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Are millennials driving changes in the sports industry of modern India?

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Abstract

India is a diverse nation with over 1.3 billion citizens. It has witnessed several sports being watched, taught and played in varying proportions. For decades cricket has been the maverick of the Indian sports industry despite not being the national game and the existence of locally popular games. However, with the advent of technology, the young Indian millennials have steered the sports industry in a new direction. Not only have the viewers promoted and engaged in watching a variety of Indian and International sports, the devices and patterns of viewership have also shifted. In addition, there has been a rapid increase in the development of online gaming to an extent where games like PUB-G have become the arch-nemesis of parents and educators. Sports, in any nation, directly and indirectly, affect the revenue, diplomacy, mental health, education and camaraderie of a country. This paper intends to highlight the changing trends of consumption of sports in India, its reasons and its consequent impact on socio-economic and personal growth and lifestyle changes.

Keywords: Sports, online gaming, viewership, indigenous sports, millennials

Introduction

India is not alien to sports, millions of Indians play, coach, and watch sports and it contributes significantly to the GDP of the Indian Economy. Indian sports have been single-handedly dominated by cricket for years. Sports stars like Sachin Tendulkar, Kapil Dev and Virat Kohli are synonymous to pop culture and the passionate history of our nation. As a collective, India remains emotional towards cricket and has often been classified as a “religion” by eminent journalists. However, very recently, Indian sports like Kabaddi, Kushti along with international sports like Formula One and Soccer among many others have found viewership in India and congruent infrastructure. (Jajo, 2016) [8].

A tremendous change has been witnessed in the sports industry. In addition to traditional sports formats, the introduction of the Premier Sports League in India has triggered a gamut of changes. The most prominent change was brought by the Indian Premier League for cricket (IPL). However, in recent years additions of the Indian Super League for football (ISL), the Pro Kabaddi League and the Pro Wrestling League among others have drawn a significantly large number of viewers. The ISL alone had a record viewership of 101 million including rural India (Earnest and Young, 2017) [4]. With the weight of celebrities such as Abhishek Bachchan, Aishwarya Bachchan, Ronni Screwala, etc rural sports of India like ‘Kabaddi’ have become profitable and have drawn a large number of viewers and continues to attract interest at a national level.

These leagues have generously contributed to the growth of sports retail and attraction of viewership. Indian millennials make 33% of viewers of entertainment content including sports in 2016 according to Broadcast Audience Research Council of India. According to the Economic Survey of 2013-2014, India is estimated to become the youngest country in the world by the year 2021. Approximately 64% of Indians would fall under the age cohort of 20-35 years. Therefore, it is expected that these figures are likely to escalate in the near future.

In 2011, in their study, Gurleen and Sukhmani concluded that most undergraduate and postgraduate students in Northern India watched television “most often” or “sometimes”. This translated in 3-5 hours of watching television for both males and females for the purpose of entertainment and information gathering among others.

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While television remains the most popular source of watching sports, the advent of technology in modern India has opened up a plethora of platforms for millennial viewers such as online browsers, applications, etc. The availability of OTT platforms (Over The Top) such as 'Hotstar', cheap internet rates and smartphones and flexibility have changed the landscape of sports viewership in India rapidly (Earnest and Young, 2016).

Millennials have often been attributed to be using 'second screens' while consuming content such as the use of a mobile phone or a tablet while watching television (Cunningham & Eastin, 2015). This practice has enabled a phenomenon called the 'social television' wherein the individual interacts with fellow viewers to discuss and debate while watching the content (Harboe, Massey, Metcalf, Wheatley, & Romero, 2008). This could also be referred to as a function of 'esports' a byproduct of the expansion of the sports industry. The sports industry has not only witnessed growth in a number of games and viewers but has also in other forms of games (online games), reinvented the roles of sportsmen around the world which include interacting with viewers off the field and turning themselves into individual brands. This has been made achievable via social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook etc where an ongoing sports event is vigorously discussed and virtually enjoyed collectively (Deloitte, 2019) [3]. Millennials used second screens for a variety of reasons, sometimes to text and other times to express their emotions about a big moment in the sporting event and to avoid commercials (Vooris, Fischer, Smith, & Achen 2016) [13].

The sports industry in India has further been revolutionized by the introduction of online gaming and fantasy leagues. Online gaming has seen an exponential growth of 250 million players in 2018 as opposed to 20 million players in 2010 while a similar growth pattern was experienced by online game development companies that have escalated from 25 to 250 from 2010 to 2018 (KPMG survey, 2019). Player Unknown's Battleground Game (PUBG), an international online game has had the most remarkable effect on Indian audiences. Mamun and Griffith in 2019 conducted case studies to comprehend the negative impact on Indian youngsters who played PUBG. They discovered incidents of suicides, exam failure, hospitalization, running away from home, accidents due to negligence and death. Such an extremely adverse effect lead the government to intervene and ban the game.

Online games are not only limited to esports such as PUBG, FIFA, etc but also Real Money Games and mobile-centric games. While many Indian millennials solve puzzles and play games such as candy crush on their phones, they also frequently indulge in playing games that reward them in terms of points, incentives or actual money such as poker, rummy, quizzes, etc (KPMG 2019). The widening market has begun to incorporate and monetize games such as Poker which were earlier only played at international casinos or for leisure at home or within personal circles.

Methodology

Data Sources and Strategy

A systematic search was conducted to identify studies that describe the concept of millennials in India and their sports viewership pattern. A review of literature was conducted for articles published post-2005. Articles were identified from the databases Google Scholar, PsycINFO, Research gate, Jstor, PubMed, Springer, among others, as well as from references

cited in reviewed articles. A combination of the following keywords were used to retrieve literature from these databases- Millennials, sports, rural sports, kabaddi, yoga cricket, esports, Indian Millennials, Gen Y, Generation Y, Nexters, Traits of Millennials, Khelo India, Differences in Millennials, Issues of Millennials, technology and sports PUBG, mental health among other keywords.

Interpretation and Discussion

With changing patterns of viewership, online games, cheaper internet rates, online platforms, new technology and a gamut of other changes, the sports industry has been revolutionized in India. Indian forms of physical exercise like 'Yoga', the traditional practice has also overtaken the West by storm. It is often perceived as a physical and spiritual tool (Ivtzan and Jegatheeswaran, 2014) [7]. This acceptance has bought a fine sense of ownership towards yoga among the Indian Millennials; they treat it as a life-transforming tool at an individual level.

Millennials are increasingly becoming conscious of their health and their lifestyles and make attempts to exchange their foul eating habits with healthy, nutritious food, which has, in turn, brought about a boom in the food industry giving way to organic food items, etc, and physical exercise in the form of sports, gymnastics, yoga, or other forms of physical activity. (Madan and Arora, 2017) [10]

The Indian Government introduced the Khelo India Youth Games campaign in 2018 for youngsters under 17 and 21 years of age. Individuals who participate and win are picked and trained for international games and are awarded a wholesome prize of 5 lakhs annually for eight years. This initiative was a result of the growing emphasis the government places on the role of sports to not only strengthen the level of sports across the country but to also promote virtues like those of teamwork, a healthy lifestyle, etc. This initiative also promotes the participation of women in all sports across the board (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2018). In addition, extensive emphasis has been placed on sports and its role in mental health. A spectrum of issues, at hand, are meant to be tackled such as the likes of addiction to online games such as PUBG and using sports as a way of life to maximise mental wellbeing and overall wellness. Sports icons across the world are using their voices and massive social media following to create awareness about mental health by promoting it, de-stigmatizing it and sharing their own experiences (Deloitte, 2019) [3]. Indian millennial golfer, Anisha Padukone, heads a mental health foundation called The Live Love Laugh Foundation in an attempt to create mental awareness.

Conclusion

The government has understood the importance of sports and thereby has rolled out relevant schemes to convert India into a powerhouse sporting nation, promote participation of youngsters and Indianisation of sports by putting its support behind sports like Kushti, kabaddi, etc. The millennials have transformed the viewing of sports with the use of multiple screens and by way of simultaneous interaction. The government and the private companies are both set to monetize the sports industry that stands at a revolutionary precipice.

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