

Audience at Play: An Inquiry into the Song *Kolaveri Di*

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The discourse in communication studies has looked at audiences as active seekers of pleasure through communicative play. This perspective has been talked about extensively by William Stephenson (1988) through his play theory of mass communication. Stephenson refutes Freud who considered play to be an unconscious, passive and an escapist defence mechanism. This paper furthers this understanding of play in the present day of digitization and virtual media technologies. The study proposes that the users of the Internet (virtual audiences) get actively co-opted into the creation and recreation of media content through play. Participative play on the Internet can be equated to what Caillois (2001) has described as Paideia (primitive, pure play of carefree gaiety). Paideia in its new Internet avatar may manifest itself in the form of shares and likes, posts and re-posts, comments and recommendations on content sharing and social networking sites. This carefree act of pure play can be attributed to the absence of a proper regulatory framework on social interactions in the cyberspace which in turn makes the play elusive and the players' (audience) behaviour very unpredictable.

Keywords: Play theory of mass communication, new media, Rasa theory, Paideia, participative play

This paper initiates an inquiry into the Tamil song '*Kolaveri Di*' and its several adaptations which have gone viral over the Internet. There are various replicas and indigenous versions which have flooded the cyber space. Ordinary individuals with no proven track record in the music industry have taken to remaking, reinventing and tweaking this song which has made the process truly participatory. The creators of these versions indulge in the fun and frolic of mixing and morphing the voice and the lyrics while keeping the tune and the refrains intact. Further, an attempt has been made to understand why the '*Kolaveri Di*' song became an ideal platform for many individuals from different parts of the world to play and participate.

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The use of English phrases and the generic theme of heart break which the song depicted became the cornerstone of its global appeal.

Any individual with some access and working knowledge of media production and delivery technology can find opportunities to participate. The study looks at this participation as play which provides participatory communication pleasure (Stephenson, 1988) or in marketing parlance; the shift from a consumer to a prosumer¹ is marked by joy and happiness. This concept of pleasure draws a close resemblance to the *Adbhuta Rasa* (curiosity) and *Hasya Rasa* (joy) taken from the Indian theory of aesthetics (*Rasas*). Stephenson adopted Freud's understanding of pain and pleasure as two categories placed on the opposite side of a continuum with work appropriated to pain and play to pleasure (Stephenson, 1988).

This paper suggests that what may constitute work for content producers and marketers may constitute play for audiences. The study further explores the usage of Internet within the context of play of the highly networked virtual audience. The idea is to elaborate upon the works of Shedletsky and Aitken's (2004) by taking the case of '*Kolaveri Di*'.

Theorizing '*Kolaveri Di*' through the lens of play theory can come under heavy criticism because the line between work and pleasure cannot be understood in binaries and the line between them is fuzzy. Also, that which may be classified as pleasure by an individual may constitute work and pain for some other. Apart from these constraints there is a possibility that some individuals may derive pleasure from work but this idea has not been taken into consideration.

***Kolaveri Di*—The Song**

'Why this *Kolaveri Di*' is a song from the Tamil movie '3', starring Dhanush and Shruti Haasan (MSN.com, 2011). The soundtrack and background score has been composed by Anirudh Ravichander and the song has been written and sung by the actor Dhanush himself (msn.com, 2011). The production and distribution rights are owned by Sony Music (ibid.). '*Kolaveri Di*' was officially released on 16 November 2011 and it gained nationwide popularity with 1.3 million hits on YouTube and 1 million shares on Facebook within a span of one week (Malini, 2011). It also won the YouTube gold award for being the most searched song and became the top most downloaded song on mobiles with 2.1 million downloads in just three weeks of its release (Movie Buzz, 2011).

The song caught on when nightclubs and discos overseas started playing the song (Malini, 2011). This sought the attention of the national and international media which further added to the growing popularity of the song (Ramadurai, 2011). It became the first song to be listed in the time magazine in the last twenty years (IBN Live, 2011). The rise in the popularity of the song was attributed to its universal theme, catchy tune and unique lyrics. The song also inspired flash mobs in various cities in India and abroad with Dhanush himself appearing one such mob in Mumbai (Malini, 2011).

The song has been written in Tanglish² (Rediff.com, 2011) and has a down-tempo mood that revolves around love and heart break of young boys (ibid.). It is sung by the character in an intoxicated state and sounds somewhat gibberish (ibid.). The background music is built around an ancient south Indian folk rhythm using a fusion of folk instruments

and modern digital technology (ibid.). The phrase ‘why this *Kolaveri Di*’ literally translates to ‘why this murderous rage’ and in turn depicts the pain of dejection (ibid.).

Multiple online versions—*Kolaveri Di* phenomenon

Many online imitations and parodies of the song were created in different Indian languages. Not just Indian, but there were transnational versions as well. The video of Japanese women dancing to the tune of *Kolaveri Di* went completely viral (Malini, 2011). Other imitations of the song included the female version, the kid (milk-u) version, Tom and Jerry, Rap, Punjabi Sharad Pawar video, Pinki Moge Wali fusion video, Gujarati, instrumental, English R&B, chipmunk version etc. These online versions need to be looked at as a phenomenon where user generated content gained prominence and added to the popularity of the original song. This study is based on the understanding that these multiple versions are an evidence of the active engagement that people had with the song and how they owned it, internalized it and recreated it with no particular economic interests or expectations.

Punjabi ‘Pinki Moge Wali’ version

There were many versions of ‘*Kolaveri Di*’ that sprawled the cyber space but this paper takes a closer look at the ‘Pinki Moge Wali’ version to understand how audiences owned the song, internalized it and recreated it. This version has a very interesting evolution. The makers of this song take the tune of ‘*Kolaveri Di*’ but replace the lyrics of the original song with that of a popular Punjabi song called ‘Pinki Moge wali’. The idea was to cash on the sudden popularity gained by both of these songs almost at the same time in 2012. This recreation tries to capture elements of both the songs. The familiar studio background theme is retained and four men are seen dancing and singing in front of the mike. An attempt has been made to give it a very Punjabi flavour by taking the popular character of ‘Pinky’ which was popularized by the Punjabi movie *Jinhe Mera Dil Lutiya*. The idea of heart break is prominent in this Punjabi version as well, but ‘Pinki Moge Wali’ increases the misogynist tone. Not so technically sound, the video looks a little unfinished and crass. This video managed to garner a sizable number of hits on Youtube, the count as of 13 March 2013 being 1,048,116. The group called themselves Desiroutz and tried something new out of the popular cinema of their region and mixed it with what ‘*Kolaveri Di*’ brought to the table.

Play and communication

The English word play has its origins in the 14th Century Dutch word ‘pleien’ which means “to dance, leap for joy, and rejoice” (Scott). The original Dutch connotation of ‘play’ has been mostly untouched by time and it is understood that people played if they moved about in a “lively, irregular, or capricious motion” (ibid.). According to Stephenson (1988) Play is a “time for recreation, hobbies, or self-cultivation” that is largely unproductive except for the self-satisfaction it provides. It is not ordinary or real but is pretentious and gives a break from the duties and responsibilities that have to be performed on a routine basis” (Stephenson, 1988). “Participatory play is characterized by a lack of purpose or expectation. Moreover, in such exchanges, one party is not trying to convince, influence, seduce, or please the other” (Stephenson, 1988). Play could take the form of verbal or non-verbal communication.

Paideia, Ludus and Wan are the three main categories of play as indicated by Caillois (2001). Paideia is primitive, pure play of carefree gaiety and uncontrolled fantasy; Ludus is formal play with rules and conventions and Wan is the quiet sensual Chinese way of playing (Caillois, 2001). The Indian Krishna-leela³ looks at play as a mischievous and a notorious act. The flirtatiousness and naughtiness has an unadulterated and innocent connotation. In the Internet domain, these types of play have a metamorphosed form. Paideia may take the form of social networking sites, while the online gaming sites can constitute the Ludus, online chatting and dating sites can be clubbed under the category of Wan.

Pleasure

Psychoanalysis has described the ‘pleasure principle’ as people seeking pleasure and avoiding suffering (pain) in order to satisfy their biological and psychological needs (Boeree, 2009). Freud believed that the pleasure principles cause reputation compulsions where people endlessly repeat patterns of behaviour. According to him the Id (it) seeks instant gratification and is an unconscious drive (Boeree, 2009). But Stephenson in his book “The play theory of mass communication” suggests that individuals engage in active play to derive pleasure and this pleasure is their ultimate goal (Stephenson, 1988). Schramm argued that pleasure is subjective by providing evidence which showed that more educated individuals are inclined to read ‘reality’ news while those who are uneducated preferred “vicarious” pleasures (Stephenson, 1988).

Play Theory of Communication

The play theory assumes that audiences are extremely active and engaged with the media and its content (Stephenson, 1988). According to the framework of play, individuals derive pleasure from communication play because it helps them define their self image which leads to individual development. Participatory play occurs when individuals are free to express themselves on an equal platform. This distinguishes it from elite dominated play. Elite dominated communication play is concerned less with the pleasure of communication and more with the pleasure of reception (Stephenson, 1988). The medium of television, radio and print posit some boundaries to multi-directional communication flow and therefore prevent open and carefree play. B.S. Smith mentions that without a notion of the play element in communication one would be led to imagine that every televised docudrama would be immediately lived out by every adolescent (Stephenson, 1988). But Stephenson suggests this does not happen because individuals pick, mix and choose among stories that they come across during the day while interacting with the media mix. This is a form of play that is “repetitious, like a child’s game played over and over again with variations made to similar themes” (ibid.)

Kolaveri Di—All fun and play

The Indian Rasa theory⁴ defines *Hasya* as the *Rasa* of joy with laughter as its most common expression (Johari D). *Hasya* revolves around the concept of *maya*. *Maya* is an illusionary aspect of the universe, where the binary opposites play out to reflect the ultimate truth. Humour becomes impossible as soon as intellect starts intervening because intellect makes

humour satirical or sarcastic. Pure *hasya* is devoid of any satire or sarcasm and is real happiness which may have no apparent reason. Stephenson also conceptualizes play as something which is devoid of expectations and motives. On the other hand *Adbhuta Rasa* (Johari D) is a feeling of wonder which comes when one recognises one's own ignorance.

This ignorance gives individuals the chance to explore oneself and the opportunity for new understanding and personal growth. The *adbhuta rasa* requires individuals to have an open mind and the will to experience. So when individuals create new versions of the song on the Internet by singing themselves, upload a remixed version of the song or when they share, like, comment, blog, tweet, post or participate in discussions of the song then they do so without much expectations. Also in this process of participative communication flow, they discover themselves. So, the *rasa* theory of *hasya* and *adbhuta* together with the Play theory of mass communication can give a possible explanation of the *Kolaveri Di* phenomenon and the communicative play of audiences.

Audience of 'New Media'?

The so called new media is very interesting to study especially in regard to the activity of its users. Very consciously and deliberately the word 'activity' has been used in the line above to indicate that the people on the internet take interest in generating content, reaching out to others, forming communities, building networks. While it is much required to not get lost in the internet jargons but at the same time the role of the 'audiences' must be reconsidered. Mediated audiences are known to be separated or distanced from the originator in the time and space continuum but with real time technology, some changes can be seen. This interface is seen by many as a platform for enjoyment, a place where individual aesthetics can be displayed. This also raises a tension between the need for personal aesthetics and the need to adhere to group norms. *Kolaveri Di* is just a case in point but the understanding that audiences have evolved and their elusive, ephemeral nature must be understood in all its complexities is what this paper aims to do.

Audience as 'Affective Labour'

The notion of non-market production and affective labour in the online environment needs to be explored further to understand how the networked audiences get constructed. The audience's engagement in the digital space becomes an act of labour. For example, Facebook requires users to upload and share personal information. The pictures they share, the status messages they update, their comments etc. all leads to content generation; which is labour. In return, what they get is the joy and fun of sharing and being connected to others. A Marxist understanding of this relationship that audiences share with the internet technology in the digital space is called the 'exchange value'. It can be safely said that Facebook among other social networking sites may cease to exist if all its members put a complete stop to their online activities. Something similar happened to Orkut⁵ in the last decade or so, which lead to its disappearance from the internet scene. These audiences can be alternatively called as cyber labour, digital labour or the new labour. It is the "new labour" on the digital space that works on fusion of technology and media to be able to communicate to each other. Jonathan Grudin (n.d.) points out in his research, that media space tries to reinforce that there is

universal reception of the same content but the reception is contextual in terms of location and identity. This labour is ‘disguised labour’ as it has no particular profit orientation. They indulge in making parodies for enjoyment as opposed to those who produce ‘re-makes’ with the aim of some monetary benefits.

Similar Examples

While the popularity of ‘*Kolaveri Di*’ was attributed to its quirky lyrics, catchy beats and its sense of spontaneity, it needs to be explored why did something similar happen with the ‘*Gangnam Style*’⁶ and the ‘*Harlem Shake*’. The craze of the ‘*Gangnam Style*’ took the world by a storm. If seen closely ‘*Kolaveri Di*’ and ‘*Gangnam Style*’ do have a lot in common. Psy’s clownish representation of himself, the silliness and the spontaneity draws a close resemblance to that of Dhanush. It is also a unique mix of comedy and sensuality. The absolutely bizarre lyrics with just the word’s ‘sexy lady’ comprehensible, did not act as a deterrent for it to receive more than a billion hits on YouTube (Schroeder, 2012). The word ‘*Gangnam Style*’ used in the song is actually a reference to the upscale fashion and lavish lifestyle associated with trendsetters in Seoul’s Gangnam district, which is the most affluent part of the metropolitan area. In “Gangnam Style Decoded” *Asia Editor*, Emily Lodish suggests that the popularity of the video could be because Psy takes a dig at the growing economic disparity in Seoul and the capitalist ideology (Leasca, 2012). Psy has achieved fame beyond borders with his unique pony ride step that has become somewhat of a celebratory dance.

While some believe that ‘*Gangnam Style*’ was a phenomenon of 2012, they argue that *Harlem Shake* is its rightful successor. ‘*Harlem Shake*’ typically begins with one person who is generally masked or is wearing a helmet gyrating ridiculously to the music mixed by DJ Baauer. Fifteen seconds into the video the music drops and all of a sudden a number of people emerge in absurd costumes who too are doing the Bernie dance (it is dance style performed by leaning one’s head back and wobbling with loosely held arms). Filthy Frank, a video blogger uploaded the first version. A group of Australian teenagers posted their response. Their version, with more than 20 million views also went viral (Ibid.). It was a parody of a parody. Throughout the second week of February more than 4,000 *Harlem Shake* videos were uploaded on YouTube every day. By February 13, 2013 approximately 12,000 *Harlem Shake* videos had been posted, gaining more than 44 million views (Ibid.). The reason behind its popularity could be attributed to the cross-cultural nature of the dance moves. The shimmy, the hip-hop and the carefree bobbing of the body can be copied even by a non-dancer. It can act as a release from the daily routine of a dull and boring life where people can dance without inhibitions. The more quirky the setting, the more jazzy the props, the more were the hits on Youtube. It can be said that individuals are looking for an escape from the mechanical routines of daily lives and when they see something enjoyable and filled with energy, it attracts them.

There is no conclusive answer to why does something go viral on the internet but patterns have begun to emerge between *Kolaveri Di*, *Gangnam* and the *Harlem Shake*, which suggest that all these videos are fun to watch, share and recreate. Nishant Shah in his recent article talks about the Harlem Renaissance and says that:

“Memes are often funny, ridiculous and capture the absurd and the silly in equal measure. Often, they’ll include subtle political commentary and reference cultural trends with a sense of irony. They appear as short, nonsensical clips that don’t ‘do’ anything and yet, they’re instruments that help us connect with the world. The *Harlem Shake* is another meme that has made us smile and realise that the here and now are worth celebrating.” (Shah, 2013)

Conclusion

Theorizing the song ‘*Kolaveri Di*’ from an audience perspective needs a Freudian understanding of the reality and pleasure principle. While the dominant economics discourse looks at the audience as rational beings who always act in a manner to maximise utility, communication studies pays attention to leisure time pursuits and downplays rationality and pragmatism to emphasize fun. This fun is a result of play which is an interactive and participatory process. The joy of this play is further enhanced due to the access of Internet through phones, laptops, desktops and other communication and computing devices which have become an integral part of everyday life.

Use of play as a framework gives a new understanding to the audience’s indulgence in the song and making entertainment an end goal in itself. Instead of reading ‘*Kolaveri Di*’ as a text laden with political hidden messages and propaganda, this looks at ‘*Kolaveri Di*’ as a toy in the hands of the individuals. This adds to the tradition of J. Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* and that of T.S. Szasz (Stephenson, 1988). Though this paper borrows from the play theory of mass communication, it conceptualizes play in a slightly different manner. Stephenson looked at play as *Ludus* (formal play as in games with rules and conventions) and called his theory the Ludic theory, while this particular study understands play as *Paedeia* (uncontrolled and carefree gaiety). Individuals view, comment, blog, chat, share something one moment and the very next moment they may be viewing another site. This is pure participatory play which lacks rigid rules and hence cannot be understood as Ludic play.

Another difference is that Stephenson proposed that play is a secluded activity which has a definite beginning and end i.e. it has a specific purpose in a particular time and space continuum. This understanding of play needs to be redefined in the context of the medium of Internet. Play is no longer constrained in time and space, the digital memory is immense and anyone can view any kind of content at any point of time he or she wishes to. Also, it is not secluded rather the networked audiences are constantly inter-connected and inter linked.

The biggest challenge in trying to explain audience behaviour through the paradigm of play is that it fails to account for those who have access to the Internet but do not use it to engage in some active communicative play or those who prefer the more traditional and less participatory forms of media. With this framework, one will be forced to conclude that these individuals are workaholics who do not wish to indulge in play. Also, this paper looks at play of only one kind, which is participatory in nature but play can also be elite dominated which gives pleasure of a different kind. Another major critique of this play theory approach would be that pleasure is subjective and different individuals experience different kinds and amounts of pleasure in the same situation.

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Notes

¹ Prosumer is someone who is both a producer and a consumer (Toffler, 1980)

² Portmanteau for colloquial Tamil and English words

³ Krishna is a Hindu god

⁴ The Rasa theory is very eclectic and pluralistic in nature. It conceptualizes audiences as active beings, always in a state of flux. It is a theory of aesthetics which finds its origins in India. The eight rasas denote the mental state of an individual and it forms an essential part of Indian dance, drama, music, cinema, literature etc. They have been talked about in *Natyashastra* by Bharat Muni.

⁵ A social networking site by Google Inc.

⁶ A music-dance video featuring a South-Korean singer and performer called Psy

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