The Genesis of Web Series As A Popular Form of Digital Entertainment: An Exploratory Analysis of Creative & Business Potential in Indian Context

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"The Genesis of Web Series As A Popular Form of Digital Entertainment: An Exploratory Analysis of Creative & Business Potential in Indian Context"

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Abstract

Technology disruption in the Indian Media and Entertainment space has changed the way we consume content across all platforms. Lately, India has witnessed the increased number of OTT (Over the Top) Content players as well as start-ups targeted towards online video. The entry of Amazon Prime Video and Netflix in Indian shores has propelled the demand for niche online content viewing. The research paper will explore the fantasy for web series among the New-Age audiences. It will explore the treatment of story-telling concepts in terms of storylines, programming, production techniques in comparison with television series formats. The second part of the paper will attempt to identify the reasons for business potential for web series formats. The paper will draw to the conclusion that web series is the future of digital entertainment and has huge business potential. It concluded that with the rise of digital millennials and subscribers and accessibility to smartphones, web seriescan have a large geographical reach.

Introduction

In Indian Media and Entertainment Industry, there has been two major shifts in digital entertainment. With the rise of digital audiences, consumers are looking forward fresh storytelling concepts—far from the mindless reality shows and television serials. This led to the revolution cult for web series, popularly known as *webisodes* in India—thus making it creative and lucrative for new breed of filmmakers.

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Literature Review

Ganhor and Guldenpfennig (2017)[i] preliminary research paper attempted to find out the early genesis of webisodes as a new form of media platform for self-expression. It is the most popular form of filmmaking which could also be created and produced by amateurs filmmakers by used low-cost filmmaking and distribution technologies They concluded that a webisode filmmaker faces tremendous challenges in deployment of advanced digital filmmaking technologies for the specific target groups. Hence, the future areas of research should focus on the design integration techniques for webisodes film production techniques.

Edgerton Katherine (2013)[ii] doctoral research emphasised on the comparison of production and storytelling strategies of 'derivative' web series. Web seriesdraw on and deviate from traditional television storytelling strategies. The study compared the analysis on different narratives styles of web series and the measurement metrics for successful webisodes. The study concluded that producing web series enjoy a degree of creative freedom than that of television series.

Objectives of the Study

1) To explore the early days and reasons for the growing popularity of web series as a form of digital entertainment in India.
2) To explore the storytelling styles of web series and its treatment to television shows and films.
3) To examine the huge business potential for web series in India.

Research Methodology: With very limited research study conducted on web series in Indian context, the author majorly relied on secondary data—particularly from electronic version of the white papers, blogs, digital news reports and viewing select web series.

PART A: Web Series As A Creative Form of Entertainment
Meaning of Web Series

Web series are narrative type of video content. In simple words, web series is defined as a series of both scripted as well as non-scripted videos. It is generally in the forms of short episodes which is narrow casted on the Web . It is a single instance of a web series program called as webisodes. J Warren defines, "A Web series is two or more related **episodes of video content that originate on the web .**"[iii] Another interesting definition can be analysed is, "A web series should feature a continuous narrative, recurrent characters, and consistent theme."[iv]

Origin of Web Series in India

Travelling back to late nineties and early 2000's, youngsters had very limited youth shows like Hip Hip Hurray, Remix and Left to Right among others. The Web series journey in India kickstarted during the early months in 2014. During 2014, it was The Viral Fever (TVF)- a web production house who released 'Permanent Roommates', a popular show which actually caught the frenzy of the new-age millennials in the teenage target audiences segment. Thereafter, in 2015, there were three back-to-back short fiction web series-which marked the formula of Web series in India. The excitement of web -series touched its

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peak with the success of Vishwajoy Mukherjee's *'Baked'* –where the storyline dealt with the midnight blues of a food-delivery service, followed by The Viral Fever's—Pitchers (which emphasised on startups and '*Bang Baaja Baaraat'* (BBB) by Y Films, which dealt on a wedding gone mad.[v]

Young Audiences and Web Series

Young Indian audiences have become frenzy towards web series. It is the millennials who are resonating towards web series. So what makes web series popular medium for alternate entertainment. Said Prithwish Ahuja—a young 22-year-old, "During my growing up years, I was bored as I did not have any serials to watch for my age group. At home, my television was bombarded with soppy *saas-bahu* dramas and reality shows. With cheaper smartphones and data packs, I have turned to Internet as an alternative entertainment."

"The interesting aspect of watching web series is that you have content across varied genres ranging from romantic comedies, relationships, sex, gays rights to fashion sleuths. Moreover, you can watch it on all devices right from mobile apps, web sites to iPad," said Ahuja on his love for rom-com web series.

Likewise, 24-year-old Priya Sheth stumbled on the very idea for web series, "My first web series I watched was Permanent Roommates by The Viral Fever. The beauty of watching the webisode was that there is no censorship of words and scenes. The style of language was colloquial and relatable to my generation. For me, it was all about watching my friends online with an element of humor."

Rise of Original Programming

Over the last few years, Indian audiences are open to New-Age original programming as they are open to watching new content on different platforms. With the result, content players in India are discovering new cost-effective digital platforms to reach out to their storylines to deliver original programming content specific to the new breed of digital audiences.

ALT Balaji—a Digital Arm of Balaji Telefilms—made a massive market entry into the space with prime focus only on original programming of fresh content.

Said Nachiket Pantvaidya, CEO of the famed ALT Balaji, "Compelling storytelling is the future of programming in India. Today, Indian millennials are open to fresh ideas. The biggest challenge for an OTT player is to form a habit for the consumer. Another challenge is to provide content that is between Hindi general entertainment channels (GEC) and western content"[vi]

Rage for Youth-Centric English Web Series

In India, web series producers are given a free hand when it comes to experimenting bold content and subject themes. The content broadcasted online is uncensored. Today, original web series are produced by independent web series production companies to the likes of The Viral Fever, All India Bakchod, The Culture Company, Arre, Pocket Films and Dice Media. Joining the bandwagon are broadcasting companies like Star TV who set up Hotstar, Zee Telefilms (OZee), Viacom 18 (Voot) and many others have set up their digital arm just exclusively catering to digital content. So also, Bollywood Production houses and television

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content companies to the likes of Balaji Telefilms (ALT-Balaji), Yash-Raj Films (Y-Films) and many smelled web series as a potential business opportunity. Credit goes to the original programming for English web series in terms of bold storylines, plot and climax. The following are some of the popular English Web series by Indian filmmakers.

a) **The Permanent Roommates:** It was conceptualized by Biswapati Sarkar for the The Viral Fever first series. This series deals with the story of a young millennial couple whose lead characters were Mikesh and Tanya. They were in a long-distance relationship for nearly three years and face the prospect of entering into a wedlock. When Mikesh landed in Indian soil from United States, he proposes to Tanya. To his shock, she seems to be commitment phobic. Thereafter, the story plot begins. The premiere webisode was on YouTube Channel, followed by its own online video streaming on TVF Play. Till date, Permanent Roommates is hailed as the longest form of web series in the present times.

b) **Pitchers:** During the year 2015, the Pitchers is a popular web series from the stable of The Viral Fever founded by one and only talented Arunabh Kumar, who is hailed as an evangelist in the Web series domain. The first season was premiered on TVF Play and a week later on YouTube—which has now five million subscribers. Directed by Amit Golani, the story revolves around four friends who quit their jobs to enter into entrepreneurship. In the process, they face different challenges of starting their dream company.

c) **Bose: Dead/Alive:** Conceptualized by ALT Balaji, this popular nine-episode Web series is an Indian historical period drama. This is a story of the legend-Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and his mystery of his alleged death with entertaining dose of fiction. With power-intense performance by Rajkumar Rao with the female lead by Naveen Kasturia. It is based on the book The Biggest Cover-Up by Anuj Dhar.

d) **Man's World:** It's Yash Raj Films initial offering into web series business. Revolving around the theme gender discrimination, it is based on a satire on gender reversal roles and its contribution in the patriarchal society. It featured the A-list Bollywood stars like Parineeti Chopra, Kalki Koechlin and Richa Chadha.

e) **All about Sec 377:** This popular web series was aimed to educate and inspire with heart wrenching experiences of the travails by the LGBT communities across India. This piece of fictional show narrates the life of a normal guy and its companionship with the two gay partners in the same household.

Upsurge of Regional Original Web series

Over the last few years, there is a rise of regional content which comprises nearly 45 percent of India's video content consumption—which is in Hindi and English. This trend has paved way for the popularity of regional web series in India.

With the newly created demand, a string of start-up content creation companies are producing off-beat regional web series for the multi-linguistic inclined audiences. The choices range from Gujarati, Punjabi, Tamil, Marathi and Sindhi. Lately, OTT players like ALTBalaji, Viu, Amazon, SonyLIV, Voot, Hotstar, Netflix, and YuppTV have taken a deep dive into offering regional content.[vii]

So what makes regional web series popular in India? Explains Manav Sethi,

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Chief Marketing Officer, ALT Balaji, "Over the last few years, there is an increased consumption from Non-Hindi Speaking population where people watched Hindi or English web series in sub-titles. We have also realized traffic from states and cities where we sensed the right business opportunity for the company. 15 percent of our total shows hours are in regional content. Hence, our popular regional web series are in Tamil, Bengali and Gujarati. The popular shows are *Maya Thirrai* (Tamil), *Dhimaner Dinkaal* (Bengali) and Stand-Up (A comedy show Marathi, Gujarati and Punjabi). In the near future, we shall dub our popular English and Hindi web series in Malayam, Telegu and Tamil."[viii]

Currently, South-Indian speaking languages have huge potential in the business potential for Web series. This is because of its presence of affluent audiences in Singapore, UAE and South-East Asian countries.

For instance, Viu-a Telegu based web series company, is focussing with shows like *Cinema Pichollu, Pelli Gola* and *Pilla*. Amazon Prime has lined up many new Hindi originals that will dub in Marathi, Tamil and Bengali. SonyLiv has launched the popular Marathi web series-YOLO developed by Indian Magic Eye Pvt Limited.

Popular Regional Web Series Shows
a) **YOLO (You Live Only Once) (Marathi): Set in the city of Pune, it is based** on the lives of four young adults named Choko, Sarika, Rochak and Pari and their experiences. They unexpectedly go through a series of dramatic events and transform their perspectives on love, relationships and sex in general. It narrates the generational gap between morality and ethics.
b) *Kacho Papad Pakko Papad* **(Gujarati):** A romantic comedy of errors, it revolves around the dilemmas of an average Gujarati middle-class families. It is centred on the life of the Maniyar family who over-complicate all their daily problems.
c) **Two Nights Three Days (Sindhi): First comedy Sindhi Web series, this caters to** highly niche Sindhi audience which delves into the typical Sindhi mentality and crankiness.
d) **Ctrl Alt Del (Tamil):** Catered to the young Tamil audiences, it revolves around the lives of four young software engineers with life problems that are relatable to the Indian youth such as pressure to marry and more.
e) *Dhimaner Dinkaal* **(Bengali):** It is a tale about a simple Bengali man who is against mobile and social media. It is about simple Bengali family man who meets a seductress on social media—who the strength of familial ties, culture, and good old Indian values.

Duration of Web Series
Millennials today lead a hyperactive and exasperated way of life. Hence, it becomes a challenge to create entertaining and compelling stories. The average time-frame per episode should be 15-20 (or more) minutes to keep the audiences interest alive.[ix]
Explains Monica Shergill, **Head Content--Viacom 18 Digital Ventures**, "In Indian context, the web series duration is dependent upon the story, plot and the content. The intention is to hold the audience attention until the end of the episode.

An ideal time should be about 20 minutes. It can exceed if the story is compelling."[x] Nacikhet Pantvaidya always emphasised that the normal duration of webisodes should be not more than 30 minutes. He strongly of the opinion that today audiences are mobile first generation. The attention span of the current millennials is extremely low, as they are constantly in app-switching looking for interesting form of entertainment.[xi]

Web Series Storyline Treatment in contrast with TV Show & Films
Web series are more or less similar to television programming formats. It is designed like a television series through a series of episodes. The only exception is that it is watched on the Web . The following are the distinguishing elements of web series in relation to television shows and films.
a) **Audience Reach:** In terms of audience reach, web series demands more personalization via gadgets and mobile phones. Hence, it is catered to a niche audiences-primarily targeted towards millennials. While in case of TV formats, the entire family sits together and consume the content together.
b) **Programming and Production Costs:** As compared to television programming costs, the web series production is fairly less expensive depending upon the story concepts and plot-lines. This provides opportunity to the amateur filmmakers and can be distributed on video-sharing platforms like YouTube or Vimeo. The only beauty of both the formats is that your creative idea and your camera is what you need to express your creativity for Web .
In Indian context, the players in the space believe that the production costs are equal to that of television formats. An average production cost of per episode of a web series is similar to that of fiction show which is around seven to eight Indian rupees, which differs from company to company. However, most of the production firms shoot with high end production technologies with emphasis of star-casts and storylines.[xii]
In case of independent production houses, it is a totally different ball-game. Said Uday Sodhi, Vice-President and Head-Digital—Sony Pictures, "Web series are key offerings to the digital audiences. The commissioning depends on the set-up an organization is willing to pay. If the series is independently produced, the Intellectual property and licensing rights remain with the owners of the series. However, this varies as one enters into co-production." [xiii]
c) **Web Series Production Process:** What is the differentiating elements of web series? Said Monica Shergill, "The treatment of web series in relation to television shows and films are two poles apart. Essentially, the production process is the same in all the formats. But in terms of the duration and the format of storytelling, TV shows thrive on the long format of daily storytelling. Films have a longer pre-production process. Web series is positioned between the two mediums where storytelling is almost like making small films for a new age audience. The writing is the key in a web series, just as in films." [xiv]
d) **Marketing of web series and TV Shows:** The Marketing & Branding Activities of a web series is completely a different ballgame altogether. This is because of the diverse audience segmentation. In case of web series, target marketing strategies are used than the regular marketing mix of television

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marketing. The digital marketing tools and techniques are focussed to the niche mobile audiences.

PART B: A New Business Opportunity for Web Series

With the popularity of digital media users in Indian markets, production companies are in the rat-race for jumping into entrepreneurship for utilizing their business and creative talent to reach out to the digital natives across the country.

Entrepreneurship Bug for Web Series Business

With the cult of web series targeted to the youth, there has been several start-ups and rise of talented independent filmmakers in the field of web production. The well-known web series production houses with over one million YouTube subscribers are The Viral Fever, All India Backhod, Pocket Aces, Funk You, The Culture Machine and many others. Most of the founders are young entrepreneurs in the age group 25-45 years of age.

The Viral Fever (TVF): Hailed as the pioneer of Indian web series, it is founded by by Arunabh Kumar, an IIT Kharagpur alumnus, the Viral Fever is the pioneer of web series in India. As of 2018, TVF has over 3.5 million YouTube Subscribers. They own YouTube channels like The Viral Fever, Girliyapa, The Screen Patti, Funda Curry, TVF Machi and The Timeliners. In addition to this, they own App and Web site—TVF Play. Their popular web series are Permanent Roommates, TVF Pitchers, Tripling's, Chai Sutta Chronicles, Barely Speaking with Arnub, Ladies Room and many others. Their story-lines are youth-centric on topics ranging from politics, movies, lifestyle, sexuality and emerging social concepts.

All India Bakchod (AIB): AIB has created an Urban Internet Phenomenon. It is one of India's funniest comedy collectives. The revolution for comedy content in India is attributed to quartet comedians who are in their early thirties with the likes of Ashish Shakya, Tanmay Bhat, Gursimran Khamba and Rohan Joshi. From a comedy podcast, they have a fan-following of over three million YouTube subscribers. They rose to fame with India's first news comedy show-- *On Air With AIB*. One of the popular works was a spoof 'Genius of the Year' with Alia Bhatt which showcased her spoofs of her songs and acting styles. They host comedic awards ceremony that celebrates the worst of Bollywood—The Royal Turds.

Bollywood Biggies and Web series

Bollywood biggies like Shah Rukh Khan, Farhan Akhtar, Ekta Kapoor, Vikram Bhatt, Anurag Kashyab, Saif Ali Khan and the likes have joined the bandwagon for producing Web series. This fantasy is possibly because there is no censorship for web content. It brings in relief from *sanskari* behaviour by the so-called Censor Board of Film Certification. It brings the barrier of restriction in time viewing and reaches out to wider global audiences.

So what makes Bollywood foray into web series business? Excel Entertainment made its impressive web series-Inside Edge—in collaboration with Amazon Prime Video-which is India's first original series with an approximate budget of Rs15-20 lakhs per webisodes. It marked the debut of popular Bollywood actors Vivek Oberoi and Richa Chadha.

Said Ritesh Sidhwani, Co-Founder of Excel Entertainment, "For years together, content was restricted to Indian audiences. Through web series, we can reach out

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to global audiences. It's a next giant leap to tap international markets with our kind of storytelling ideas. Likewise we enjoy digital entertainment from international markets."[xv]

Web series based on popular adaptations is the next in-thing for streaming giant-Netflix. Red Chillies Entertainment, owned by Shah Rukh Khan-in collaboration with Netflix is currently working on web series adaption based on Bilal Siddiqui book-Bard of Blood.

Similarly, a web series on Vikram Chandra's acclaimed novel—Sacred Games is another Netflix Indian originals. Directed by Anurag Kashyab and Vikramaditya Motwane, the web series marks the debut of Saif Ali Khan and Radhika Apte. These eight webisodes is set against the backdrop of Mumbai, it touches the world of politics, crime and corruption that lie beneath India's economic renaissance.

Acclaimed Bollywood director Kabir Khan—*Kabul Express, Phantom* and *Bajrangi Baijaan* fame who has decided to jump on the future of web series. He will be directing a web series titled 'The Forgotten Army' which is based on the life of Subhash Chandra Bose.

A Lucrative Business Opportunity

Venture capitalists and angel investors have realized that the resonance of good content to attract eyeballs of millennials. The following are the reasons for venturing to web series business.

The Meteoric Rise of Digital Subscribers

Over the years, digital subscription has made a strong impact among Indian audiences. There are approximate five million paid digital subscribers across all application providers.

Growth of Over the Top (OTT) Platforms

Lately, there are many over-the-top content (OTT) platforms, which broadcast the digital video content on the Web without the engagement of distribution intermediaries. Some of the popular OTT platforms which has created a rage in Indian markets are Netflix & Amazon Prime Likewise, other distribution platforms like video-on-demand services like SonyLiv, VOOT, ZEE5 and MX Player and YouTube channels (such as Y-Films, All India Bakchod and 'VB on the Web') are soaring great popularity in the Indian digital entertainment space.

Maturity of Video Subscription Players

The video subscription ecosystem has matured in leaps and bounds. Currently, there are over 30 video OTT (Over the Top) platforms in the ecosystem. . To gain footfall in India's highly competitive space, global players like Amazon Prime Video and Netflix have invested with production houses and broadcasting firms in producing exclusive original web series to meet the tastes of English and regional speaking viewers.

Rise in Online Video Viewing Audiences

India is the second largest online viewing audience globally, next to China. The India's Hotstar Watch Report suggested that online video consumption in India has grown by five times. 96 percent prefer watching short-term formats.[xvi]

According to FICCI-EY Report, 250 million people have viewed online

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videos which has seen exponential growth. Consumers have shown increased preferences towards short-form content with an average length of video viewed is 20 minutes. YouTube is the popular platform where 62 percent of the content is in short-form content.[xvii]

Birth of Exclusive and Snackable Content

With an average viewing time for Indians is 20 minutes, exclusive and snackable content is going to be the next future. There is a shift in content differentiation. By snackable content, it refers to content which is easy to watch and share which is attention grabbing, visual and emotional. For which content providers like Eros International and Star-India is now focussing on creating exclusive and snackable content to engage users via apps and mobiles.

Increased Digital Video Advertising Spends

Over the last few years, there has been an increase in digital video advertising spends. According to Media Partners Asia, There shall be an increase in the digital video advertising spends which is expected to touch $1.6 billion by 2022.[xviii]

Branded Content through Web series

Indian advertisers are recreating the art of brand storytelling through Web series. They are creating their own web series to engage and interact with their target audiences. It is becoming the hottest form to reach out to the millennials. It all began with online real estate portal—Common Floor- collaborating for the Viral Fever's--Permanent Roommates. The second season was sponsored by OLA. Thereafter, for their Pitcher Series—they associated with brand sponsorships from Uber, Pond's and Kingfisher.

YouTube platforms like The Viral Fever (TVF) and The Culture Machine work entirely on brand partnerships to keep the business models sustainable. Said Jikku Abraham, General Manager-TVF, **"**Brands don't just buy media space on our platform. We integrate brand stories with content with innovative ways like product placement, pre-rolls and integrated logo unit and creating characters." [xix]

For instance, Sugar Free created a web series called the 'Sweet Break-Up' with celebrity chef Kunal Kapur and foodies Mayur and Rocky. It was a food trail where they explore different sweet dishes from different parts of India. So also, Honda Cars created 16 webisodes for its Web series-Honda Jazz presents 'Sexy and I Know It'. However, brands like Skybags (SonyLiv-Lost and Found), Redmi Note 4 (The Viral Fever Bachelors), One Plaus (Arre's--Official *Chukyagiri*) and many more.

Future of Web series Mania in India

In the coming months, web series as an entertainment form has a bright future. The changing digital audiences have now moved from watching on television to Web . It must be accepted that the Web is the touchpoint for increasing digital consumers. Said Vikram Bhatt's after the release of his popular fictional Web series—*Hadh*. He said, "Cinema are on the way out. The future is the Web . Today's youth are open to new content. For several years, they are hooked on American television shows on their gadgets."[xx]

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"First, we witnessed the disappearance of books, as online portals ruled the roost. This was followed by sales of music shifted online. And now, it's turn of entertainment. Cinema theatres are going to face stiff competition. The concept of 'appointment-viewing' doesn't appeal to the young or urban population anymore. They want to watch content as per their convenience and in their comfort zone," added Bhatt.[xxi]

Results & Discussions

Based on the above analysis from the perspective of content creation and monetization for Web series, the following are the observations and findings. Web series is an accepted form of digital entertainment by Indian millennials for reasons ranging from smartphone affordability, cheaper data packs and increased internet penetration. Indian millennials are open to fresh and bold story-telling narratives ranging from relationships, sexuality, romance, comedies and the likes.English web series in six-eight webisodes is the most trended web series on YouTube, Amazon Prime Video and Netflix.Regional web series in Indian languages is the next explosion in digital entertainment.There are differentiating elements of treatment of web series in relation to television formats—right from programming, production, scripting and marketing.

Web series offers lucrative business opportunities for investors in the media ecosystem. This is due to factors like rise in digital subscribers, online video consumption, OTT players and many others. Youth-centric brands are using web series to engage with the youth for its marketing and branding campaigns.No Censorship for digital content is the critical element for the surge in interest for Web series. This has led to experimentation and creative freedom for independent filmmakers.

The future of web series is bright and promising with major production houses and OTT players like Amazon Prime and Netflix collaborating with Bollywood biggies and production houses in producing Indian original Web series.

Conclusion

From the above deep exploratory analysis, it could be concluded that web series is an accepted form of digital entertainment by Indian millennials. From the creative perspective, young independent filmmakers are open to bold storytelling subjects provided that they are liberal and open minded in their perspective in English, Hindi and regional languages. From the business perspective, it can be concluded that several external forces in the rise of digital subscribers, online video consumption, OTT players and branded content has paved the way for lucrative entrepreneurship opportunities in the domain of web production. Future scholars could explore on analysing different web series and its storytelling formats, Indian web series in relation to American Web series, detailed business models for web series and much more.

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