

Knocking the Ball Out of Television Sets and into the Living Rooms: The Rise of Immersive VR Experience in Indian Sports

Sushobhan Patankar

Assistant Professor

Symbiosis Institute of Media and Communication, Pune, India

Mudita Mishra

Assistant Professor

Symbiosis Institute of Media and Communication, Pune, India

mudita.mishra@simc.edu

ABSTRACT

IPL 2018 offered its viewers to engage with every cricket match via what they termed 'Immersive Virtual Reality.' The effect was fantastic: whether for a live match or for highlights, a user wearing VR headsets could actually feel that he was in the stadium itself, able to look at every element of the game around him. If not, augmented reality effects could be experienced by even those who chose not to indulge in the basic VR headset gear by simply manoeuvring their hand help devices to get a 360-degree view of the field settings, among other details. Digital technology has changed the way content is generated, distributed and consumed. It enables content producers to add value to the content. The enhancement in picture and sound quality, animation and graphics has helped in improvement of users' experiences. Today, social media and online content platforms engage users through different levels of interactivity. Interactivity is one dimension which adds up when digital content converges with the internet. The paper looks at interactivity as per the framework proposed by Kiouisis and explores the introduction of interactivity in sports content over the internet. This also warrants a discussion on the importance of cricket as a sport in India, not just from historical perspectives, but also from the perspective of being the harbinger of technological changes in the way sports and other video content might be consumed in times to come.

Keywords: Interactivity, Immersive experience, Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality, Sports, Cricket, Television, Digital technology

Introduction

You've got to start with the customer experience and work back toward the technology, not the other way around." – Steve Jobs (superapple4ever, 1997).

The industry in general and the world of media, entertainment and brands in particular, have increasingly become focussed on experiences of their stakeholders, primarily their audiences and consumers. The key endeavour is to tell the recipients that their experience is the topmost priority for the industry, and then to create such an experience for the recipients. Following from that, experience of physical products and intangible services alike has come to become the key driving force for appealing to more and more audience segments, and thus, attracting consumers who are willing to pay for those experiences.

Over and above the rational and utilitarian aspects of consumption, market offerings, even if in the form of entertainment content, are presented to audiences to appeal to their senses and feelings, to a hedonistic pursuit of intellect, pleasure and self- image (Schmitt, 2011).

The premise in which this research sits is one of experience. It talks about provision of a holistic experience for visual engagement of the digital audiences of sports, specifically cricket, in India. This holistic experience, for the purpose of this study, has been understood from the lens of a technological uprising in India through the mode of viewership, viz., and virtual reality experience for video content engagement.

It has to be first understood that with newer forms of media like 'Over the Top' (OTT) platforms springing up in Indian broadcast

market, interactivity as a concept becomes important to explore. For instance, the very successful broadcast of Indian Premier League (IPL) on Hotstar from 2017 to 2019, the broadcast of FIFA World cup on Sony Liv in 2018 and of Pro Kabaddi League on Hotstar, also in 2018, are all examples of interactivity that go beyond viewership on the conventional medium of television (Biswas, 2019). As if that was not enough, IPL 2018 offered its viewers to engage with every cricket match via what they termed 'Immersive Virtual Reality.' The effect was fantastic: whether for a live match or for highlights, a user wearing VR headsets could actually feel that he was in the stadium itself, able to look at every element of the game around him (Lidhoo, 2018). If not, augmented reality effects could be experienced by even those who chose not to indulge in the basic VR headset gear by simply manoeuvring their hand help devices to get a 360-degree view of the field settings, among other details.

Digital technology has changed the way content is generated, distributed and consumed. It enables content producers to add value to the content. The enhancement in picture and sound quality, animation and graphics has helped in improvement of users' experiences. Interactivity is one dimension which adds up when digital content converges with the internet.

Today social media and online content platforms engage users through different levels of interactivity. This paper explores some latest trends with respect to interactivity observed across different genres specifically with respect to Indian television broadcasters in the genre of sports in India, especially cricket.

The paper looks at interactivity as per the framework proposed by Kiouisis (Kiouisis, 2002) and explores the introduction of interactivity in sports content over the internet. This also warrants a discussion on the importance of cricket as a sport in India, not just from historical perspectives, but also from the perspective of being the harbinger of technological changes in the way sports and other video content might be consumed in times to come. This justification on the invocation of cricket for purpose of academic

articulation of issue at hand shall be mentioned at a later stage.

More importantly, the paper will focus on the role of interactivity and disruption in this form to eventually lead up to the role of such markets in creating a sense of unique consumer identity, thereby actually affording the audience of today the agency to not only choose what they want to watch and when, but also *how*.

This research endeavours to arrive at a conceptual understanding on this evolved form of interactivity between media and its consumers by exploring the industry trends and literature available thereon. The authors hope to present possible propositions and theoretical arguments that would support the cause of immersive VR experiences as a win-win for the industry as well as for the audiences.

Cricket: A History of Creating Audience Experiences

'Cricket is a religion in India' is an old adage. Despite the fact that this sport finds its roots in the history of colonial rule of the British in India, even seventy years after our Independence, millions of Indians, irrespective of their caste, religion or socio-economic status, follow cricket passionately.

While Indians, whether in the role of audiences or players, have also enjoyed other sports such as hockey, football and badminton, among many others, none of these games could ever capture the imagination of millions of Indians the way cricket did. The success that the Indian cricket team has achieved internationally, and consequently, the celebrity cricketers and role models that the game has given unto the nation, have played an important role in popularizing the sport in India. A rich legacy of cricket stars such as Sunil Gavaskar, Gundappa Viswanath, Ajit Wadekar, Kapil Dev, Sachin Tendulkar, Sourav Ganguly, Mahendra Singh Dhoni and Virat Kohli have earned numerous laurels and acclaim on the world stage. These cricketers come from every part of India, and that global factor has helped establish the identity and popularity of this sport across the length and breadth of this country which houses over a billion people today.

The history of cricket is vast, and for this reason, books after books have been written on the evolution of the game from a multitude of perspectives. But if one were to chart out the evolution of cricket *experience*, it would have to begin with the 1977 radical movement that the Australian media tycoon Kerry Packer led from the front. He changed the look of the format permanently when he introduced World Series Cricket, in which teams played in coloured ensemble. The red cricket balls were replaced with white cricket balls so that they were 'easily visible to players against the background of coloured clothing'. He, however, is credited gratefully for pioneering day-night cricket matches by providing the solution to night time playing via introduction of artificial floodlights (Barker, 2017).

This is a perfect example of the history of experience that the sport of cricket strived to build for its audiences. It strived to add a little colour to cricket, to give them the opportunity to watch cricket at home, and to do so even after work in the evenings, when the day-night matches excited them as much as they appeased their appetite for immersing in a complete cricketing experience in the comforts of their homes.

Understanding the evolution of crafting and providing better cricket experience to more and more audiences, whether in the stadiums or at home provides the foundation to studying the advent of immersive virtual reality and other technological advancements as a part of the viewing experiences of consumers today. Of course, this was followed by the 1982 paradigm shift in the culture of viewership, when the market in India changed owing to the broadcast of ASIAD games and garnered an interested audience for sports. Then came the years between 1987 to the first edition of IPL in 2008, when year on year the broadcasters improvised their telecast quality by means of graphics, picturization, better quality panels etc. Of course, one cannot forget the 1991-92 Transworld international foray in Indian cricket arena- politics aside, it did significantly contribute to the quality of sports entertainment in varied ways (Bose, 2002). As for IPL in 2008, there was a radical realisation of how the experiences for audiences could be improved- better still, be taken beyond mere satisfaction. Customer delight as a concept talks about providing consumers with more

than what they expect. Indians were literally delighted when Bollywood, the Hindi film industry, and cricket came together in the first ever edition of IPL. The broadcasters realised that these two bound the Indian audiences as far as impact and value driven experience were concerned. It was an innovative concept indeed, where local teams in the form of city based franchises, owned by a film celebrity or an industrialist, provided identity to people across India. This also gave opportunity to local level players to be exposed to the highest level of cricket, which was at par with any other international cricket league (The Times of India, 2013).

The storyline weaved in the above pages is but a trajectory that seems to indicate towards a bigger and better experience of audiences engaging with cricket. And with the growth of internet as it is today, what is needed is providing the next level of viewing experience aided by digital technology.

Sports industry in India: Trends, Technology and Disruption

Cricket commands 69 per cent viewership of the total viewership attracted by all the sports in India. Indian sports market is valued at over INR 185 billion, and needless to say, a major chunk of this market is dominated by cricket (FICCI, EY, 2019). It does not come as a surprise then, that Star India secured the broadcast rights for production and telecast of both domestic and international cricket matches globally for INR 6, 138 crores in the year 2018 (Board of Control for Cricket in India, 2018). In the same year, Star India also acquired global telecast rights for the Indian Premier League (IPL), along with its digital rights for telecast on its OTT platform Hotstar, for a whopping INR 16, 347 crores. The point to be noted here is that securing such rights for any broadcaster is, to say the least, very expensive. Throw in a competitive market scenario, and lo and behold, maximizing gains for any broadcaster becomes essentially a function of two factors- securing gains through advertisements, and enhancing its reach to its audiences. The growth of the internet can help in augmenting the reach of the broadcaster and this reach can very well be monetized.

With over a million internet subscribers in India, engaging viewers over the internet is

critical. The ever improving technological infrastructure and data speeds, affordability of data and ease of access to over the top content on internet are going to further increase the number of internet subscribers in India. Globally, linear broadcasting is taking a back seat and content dissemination and consumption over the internet is rising. In such a scenario, the broadcast companies are looking at the technological capabilities of internet in providing enhanced experiences to sports viewership.

In 2018, more than 200 million viewers watched the two month long Indian Premier League matches on the video streaming platform Hotstar. This roughly translated into 'a record 28% of STAR India's over 700 million IPL viewers' watching the cricket league online in 2018(FICCI, EY, 2019). In the same year, sports content was consumed on mobile phones only second to entertainment as a category.

As mentioned earlier as well, 2018 saw the streaming of IPL matches on Hotstar in something they termed 'Immersive Virtual Reality' experience. Incidentally, Hotstar had dabbled in providing its audiences VR experiences earlier as well, when in 2017, it streamed the Kabaddi World Cup live in 'stereoscopic 3D virtual reality in partnership with VOKE, a Silicon Valley-based VR company'(FICCI, EY, 2019). The FICCI -EY report for the year 2018 mentions Star India's plans of overhauling its production infrastructure to better equip it in shooting in VR. Hotstar is owned by Star India. To quote the report verbatim, the industry expects to "see more investments made in AR and VR initiatives, to enable sports fans to experience being inside their favourite games, as audience members, or even participants."

The AR/VR market in India has been categorically considered a disruptive force of technology, even projected to be the next big computing platform. It is expected to grow at a CAGR of 76 per cent over the next five years(Analytics India Magazine, 2018). All these trends point to a promising, next generation level of experience aiding technology that can be integrated with entertainment and sports, as is evident from its recent success, no matter how feeble.

The Cricket Factor

It is not surprising that the appeal that cricket has among not only Indian fans, but international fans as well, has generated an interest amongst various brands, marketers and television broadcasters. The wave of economic liberalization in India in 1991 helped the sport of cricket commercially. Cricket was used not just as a tool to evoke nationalism but it also helped in addressing commercial interests of multinational corporations and brands thereof (Ramani, 2008). This is the point where the authors deem it fit to introduce the argument in favour of cricket and discuss why is it important to tackle this research endeavour through the lens of cricket as a universe. It will do us well to understand that only and only riding on this huge network of commerce and community of fans that cricket, and no other, has been able to weave over the decades in India, will it be ever possible to introduce technologically advanced viewership modes, like immersive VR, to bring about a shift in the viewing patterns in order to now reach those fans who only want to come closer to the game every day. These are viewers who dream to get a token cricket ball signed by the winning captain in IPL matches as one step towards personalization of this fanaticism. And why should it not be so; consumers of today have been conditioned and made habitual to engaging with brands, with cricketers and with their favourite cricket teams on social media. They have become habitual to receiving customised notifications and advertisements, notifying them of the latest offers on brands that their favourite cricketer endorses, and of match schedules. The experience certainly cannot go downhill from here. The argument in favour of studying cricket as the response model for immersive VR experiences is that AR and VR technologies can easily piggyback on the huge infrastructure as created by cricket, the fandom it commands, and the sheer numbers it has at its disposal in terms of audiences across India.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Reflections

Consider this premise- when one looks up the word 'interactivity' on Google, the results mention two types of interactivity- that between humans, and that between a human and a computer. In fact, the very act of carrying out this internet search was

interactive- there was a machine response to an input from a human user.

New technologies, leading to newer industry models and regulatory frameworks always end up merging with the older versions of themselves, thereby constantly creating something absolutely new and unpredictable. That is the intricate beauty of emerging technologies and the mass cultures arising thereby. The only certainty in such an unpredictable chaos is that arising from the existence of individual consumer choice to be made from a diverse content available across high-tech, personalized interfaces (Kompore, 2004).

Interactivity as a grand concept has come such a long way, that it is difficult to separate the individual constituent sub-concepts from the intricate network that has been created between the machine and us. While it was with the advent of new media that the machine aided interactivity came into picture, digital technology has surpassed its application in our lives faster than we can now imagine. This is not a clichéd statement- augmented reality is one form of interactivity that perfectly proves how the actual surroundings for a user are blended with digital content generated by AR software on a device like, say, a smart phone. Case in point? Pokémon Go, the game that drove countless users around the world euphoric with the possibilities that the platform offered (Rauschnabel, 2017). However, augmented reality in itself is a part of virtual reality, a higher form of interactivity which is again computer generated, but is simulated in a way that is so immersive that it feels that such an experience is not possible in the real world. Virtual reality headsets, for instance, provide such experiences (Aukstakalnis, 2016).

In a research paper on Networked Interactivity, the authors discussed the possibility of studying group computer-mediated communication through interactivity. They go on to define interactivity as a theoretical construct that dealt with 'origins of captivation, fascination, and allure' all three of which were a part of computer mediated systems uniformly ((Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997)

Interactivity has also been defined as criteria, wherein, it must most certainly include a dialogue that must take place between a 'user and a system'. It has been understood as the active involvement of a user, whereby they control the direction and execution of a video content (Jensen, 1998)

Interactivity has three primary attributes, namely i) technological attributes ii) communication process, and, iii) user perceived reality (Kiousis, 2002). The Technological Attributes concern themselves with Responsiveness, (Real-time) speed, Timing Flexibility, Selection options, Modification options, Range, Spatial independence, Temporal independence and Sensory complexity. Similarly, the Communication Process concerns itself with Exchange, Dialogue, Control, Two -way communication and Third order dependency. Finally, the attribute of User Perceived Reality includes the factors related to Perceived responsiveness, Perceived Navigation, Perceived Speed, Sensory activation and playfulness, Connectedness, Proximity and Presence.

Upon delving into the factors within each of the three attributes, the authors find that immersive virtual reality in interaction with the audiences allows them to experience technological attributes like responsiveness of the technology, the real time (speed) at which the technology engages the viewers in the content, the spatial independence to experience the video content in the VR world, temporal independence to engage with the content when they want, and finally, the sensory complexities in form of mentally receiving and interpreting the VR content, along with physically feeling their presence as an audience in the stadium premises. Of course, the other two attributes, viz. communication process and user perceived reality are also exhibited in the characteristics of immersive VR as a technological interaction happening between a human and a digital technology. For instance, in the communication process, dialogue, control and two-way communication is happening as per the interaction dynamics between the user and the technology, aiding his overall viewing experience. Most interestingly, the factors housed in the attribute of user perceived reality are all a perfect description for the

interactivity that exists between the user and the technology. Therefore, Perceived responsiveness, Perceived Navigation, Perceived Speed, Sensory activation and playfulness, Connectedness, Proximity and Presence, all come into play when a viewer tries to engage with digital content while immersed in the experience 'virtually' as that in the actual physical setting.

Upon deliberation of interactivity and its nature, the theoretical framework that is necessitated by the nature of this research falls in the domain of the many comprehensions of interactivity. Needless to say, the interactivity element of the parameter of immersive VR is very high, and positively orients with the basic postulates of the concept as defined by Kiousis' model of interactivity.

There is a justification as to why this work has emphasized on the academic articulation of this phenomenon in context of the above chosen frame of theory, and not much on other possible literature in the area of experiential interactions in marketing, or other empirical and experimental assessments of the authors' own doing. The reason is that this is an attempt to conceptually highlight the idea of interactivity in a digitally immersed world, specifically with reference to the alteration of perception of reality through AR/VR technologies. How then does this become a conceptual research endeavor?

The answer is simple. It has been attempted here to narrate the significance of immersive VR technologies in the sports related media today- what it means for the industry, for the audiences, for the consumers of such content - while simultaneously trying to understand it from the point of view of one comprehensive theoretical lens. The field is in its nascent stages, and for quite some time, there will not be a great pool of academic repository created. But this study aims to create a conceptual framework, the one which houses interactivity as that much required view of looking at VR from. Coupled with technology, interactivity births something which, for the time being, we could refer to as technological interactivity. The one which leads to creating experiences through engagement in video content via immersive VR technologies. That's the equation- **Technology**, encompassing

interactivity, to create **immersive experiences**. That's the conceptual framework.

Still, to answer as to how does this become a conceptual study, one could refer to the defining tenets of what constitutes a conceptual paper. One, it is imperative that any conceptual endeavor address one specific problem or issue, hence be driven by it in entirety. Two, while a conceptual paper may not propose a theory, it must bridge existing theories together, across disciplines, to be able to fashion a workable proposition. And three, most importantly, it should be able to address the question of 'what's new' (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015).

This work has attempted to work with one focused issue of emerging viewership technology in Indian media- the IVR or immersive VR video engagement for sports content. It has also attempted to use the theory of interactivity to connect the various concepts involved in this endeavor together. Finally, it addresses something new- not only new from the technological evolution standpoint, but also new from the point of view of how it has been approached through the dimension of interactivity.

The Way Forward

A few years back, with the rapid advent of the internet, The Board of Control for Cricket in India had realized its potential and it was no surprise when during last IPL bidding, digital rights were floated separately. It is interesting to note that digital behemoths such as Facebook were interested in acquiring these rights. And while they may not have secured these exact rights, they have been able to claim their rights elsewhere- in 2018, Facebook played and won the rights to La Liga, which is a Spanish football league. This deal was made for the Indian subcontinent for the next three years (FICCI, EY, 2019).

All of this goes on to show that internet as a *medium* has emerged strongly over the last five years. Unlike in other genres of television entertainment, Indian Sports broadcasters are now attempting to give live action experience to viewers through technologies like AR and VR.

The authors wish to lay down a few propositions for future research, academic deliberation and articulation as follows:

1. Cricket must be looked at as the video genre that binds audiences across India as a cricket loving nation.
2. AR and VR technologies are making headway in India and acclimatizing audiences to them by riding on the shoulders of the above mentioned proposition.
3. The attributes of interactivity along with technological advancements are together leading to newer viewing experiences and immersive engagements with this kind of content.
4. The notion of consumer identity is being driven by marketplace cultures. Markets are generating a sense of self for the consumers, in this case, by allowing them to identify with their sport, with their team, with their cricket idol. This identification then goes on to feed itself into the marketplace cultures, where consumers are seen as culture producers, in this case, creating communities of cricket lovers, viewers, sharing immersive VR experiences (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).
2. It is interesting to note that 'experience' as defined in proposition three above could act as the independent variable affecting the 'consumer identity' as mentioned in point four above. What this essentially means is that conceptually, the more the technology evolves and facilitates better interactivity leading to a composite 'experience' variable, the higher one ideally reaches towards facilitating consumer identities. Be it then a local team representing their state, a player representing his city, and finally, coming to terms with one's consumer identity of being the navigator through a live match and being able to see action in the field, at one's perusal of technology experienced in a living room. Interactivity tempered with technology has made the audiences argentic in their choices of what they watch and when, but it has also allowed for them to immerse in the experiences of a live action sport right from the comforts of their living rooms. In today's day and age, the ball is in the viewer's court, and it

has been hit for a six from beyond the television set.

Bibliography

- Superapple4ever. (1997, 05 13). Apple's World Wide Developers Conference 1997 with Steve Jobs. San Jose, California, USA: YouTube.
- Schmitt, B. (2011). Experience marketing: concepts, frameworks and consumer insights. In *Foundations and Trends in Marketing* (Vol. 5, p. 56).
- Rafaeli, S., & Sudweeks, F. (1997). Networked Interactivity. *Journal of computer-mediated communication*, 2 (4), JCMC 243.
- Jensen, J. (1998). Interactivity. *Nordicom Review, Nordic research on media and communication review*, 19 (2), 191.
- Kiousis, S. (2002). Interactivity: a concept explication. *New media & society*, 4 (3), 355-383.
- Gilson, L. L., & Goldberg, C. B. (2015). So, What is a Conceptual Paper. *Group and Organisation Management*, 40 (2), 127-130.
- FICCI, EY. (2019). *A billion screens of opportunity: India's Media & Entertainment sector*. Kolkata: Ernst & Young LLP.
- Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2005). Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) : Twenty Years of Research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31, 868-877.
- Kompare, D. (2004). *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television*. Taylor and Francis.
- Biswas, V. S. (2019, 04 21). *Adding up: How Hotstar, SonyLIV can make sports live streaming more lucrative*. Retrieved from Financial Express: <https://www.financialexpress.com/industry/what-ott-platforms-must-do-to-make-live-streaming-of-sports-lucrative/1554426/>
- Lidhoo, P. (2018, 04 10). *Hotstar's VR venture: Novelty or game changer?* Retrieved from Fortune India: <https://www.fortuneindia.com/technology/hotstars-vr-venture-novelty-or-game-changer/101726>
- Barker, P. (2017, 02 26). *How Packer's revolution changed cricket*. Retrieved 05 04, 2019, from Inside the Games: <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1047497/how-packers-revolution-changed-cricket>
- Bose, M. (2002). *A History of Indian Cricket*. Andre Deutsch Ltd.
- The Times of India . (2013, 04 02). *Indian Premier League: How it all started* . Retrieved from The Times of India : <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/ipl->

history/Indian-Premier-League-How-it-all-started/articleshow/19337875.cms

Board of Control for Cricket in India. (2018). *Star India Private Limited bags BCCI India International and Domestic media rights*. BCCI.

Analytics India Magazine. (2018, 07 13). *WHY VIRTUAL REALITY IS STILL NOT MAINSTREAM IN INDIA DESPITE TECH PROGRESS*. Retrieved from Design4India: A NASSCOM INITIATIVE: <https://design4india.in/why-virtual-reality-is-still-not-mainstream-in-india-despite-tech-progress-analytics-india-magazine/>

Ramani, S. (2008). Cricket, Excesses and Market Mania. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43 (10), 13-15.

Rauschnabel, P. A. (2017). An adoption framework for mobile augmented reality games: The case of Pokémon Go. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 76, 276-286.

Aukstakalnis, S. (2016). *Practical Augmented Reality: A guide to the technologies, applications, and human factors for AR and VR*. Addison-Wesley Professional.
