarily due recent video frauds. They need to be reassured that the equipment is only for the test purposes and mean no harm. Most urban participants do showcase a certain amount of exhibitionism. They play act to the camera with exciting quotes, sometimes risqué conversation and more extremist views. This proves to be rather entertaining to watch and report however might not be representative of the reality.

Takeaway: Use a very nondescript video camera and downplay its presence. Avoid drawing attention to its presence by making users sign the non disclosure agreement. These are not legally binding or mandatory in India, thus do not serve any value for researchers.

5. Venue: Attitudes towards the venue. Hotel vs. cafeteria.

The choice of venue often has strong repercussion on the nature of insights. Sessions in hotels or formal labs are perceived with a level of seriousness. Users make an earnest effort to complete tasks and participate actively. They are more serious as they are aware that they are called for a specific and important activity. It is much easier for the participant to listen to the questions and focus on the given tasks as there are no external, environmental disturbances. The participants are able to accomplish more tasks.

Women often are not keen to attend sessions in hotels, as hotels per say are viewed as locations of vice and in appropriate for young girls to frequent unescorted.

In informal or real settings like a café's are casual and the sessions are not considered very serious. As a moderator one has to work hard to keep the users attention. However the setting provides insights on real life distractions which

will act on a real user. There is a high possibility that the participant is likely to meet his/her friends, be disturbed by many factors like, ringing of mobile phones, cigarette smoke, groups of youngsters talking and laughing etc. Conducting tests and setting up of equipment in public spaces in India are very tough primarily because of the crowds and the unwanted attention one receives. At the same time conducting sessions in sanitized laboratories or hotels do not provide the whole picture.

Takeaway: Avoid usability laboratories or absolutely public settings. A living room in an apartment block or an empty classroom in a school are familiar surroundings yet are not logistically problematic to handle. Often usability tests labs that have been designed to look less formal and more lived in make users feel at home.

6. Forming a connection: What a moderator wears, how s/he talks, and the way d/he presents her self. Participant reacts differently to different moderators. A moderator's age, attire, attitude and presentation style has impact on the way youngsters behave during the sessions.

It is noticed that, in Tier 2 cities and rural areas, participants are uncomfortable if the moderator is dressed in formal attire. The first time jobbers felt that they were facing an interview. When the tests are for the young (college students, young professionals), it is better to dress up casually or in semi formals. It is also suggested not to sit across the table but rather sit along side of the participant. In this case the participants feel more comfortable with the whole environment.

It is easier to get better results if the moderator can to connect with their culture and attitude. Having a serious environment can give them a class room feel and this can scare them a bit. Being extremely casual and friendly might take the test feedback in different tangents without actually touching the relevant points.

Takeaway: Moderators who get maximum interaction from young participants are usually just a few years older than the participants, are casually dressed, don't draw too much attention on them selves, are friendly yet focused on the task at hand. The moderators have to be friendly yet have the complete control of the test environment. Male moderators usually find it tougher to conduct tests with young girls, however strangely the reverse is not true. English speaking non Indian moderators usually

are not very effective. This is primarily because of social conditioning; most youngsters don't open up to foreigners.

7. Language

The average Indian youth are more comfortable with English than their parents. In urban neighborhoods, most users are very comfortable with 'Hinglish' a hybrid of Hindi and English. In a multi-cultural place, where the population is a floating one, youngsters are comfortable not only in English but also speak the national language and a local language. Thus normal day to day activities are conducted in this strange concoction.

However, if a test is conducted a rural place, then it would be more beneficial if one restricts in speaking in the local language. Not just because of the language issue, it is also observed that having a local language moderator makes it easier for the participant to respond more openly and freely, thus providing appropriate feedbacks.

Takeaway: Moderators should have a working knowledge of 'Hinglish' terms and phrases to correctly understand what a user is trying to communicate. However a moderator should avoid aping the youngsters and speak their lingo. Most youngsters don't like this level of familiarity and are likely to consider it odd.

8. Impatience

Participants are excited to explore on their own rather than do something that they have been told to do. Their level of patience is low. This generation has with constant change and amazing array of technologies that did not exist before. There are a variety of social and cultural factors influencing and sometimes encouraging impatience. Family pressures for success, the booming go get it economy, even modern twists to religion and cultural folklore which rewards the smart and quick have encouraged this impatience.

Previous generations had hobbies like collecting coins, stamps, books, etc. The current generation rarely has any reposeful hobbies. If you ask them, the only response you will get is "I don't have time". They can't be blamed, yes, there are too many things happening around for them to focus on one single item.

Takeaway: Pace of a session is key to hold participant's interest. It is recommendable to conduct many small sessions rather than do a few detailed in-depth ones. Sustaining a

participant's interest for more than an hour is tough even on the most seasoned moderators.

9. Topics of Interest

There is an increased awareness of global culture and pop culture consumption among the Indian youth. This is largely due to the impact television, internet, social networking portals, email services, photos and video sharing, etc. Indian media has more references and increased airtime of international programming. Sports (Soccer, Formula 1 racing, WWF), music (primarily pop and rock) and international sitcoms are popular among the youth. This is a distinctly different from the older generation who prefer home grown regional content. Politics is of no interest to this generation. Unlike previous generations, today's youth are not obsessed with the ins and outs of politics. They showcase a different brand of nationalism which showcases the countries achievements not its history and culture.

Takeaway: Avoid designing test scenarios which have political or historic reference. Young users are likely to get bored and de-motivated to go through the tasks.

Use instances of popular culture, sport, music, *bollywood* and relationships. This usually perks young users up.

10 Social Hierarchies

The famed religious and cultural Indian caste system is insignificant among most youngsters. In fact most youngsters are against reservations and perks provided on the basis of religion, caste or minority status. Youngsters socialize and make friends irrespective of caste boundaries and some intend to marry across

caste boundary lines too. However the concept of social hierarchies is not dead. Youngsters are very aware of the socio economic background they represent. These new hierarchies are less clearly defined than the religious ones and are a combination of education, family economic status, the people you know, the gadgets and cars one drives etc. The evidence of this smoke screen of social hierarchy is evident in the way people treat each other and behave in public. Very often even moderators are put on the judging table and assessed.

Take away: Concepts of social hierarchy are hard coded into individuals. One need to be sensitive about these perceptions as moderators, but the best policy is to steer clear of unpleasant situations.

3. Conclusion

Conducting user research with the youth in India has been an enriching experience. We see parallels in other emerging markets like Turkey, China and other Asian countries. It will be interesting to see how Hofstede's principals of culture scores are re- defined for each of these societies in the coming decade.

4. References & Learning Aids

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