

Literature Review: Proliferation of Crime Narratives in Indian Podcasts: A Qualitative Analysis of Two National and Two Regional Podcast Channels Narrating True Crime Stories

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Introduction

The rising popularity of true crime podcasts in India reflects larger global trends, where the genre occupies a significant share of the streaming landscape. Podcasts like Khooni, Crime Kahaniyan, The Crime Paradox, and Sujoyneel exemplify this proliferation in both national and regional languages (Hindi and Bengali). The study aligns with established scholarship in media studies to interrogate how Indian audiences use, interact with, and derive narrative meaning from crime podcasts. Media effects theories such as Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Cultivation Theory provide a robust framework for analyzing these dynamics. This chapter introduces the role of true crime podcasts in fostering empathy and stimulating critical thinking through nuanced narratives, filling gaps in Indian-centric scholarship on a globally-dominant media format.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of true crime podcasts relies heavily on two seminal media theories:

1. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT): Rooted in the audience-centered approach, UGT explores podcast listeners' motivations. Research highlights audiences seek gratification through entertainment, emotional engagement, and education [1]. For true crime narratives, the gratification often lies in curiosity, problem-solving, and moral contemplation. Studies on crime documentaries, for instance, suggest that audiences feel vicarious justice-seeking in analyzing criminal behavior, a theme applicable to Khooni and Crime Kahaniyan for Hindi-speaking users [2].

2. Cultivation Theory: Developed by Gerbner, this theory posits that heavy media consumption reinforces a viewer's perception of reality. True crime content often normalizes the fear of crime, but it also has the potential to educate by showing systemic flaws, victim vulnerabilities, and deterrent punishments [3]. Podcasts targeting the Bengali-speaking demographic, like The Crime Paradox and Sujoyneel, could cultivate regional-specific attitudes toward crime.

This chapter demonstrates the applicability of these theories to understand how Indian podcasts influence audience engagement and critical thought.

Literature Review

The following sections identify key themes, debates, and gaps in the scholarship on true crime podcasts globally and within India:

Global Trends in True Crime Media

True crime narratives globally have gained enormous traction since the 1990s, particularly in serialized podcasts [4]. Shows like *Serial* and *Criminal* have been extensively studied, revealing audiences' fascination with the mystery of violent crimes, legal intrigue, and systemic failures [5]. Globally, podcast creators incorporate authentic storytelling and dramatization techniques to sustain interest [6].

In the Indian context, however, studies rarely examine the implications of this narrative style, despite an increasing reliance on vernacular languages to reach wider, rural audiences.

Podcasts like Khooni and Crime Kahaniyan follow a serialized format but adapt Western storytelling templates to suit Indian cultural contexts, requiring deeper study.

True Crime Podcasts and Identity Narratives

Research indicates that true crime podcasts often address broader social issues and intersect with identity politics, such as gender, class, race, and ethnicity [7]. However, regional Indian podcasts like The Crime Paradox (Bengali) offer rare platforms for marginalized perspectives, weaving cultural norms into crime storytelling. Addressing this gap could provide critical insights into how regional languages influence the reception of complex narratives.

Emotional Engagement and Empathy

Studies underscore the role of true crime content in fostering empathy for victims, particularly through immersive storytelling [6]. Indian podcasts like Khooni demonstrate this by highlighting systemic failures while emphasizing familial or social contexts. Unlike global examples, regional podcasts focus more heavily on local instances of crime, potentially heightening relatability and engagement among listeners.

Critical Thinking and Justice Debates

True crime podcasts encourage critical contemplation of legal systems, the portrayal of morality, and societal response to crime (Byfield, 2020). Listeners of Indian podcasts engage with unequal justice systems and local cultural specificities, differing from the engagement seen in Western true crime. The lack of research on Indian audiences' critical thinking abilities and their perceptions of restorative justice through crime storytelling challenges areas explored in global literature.

Gaps and Future Research Directions

While global studies on true crime emphasize its educational potential and societal impact, Indian research largely remains descriptive, focusing on consumption patterns without delving into theoretical implications. There is minimal exploration of vernacular audiences or the psychological effects of their media consumption. Furthermore, scant attention is paid to how localized storytelling reflects or challenges structural inequalities, especially when compared to Western media.

True Crime in the Indian Podcast Landscape

This chapter focuses on the unique role of Indian podcasts in crime storytelling, particularly in fostering local narratives:

1. Khooni: A widely popular Hindi-language podcast engaging audiences with dramatized analysis of high-profile Indian crimes.
2. Crime Kahaniyan: Grounded in traditional storytelling styles, it reflects cultural nuances of northern India, blending fiction with reality to inform audiences.

3. The Crime Paradox: A Bengali offering featuring real stories of local crime to explore systemic corruption and vulnerabilities in West Bengal.
4. Sujoyneel: A hybrid podcast merging Bengali folklore and true crime, appealing to culturally rooted audiences.

These podcasts underscore a largely untapped realm of research, presenting opportunities to explore regional adaptations of global formats.

Implications of True Crime Podcast Storytelling on Empathy and Critical Thinking

Indian true crime podcasts emerge as powerful pedagogical tools, pushing listeners beyond passivity into introspection. While empathy arises through explorations of victimization and survival, critical engagement is inspired by shifting listener focus toward societal inequities. For instance, Khooni frequently critiques law enforcement inefficiency, while The Crime Paradox questions systemic gaps in justice.

However, the variations in audience engagement between Hindi-speaking and Bengali-speaking regions require further probing. Understanding how regional audiences interpret and emotionally connect with crime stories presents an inviting research avenue.

Conclusion and Future Research

True crime podcasts in India hold potential for bridging entertainment and education. They foster emotional connections while inculcating critical evaluations of society. Expanding this academic inquiry could enrich an understanding of how media influences localized emotional and behavioral outcomes.

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