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Vedantic applications of augmented reality for strategic social marketing campaigns in India

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Abstract

Purpose – Social outreach campaigns such as mainstream commercial marketing campaigns are drawn to digital communication practices for increased visibility, speed and recall. This paper aims to highlight the usefulness and application of augmented reality (AR) technologies and proposes a change-driven usage of the AR environments for social marketing.

Design/methodology/approach – Paradigmatic structural analysis is used to extract the underlying schematic forms. A multimodal analytic approach is used to propose the conceptual framework.

Findings – AR is defined vis-à-vis conceptualizations of reality and hyper-reality from the Vedantic philosophical texts and treatises. The study examines and demonstrates an earlier version of AR expression in ancient times in the use of spatio-temporal constructs and their degrees of modality. It derives a conceptual schema based on AR resonant applications in narratives from the Vedantic literature. Based on these, the study highlights the persuasive appeal and co-creative potential of these illustrative examples to recommend marketing communication strategies for social outreach campaigns.

Research limitations/implications – The analysis recognizes a conceptual bridge between human extra-sensory/transcendental ability and contemporary technology. This study identifies five propositional structures (PS). It opens up the field of social marketing research to alternative methodologies such as multimodal analysis.

Practical implications – While most of contemporary AR usage is in commercial marketing, this study has derived specific guiding principles/propositional structures. These can be applied to create specific virtual environments that can simulate and demonstrate desirable societal outcomes and behaviours. As newer technologies permit further and more futuristic design interventions, developers could experiment with transitional states to impact behaviours, with implications for experimental layering of information.

Originality/value – This study responds to a call for innovative design interventions in the field of social marketing. Its originality lies in its use of the Vedantic framework which has not been explored in this direction elsewhere.

Keywords Social marketing, Maya, Augmented reality, Design interventions, Siddhis, Vedantic

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Social outreach campaigns like mainstream commercial marketing campaigns are drawn to digital communication practices for increased visibility, speed and recall. The proliferation of digital devices and techniques across platforms and requirements underscores the growing significance of these digital modes. This study responds to a call for improvements to:

The quality of social marketing interventions [...] new intervention design, drawing on innovative practices and technologies [...] both from within and beyond the marketing



mainstream, encompassing the sharpest new ideas and innovative working practices from elsewhere (Dibb, 2014, p. 1178).

This study locates such potential possibilities in contemporary augmented reality (AR) applications. Hence, this paper proposes a conceptual framework grounded in insights drawn from ancient Indian literature, specifically *Vedantic* texts which contain dynamic illustrations of the augmentation of reality geared to the acts of persuasion and transformation. To do this, the study first examines the nature of AR applications. AR is defined *vis-à-vis* conceptualizations of reality and hyper-reality from *Vedantic* philosophical texts and treatises. Next, the study draws from three illustrative texts in the Vedantic tradition to examine and demonstrate an earlier version of AR expression in ancient times in the use of spatio-temporal constructs and their degrees of modality. It derives a conceptual schema based on AR resonant applications in narratives from the Vedantic literature. Finally, it highlights the persuasive appeal and co-creative potential of these illustrative examples to recommend the marketing communication strategies for social outreach campaigns.

Empowering approaches to social marketing and digital interventions

Kotler (2013) views social marketing as a set of marketing practices aimed at social rather than monetary gain. Two broad approaches are identified in social marketing research. These are the “empowering” approach (Feste and Anderson, 1995; John *et al.*, 2009) and the “patronizing” approach (Hastings and Saren, 2003; French, 2011; Table I). Zharekhina and Kubacki (2015) advocate a more comprehensive use of empowering approaches that ensure consumer involvement.

Empowering techniques in the present study are viewed as “pull” mechanisms as opposed to patronising ones that reflect “push” strategies. More recent work (Saunders *et al.*, 2015) also raises important questions about the limitations of the behavioural change approach to social marketing based on the 4Ps and hence unidirectional and calls for greater participation and community involvement (Deshpande and Lee, 2013, p. 166); with this, the marketer facilitates or enables the process. They point out, “Instead of positioning themselves as change agents, social marketers can be ‘social enablers’”.

Dibb (2014) points out how social marketing outcomes such as individual changes or societal good are a result of marketing ideas that may draw on a range of behavioural change approaches and marketing tools. She especially draws attention to the many new ways and contexts in which new possibilities for intervention design and data capture based on advanced technology can enable social marketing campaigns. This strategic view of social marketing works from the vantage of combining three kinds of interventions: “downstream” interventions – those dealing with individual behavioural change; “mid-stream” interventions – an interpersonal approach focused on communities and groups; and “upstream” interventions – incorporating structural changes through regulation, economic shifts or technological developments. (Andreasen, 2002, 2006). There is an extensive body of

Table I.
Two broad approaches to social marketing based on the literature

Empowering	Patronising
Liberating	Restricting
Expert-involved	Expert-novice
Employs questions	Employs fear, shame, guilt
Storytelling, behavioural language	
Efforts to engage	Can provoke defence mechanisms

work on digital application development and digital platform usage for social and behavioural changes. [Guidry et al. \(2014\)](#) examine the use of Twitter for social advocacy and the types of messages that can effectively bring about behavioural changes. This provides insights on how specific Twitter communication tools are used and whether the interactivity of the platform is used to its full potential. [Manikam and Russell-Bennett \(2016\)](#) demonstrate the development of an interventional mobile application targeted at behavioural changes. [Beall et al. \(2012\)](#) draw attention to the importance of “creativity, ingenuity and innovation and the need to incorporate ever-changing tools and resources”, including the digital. In a previous study concerning leader in social marketing and change, [Lefebvre \(2007, p. 32\)](#) indicates the collaborative and dynamic interactive quality of new communication tools of the new media which necessitates not only the designing of messages but also viewing the consumer as a participant. He advocates “using media in new ways, NOT using new media”. [Lefebvre \(2011\)](#) also adds how such innovations must open up participatory opportunities for people such that these may lead to behavioural changes. He also insists that the field of social marketing must open up to insights and techniques from other disciplines such that it remains relevant and contributory ([Lefebvre, 2012, pp. 124-125](#)). This model of transformative social marketing includes “enhancing experiences” as an important design element along with “honouring people”, “radiating value” and “engaging service”, suggesting how social marketing programs might be designed for co-creation and participation. This article also lists out a call to action and AR as a social marketing tool responds to several of these such as “to become co-creators of value, to create places where people can play, design research to fit the puzzle and the people; offer new ways to solve problems” (p. 127).

Augmented reality for the next level

[Dibb \(2014\)](#) also points out how marketers are increasingly experiencing the need to address fundamental changes in consumer behaviour as a result of the pervasive effects of the digital era wherein the contemporary markets and consumers operate. The field of virtual interactive technologies has opened up co-creative possibilities for consumer participation. These, according to this study, can thus function as useful tools for downstream, mid-stream and upstream interventions. According to [Carmigniani and Furht \(2011, p. 3\)](#), “Augmented Reality is the real-time direct or indirect view of a physical real world environment that has been enhanced/augmented by adding virtual computer-generated information to it”. [Scholz and Smith \(2016, p. 149\)](#) view it as “the practice of displaying digital information over people’s real-time view of objects, people or spaces in the physical world”. While both these definitions view AR applications as “tool-based”, [Munnerley et al. \(2012, p. 40\)](#) discuss how [...] augmented realities, unlike virtual realities, are not substitutions for physical reality, not approximations to reality, but the *layering of perspectives and experiences to augment and enrich reality*. [Dholakia and Reyes \(2013\)](#) identify these differences in the virtuality of a fixed place or an object as against the virtuality of the process.

In this context, this study recommends the use of AR applications for social marketing campaigns, to enable strategic empowering techniques in the consumption experience, not only for individual or community-based behavioural changes but also as driven by upstream policy approaches. While AR technologies have been used for information dissemination, product or technology demonstrations, education and training, retail simulations and virtual gaming ([Hahn, 2012; Han et al., 2017; Kang, 2014; Aluri, 2017](#)), this study proposes the usefulness of AR as a persuasive tool and medium for social marketing objectives.

Modality markers in hyper-real or augmented environments

AR applications operate at the point at which the seemingly unreal can be interpreted as the real. The concept of the “hyper-real” or the “augmentation of reality” reflects a fundamental connect with the notion of “modality”. Modality refers to the reality status accorded to or claimed by a sign, text or genre (Chandler, 2007). When what is considered standard or naturalistic is either reduced or amplified, it results in various degrees of modality. Thus “the greater the abstraction [. . .] the lower the modality” (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996/2006). According to this scale, an element that “absolutely” resembles the “real” can actually slip into the field of the “unreal” (Figure 1).

In the sections that follow, this paper particularly looks at the possibilities that lower modalities create for visualization: how these impact the persuasive modes in the illustrative Vedantic episodes and scenarios and by extension how these can be used for enabling persuasive conditions through augmented environments for contemporary social marketing campaigns.

The conceptual framework that follows is derived by drawing from the “pre-digital” era of Vedantic texts which demonstrate the strategic encoding of hyper-real modes to communicate, persuade and empower the decoder-consumer.

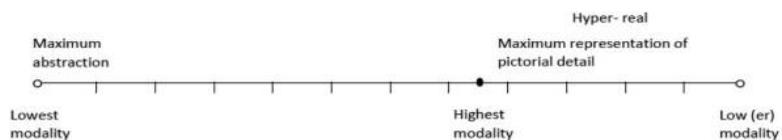
Comparative approach to the “hyper-real” in Vedantic systems and post-modern conceptualizations

While adopting a comparative approach, this section first examines modern and post-modern theorization on the hyper-real, as this is where contemporary digital usage is typologically situated. It then looks at the illustrative theory and applications from a select corpus of Vedantic texts.

Post-modern theorization on the “hyper-real”

Media theorists Marshall Mc Luhan (1964, 1967) and Baudrillard (1988) represent the two ends of the spectrum of thought on the functional and representational in media usage. For Mc Luhan (1964) “the *medium* is the message”, whereas for Baudrillard’s post-modern sensibilities “the *medium is* the message” (Kellner, 2005). Baudrillard’s visualization of society as the proliferation and simulation of reinforced messages turning into an endless “simulacrum”, where the unreal becomes the real is viewed as a cynical, sceptical take on the efficacy of the media. Theorists such as Eco (1986) or Deleuze (1990), on the other hand, believe that such simulation or replication can be optimised for societal benefits, a view that originates from Mc Luhan’s optimistic outlook on the role of the media. This paper draws from these beliefs to reconstruct the ways in which AR applications can, through their focus on the “real” and “unreal”, enable a range of persuasive techniques and approaches to social marketing aimed at positive social outcomes.

Figure 1.
Modality status of the hyper-real based on Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996/2006) scale for reading images



Vedantic representations of the “hyper-real”

As in other cultures and philosophical trajectories, what could be called the “Indian” thought is a multi-dimensional amalgamation of form and thought-based approaches to ontological questions of nature, human existence and the connections between the tangible-visible, the nature of knowledge and knowing and the metaphysical. What is considered Indian thought can be said to span across civilizational enquiries into modes of being, the idea of God (s) and the connections between self and society, consciousness and subjectivity. This marks the speculative knowledge of the Indus/*Sindhu* phase to the Vedic and then Vedantic period marking a movement from an abstract idea of God and deep dialogic enquiries into natural signs and elements to their ontological culmination in Vedantic texts and the subsequent concept of a personal god in Puranic literature. Fluid movements ranging from orthodoxies to heterodoxies culminating in the Bhakti phase and the Sufi mystic traditions or departures and reactions are seen in the Buddhist phase and subsequent Orientalist approaches. Further reactions to Western frameworks and approaches, non-violence, reform, liberalism and contemporary multicultural debates all reflect the diverse and textured terrain of what could be called the Indian thought (Radhakrishnan, 1923/1996; Mohanty, 2014). With this backdrop, we situate our research and draw from the Vedantic-Puranic phase for structural insights into the idea of the hyper-real for AR applications.

The Vedic period in Indian thought is marked by the philosophical speculations and systems of four major compositions called the *Vedas*, the earliest texts having been composed around 6,000 BCE. The texts and philosophical accounts that distilled Vedic thought into other forms of expression such as devotional verse, hymns, stories, commentaries and other symbolic narratives are referred to as the *Vedanta* (towards the end of the *Vedas*). These Vedantic philosophical treatises and narrative texts explicate ancient Indian mytho-philosophical approaches to the notion of the “real”, “unreal” and “hyper-real” through sensory and extra-sensory realms using specific spatio-temporal constructs. Digital technology with its associations of speed, accessibility and the modern/postmodern is essentially viewed through a western lens as empowering the rest of humanity. This paper uses an eastern framework and hence draws from the rich multimodal narratives from Vedantic narrative texts to highlight the ways in which structural elements in these narratives pre-date and pre-empt contemporary digital technology. This paper draws out such schemas to illustrate their possible extrapolation for social marketing campaigns.

An outside-in approach to the ancient Indian systems and especially those that address ontological, philosophical issues; the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, epics and *Puranas* have also witnessed the “mythologization” of individuals, entities and concepts to the point at which these are viewed from the lens of the “magical” and the “supernatural”. This has impacted the nature of enquiry into rich and variegated sources and approaches to questions of “nature”, “being”, “truth”, “appearance” and “reality” and transformation (Mohanty, 2000; Thompson, 2004, 2012). Apart from connections made between spirituality and the wider field of management, the association between spirituality and marketing (McKee, 2003) has been specifically focused. Kale (2006) looks at the dynamics between the consumer experience of the self and spirit in product utilities and modes of consumption. The working definition of spirituality in Kale (2006) as “an individual’s endeavours to explore – and deeply and meaningfully connect one’s inner self to the known world and beyond” may possibly connect with a view of the spiritual as an evolving condition of self-reflection and desired change, part of an individual’s quest for the meaning of life. In this context, we may admit the role of “spirituality” in behavioural change interventions for social marketing campaigns. At this stage, however, the paper does not propose any spiritual angle to the consumer’s participation in and co-creation of a social marketing project.

Here, this study subscribes to a framework-based reading of representative texts to highlight the prolific understanding of form/function, the functional and representational and the narrative richness of text and application reflected in Vedantic thought – all of which point to an extensive understanding of layers of representation that are crucial in contemporary times and the usage of digital technology.

Key spatio-temporal constructs

The study first examines the key spatio-temporal concepts in the Vedantic thought that can enable this discussion on AR. These illustrative concepts are *maya*, *siddhi*, *avataar* and *divya drishti* (Campbell, 1972; Malinar, 2011; O’Flaherty, 1980, 1981; Radhakrishnan, 1914, 1923/1996). These are all considered here as illustrative of the hyper-real, a point reached beyond high modality (HM) tending towards lower modalities (LM) as against a concept of the real tending specifically towards high modality (HM).

Maya

It is important to understand various approaches to and interpretations of this concept as they are rooted in an ontological understanding of what is known as *prakrti*, which is an elemental manifestation of the physical world available to the sense organs. An individual’s spiritual growth or *yogic* ability depends on this understanding of the manifest world to differentiate between “reality” and the “hyper-real”. The concept of *maya* according to Radhakrishnan (1914, p. 431), one of the early scholars on Indian philosophy, appears to signify the illusory character of the finite world. This, he points out, is not part of the cosmological view of the Vedas and early Upanishads where the universe was considered as “real”. On the other hand, in Vedantic philosophy, the empirical world is accessible to the finite mind through objects of thought, the manifestations of which are considered by Vedantins such as Sankara (A.D. 680) as illusory or *maya* – the most famous example being that of the rope being mistaken for a serpent (Radhakrishnan, 1923/1996, pp. 460-461). Broader Vedantic philosophy views elements of the finite world as approximations of the Absolute Real which is infinite. Although this theory of *maya* is not consensually accepted by scholars as native to Vedantic thought, it is a significant perspective that recognizes discrete levels of reality. It states that higher reality shares the same relation with ordinary reality that ordinary reality shares with the idiosyncratic dream state, which is a subtle manifestation of the hyper-real. Hence, the concept of *maya* is associated with the empirical world. In the Vedantic view, just as ordinary reality is not accessible to the sleeper in a dream state, so is higher reality or the Absolute Real, not accessible to the individual in the “real” physical world. (Goldman, 1986). Vedantic texts such as the Puranas and the epic Mahabharata (MB) and especially the Bhagwad Gita (BG) distil the teachings of the Upanishads and weave this visualization of the hyper-real in terms of “shape-shifting” (Pattanaik, 2016) or “dynamic form” into illustrative and persuasive models for spiritual growth and liberation. This usage, as we shall see, are early examples of spatio-temporal modes which contemporary digital environments can draw from as kinaesthetic models of persuasion, involving a multi-sensory approach, visualization and co-creation by participants.

Siddhis

The attainment of *Siddhi* meaning “realization”, “accomplishment” and “liberation” is the core of the *Siddha*. One of the most well-known devotional expostulations is the *Hanuman chalisa* that praises the god Hanuman for his eight *siddhis*. These are the eightfold psychic and higher dimensional powers emphasising *yogic* practice. They are indicators of the

yogi's spiritual progress. The underlying logic is to understand the elements and be able to control them so as to overcome the constricting nature of the physical world. Thus, as Malinar (2011, p. 44) points out, "a miraculous, paradoxical situation that the yogi is active and inactive at the same time, that he is liberated from physical existence, yet assumes all kinds of bodies". This classical list of eight siddhis are a part of Patanjali's *Yogasutra*. These are *anima/sookshma* (smallness/contraction); *mahima* (greatness/expansion), *garima* (heaviness), *laghima* (lightness), *prapti* (obtainment, to have direct access to all locations), *prakamyā* (flying in air/wilfulness), *ishatva* (divine peace) and *vashitva* (to control under one's self/pervasion). Malinar (in Jakobsen, 2011) highlights the legitimate use of these powers for liberation from the order of prakriti or the physical world and how these are not to be used for pride, pleasure or manipulation. She adds:

The yogi who is equipped with the power of yoga is in control of all objects, and is therefore, for instance, in a position to multiply himself, like a creator god and move around on earth in different shapes [...] (p. 43).

For instance, *sookshma-sthoola*, the ability to become very tiny, very large and to appear and disappear and *vayubhuta*, using or being the wind, are conditions of perception and access to the senses. The siddhis thus are a concentrated understanding and enactment of spatio-temporal forces such as earth, matter, wind, space and time.

Avataar

This concept derived from *avataran* (to descend) has its strongest expression in the Vaishnavite tradition that recognizes various manifestations of the god Vishnu who reincarnates in the physical world taking on different bodily forms. These forms range from animal to human manifestations. These are beings who experience earthly life and exist for the enactment of motivating, persuasive actions leading to a transformative change.

Divya drishti

The concept of divine eyes (*divya chaksu*) causing *divya drishti* which is imparted by a *siddha* to a human *non-siddha* who functions only within the limits of the material senses enables the experience of enhanced vision and the ability to gain a deeper perspective on that which is non-material. The absence of this medium, the *divya drishti*, halts the experience itself. As the everyday consumption experience limits experience to the physical senses, AR technology draws from this enabling medium to create a heightened or augmented experience with enabling equipment and processes that provide an immersive experience. Table II summarizes these spatio-temporal constructs. The sections that follow extract propositional structures and applications by analysing these constructs in the narrative contexts.

No.	Spatio-temporal construct	AR application
1	<i>Maya</i>	Modality-switching for behaviour change
2	<i>Avataar</i>	Visualization of alternative action
3	<i>Siddhi</i>	Creation of transitory persuasive states
4	<i>Divya drishti</i>	Usage of enabling equipment and processes that provide a strategic immersive experience

Table II.
Vedantic Spatio-temporal constructs and corresponding potential AR applications

Research methodology

A large body of analyses of “mythological” narratives view these through a hermeneutic lens interpreting ancient writings for their literal and figurative aspects and locating language-in-time both past and present. This paper marks a departure from these readings in that the text is viewed structurally as a system of linguistic, aural-visual elements and where the researcher takes a step back from interrogating the literal or the figurative to viewing the text as a pragmatic mix of both to be reconstructed schematically.

This study examines the key illustrative visual narratives by analysing verbo-visual units based on the applications suggested by [Kress and Van Leeuwen \(1996/2006\)](#) in their explication of multimodal analysis. The analysis seeks to identify the modality status of the functional and representational, especially the modalities involved in spatio-temporal markers for hyper-real visualizations in these mytho-philosophical texts. To understand these operative modalities, this study first applies paradigmatic structural analysis to an understanding of episodic narratives to reconstruct the underlying schema that suggest frameworks or propositional structures for AR applications in social marketing.

Schemas are representations of a plan or theory in an outline or model format. In Kantian philosophy, they refer to a type or form which could be essential or general in terms of expression. [Propp's \(1968/2010\)](#) analysis of the underlying schema of the story is an example of a linear sequential analysis. Here, in this syntagmatic structural method of analysis, the formal organization of the text is described following the chronological sequence of elements (such as characters or events) in the text. In the paradigmatic approach, however, the elements are not viewed in their chronological positions but as units contributing to an analytic schema. Anthropologist Levi-Strauss, for instance, considers the linear sequential structure as apparent or surface content, whereas the paradigmatic structure reflects the latent content which he considers more significant. ([Propp, 1968/2010](#)). Here, the analysis moves from the episodic content to reconstruct the underlying schema and their implications. This justifies the use of this method of analysis for the simplification or extraction of the underlying processes in abstract concepts and symbolic events which can then be adapted or developed by programmers and implemented by social marketing planners.

The broad research question that this study engages with is:

RQ1. How would the modalities in Vedantic spatio-temporal constructs result in useful applications for social marketing campaigns?

Analysis and discussion

The analysis draws from the ancient and post-modern conceptualizations of the hyper-real to discuss the key texts from Vedantic literature which can provide a basis for AR applications in social marketing. The analysis recognizes a conceptual bridge between human sensory/transcendental ability and contemporary technology. It identifies five propositional structures (PS). These can be used to create behaviour-based applications in augmented fields. The study explicates how these could result in AR applications for social marketing campaigns.

Transmutation

The *Narasimha Avataar* is a narrative in Book 7, Shrimad Bhagavatam [[SB \(800–1000 CE\), 2016](#)]. Known as the fourth incarnation of Vishnu, the avataar has a human body with lion's head and claws. According to the narrative, as his brother Hiranyaksha was killed by Vishnu, the demon king Hiranya Kashyapu directs his subjects to never worship Vishnu but

treat him, the king as God. However, his own son Prahlad is a staunch Vishnu devotee. The king tries killing Prahlad who is always saved by Vishnu. On this last fatal occasion, the father challenges the son and asks “Where is Vishnu?” Prahlad says he is omnipresent. Hiranya Kashyapu laughs this off pointing to a pillar and asks whether he is also in that pillar and strikes the pillar; Vishnu emerges from the pillar as the *Narasimhavaataar*, half-human half-lion and kills Hiranya Kashyapu to save Prahlad.

sa sattvam enaṃ parito vipaśyan
stambhasya madhyād anunirjihānam
nāyaṃ mṛgo nāpi naro vicitram
aho kimetan nṛ-mṛgendra-rūpam (SB 7.8.18)

Translation: While Hiranya Kashyapu looked all around to find the source of the sound, that wonderful form of the Lord, which could not be ascertained to be either a man or a lion, emerged from the pillar. In amazement, Hiranya Kashyapu wondered, “What is this creature that is half man and half lion (nṛ-mṛgendra-rūpam)?”

Table III lists the operating modalities in the *Narasimha Avataar* episode.

This episode is symbolic of transitory conditions: not man-not animal; not day not night (twilight); no weapons (claws); killing neither inside nor outside (threshold lap). This was to overcome a boon obtained by Hiranya Kashyapu that he could not be killed by man or animal, by any weapon, during day or night, on earth or in the sky. There is thus an extensive range of spatio-temporal modalities that can open up creative possibilities in digital environments. These could include experimentation with colour, sound, material and other aspects of information design that could be perceived as occurring between the two ends of a spectrum. This leads to the following propositional structure (*PS I*).

PS I: Shape shifting

Proposed AR application: Achieving/developing forms (known/unknown) that are taken to achieve targeted behavioural outcomes

Visual layering

The immersive experience imparted by *Divya Drishti* finds its strongest explicatory parallel in the *Vishwaroopdarshan* in Chapter XI of the *Bhagavad Geeta* (BG) dated approximately fifth century BCE. The BG consists of 18 chapters in the *Bheeshma Parva* of the epic *Mahabharata* (Debroy, 2014). The BG, a key influential text in the Hindu sociocultural system, is a summary of *Upanishadic* teaching and hence of Vedantic philosophy. Set in the battlefield, the *Kurukskshetra*, Chapter XI is about the powerful and all-encompassing vision or *Vishwaroopdarshan* that Krishna, the avatar of Vishnu, imparts to Arjuna, the Pandava

No.	Verbo-visual unit	Modality
1	Human body	HM
2	Lion's head	HM
3	Human body with lion's head	LM
4	Omnipresence	LM
5	Striking the pillar	HM
6	Avataar emerging from the pillar	LM
7	Transitory conditions: not man-not animal; neither inside nor outside	LM

Table III.
Operating modalities
in the *Narasimha*
Avataar episode

warrior who after Krishna's persuasive rhetoric desires to see the essence of the Supreme Being, the unity expressed in Vedantic thought. This episode highlights the layering of Arjuna's visual field with all the elements of the universe seen in Krishna's being. Verse after verse, this chapter brings out this powerful and enabling layering that is a rich and dramatic precedent to any such attempts approximated by contemporary technologies. Hence, this study believes that much can be drawn from a reflective understanding of this concept of the "vision" only witnessed by *divya drishti*, as discussed earlier.

na tu mām śakyase draṣṭum
 anenaiva sva-caḅṣuṣā
 divyaṃ dadāmi te caḅṣuḅ
 paśya me yogam aiśvaram (BG 11.8)

Translation: But you cannot see Me with your present eyes. Therefore I give you divine eyes. Behold My mystic opulence!

The transfiguration of Krishna is as in the case of the Vamana avatar, involves spatio-temporal modalities through a three-fold manifestation of form and proportion.

kirīṭinaṃ gadiṇaṃ cakra-hastam
 icchāmi tvāṃ draṣṭum ahaṃ tathaiva
 tenaiva rūpeṇa catur-bhujena
 sahasra-būhō bhava viśva-mūrte (BG 11.46)

Translation: O universal form, O thousand-armed Lord, I wish to see You in Your four-armed form, with helmeted head and with club, wheel, conch and lotus flower in Your hands. I long to see You in that form.

arjuna uvāca
 drṣṭvedaṃ mānuṣaṃ
 rūpaṃ tava saumyaṃ janārdana
 idūṇiṃ asmi saṃvṛttaḅ
 sa-cetāḅ prakṛtiṃ gataḅ (BG 11.51)

Translation: When Arjuna thus saw Krishna in His original form, he said: O Janārdana, seeing this humanlike form, so very beautiful, I am now composed in mind, and I am restored to my original nature.

While Arjuna desires to see this cosmic vision, once witnessed, not only is he convinced by this all-encompassing visual presence but also rendered fearful and overwhelmed by the illumination. He thus exhorts Krishna to return from this multi-armed presence to his four-armed and finally to his physical presence as avatar.

[Table IV](#) lists the modalities in the *Vishwaroopdarshan* episode.

No.	Verbo-visual unit	Modality
1	<i>Divya drishti</i>	LM
2	<i>Vishwaroop</i>	LM (Abstract)
3	Layering of visual field	LM
4	All elements of the universe within a contained space	LM
5	<i>Chaturbhujā</i> (four-armed form)	LM
6	Physical presence as Avataar (human form)	HM

Table IV.
 Operating modalities
 in the
Vishwaroopdarshan
 episode

The conceptualization is that AR output could therefore be positioned between levels of the hyper-real and the real before a condition of lowered modality is reached. Thus, this episode illustrates how one may situate the hyper-real between the higher modality and lower modality states. Spatio-temporal modalities if used through an understanding of the precise use of form and proportion may thus effectively impact behaviours as illustrated by Arjuna's case in similar simulated environments. This leads to the following propositional structure (PS 2).

PS 2: Construction-reconstruction-visualization-redefinition; *maya; mithya; divya drishti*

Proposed AR Application: Hyper-realism induced in external environment; induced shifting between physical and mental states

Illusion and reality

One of the most illustrative of several texts that dwell on temporal and spatial modalities is a key narrative from Book 12 of the Shrimad Bhagavatam (SB). This is a dramatic episode where the immortal sage Rishi Markandeya gains an immersive perspective on creation-destruction, within-without and the transitory nature of being. Central to an understanding of this humongous experience are the concepts of the beginning of the *yugas* (epochs) and their dissolution and re-commencement paralleled in the awakening of the creator Vishnu and the destruction and drawing in of all elements of the universe, which again live in conscious inner narratives and worlds within his celestial body as he sleeps and emerge to form a new cycle of epochs as he wakes to create the universe anew.

sa-kṣmāntarīkṣaṃ sa-divaṃ sa-bhā-gaṇaṃ
traī-lokyam āsīt saha digbhir āplutam
sa eka evorvarīto mahā-munir
babhrāma vikṣīpya jatā jaḍāndha-vat (SB 12.9.15)

Translation: The water inundated the earth, outer space, heaven and the celestial region. Indeed, the entire expanse of the universe was flooded in all directions, and out of all its inhabitants only Markandeya remained. His matted hair scattered, the great sage wandered about alone in the water as if dumb and blind.

A while later, as the sage sees the sleeping Vishnu, in the form of a little child on a banana leaf; he is drawn towards the infant's beauty and is inhaled into its sleeping body. What he sees inside leaves him astounded.

khaṃ rodasībhā-gaṇān adri-sāgarān
dvīpān sa-varṣān kakubhaḥ surāsurān
vanāni deśān saritaḥ purākarān
kheṭān vrajān āśrama-varṇa-vṛttayaḥ

mahānti bhūtāny atha bhautikāny asau
kālaṃ ca nānā-yuga-kalpa-kalpanam
yat kiñcid anyad vyavahāra-kāraṇam
dadarśa viśvaṃ sad ivūvabhūsitam (SB 12.9.28-29)

Translation: The sage saw the entire universe: the sky, heavens and earth, the stars, mountains, oceans, great islands and continents, the expanses in every direction, the saintly and demoniac living beings, the forests, countries, rivers, cities and mines, the agricultural

villages and cow pastures, and the occupational and spiritual activities of the various social divisions. He also saw the basic elements of creation along with all their by-products, as well as time itself, which regulates the progression of countless ages within the days of Brahmū. In addition, he saw everything else created for use in material life. All this he saw manifested before him as if it were real.

The Rishi Markandeya roams in this inner world but is exhaled out of Vishnu's parted lips as he sleeps. Once outside the sage witnesses the contrasting elements of "within" and "without" as he splashes about in the dark celestial ocean outside Vishnu's slumber.

himālayaṃ puṣpavahāṃ ca tāṃ nadīm
 nijāśramaṃ yatra ṛṣī apaśyata
 viśvaṃ vipaśyañ chvasitāc chiśor vai
 bahir nirasto nyapatal layābdhau (SB 12.9.30)

Translation: He saw before him the Himūlayan mountains, the Pushpabhadra River and his own hermitage, where he had had the audience of the sages Nara-Nārāyana. Then, as Mārkaṇḍeya beheld the entire universe, the infant exhaled, expelling the sage from His body and casting him back into the ocean of dissolution.

Table V lists the modalities in the Markandeya episode.

The real, the unreal and the hyper-real alternate in a dramatic form to suggest a dynamic and fluid coalescence of all that is apparent and all that aspires to the dream state. This is thus one of the myriad texts which draw from degrees of reality and *maya* that Vedantic philosophy eventually seeks to articulate. This leads to the following propositional structures (PS 3 and PS 4).

PS 3: Visual exposition of the extra-sensory; *vichitra*; *avarnaneeya*; *adbhuta*

Proposed AR Application: Stretching the imagination, innovative visualization

PS 4: Transition from known to unknown/unknown to known; formless; boundaryless; limitless; the interaction of time and space

Proposed AR Application: Participation; Co-creation by viewer/user of AR tool

Siddhis

The *Vaamana Avataar* which appears in Book 8 of the Shrimad Bhagavatam is the fifth incarnation of Vishnu. Vaamana has a diminutive stature but tricks the demon-king Bali

Table V.
Operating modalities
in the *Markandeya*
episode

No.	Verbo-visual unit	Modality
1	Rishi Markandeya	HM
2	Entire expanse of the universe	LM
3	Deluge	HM
4	As if dumb and blind	HM
5	Little child on a banana leaf	HM
6	Inhaled into its sleeping body	LM
7	Seeing the universe inside the body	LM
8	Roaming this inner world	LM
9	Exhaled out of the child's body	LM

into ending his dominance. However, he does at the same time honour Bali's sense of charity with a vision of the divine. When as a Brahmin guest in the king's palace, Vaamana asks for three paces of land; the king honours his request. Vaamana transforms into a huge being and takes two steps that cover all of heaven and earth.

tad vāmanaṁ rūpam avardhatādbhutaṁ
harer anantasya guṇa-trayātmakam
bhūḥ khaṁ diśo dyaur vivarāḥ payodhayas
tiryaṅ-ṅṛ-devā ṛṣayo yad-āsata (SB 8.20.21)

Translation: The unlimited Supreme Personality of Godhead, who had assumed the form of Vāmana, then began increasing in size, acting in terms of the material energy, until everything in the universe was within His body, including the earth, the planetary systems, the sky, the directions, the various holes in the universe, the seas, the oceans, the birds, beasts, human beings, the demigods and the great saintly persons.

When Bali has no land left to offer, he bows his head. Vamana takes the third step to place his foot on the king's head.

śrī-balir uvāca:
yady uttamaśloka bhavān mameritam
vaco vyalīkaṁ sura-varya manyate
karomy ṛtaṁ tan na bhavet pralambhanaṁ
padaṁ ṛtīyaṁ kuru śrīṣṇi me nijam (SB 8.22.2)

Translation: Bali Mahārāja said: O best Personality of Godhead, most worshippingable for all the demigods, if You think that my promise has become false, I shall certainly rectify matters to make it truthful. I cannot allow my promise to be false. Please, therefore, place Your third lotus footstep on my head.

Table VI lists the modalities in the Vaamana episode.

This narrative is particularly illustrative of the unexpected and dramatic expansion of form and the visual rhetoric of proportion. As discussed earlier, the siddhis are a concentrated understanding and enactment of spatio-temporal forces such earth, matter, wind, space and time, they are especially significant for environment-based applications for behavioural change. Dramatic exaggeration and minimalism as also unimaginable speed can be located at the point of the hyper-real in the modality continuum. This leads to the following propositional structure (PS 5).

PS 5: Visual approximations of *siddhis*; *sthool-sookshma*; *prāpti*, *vasitva*; *anima*, *laghima*, *mahima*

Proposed AR Application: Movement from gross to subtle; augmented expansion and contraction of spaces

No.	Verbo-visual unit	Modality
1	Asking for three paces of land	LM
2	Transforms into a huge being	LM
3	Universe within the body	LM
4	Two steps that cover all of heaven and earth	LM
5	Bali bows his head	HM
6	Third step to place foot on Bali's head	LM

Table VI.
Operating modalities
in the *Vaamana*
avataar episode

These higher-order energies continually question the three-dimensionality of human experience and the representation of such experience in material, physical terms. In strictly oppositional terms, these contrast “what is” with that “which is not” which when extended opens up the field to what is now technologically enacted and perceived as the “augmentation of reality”. What was once perceived as human ability now finds functional parallels in digital technology. The experience of material phenomena thus occurs in a higher and broader sensory realm of experience, albeit, a digital one. This digital experience operates between the “real” and the “unreal”. The study of the narratives above and the extracted schemas suggest that AR usage can be positioned by social marketing professionals between the hyper-real and a return to higher levels of modality rather than a direct positioning at the point of high modality. This is because a direct access to the “real” may render the real redundant or too familiar and may not bring about behavioural change. On the other hand, an access to the “hyper-real” may stimulate initial interest in a co-creative or participatory experience. A prolonged hyper-real experience on the other hand may lead to lower levels of modality, disbelief or a disconnect. It may also lead to a false sense of control. While these can be corroborated through studies on the psychological effects of hyper-real states, finding an optimal gradient which can lead to behavioural change is a significant area for future research in social marketing using AR technologies.

Proposed applications

Contemporary digital environments have demonstrated such aspects of augmentation as holographic projections, customised displays in retailing, real-time information overlays and projections, game-based character creations such as “avataars” or layering of immediate environments. While most of this usage is commercial marketing, this study has derived specific guiding principles/propositional structures which can be used for socially benefiting outreach campaigns to achieve transformative behaviours. Consider, for instance, the creation of an augmented environment where the participant does not simply receive a social message but interacts with the environment to enact that message and thus internalize it. A case in point would be the Government of India’s “Swachh Bharat Mission” (<http://swachhbharatmission.gov.in/sbmcms/index.htm>) aimed at changing behaviours to enable clean spaces. With several roadblocks such as resistant mindsets, a related lack of civic sense, a lack of pride in spaces, a limited sense of hygiene, slow growth in requisite infrastructure and such others, merely communicating the message through verbal or visual modes has a limited impact. It may be possible, however, to create immersive environments with negative or positive message framing. In this situation, a positive framing would be immersing participants in their immediate environments such as a locality/*mohalla* which in an AR environment is layered as optimally clean, garbage-free and safe. Thus, the participant can visualize a sense of what this alternative, ideal space can be to be impacted for a change in behaviour. The other type could be negative framing where the participant is first immersed in an augmented environment that kinaesthetically communicates what an unclean, disease-prone, hazardous environment could look, feel and sound like and then switch to the positive scenario described earlier to effect behavioural changes by enabling the participant to simulate tasks that would help transform the locality. The scenario described within the context of the Swachh Bharat Campaign derives from a participant-enabling, hand-free usage of AR technology, one which does not require the participant to acquire/use any device or form of technology. The onus of such AR implementation would lie on the government agency and the developers of the AR interactive tool.

The *Narasimhavtaar* narrative has significant implications for developers of AR applications for social marketing campaigns. The view of shape shifting in our study draws

from transitory states or conditions which, as we suggest, if simulated could create multimodal experiences and experimentation with form for targeted behavioural outcomes. As newer technologies permit further and more futuristic design interventions, developers could experiment with transitional states to impact behaviours, with implications for experimental layering of information.

By digitally inducing physical and mental states derived from the philosophical constructs discussed above such as the *siddhis*, the construction of illusion and reality or the transitions from known to unknown/unknown to known, contemporary digital usage can approximate the sensory and “extra-sensory” aspects of Vedantic enactments. While a postmodern Baudrillardian view of the hyper-real problematizes its usage, Eco points out how the hyper-real also generates a demand for that which is thus replicated. Deleuze views the proliferation of the hyper-real through a more positive lens and sees its potential in a newer and transformative usage. This is highlighted by [Massumi \(1987\)](#):

Advanced capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari argue, is reaching a new transnational level that necessitates a dissolution of old identities and territorialities and the unleashing of objects, images and information having far more mobility and combinatory potential than ever before.

This study locates such potential in Vedantic spatio-temporal constructs. Optimising such constructs as *maya* or the *siddhis* seen from different lenses resonates with this positive take on hyper-reality and its usefulness.

Conclusion

One of the aims of this study has been to reflect upon the rich examples of the “hyper-real” documented in the oral and written traditions of Vedantic philosophies. Visualized by sages, poets and seers, the hyper-real in these symbolic manifestations pre-empts contemporary digital experiences based on an advanced technology. The present study has drawn from the philosophical sensibilities of Vedantic traditions to demonstrate how specific concepts in these traditions lend themselves to a responsive persuasive appeal. This, as the study proposes, can be effectively transposed into the targeted requirements of transformative social marketing campaigns aimed at societal change and sustainable development.

A reflexive look at the present study may suggest that the limitations arise from the usage of the Vedantic schema more accessible to Indian reception, to the exclusion of other texts from parallel philosophies in Greco-Roman, Christian or Sufi traditions, for instance. Herein, there is scope for further research into propositional frameworks that can be drawn from the persuasive models and rich narratives in these philosophies. [Jung's \(1954\)](#) archetypal theory of the “collective unconscious” helps link the latent connections that mytho-philosophical narratives can have with other such narratives across the world. Jung's key proposition views archetypal forms, figures, symbols and motifs as innate and universal psychic elements that guide behaviour. This may also help extend extracted propositional structures to similar application in other consumption cultures which also have access to this collective pool of patterns, instincts and images through their representational narratives. The field of marketing has recognized this universal system that could reflect consumer behaviours ([Levy, 1981](#); [Wertime, 2003](#); [Woodside et al., 2012](#)). Cultural alignment of consumer experience also suggests that in increasingly global environments, marketers may also need to broaden their understanding of empowering persuasive principles across cultures for targeted behavioural change and societal transformation.

Implications for marketing professionals, planners and developers

Marketing professionals and software developers are well aware of the huge potential that the field of virtual experiences has opened up not just for commercial marketing but in areas such as education, healthcare, manufacturing, defence, engineering and space research to name a few. Being able to explore the intrinsic structure of objects through three-dimensional experiences in actual settings is now increasingly contributing to constructive behaviours and further research in these areas.

This study has addressed the need for design interventions in these areas by drawing from ancient Indian systems of “augmented reality” which have continued until the present times, to raise significant questions about the ontological status of the presence/absence and the nature of human perceptual experience. As the above findings demonstrate, the propositional structures and applications derived by this study can be applied to create specific virtual environments that can simulate and demonstrate desirable societal outcomes and behaviours.

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