

A Study on the Impact of Thumbnails on YouTube amongst Teenagers in Mumbai

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Abstract

YouTube has reached a viewership of 265 active million users in India and the need to compete more in the virtual world has been increasing each day. The need to be exceptional amongst the crowd of video content has become more challenging. 98% of the youth in India have installed YouTube in their phones making it the most viewed application. Industry experts have emphasised on the importance of thumbnails on YouTube. A potential viewer will first see a thumbnail when they browse on YouTube. While scanning on YouTube, the viewer accordingly chooses videos to watch on the basis of information and feeling they achieve on thumbnails. Therefore, Thumbnails should have the ability to grasp the attention of the viewer and at the same time, even provide a basic gist on the video. The study is based on the aesthetic characteristics of a thumbnail such as object complexity, colour complexity, brightness and celebrity endorsement that can enhance the marketing experience by providing an intensified visual complexity. The results will provide important guidelines to video marketers to enhance thumbnail experience amongst potential viewers and garner more viewership.

Keywords: *Thumbnails, YouTube, Video Marketing, Visual Complexity.*

Introduction

The need to browse and use the internet has grown more than ever. After Google, YouTube is the second most visited website (Newberry, C. 2021). At the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a big boost in the number of viewers on YouTube for young different purposes. (Omnicoagency, 2021) YouTube has a whopping viewership of 265 active million users in India. According to (YouTube 2020), people watched 100 billion hours of gaming

and 72% people in used YouTube for the purpose of keeping themselves fit or exercise. Evolving interfaces of YouTube brought out different traits like live-streaming, premium channels, and monetization (Arthurs et al., 2018), YouTube is recognised as being more differentiated from traditional content broadcasters with user-to-user social experience contributing to high demand (Susarla et al., 2012). With the advancing of technology in the coming time, there has been a substantial rise in product

promotions through social media platforms, which has unarguably made YouTube its most important target, due to its user index (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018).

Relevance of YouTube usage in India.

YouTube has transpired as an interactive tool for young grownups (Berryman et al., 2018) with a considerable number of users falling in the age group of 18–34 years (Talwar et al., 2020, YouTube, 2020). Members of this age group have been noted to use social media to satisfy a variety of needs, especially of social nature (Young et al., 2017). A report from the Institute of Governance, Policies and Politics (2020), 98% of the youth in India have installed YouTube in their phones making it the most viewed application. Another online survey by Ipsos (2020) stated that 94% of Indians used YouTube to learn to do things themselves. Being the most active group, young people never failed to get updated about contemporary developments of the market, making them suitable participants of the study. Moreover, younger viewers preferred to watch YouTube videos since they found the user-generated content to be more authentic (Holland, 2016). Digital video platforms especially YouTube has become a renowned marketing channel for business to reach a wider range of target customers and accordingly engage with them.

According to Tube filter (2019), at each minute, 500 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube. With the amount of latest content being uploaded at every minute, it is no brainer that YouTube is growing its reach as a channel. Advertisers paid \$90.7 billion on video marketing in 2018, with the value expected to augment to \$102.8 billion by 2023 (Kurzer 2018). Eighty-eight percent of advertisers said that they were contented with the ROI (return on investment) of their video marketing efforts in 2018 (O'Neil 2018). However, moreover businesses becoming a ware of the advantages of video marketing, the need to grab the attention of the viewer is become fiercer than ever. Chowdhury and Makaroff (2013) in their study stated that among 47,771 YouTube videos in their study, only 0.08 percent received more than 100,000 views. It means that just about half of those videos viewed were less than 100 times and around 25% of them were viewed below 10%. The challenge to stand out in the digital world has become more difficult with time.

Industry experts have emphasised the significance of thumbnails for the view-through of videos (Gollin 2018, Newberry 2018, Lawrence 2019, Dean 2020). The audience can accordingly decide which videos to watch when surfing through the

digital video platform based on the data and impression obtained thumbnails. Koh and Cui (2020) stated that a thumbnail is a structure taken from a video or a customized picture that represents the subject matter of the video. YouTube states that although it offers a few thumbnail choices from the video itself based on some algorithms, 90 percent of top-performing videos use personalised thumbnails rather than these "suggested" choices (Funk, 2020). Anecdotal evidence suggests that "optimized" thumbnails augment the view-through of videos by 15 percent (Vidyard 2013).

A thumbnail is a condense of a video being small clickable images that a person can get on to watch any video based on ones' choice. Hence, it may need to put across requisite information and convey to potential audience what the video is about. It has been shown that greater the stimuli, easier is the information to process (Keller et al. 1998, Luffarelli et al. 2019). A thumbnail, however, should not possess exorbitant information, as it can become cluttered, making it hard for potential audience to trace certain information from the thumbnail (Donderi and McFadden 2005, Rosenholz et al. 2007).

Literature Review

Further studies have found that factors of a thumbnail can affect the view-

through of videos. According to YouTube Creator Academy (2021), usually, thumbnails and titles are the initial things that are noticed by the viewers when surfing on YouTube and important elements of the content creator's metadata. Thumbnails and titles work hand-in-hand to create anticipation while accurately representing the content of the video. When viewers click on the video and stay to watch through, this allows YouTube to understand that the viewer is enjoying the content. However, if the thumbnails and titles don't deliver the content promised in the video, viewers tend to leave almost immediately which can obstruct the discoverability of the video on YouTube. The longer the content creator can keep people watching YouTube, the more the content may appear.

Studies also suggest that the view-through of videos can be plausibly affected by the social capital of the uploaders (Khan and Vong 2014, Bärtl 2018) and the characteristics of the videos such as length (Ruedlinger 2012), age (Borghol et al. 2012, Khan and Vong 2014), and viewer reviews (Khan and Vong 2014). Moreover, Dean (2017) shows that the number of views of a YouTube video is highly correlated with its ranking, which is in turn correlated with the size of the channel and the number of Likes the video received.

Features of Thumbnails

Thumbnails are commonly used to attract the probable viewers when they are surfing on YouTube. Therefore, the thumbnail needs to be able to tell potential viewers what the video is about (i.e., informative) and at the same time needs to grab potential viewers' attention (i.e., visually appealing) (Brown 2017, Funk 2020). By itself, the view-through of videos may be linked with how informative and visually interesting their thumbnails are. On related studies, how informative a thumbnail may be affected by element complexity (Keller et al. 1998, Luffarelli et al. 2019) and how visually interesting a thumbnail may be affected by the artistic and appealing features of the thumbnail such as celebrity endorsement (Erdogan 1999, Amos et al. 2008), object complexity (Pieters et al. 2010), colour complexity (Reinecke et al. 2013), brightness (Park and Zhang 2015).

Element Complexity

In this type of visual advertisement (e.g., Childers and Houston 1984, Sojka and Giese 2006, Lewis et al. 2013, Aydinoglu and Cian 2014, Kahn 2017), thumbnails give information through two major design features; picture and text (as shown in Figure 1A) and using two types of pictures which is either product and/or person (as shown in Figure 1B). Sometimes, all three

elements (text, product and person) are used in one thumbnail (as shown in Figure 1C). Studies have suggested that thumbnails containing more design elements are more element-complex and can thus express more information (Keller et al. 1998, Luffarelli et al. 2019) yet delay potential viewers in locating precise information.



Figure 1A: Thumbnails using Text and Product.



Figure 1B: Thumbnails using Product and Person



Figure 1C: Thumbnails using Text, Product and Person.

Celebrity Endorsement

At times, a person who is renowned in the public (celebrity) is also a design element included in a thumbnail. Based on previous studies, celebrity endorsements increase the attention paid to advertisements (Knoll and Matthes 2017). Adding a celebrity picture makes the thumbnails aesthetically pleasing rather than those thumbnails which does not use a public figure.

Object Complexity

Object complexity speaks about the number of objects comprised in a thumbnail. Element and Object complexities are referred to as diversity and richness, respectively, in the context of website design in Deng and Poole (2010). Previous studies suggest that the supposed aesthetics of a design are affected by its object

complexity; though, the sign of the effect is still inconclusive. Some studies claim that designs with more objects are less appealing (Birkhoff 1933, Anderson and Jolson 1980, Bauerly and Liu 2008) and other studies claim that designs with more objects are more appealing (Palmer 1999, Morrison and Dainoff 1972, Pieters et al. 2010, Kusumasondjaja and Tjiptono 2019).

Colour Complexity

Differences in colours within a thumbnail is referred to colour complexity. Thumbnails with larger differences in colours are claimed to be more colour-complex than those who have lesser colour. Colour complexity has been found to be one of the critical properties that influence the aesthetics of designs (Moshagen and Thielsch 2010, Reinecke et al. 2013, Harrison et al. 2015); however, the findings are varied. Some studies have found that designs with a more level of colour complexity are more appealing (Harrison et al. 2015, Wang and Li 2017). Other studies have argued that adding more colours above certain levels can distract from the message (Lohtia et al. 2003).

Brightness

Brightness is considered another important colour-related property that affects the aesthetics of designs (Seckler et al. 2015). Prior studies

have shown that websites with brighter backgrounds receive higher ratings (Lindgaard et al. 2011), and mobile apps with brighter icon designs are downloaded more (Wang and Li 2017).

Scope and Limitations

The present study is a behavioural analysis on understanding the impact of thumbnails amongst teenagers. Preferences are subjective to an individual and hence, there is a possibility for variations in choice. The study also explored ways to design thumbnails that can help marketers to create thumbnails based on the findings given in the study. The study on thumbnails is conducted only for YouTube but can be extended to any other digital platforms that aims to effectively capture the attention of the audience. The scope on the study of thumbnails also extends on other attributes namely text, emojis, size and images displaying humans with emotions. The study was conducted amongst teenagers in Mumbai as universe where 120 individuals between the age group of 16-19 were chosen as the illustrative sample from all over Mumbai. There is a possibility of regional differences on preferences within the city and thus, the findings cannot be generalised.

A study has shown (Zhou et al. 2010) that YouTube recommendations are imperative factors that affects the

view-through of videos because a dataset that captures YouTube recommendations across is not swiftly available, as this process is heavily personalized (Madrigal, 2018). Thumbnails are an indirect measure to capture the attention of the audience as many of the YouTube channels runs on popularity namely the likes obtained on videos, subscribers derived on each channel and the number of people recommending videos to other people (Covington et al. 2016, Dean 2017, Madrigal2018, Jaffari 2019, Coh et al. 2020). There is a further scope to understand that there exists a possibility of a direct relationship between thumbnails and view-through of videos (Coh and Kui, 2020). The study talks about the aesthetic characteristics of a thumbnail; however, Cunningham and Nichols (2008) show that viewers eventually find videos by surfing directly, and viewers report that surfing is a useful and efficient way to find relevant videos in YouTube.

Research Methodology

Research undertaken in the study is descriptive. For primary data, a questionnaire was handed out online to 120 teenagers living in Mumbai. The questionnaire evaluated different attributes of a thumbnail namely objects, colours, brightness and celebrity which were close ended. However, on each attribute, the

respondents provided a justification for their choice. A random sampling method was chosen. Out of the population of teenagers in Mumbai, 120 teenagers between the age group of 16-19 were selected. For secondary data, relevant research papers and web links were studied that focused on usage of YouTube and thumbnail attributes.

Results and Discussions

1. Upon the study of objects complexity, 63.3% of the respondents have preferred option B (Figure 2b) and 36.7% of the respondents have preferred option A (Figure 2a). The data is given below (Figure 3):



Figure 2a- Thumbnails with Minimal Object Complexity



Figure 2b- Thumbnails with Multitude Object Complexity

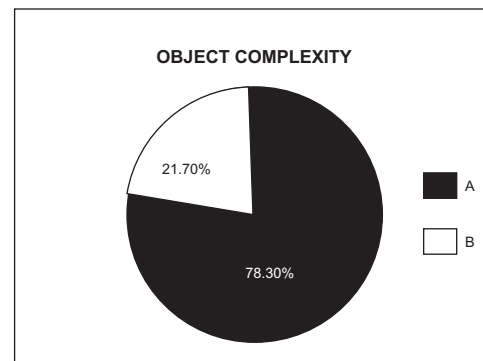


Figure 3

2. Upon the study of brightness, 78.3% of the respondents gave their preference to option A (Figure 4a) and 21.7% of the respondents gave their preference to option B (Figure 4b). The data is given below (Figure 5):



Figure 4a- Thumbnails with Bright Colour Complexity



Figure 4b- Thumbnails with Dull Colour Complexity

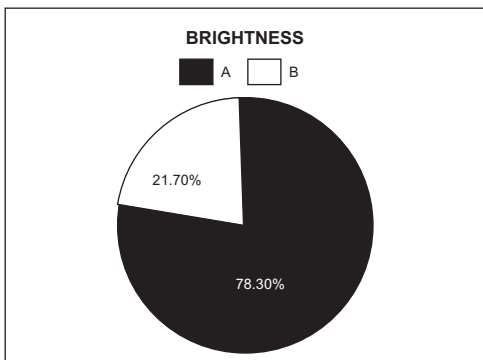


Figure 5

3. Upon the study of colour complexity, 70% of the respondents have preferred option B (Figure 6b) and 30% of the respondents have preferred option A (Figure 6a). The data is given below (Figure 7):Figure



6a- Thumbnails with Multiple Coloured Background



Figure 6b- Thumbnails with Single Coloured Background

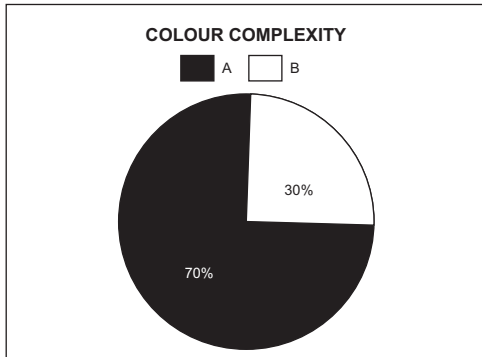


Figure 7

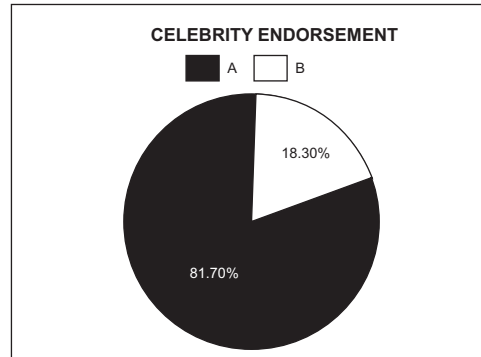


Figure 9

4. Upon the study of having a celebrity endorsement, 81.7% of the respondents have preferred option B (Figure8b) and 18.3% of the respondents have preferred option A (Figure8a). The data is given below (Figure 9):

Analysis:

The study presented a number of interesting behavioural findings. While most of the respondents (63.3%) have agreed that more objects in a thumbnail provides a variety of products that a brand has to offer. Although, a few of the respondents (36.7%) have felt that in order to identify the brand, it helps to have a single or minimal object displayed on the thumbnail as it provides a clear visibility in identifying the brand. While testing the feature of brightness on a thumbnail, 78.3% of the respondents preferred the bright colours as it is more appealing and can capture one's attention easily. However, 21.7% of the respondents found bright colours can be distracting and dull colours can convey the message without being too gaudy. Upon testing the colour complexity, 70% of the respondents preferred a plain single colour as they found it to be less distracting and 30% preferred



Figure 8a- Thumbnails not featuring Celebrity



Figure 8b- Thumbnails featuring Celebrity

multiple colours as it is visually more appealing and eye-catching. 81.7% of the respondents stated that they are likely to view a video if the thumbnail has a celebrity as it makes the thumbnail visually attractive. 18.3% of the respondents have preferred the thumbnail which did not have a celebrity as it helps to keep the thumbnail, simple and clear for the viewer to understand.

Recommendations

- Digital marketers can use customized thumbnails to capture the attention of the audience when working on their channel on YouTube.
 - Texts, People and Pictures can always be used as a way to enhance the aesthetic appeal of a thumbnail.
 - Multitudinal objects on a thumbnail can be used as it provides more variety and a clear idea of what the brand has to offer in the video.
 - Brighter colours on thumbnails can be used as they are more eye catching.
- Single colour thumbnails are more appealing as they can help capture the brand more easily.
 - Celebrity endorsements are a powerful tool and so, it can be used on the thumbnails as it sustains the faith of the brand.

Conclusion

While the effect of thumbnails can be indirect on view-through of videos, it can help the audience to decide to watch a video. Well-designed thumbnails can interest more people and also encourage people to watch more videos because they will know what to expect. Text, people and pictures are a measure to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the thumbnail. Multitudinal objects, brighter colours and single colour thumbnails help to capture the attention at a glance. When celebrities are used on a thumbnail, they create a favourable trust which helps viewers to view the video. Following the recommendations, digital marketers can use thumbnails to garner more viewership and expand their target market.

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