Ipsos Connect

BBC

VR: WHAT'S THE REALITY?

Thought Piece

2017

GETTING UNDER THE SKIN OF THE VIRTUAL REALITY EXPERIENCE

Virtual Reality (VR) is certainly having a moment, with predictions of millions of headsets and billions of dollars of entertainment revenue. For instance, a recent forecast predicted that by 2020 81m headsets will be sold and consumer spending on VR entertainment to be $3.3 billion.[1]

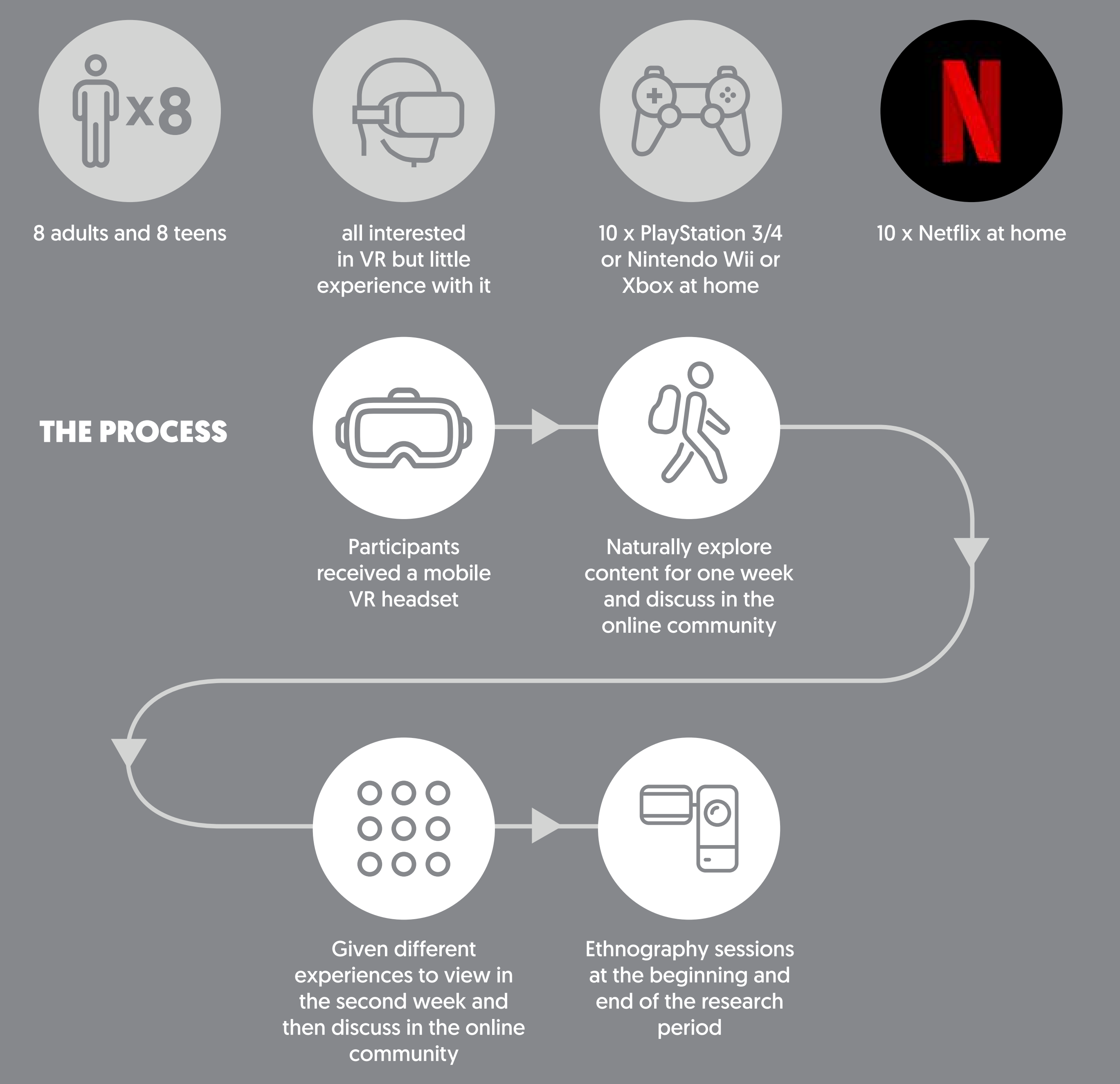
But we need to pause for a second. A recent Deloitte report observes that 'enthusiastic reactions to VR at trade fairs or at industry conferences, based on a few minutes of usage, may not convert into mass market demand.'[2]

So let's be clear. The actual audience usage today is a long way from the heady projections that fill marketing and technology column inches. A recent poll run by the BBC found that only 8% of the UK population said they had used VR, and less than 4% had access to a headset.[3] And an Ipsos MORI poll found that 60% of participants felt that VR was mainly for gaming and 46% of participants agreed that they couldn't see a practical use for people like them.[4]

But if we ask ourselves: do we actually know what people want out of VR entertainment experiences? Or: how do everyday people experience VR in their home? Do we really have any idea?

In collaboration with Tim Fiennes at the BBC, we wanted to get under the skin of the VR experience to truly understand how people experience VR, the content that resonates with them, and how VR integrates into media routines. We did this by recruiting 8 teens and 8 adults who were interested in VR but had little experience with it. We gave them each a mobile VR headset for two weeks. They joined an online community to talk about their experiences and we concurrently visited 6 of them in their homes in the first week and then re-visited them in the second week to compare.

By taking a people first approach, we uncovered both drivers and barriers of VR in-home entertainment usage and appeal.



FOCUS ON THE EXPERIENCE NOT THE TECHNOLOGY

The first thing to mention is audience associations and expectations. Before participants got their hands on the VR headset they were unsure what to expect and unsure about the type of experiences they wanted to have. They associated VR with being shiny, futuristic and cool. Many expected the quality to be low. This was often driven by first experiences with Cardboard. VR was intuitively seen as a porthole to escapist or novelty experiences like gaming and going on a rollercoaster. They were excited to try VR, but also had concerns such as getting nauseous, getting too into a virtual world and being isolated, as well looking silly in front of friends and family.

Yet, when our participants tried VR they were blown away by it. Strong positive emotions come through. In terms of looking at the initial impact of VR technology from an audience perspective, everyone 'gets it'.

"I found the whole experience really cool. I was very engaged in the experience and actually screamed out load and was waiting for the next thing to happen and was scared when the roller coaster dropped."

Female, teen

"The standard video content has no comparison to the VR experience as its just 'Out of this world'. Totally mind blowing."

Female, 18-44

It seems that our participants were associating VR with the technology, not the experiences they could have within VR prior to trying it. And judging by the gap between their expectations (low to middling) and their experiences (very good), this is a fundamental marketing problem. VR is an immersive experience that is hard to translate to someone who has not had the experience. Therefore, understanding how audiences see VR before they have experienced it gives us clues as to what marketing messages they need to hear to maximise VR appeal. Central to this will be moving VR out of a gaming associated niche by getting audiences excited about the different kinds of experiences they might have, and matching these experiences to real audience needs.

THE NEED TO ADD VALUE WITH VR

Initially, participants were left with the headset and briefed just to try it out without any specific direction. During this exploration phase, participants didn't venture outside the Oculus App or YouTube. They chose a narrow range of experiences that usually got their blood pumping. Things like horror and extreme experiences (like Face your Fears – designed to help people overcome things like a fear of heights or skydiving). And they felt the experiences they came across were mostly games-oriented, gimmicky, and often low quality. Reflecting the seemingly random way they searched for and consumed content, participants struggled to attribute their experiences to content creators within this environment. During this time, most came to the conclusion that VR was a novelty experience.

"It can be quite boring and difficult to endlessly scroll through 50 odd pages of apps."
Female, teen

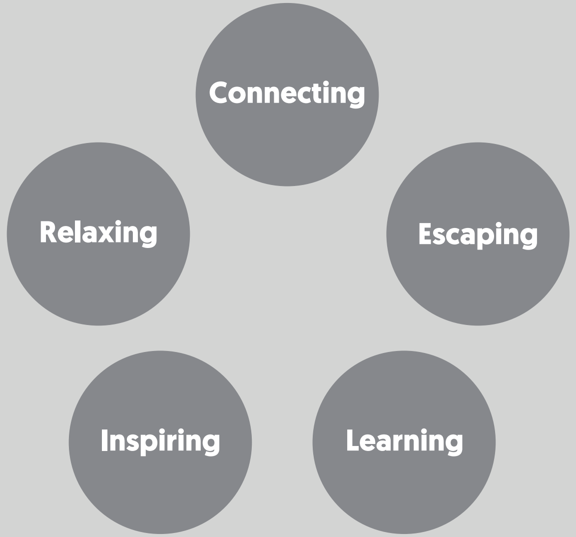
However, when we purposefully exposed participants to a variety of interesting VR content, they were surprised and excited about these new experiences. We showed participants learning experiences like The Body VR and Attenborough and the Dinosaurs, emotive experiences like the music-based Strangers and doing a skydive, empathetic experiences like Notes on Blindness and Fire Rescue 360, and finally, meditation and social experiences, like the Facebook Spaces or Oculus Rooms apps. This led participants to start shifting their views of VR from being a novelty to being a media form with more meaningful experiences available.

These experiences tended to resonate much more deeply than their initial gimmicky experiences. This type of content had a big impact in the sense of not only simple appeal, but also in being profound in its impact in the real (non-VR) lives of participants. They tended to be experiences that:

1. put the audience in someone else's shoes and enabled greater understanding of others or the world
2. enable them to do something they wouldn't normally be able to do, like sky diving or visiting another place
3. help them learn (for example, learning about the human body by shrinking to the size of a cell and travelling through the body)
4. encourage switching off by immersion in relaxing environments i.e. meditation.

In short, the truly appealing content 'adds value' to media choices by feeling like a special experience that could only have been conveyed in VR and not through any other media.

"The biggest benefit for this is that I'm watching this I'm not doing anything else, and then the sense of scale. So [in David Attenborough and the Dinosaurs] he says I could talk about how long 50 feet is, but here it is. Then the thing walks past you and it takes a particular period of time to walk past you. Ok, now I get how long 50 feet is; I can visualise that."
Male, 18-44



Cirque du Soleil, KÀ The Battle Within.
Courtesy of Felix & Paul Studios

STORYTELLING VS. EXPERIENCE

From an industry perspective we are still in the learning phase around producing content that works, but we were able to pull out a few content fundamentals that explain why participants got excited about certain content.

Good storytelling is still required. Participants often spoke positively about experiences they felt were well thought out. For example, Notes on Blindness is a well-crafted and narrated tale with unique visuals. And games appeal early on in part because they have clear objectives.

Playing around with scale works well for audiences in VR. For example, The Body VR shrinks you to cellular level and Attenborough and the Dinosaurs shows the true size of dinosaurs as they walk by you. On one hand, this is just cool to experience; and on the other, it helps aid understanding.

Presence and immersion are important to consider. Attention needs to be paid to ensuring the viewer feels really 'there' and therefore immersed; for example, a Cirque du Soleil experience resonated in part because the characters make plenty of 'eye contact' with the viewer in amidst a surreal experience.

Avoid cognitive overload; the audience need time and space to process and understand what is happening given they are watching in 360 degrees. When and where to draw their attention is also fundamentally important and experiences that do this well appeal.

"The lighting was misty, dark, characters stood out with their bright coloured clothing contrasting the misty background. The music especially was very mystic ... It was rather slow moving which makes it better as it builds tension and draws me in."
Female, teen

The takeaway for content creators is that VR experiences need the same care and love applied to them that other high quality video content generally has. It's not enough just to be producing generic VR. Participants quickly tire of the novelty of VR, especially low quality experiences.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO ADOPTION

We've alluded to marketing and content discovery as barriers to VR appeal and usage. Other barriers include practical hardware limitations and the tricky nature of integrating VR into existing media habits.

We observed participants running into two main practical issues. First, many mobile phone handsets were overheating after 30 or so minutes of usage. This was frustrating for participants and also put a ceiling on the length of experiences. Second, variable Wi-Fi quality was an issue as it resulted in variable quality content resolutions, especially when viewing YouTube 360 content. Participants did not always realise that the low quality or blurry VR experience they were having was related to the quality of the Wi-Fi.

"I tried the Fulldome cinema but it had some issues, it was a bit slow and was buffering most of the time, so I went on a different app instead."
Male, teen

The key point here is that a consistently frustrating user experience will severely limit VR usage. Audiences don't particularly care if it's the hardware, the software, or anything in-between that causes a glitch. They just want good experiences and become frustrated when this isn't possible.

How VR integrates into busy lives is also an important challenge to consider. Across the two weeks, participants were only occasionally using VR. This was often during downtime, in the evenings, or at weekends. It's not something that people jump out of bed for. Usage occasions were fairly short at around 20-30 minutes, suggesting real limits to mobile VR experiences. And finally, VR was mainly seen as an individual activity – a chance for participants to be absorbed in something – although some enjoyed novelty content for sharing with friends at a party.

The main limitation in VR usage was the effort required to have a VR experience. Participants felt that VR was a purposeful activity, especially when compared to their habitual media choices like smartphones, tablets and the TV.

"At the moment it isn't replacing any of my media habits. In a way, I feel like it's not as easy to sit down with as you have to get your phone ready, slot it into the headset and then find something to watch. Whereas normally I can just flick on the TV and watch something instantly!"
Female, 18-44

Also, social factors were an important barrier participants had to overcome. Participants were worried about the headset messing up makeup or hair, about looking silly in front of friends, or even about feeling odd wearing the headset on their own.

REALISING VR'S FULL POTENTIAL

VR in-home entertainment has massive potential. Headsets will get cheaper and more content will be made. But, we need to carefully consider making the most of opportunities and overcoming current barriers.

Core opportunities exist around good quality content that taps into real audience needs.

1. Need states emerging from our research were around escaping, relaxing, empathy, and learning. Content makers need to tap into these need states to better appeal to the mass market by making content that has real impact.
2. High value appointment viewing (i.e., programming that the viewer feels invested in as opposed to programmes that they watch casually) best motivates participants to overcome usage barriers. More innovative, well thought out, well told, and unique VR experiences need to be produced to captivate audiences and encourage them to use it outside of novelty experiences.
3. Given low knowledge levels and mostly positive first VR experiences, far more work needs to be done to educate audiences about the experiences they could have. We need to avoid talking about the VR technology, but instead emphasise the unique, relevant experiences people want to have.

There are some challenges that need to be addressed for VR to realise its potential.

1. The user experience needs to be more intuitive and seamless.
2. The good content is far too difficult to find for most, therefore inhibiting the ability to unlock the value or relevance of VR and this is a significant barrier to VR being adopted. Audiences need to be able to find content that meets their needs quicker and easier to move VR out of the novelty zone.
3. Audiences also need to be exposed to content they might not automatically choose, to expand their range of tastes in VR. There is room for intelligent content curation from trusted brands which takes into account the audience needs, and with the goal of expanding VR beyond novelty experiences for audiences.
4. Audiences need to know what to expect from certain content destinations, and this will help content attribution for brands.

The VR industry needs to make seamless experiences that appeal to audiences. Hardware, platforms, and content creators need to be cognisant of the limitations of technology, but also aware of the real-world context in which audiences are interacting with VR in order to realise the full potential the market affords.

1 https://technology.ihs.com/584349/consumer-spending-on-virtual-reality-entertainment-to-hit-33-billion-by-2020-ihs-markit-says

2 https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/technology-media-and-telecommunications/articles/tmt-pred16-media-virtual-reality-billion-dollar-niche.html

3 http://www.comresglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Wiggin-Virtual-Reality-Ethics-Public-Poll-Final-Tables-Feb-2017.pdf

4 **Source:** Ipsos MORI VR Study, April 2016. **Base:** 1,117, Age: 16-75, UK, online

RESEARCH MANAGER

Neil is one of our digital experts within Ipsos Connect and has many years of qualitative research experience. He's interested in how consumers and brands make sense of and use emerging technology. Neil has conducted a number of projects in the Virtual Reality space and is actively exploring its research potential.

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MARKETING & AUDIENCES

Tim works in the BBC's Marketing and Audience department. A strategist, researcher and innovation expert, Tim's work centres on harnessing insight and data to drive group-wide strategy and create brilliant products, programmes and brands. Most recently he has been leading the development of the BBC's Virtual Reality strategy.

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Ipsos Connect

ABOUT IPSOS CONNECT

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Our services include:

- **Brand & Campaign Performance:** Evaluation and optimisation of in-market activities to drive communications effectiveness and brand growth.
- **Content and Communications Development:** Communications, content and creative development from early stage idea development through to quantitative pre-testing alongside media & touchpoint planning.
- **Media Measurement:** Audience measurement and understanding.

Ipsos Connect are specialists in people-based insight, employing qualitative and quantitative techniques including surveys, neuro, observation, social media and other data sources. Our philosophy and framework centre on building successful businesses through understanding brands, media, content and communications at the point of impact with people.