Medium is the Sensation:

OTT Platforms on the Smartphone Screen

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Abstract

This article probes the production of the screen sensorium and media and cultural significance of the concept of play in media studies. The article specifically examines the smartphone screen by exploring the transformation of screen cultures and spectatorship and the changing viewing practices with the coming of OTT, to understand the affordances and limitations initiated by these new modalities of screen consumption. This aspect of play, and the conditions of mediation and its impact on everyday intimate and social life of the audience has been significant. This paper argues that the smartphone screen offers the pleasures of play operating within the regime of sensing and generates new modalities of watching films and television content for audiences.

Keywords: *Screen, Youth, Play, Sensing, OTT, Sensorium*

Introduction

The increasing popularity of the smartphone screen as a ubiquitous device points towards how it is at once an idea, media and technology, and our engagement with it in everyday experience has made it one of the dominant screens of our lives. The contemporary smartphone screen, in opposition to cinema, television, mobile phone, computer and laptop, signals towards new frameworks which determine the relationships between

technologies, culture and individuals, and requires us to address the materiality and reality of these technologies and techno-cultures produced due to the transition into an individualized screen experience. The smartphone screen, unlike that of television and cinema is also more "playful" and intimate in creating a personal visual and tactile sensory experience for the audience-user, thereby transforming the senses. Subsequently this study brings the questions of screen cultures and screen sensorium produced, and the forms of engagement specifically with respect to the smartphone screen in contemporary times.

In an article published in *The Quartz* titled, "Indians love watching videos on their phones – as long as it is for free", an image of two men sharing a smartphone screen lying down on their beds, and another man lying down on a platform next to them using his smartphone as well, is deeply evocative (Bhattacharya 2018). The article also cites a report published by the Boston Consulting Group in the year 2018, that one of the primary reasons for growth of OTT (Over-the-top) video platforms in India is the adoption of smartphones, followed by cheap mobile data and broadband.[1] The central premise of the article was that Indians are gravitating towards using smartphones, primarily for watching videos, as long as they don't have to pay for them.

In a study conducted by a big data and AI based mobile advertising company on consumer preferences between OTT and DTH (Direct-to-home) platforms in August 2019, 55% of the respondents said they now preferred to watch and consume video content on OTT, whereas 41% of the respondents continued to prefer watching content on DTH (Brand Equity 2019). In another study published in 2019 by KPMG about 87% of the respondents consumed online content on their smartphones (KPMG 2019). The study also mentioned that the age groups of 15-24 and 25-36 spends the most time per week at 9.2 hours and 8.3 hours respectively, though followed closely by the age groups of 37-50

and 50+ as well. Proliferation of smartphones, affordable and cheap mobile data have made it the preferred and the dominant medium for consuming online video content, followed by Smart TVs (5%), tablets (1%), laptops (4%), personal computers (2%), and others. It has also been reported that OTT platforms in India added about 3-4 million new users in the period between March 2020 and April 2020, owing to the national lockdown imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Tandon, Jha and Tewari 2020). These statistics point to an emerging screen spectatorship culture, with online video, film and television content converging on the smartphone screen.

The smartphone screen media has also generated new modalities of watching films and television content for audiences. OTT consumption on the smartphone screen displaces television viewing or watching films as a "family activity" in urban India thereby reconfiguring social formations (Mankekar 1999). The inclusion of new content lexicon such as streaming and playing are reconfiguring the access and engagement with media texts on screen. With access to this content mediated via the smartphone screen, across multiple platforms, there are newer ways of imagining the audiences as well. They no longer watch or tune-in, but stream content on devices, activating various modes of play. They are more diverse in the content they consume but at the same time converge on a few handful platforms available via screen media.

While the structural dynamics of OTT platforms, in terms of the content they produce and licence, their marketing, distribution and publicity strategies, are influenced by their prospective audiences that are increasingly spending a significant part of their time online, it is also guided by the architecture of the smartphone screen, its interface, its functionality, its uses, its possibilities and limitations and its software. All of these aspects of OTT streaming platforms are crucial to understand how the screen sensorium gets generated, activated and circulated in OTT spectatorship in and

through the smartphone screen as modes of play. In that sense if certain media experiences cannot be neatly categorised as consumption or use, then "play" becomes a productive term to think through consumption of media texts on the smartphone screen. Play can then be used creatively to look at it as a mode of media consumption and as a cultural practice, specifically where there is *consumption* of new media forms not exclusively for instrumental *use* of digital technologies, which might be still considered ambiguous owning to their fleeting nature.

The contemporary smartphone screen, in opposition to the mobile phone, computer and laptop produces interaction via the senses - of touch, of vision, of space, and of hearing, enabling and making possible our experience of the screen itself. Sensing is the ability to perceive, and technologies increasingly help in configuring and enabling this perception, thereby ordering sensory experiences. Humans have historically amplified and extended their senses by using instruments and artefacts such as telescopes, microscopes, microphones etc. among other devices (Connor 2005). In fact, it is not limited to these devices becoming routes for us to merely sense the world, but they produce newer sensations and sensing capabilities themselves. He further suggests that the camera for instance knows how to "see" on its own, and the microphone knows when it "hears" a sound, acting and sensing independent of the subject. These technologies also adapt and become intelligent over time, adapting to changing environments. The ability to sense then gets repositioned by technology. The smartphone screen is a popular and widespread technology of sensation which directs us towards new sites and practices of sensation. While a lot of what the smartphone screen does is invisible and virtual, it simulates and stimulates our senses in how we navigate our everyday worlds. We now see (digital maps), hear (audio from it and in it) and touch our phones. Our sensory taxonomies have been rearranged, in many ways augmenting the sense of sight, touch and sound, and extending it via light, location, and mobility. Technologies play a significant

role in the formation of sense. The touchscreen of the smartphone screens set it apart from other mediums such as that of the television or cinema. This tactile nature enables a kind of travelling through windows where you have to touch in order to see. The screen is held and cradled in the hand itself which is how the kinetic and haptic converge. This is the temporal collapsing of making and viewing images or "haptic experience of productivity" (Verhoeff 2012: 84). Using the smartphone screen is at once a physical and performative activity. Unlike the viewing practices like that of television or cinema, it is not just consuming images, but of image-making constantly, it is production and reception at the same time. It also requires massive amount of coordination – between fingers, eye and hearing, screen and image, and space and time. Sensory experiences show that the image on the screen can be expanded with fingers, pinched to a smaller size, disappear with a flick and appear again with a combination of finger gestures. What are then the social and cultural processes that activate the physical responses of our senses in the mediation with the screen? The smartphone screen sensuously evokes activities of everyday life and hence calls for a study of the deep significance of sensation. Human interaction with smartphone devices via sensors for both incoming and outgoing information produces sensory experiences apart from the traditional five senses and there is invocation of other sensory experiences as well. The interaction between humans and smartphones is significant, because it's not just the stimulation of human senses but also the presence of mobile sensors themselves which together converge to produce specific OTT viewing experiences for instance. How does the smartphone screen impact the sensorium by extending human senses? In subsequent sections I will elaborate on sensing processes and "playful" OTT experiences.

Sensuous Scholarship and Sensorial Relationships

The social and cultural significance of the senses mediated via screen technologies reveals how sensuousness and embodiment get activated. There has been emerging sensuous scholarship, specifically with respect to understanding media texts. Howes (2003) views Sensory Studies to be based on a cultural approach to the study of the senses and a sensory approach to the study of culture. The usefulness of this approach is that it recognizes the various subjective meanings attached to the senses. The study of auditory, haptic, kinesthetic and visual senses is crucial in my understanding of the screen mediated experiences. Howes and Classen (2014) in their introduction to *Ways of Sensing* emphasise on "intersensoriality" or moving away from the traditional categorization of senses as independent to further the argument on the interplay between them. Marks (2002), in her work on multisensory media, has advanced an approach of understanding art for instance, via multiple sensory approaches. She expands on engaging with art through haptic perception and including kinesthetic and proprioceptive functions. She argues that artists for instance seek to interpellate the many senses of viewers by creating a multisensory experience which goes beyond the narrow confines of audio-visual aspects of a work of art. The field of contemporary sensory studies has examined a range of issues, for instance Sheller (2004) has studied how the marketing of automobile technologies involves the stimulation of very specific senses, Parisi (2008) has looked at the re-framing of the touch of sense in the context of video games, and Bull (2000) has examined the use of portable music-playing devices in urban public spaces and how it transforms the users' sonic experience of the city providing them with a private soundscape. Drysdale and Wong (2019) also provide a useful framework for conducting sensory ethnography by suggesting the development of a "sensory sensibility" by making use of the role of senses in conducting research, being attentive to the senses and alert to the embodiment

and expression of the same. Further they suggest being aware of the sensory capacities being utilised in everyday life and activities as a disposition during all levels of the research process, in order to study and understand the complexities and the emplacement of sensory experiences and expression.

Vannini et al (2012) in their work on sensuality in sociology speak of how media and consumer culture rely on stimulating the senses and cater to the need for sensual pleasures through consumption of objects and services. Some of these pleasures are evoked via the powerful seduction of images, the commercialization of aromas and perfumes, the elevation of culinary tastes, and facilitated through modern technology - the commodification of touch and even satisfying our acoustic senses. Our everyday activities are getting amplified by appealing to our senses by the somatic work performed by media and consumer culture, screen media and technologies. Vannini et al make a compelling argument when they call for a "more-than-human approach to sensory studies" (2012, 168) in order to adapt to the changing nature of the sensorium because neither technology nor biology solely determine our sensations and sensory experiences. They further elaborate on the approach that I have also followed, that there is in fact an assemblage of octants (users, technologies, corporations, relations, developments, software, devices) that transform our sensorium and sensory experiences. They go on to argue that sensing the world or carrying out somatic work requires us to incorporate this dynamism of various factors in order to fully understand what makes our senses as well as the ways in which we come to sense the world. In that sense, the screen creates a particular kind of sensorium for the audience-user and hence if we "experience the world, others, and the self through our senses" (Gabriele 2008: 240) then in the context of my study, the screen media and technologies further stimulate our sensory orientations in qualitatively different ways.

Classen (2012) in an introduction on the interpellation of our senses has discussed how the department store discovered and introduced sensory marketing by allowing customers to feel, touch and see products before buying them, as opposed to the practice of verbally asking for products to be retrieved by the salesperson in the store, for thereby engaging their senses fully. The experience of navigating OTT is much like the experience of visiting a departmental store then. There is stimulation of visual and tactile sensations. An audience-user is invited to, much like in a store, to see, touch, open and experience audio-visual content with a flick of their finger. OTT on the smartphone screen, in comparison to cable television and cinema, offers the audience-user the sensory experience of visually engaging with content, of touching different library offerings by opening them, scrolling through them, and feeling this immersive experience sensually.

Mapping the OTT Phenomenon

In an editorial statement published in *Bioscope* for screen studies in South Asia, Vasudevan et al (2010) spoke of the need to address the definition and ambition of the field to incorporate the various media and cultural forms that have now emerged. He points out that South Asian media studies have largely meant film studies - and later television studies to an extent - given the widespread influence of cinema. He goes on to add that the screen needs to be located in researching about people and their practices, technologies and the techniques which inform the viewing experience. For him the sensory and affective experience of the screen encompasses the songs, radio stations, television channels, records, cassettes, CDs, DVDs, books, magazines, and internet cultures which expand our understanding of how screen experiences are constituted. He signposts Internet cultures, but does not take it further to provide for the convergence of screens, enabled by the Internet. In his renewing of the frame of screen studies, the screen continues to be a reference point as he gestures

towards newer screen mediations while raising some questions about the fields of mobile telephony, screen-based installations, urban planning and architecture, and implores us to see newer ways of engaging with this "dispersed mediascape" (Vasudevan et al 2010, 8).

The popularity and dominance of YouTube for consuming online video content in India was challenged in 2015, when India's first subscription video-on-demand streaming service, Hot star (owned by the Star Corporation) was launched, coinciding with the Cricket World Cup and the Indian Premier League. Thereon the website became the go-to platform for sports streaming in the country, and later incorporated general entertainment programmes such as syndicated Indian and global television shows and films. A leading American OTT platform, Netflix entered the Indian market in January 2016, with their plans starting at $6.70 per month.[3] Its launch was closely followed by Amazon Prime, which entered the Indian market late in 2016, offering much lower subscription rates ($6.70 for a year), along with its free delivery service, bundling these two together for its customers. The next few years saw a consolidation of audiences on these three platforms, with the initial hiccups of slow data speeds and video buffering eventually being overcome to pose a credible challenge to programmatic television, on-demand services, and also hitting the DVD market for films and television.

Soon established networks and channels in India, such as Sony Liv and Zee also entered the fray, offering streaming of their television shows and other content on their OTT platforms via apps and websites. In addition to this they also onboarded popular international syndicated shows as well as films to their digital library. Eros Now, an Indian media company involved in the distribution of VHS and exhibition of films originally, also offered its video-on-demand platform, initially offering music videos and its own films, and later adding content such as short films, web-series and other curated content, in addition to its

original productions as well. Some of the other notable players include Voot and MX Player.

In a move which signals the retention of control and concentration of ownership by big media companies, Star Corporation's 21st Century Fox was bought by The Walt Disney Company in 2019, and subsequently, Hot star was rebranded as Disney+ Hot star. Since the majority of smartphone users in India use the Android operating system, owned by Google, the whole screen ecosystem is deeply connected to the company's operations as well. It is for this reason that all these formidable corporations are together referred to as FAANG (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google).[4]

There is considerable scholarship that has emerged with respect to streaming of content online, emergence of transnational television and transformations in cinema production and distribution practices. The consolidation and concentration by traditional big media corporations has also spurred fears of media imperialism, a frame that has been used by Fitzgerald (2019) for instance to study the globalised development of OTT video services as a new international communication order. This has also been explored by Cunningham and Craig (2020) in discussing media globalisation and emerging patterns of distribution and consumption, making key distinctions between social media entertainment (SME) and professionally generated content (PGC) such as those by streaming platforms. Mikos (2020) has also mapped the emergence and form of the transnational television audience with the coming of global distribution platforms such as Netflix and Amazon. Netflix has also been at the centre of a sustained examination from various perspectives, including but not limited to, its business model and conception of spectators (Zundel 2014), its long-form programming and production practices (Jenner 2018) and unpacking of its recommendation algorithm (Frey 2021).

Among the many factors influencing the growth of online video consumption in India, is that India has the second highest per capita consumption of online video in the world. Mobile data rates are relatively cheaper in comparison to other countries, with prices starting from Rs $0.24/GB in 2019.[5] Classifying India as a mobile-first country, Amazon Prime launched its mobile-only video plan in India in January 2021.[6] This has been in collaboration with Airtel, a leading telecom network provider in India. This subscription will work only on a smartphone, offering SD (Standard Definition) streaming quality content making use of mobile data. Disney+ Hot star has also recently collaborated with Airtel to offer mobile-only free subscriptions to its subscribers for one year. Vodafone Idea, another telecom network operator, has also tied up with leading OTT platforms offering reduced subscription rates.

Some of the leading players in the OTT space include big tech giants such as Amazon, Apple, Reliance Jio, and traditional broadcast networks such as Sony, Zee, Walt Disney, among others. In many ways now, the consolidation in the OTT industry seems to mirror the concentration of ownership in cable television in India. In September 2021 Amazon Prime brought 8 OTT apps as part under its service offering, becoming India's first OTT aggregator platform.[7] Additionally there has been a merger between Zee and Sony, leading to a combining of their OTT offerings on one single platform.[8] It has also been argued that the illusion of choice of having multiple platforms and the apparent "decentralisation" due to displacement of programmatic television masks the increasing centralisation in proliferation of digital platforms and technologies. Zuboff (2019) has argued similarly that big technology companies, in collision with the state, have now enabled an era of information civilization, where our ways of seeing, knowing and being are governed by technology and data, a true hallmark of "surveillance capitalism". In India for instance, the period between 2016 and 2017 saw Reliance Jio shaking the mobile data space by introducing their 4G services free of cost,

thereby cornering the market and on-boarding a huge section of the Indian population as mobile-data users.[9] Due to the lack of a robust telecommunication policy pertaining to mobile data tariffs by TRAI (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India), Reliance Jio was able to initiate such a predatory practice, making other network providers succumb to the pressure of slashing rates for mobile data, just to remain relevant.

Screen Audience-users and Playful Consumption

My interviews were held with young men and women between the ages of 18 and 30, residing in Delhi. I conducted in-depth unstructured interviews with respondents that were recruited from known networks between March 2020 and May 2021 (Table 1). The interviews were largely semi-structured, informed by the following themes to address and speak to different theoretical and practical aspects of playful OTT screen experience enabling sensing: their viewing context and practices, bodily sensations and feelings emerging out of using the app, the change in how they use technology, functional experiences of using OTT, changes in lifestyle, social relationships and communication on social media, among others.

In present times, the technological, social and cultural contexts in which contemporary audiences exist have changed significantly. Emerging technological developments, proliferation of newer distribution platforms, the changing viewing contexts, and new screen laws are transforming the spectator. The smartphone screen audience-user is significantly different from the legacy film and television audience. I use the term audience-user here, for even though spectator studies evolved to include an active audience perspective, freeing the audiences from being bound by the text, by seeing them as active producers of meaning, however the traditional medium context of film and television screens still limits the possibilities of being an audience-user. Some have also called the new audience, a prosumer, collapsing

the differences between consumers and producers (Bruns 2008). The smartphone screen on the other hand is dependent on user's inputs and navigation of the screen, it produces a more active viewing context, also allowing viewers to create their own content, memes, social media posts, and images in relation to the content they consume. The audience now, as smartphone screen users, are offered numerous participatory opportunities. This conflation, and hence the challenge of locating and understanding online audiences and users, is perhaps why the Indian government struggled with formulating a policy for OTT platforms in India, with rules being notified as recently as 2021, and compliance of those rules still ambiguous and incomplete. Regulations and policy in India and elsewhere for OTT were limited to rules for information technology platforms specifically, but by and large limited regulation of content which has led large technology giants to consolidate their presence and gain monopolistic control.

Another emerging question is that how do we categorise media experiences that do not neatly fit within the definitions of media consumption and use? Specifically, new media devices and texts, which offer interactive pleasures and possibilities that can be thought of as play? In signalling a "playful turn", Raessens (2014) has argued that play has not received a sustained examination within the field of media studies, apart from work on video games (which has been recent), to use it as a frame of analysis for other media forms and texts. The concept of gamification is also useful here in exploring the playful nature of media experience. Gamification refers to game-like structures, rules and practices being deployed in non-game contexts to fuel user engagement and interest. Gamification is not entirely new but the contexts in which it is being adapted and adopted are certainly novel. The smartphone screen offers numerous possibilities for playful activities and communication. The concept of play is not only a characteristic of leisure, but can also be invoked in other contexts, such as that of consuming content interactively, and in this case, OTT applications.

The smartphone screen lends itself very well to playful activity, because apart from being a communication device, it is also a playable device, one which we toy with when we are bored, for leisure and pleasure. The screen itself and the apps within it offer unprecedented ways to pleasure ourselves. The concept of play on the smartphone screen with respect to media technologies, platforms and texts has the potential to complicate and even confuse the established silos in media and cultural studies, including but not limited to production/consumption, real/virtual, structure/agency, meaningful/banal, representation/simulation, to name a few.

Play-like gamification is very evident in sports content streaming, for instance there are emerging opportunities for engagement and monetization, with personalised sporting statistics, options for fantasy play, betting tips and odds, quizzes and interactive games to keep audience-users hooked to the platform. During the IPL in 2020, Disney+ Hotstar introduced its "Watch'N Play" feature, calling it an "immersive experience" by allowing audience-users to upload their selfie videos, duets, and the opportunity to discuss the match in real time by commenting in the interactive section.

Game mechanics are also employed in the genre of fictional content. ZEE5 launched its ZEE5 Super Family (ZSF) gaming experience for their Hindi-language content in February 2020. As part of their playful offering, audience-users are allowed to watch advertisements and earn points in return. The cumulated points then can be redeemed later at the platform for buying subscription packs. Further audience-users can choose their favourite characters across the shows, and predict and place bets on how the character's arc will progress. Successful predictions stand the chance to win rewards such as cars, smartphones, gift vouchers and ZEE5 subscription. All this feed into the assumption that audience-users will connect with their innate or acquired competitive nature and spend more time on the app. Additionally,

this platform introduced PLAY5, a feature by which brands can engage with audience-users via hyper-personalised advertisements in an interactive format. In their words, it is, "an extension of the show property."[10]

Netflix also introduced "Netflix Party" in 2020, which provided for a co-viewing feature in the app. Audience-users can share the link of what they are watching with their friends and others. The link continues to stream in real-time and hence whenever an audience-user opens the link, everyone will be watching the same content on their screens. Users can also pause, rewind and play at the same time. This is very similar to and reminiscent of multiplayer video games which are played by two or more players simultaneously across different screens.

In order to keep up with emerging trends of short-format videos and drive more traffic on their apps, platforms such as Eros Now introduced a short-form video content offering called "Quickies". ZEE5 similarly leveraged the banning of TikTok, and introduced HiPi, a platform for audience users to upload their own short videos. MX Player, another OTT platform, introduced actual games in their app to encourage users to play them and earn MX Coins. These coins can then be used to unlock premium content on the platform or even use them as discounts or coupons for shopping on e-commerce platforms such as Paytm, Myntra and OYO.[11]

The increasing use of hyper-personalization, gamification and interactivity produces a playful streaming experience for audience-users. Hence the smartphone screen is essentially a playable device that offers opportunities to play with content on the screen via OTT apps. In the next section I will argue that this play universe on the screen operates within the regime of sensing which structures and mediates screen experience for the audience-users.

Screen Sensorium and the Audience-user

The smartphone screen, unlike that of television and cinema is also more intimate in creating a personal visual and tactile sensory experience for the audience-user, thereby transforming the senses. Undoubtedly, the experience of going to the theatre is also a somatic one, with dim lighting in the beginning and complete darkness once the film starts, the temperature-controlled environment, plush seats and an overall cosy environment. For some respondents however, the chatter of fellow audience members, the crunching of the popcorn, among other things, either adds or subtracts from their experience. In similar ways, the watching of traditional television experience gets interrupted by advertisements, the movement of other people in the house, and sometimes even interruption by power outages or signal loss. The smartphone screen on the other hand offers a private soundscape, which eliminates distractions and ambient noise. The smartphone screen then has reconfigured the sensorium with the use of technologies to condition our bodily habits of media consumption.

> *I mean we can use Bluetooth speakers with our television also, but when I use earphones with my smartphone screen, the audio feels more powerful, and the image even closer to me because it's in my hands, it creates a more personal and intimate watching experience. Sound effects feel more immediate and live with the earphones. Like I am less distracted because nothing else is there in my line of vision you know. (No. 14)*

For my respondents, the smartphone screen is the default screen of their life, reading Twitter feeds and comments, reading blogs and even books on their phone, and the size of the screen does not take away but in fact redefines the idea of immersive play experience for them, making the screen more intimate, the content more private and personal, to the point that a private activity such as television and cinema watching can now be done

in a public place. Subsequently, since most smartphone screens now come with AMOLED displays (Active Matrix Organic Light Emitting Diodes), High Definition and even 4K resolution, and superior overall picture quality, that visual and aural intensity does not diminish for them.

The domestic context of viewing television and the theatre context of watching cinema earlier produced an associative sense of location. However, with the mobility of the smartphone screen and uninterrupted mobile data, new sites of sensation get produced with consumption of content on the screen in other public and private viewing contexts. Watching content in public spaces leads to an interplay of different senses such as while commuting, waiting at the bus stop, in the class, in the mall as well as in private modes of consumption such as watching it in bed, under the covers, on the terrace, in the bathroom, etc. developing new kinds of perception and associations with media content. The emerging screen culture produces new sensitivities and new spaces of sensation thereby leading to the formation of new senses of association, proximity and immediacy.

> *I don't know how this started, but I have gotten into this habit of watching a show or a clip while in the bathroom. Either I start a new episode, or continue from where I left, but I cannot do my business without watching something on my phone. (No. 18)*

The sensing of the smartphone device also conditions the mediation of the audience-user's experience with the screen. For instance, the proximity sensor in smartphones, which is on top of the device, turns off the display when we are talking on the phone, when the phone comes near the user's ear, and turns on when it moves away. Further, inactivity on the screen leads to time-out of the display similarly. Some respondents spoke of how they would sleep while watching something on their phones, only to wake up and find that the screen has gone to sleep.

Additionally, the light sensor in smartphones adjusts the brightness of the screen by measuring the brightness on the user's face, thereby calibrating the most optimum light sensitivity for the audience-user. The gesture sensors in the smartphones similarly transform media consumption on the screen. For instance, drawing a V sign to switch on the flashlight, or a circle to unlock the phone's camera, or drawing lines to play or pause music playback. Some smartphones also offer another gesture control whereby users can answer their phone calls by bringing the phone close to the ear. The Samsung Galaxy S5 phone has another feature called "eye tracking", where the camera registers the user's eye movements, and will pause a video automatically if the user looks away from the phone.[19] Similarly in 2018 Apple introduced eye tracking and gaze control as part of its Attention Aware and Detection features in its iPhones, automatically dimming the screen brightness when the user looks away from the screen.

> *When I watch something on my phone it is a very personal intimate experience and I have the power to choose what I want to watch, when I want to pause and when I want to stop. On television it feels very impersonal. Going to the theatre hall also feels like a community-experience, and with Covid who knows when and if we will ever go back. When I go on any app I can browse, read, choose, watch, stop and start again. I control it with my fingers or even just with my eye by not looking at the screen anymore. (No. 1)*

The flip-side to this is also the visual fatigue of the OTT library display, with some respondents speaking of the visual stimuli which can overload their senses with the problem of plenty, thereby producing sensory saturation. What Lipovestsky (2011) calls "hyperconsumption" in the era of hypermodernity is the constant stream and play of new media and cultural commodities and services that enable constant consumption.

> *Honestly sometimes my eyes start hurting, and it hurts to keep scrolling. Sometimes you just cannot choose what to watch, nothing seems exciting enough. Then I just get tired, either I keep the phone down or go on YouTube or maybe Instagram. But I do feel lost when deciding what to watch, because there is so much, and everything looks interesting, but not interesting enough to watch at that moment, so I just keep adding them to the watchlist. (No. 6)*

Most OTT apps make a concerted effort to offer a unique user design interface, to help them differentiate themselves from others in how they interpellate the senses of the audience-user.

> *If I have to be honest, I prefer the Netflix design. I mean the interface makes it easy for me to navigate, it comes naturally. When I watch on my phone, I tilt the screen horizontally for better display, and I feel that Netflix is easier to exit or go back in comparison to Amazon Prime. I have to constantly keep touching the screen for the controls to come, so that I can return to the main menu, it is kind of annoying. (No. 9)*

Technologies not only amplify and extend human sensing capabilities, but also produce new sensations and sensing capabilities of their own. The smartphone screen has produced significantly different textures of media experience and consumption. Consuming televisual and cinematic content on the smartphone screen demonstrates how it is no more a social experience, but an individualised, contingent and variable form of play. The smartphone screen has enabled our perception in an acutely different way, by ordering and configuring our sensory experiences. We have in many ways learnt the skill of how to sense with the smartphone screen. The smartphone screen and OTT have been produced and adapted to the changing viewing practices. We have come to learn to sense via technologies,

rearranging our sensory taxonomies. A respondent for instance shares how their sense of time or *chronoception* when it comes to watching content on their smartphone has changed. Due to the lack of any scheduling of content as with television time and cinema time, their time spent on their smartphone and OTT applications consuming content has become unhindered, interrupted only by calls or messages, or in some cases, heating up of the phone, and cramping of their hand and fingers.

> *You know there is this new term called 'text claw', where your fingers clamp up and ache due to constant use of the phone. Like I feel my thumb sometimes starts hurting due to the constant scrolling. I mostly keep my phone cradled in my hand, and after some time you can feel the warmth of the phone due to the heat produced, and I immediately realise that I've been on the screen far too long (laughs). (No. 4)*

Increasingly there is a deeper relationship between our bodies and the external environment mediated by information communication technologies. Our bodies communicate data about itself to technologies, which make sense of this data and relay it back to us. The screen invites the user to have an interactive and immersive experience, offering possibilities of engagement far exceeding those of traditional television and cinema. In many cases respondents shared the ability to do much more with the screen such as using touch to pause, take screenshots of certain scenes and uploading them on their social media accounts or sending to their friends, annotating it with their comments.

> *I always associated watching a film in the theatre with family or friends. Now I feel that sense of association does not exist, like I have new activities I do, like I take a screenshot and write something funny and post it online and send it to my friends. (No. 17)*

Previously in the absence of the newly announced Digital Media Ethics code, most content on OTT platforms was streamed without censorship or certification, making use of the loopholes in the Cable Television Regulation Act and the Cinematograph Act. A proliferation of content with violence, drug use, profanity, sexual content was available for streaming without any restrictions. Indian television and programming rules for instance also adhered to time schedules for adult content. OTT then provides new kinds of viewing pleasures and sensations which were earlier restricted or not available to audiences (such as transnational content).

> *We had become used to the fact that there will be no swearing on Indian television or even mention of sex for that matter. Even English films in the theatre would be censored. And imagine now you can watch anything at any time, without it being censored. You feel more connected to what you're watching when the characters are freely abusing in a situation where everyone in real life actually does! And showing sex is not taboo anymore, it has really become normalized now because how can you censor the Internet (No. 10)*

> *I really like the fact that there is no censorship when it comes to violence and action now. As a genre it is so exciting. They don't treat us like kids who cannot watch blood, guns and death. It assumes that its audience is mature enough to sense what they are watching is fiction but at the same time be able to enjoy it also without random cuts. (No. 16)*

> *Sexual content has become an integral part of OTT content, I mean it's so common no one is bothered even. I remember when Game of Thrones would air on Star World they would heavily censor it, cutting all sex scenes and beeping abuses, and the same episode on*

> *Hotstar would be free of censorship, obviously everyone ditched TV and watched Hotstar. It's thrilling to be able to watch such content without it being edited. And now there is hardly any show online without a sexual reference. Sometimes if I have to watch something very adult in nature, I prefer to do it on my phone because I don't want others at home to see what I am watching, I mean my parents are cool but it can be embarrassing. I can safely read and watch what I want in the privacy of my phone screen. (No. 9)*

The domestic experience of watching television and the sociality of cinema has given way to individuated consumption on personal screens. Content is on-demand and instant, with new films being released online, and all episodes and seasons of television series being available to audience-users. Many users shared that they feel relaxed as there is no urgency to watch something at a specific time, they know they can always go back to it. The sense of television and cinematic impermanence has been obliterated. A respondent shared that much like playing a game, with all the seasons and episodes available to watch at one go, it leads them to binge-watch more than a few episodes together, thereby producing a sense of living in the show's metaverse for some time.

> *It happens that if I get hooked onto a show then I will watch many episodes together. I have noticed that because I spend 3-4 hours in a day on a show, I kind of start living in that world, in my head I sense I am still inside the show, constantly thinking about it. Obviously, that feeling doesn't stay for long, but it is there. And I remember talking about this with a few friends also who felt something similar. (No. 18)*

There is however, some level of technical frustration as well. Some respondents shared how buffering of content either due to

their own slow internet connections or server issues with OTT platforms, is frustrating, making them think about how television never buffered. The smartphone screen and fast internet speeds have further made stronger the sense of immediacy and instantaneous nature of our interaction with technologies. When the screen hangs and becomes unresponsive, and the Internet disconnects, it immediately produces a sense of unease and frustration.

> *Sony Liv is the worst app in the world, actually even ZEE5, it just hangs randomly, keeps buffering, if you try to zip ahead, it starts from the beginning, without explanation. And I get so frustrated sometimes I just want to throw my phone, because the phone just hangs you know, it's useless. I have to restart it and pray that Sony Liv is now in a good mood and behaves itself. (No. 6)*

In many ways then the screen exists and produces a multimedia sensorium, where the technology senses the user and in turn the user senses it through the screen. A very intuitive, real-time relationship between the screen and fingers and the palm develops, with streams of data flowing both ways.

In lieu of a Conclusion: Streaming and Playing the Screen

With access to films and televisual content on the smartphone screen, modes of viewing have transformed, as have viewing practices, both temporally and spatially, a journey travelling from *tuning in* to *playing* content. A shift in perceptions of visuality has ensured that the exhibition context does not inflect the textuality of the content, and is not considered subordinate to it. Subsequently, the aesthetic and cultural assumptions of the intrinsic qualities of what television and cinema are, and are supposed to be, seem limiting, and even arrogant now,

considering such ontological arguments do not seem tenable and viable any more, in terms of playing of content on the smartphone screen.

While consumption of OTT on the smartphone screen has not completely displaced television and the theatre, however the confluence of all video content on the smartphone screen has reconfigured screen cultures, constructing new viewing habits and shifting medium-specific preferences for audience-users. The push to hyperconsumption also drives them to pause content and search for commodities on e-commerce apps, inspired by what they are watching, thereby changing the modalities of media viewing and spurring spontaneous consumption. About 90% of my respondents shared that they solely use their smartphone screen for all their online shopping.

The concurrency of the smartphone screen's ubiquity in human life at every time of the day and an intimate connection between users and their screens makes it a unique object of study. The screen in Marshall McLuhan's sense is literally an extension of humans, in a way in which our central nervous system is technologically extended by the screen – when users engage with the screen via multiple senses of touch, hearing and sight. Even our sense of space is affected by the screen, in our movement and positioning of our bodies, tilting of our heads, tracking out hands. The smartphone screen is a sensuous form of capital, technology and media.

Notes

1. OTT stands for Over-the-top, and refers to any streaming service which delivers its content over the internet. The service then is delivered over the top of another platform such as cable, broadcast and satellite. OTT is also similar to video-on-demand or SVoD as it is subscription based, but does not

require downloading unlike other video-on-demand services, as the content streams over the Internet.

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Table 1: Respondent Details

Respondent #	OTT Duration on Smartphone Screen (per day)	Gender	Age	Screens (in order of OTT use)	OTT Platforms consumed
1	2-3 hours	Female	25	Smartphone, Laptop, TV	YouTube, Amazon Prime, Disney+ Hotstar, Sony Liv
2	4 hours	Male	19	Smartphone, Tablet, TV	YouTube, Netflix, Amazon Prime, Zee5, Sony Liv, Voot
3	1 hour	Female	18	Tablet, Smartphone	Amazon Prime, Sony Liv, Zee5, Disney+ Hotstar, JioTV
4	2-3 hours	Female	18	Smartphone, Tablet, TV	YouTube, Amazon Prime, MX Player, Eros Now, Voot
5	4 hours	Female	19	Smartphone, Laptop	Netflix, Sony Liv, Zee5, Disney+ Hotstar, Voot, Alt Balaji
6	2-3 hours	Male	23	Smartphone, Tablet, Laptop, TV	YouTube, Amazon Prime, Disney+ Hotstar, Eros Now, Voot
7	3-4 hours	Female	18	Smartphone, Laptop	Netflix, Sony Liv, Disney+ Hotstar, Alt Balaji

8	2-3 hours	Male	20	Smartphone	YouTube, JioTV
9	2 hours	Female	26	Tablet, Smartphone, TV	YouTube, Netflix, Sony Liv, Zee5, Disney+ Hotstar, Voot
10	1 hours	Female	28	Smartphone, Laptop, TV	YouTube, Amazon Prime, Sony Liv, Zee5, Disney+ Hotstar, Eros Now, Alt Balaji
11	1-2 hours	Male	22	Smartphone, Tablet, Laptop	Netflix, JioTV, Sony Liv, Disney+ Hotstar
12	1-2 hours	Female	24	Smartphone, TV	Amazon Prime, Disney+ Hotstar, Zee5, Eros Now
13	2 hours	Male	18	Smartphone, TV	Netflix, Voot, Zee5, Sony Liv
14	2-3 hours	Male	19	Smartphone, Tablet, Laptop	YouTube, Amazon Prime, Sony Liv, Zee5, Disney+ Hotstar
15	2 hours	Female	22	Laptop, Smartphone	Amazon Prime, Zee5, JioTV, Voot, Alt Balaji
16	1 hour	Male	29	Smartphone, TV	YouTube, Amazon Prime, Sony Liv, Zee5, Disney+ Hotstar
17	3 to 4 hours	Female	21	Tablet, Smartphone	Netflix, Disney+ Hotstar, Eros Now, Sony Liv, Voot, Alt Balaji
18	2 hours	Male	27	Smartphone, Laptop, TV	YouTube, Amazon Prime, Zee5, Sony Liv, Voot

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