Sports Consumption Behavior and Brand Perception of the Olympics among Millennial in India

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Abstract

Background: The research assists to shed light on the sports consumption behavior of Indian millennials and their perception of the Olympic brand. Brand behavior towards mega sports events within the category of millennials in India is an area that requires further investigation and this study has been conducted keeping that into consideration. Methods: A data set of 100 millennials for quantitative data collection and interview of four industry experts for qualitative data collection was collected. The mixed method technique offers an intersection of data collection and analytical techniques that can be argued to provide a comprehensive understanding in the topic of concern. The target population was evaluated on four brand parameters namely Brand Image, Brand Knowledge, Brand Loyalty and Brand Communication. Conclusion: Following investigation, it can be inferred that, the Olympics, one of the most iconic brands in the world lacks holistic awareness and reach within the Indian millennials. Implementing a well-constructed marketing strategy focused on the target population will contribute in boosting their sports consumption behavior and raising the perception of the Olympic brand amidst millennials in India.

Keywords: Olympic Brand Perception, Brand Loyalty, Brand Image, Brand Communication, Millennial Sports Behavior

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1.Introduction:

The Olympics is one of the most dominating and the biggest brands in the world of sports. 207 countries and 11238 athletes participated in the last Olympic games, Rio games 2016 (1) Rio 2016 Olympics garnered over 50 percent of the world population consuming Olympic content. With 35 sports, over 30 disciplines with a total of 408 events the Olympics can be rendered as the world’s foremost sports competition(2). Besides the sports perspective the Olympics is also a major contributor to social causes through its various initiatives and policies designed to promote Olympism in the society.

The Olympic logo is well known all round the world as the Olympic rings – it is the visual ambassador of Olympism for billions of people. In light of a plan previously made by Pierre de Coubertin, the Olympic rings stay a worldwide portrayal of the Olympic Movement and its action (3). The interlaced rings of blue, yellow, black, green and red color can be proclaimed as one of the superior brand logos efficiently functioning as a point of recognition for the Olympics.

The Olympic rings, the flame and the oath all are powerful tools of symbolism and competitive advantage for the brand in building its equity (4). The Olympic partner program assimilates various big brands such as Coco Cola, Toyota, Visa, Samsung to name a few which further strengthens the Olympic brand. Looking at its iconic status, it can be argued that consumers link the Olympic
brand with victory, excellency, international cooperation, a power for world harmony, and the root of national pride (5).

At the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Abhinav Bindra won gold in the Men's 10-meter air rifle occasion transforming into the primary Indian to win an individual gold award at the Olympic Games, in the similar Olympics Vijendar Singh won a bronze for India in boxing middleweight bracket. These 2 victories attracted additional attention towards Olympics from the Indian population as they provided the Indians with enhanced hope and interest. The 2012 summer Olympics saw a 83-part Indian Contingent participating in the games, setting another best for the nation with an aggregate of six medals Wrestler Sushil Kumar packed away a silver at 2012 Olympics turning into the main Indian competitor to win different awards in the Olympics (He won a bronze decoration at 2008 games) (6). Saina Nehwal won a bronze medal, Mary Kom turned into the primary Indian lady to win a medal in boxing when she secured a bronze position in Women's flyweight classification. At the 2016 Olympic games a record number of 117 competitors participated. 2008 Olympic games onwards with the first Gold medal for India by Abhinav Bindra, Sports and Olympics started developing an enhanced perspective in India. Abhinav Bindra’s Olympic gold changed the perspective of aspiring shooters in India, says Abhishek Verma (7). Studying these results, it can be stated that after 2008 Olympics due to the evolving results of the Indian athletes the Olympic brand started gaining momentum among Indian population.

Over the most recent twenty years, Indian cricket has changed. With the appearance of worldwide broadcasting companies, mass-media coverage and multinational sponsors cricket has become enormous business and India has become the main financial impetus on the world game. For the first time a developing country has become a major player in the international sports arena says Mihir Bose in his book (8).

Cricket has launched itself past every single other game in the nation and caught the dream of a billion hearts. When it comes to sports in India, cricket easily dominates every other sport and also has a huge market as well as demand for it. (9) Mentioned in his blog that a country of 1.2 billion population gets overjoyed over a single gold medal whereas other countries go with a bunch of them and unless Indian population moves past the Cricket craze it will be a dominator in only a single sport, ‘Cricket’ played between 20 countries throughout the world but at the back with respect to other sports.

8.7% of the Indian population that translates to 89,764,132 lies between 20-24 years and 27.6% (284,008,819) of the Indian population falls between 25-44 years of age as per (10). A cumulative of 36.3 percentage of the Indian population falls in the 20-44 years age group and are also parallelly referred to as millennials. This generation is distinguished by increased use of internet, smart devices and social media. Millennials are hailed as “digital natives” (11) born between the years 1980-2000 are highly considered as the tech savvy generation. The first basic observation for millennial sports consumption would simply rely on the millennial’s consumption of data online. Millennials spend a lot of time online and thus there arises an urge to keep their activities updated on social media as well. A millennial watching a match on television would post about it on social media. While if a millennial is watching the match online, he will make sure he indulges in online chat or commentary with people watching the match with him. There seems to have been a huge spike in sports consumption now that sports are also broadcasted on OTT platforms, so there is reduced chance of missing important parts of a match. Such basic innovative developments have increased the millennial sports consumption.
Sport branding is presently an actual topic of sport marketing and the demonstration of its identity is a pivotal factor for business practices in the sport field (12). The relationship between the Indian millennials and the Olympic brand consumption has not been clarified and a knowledge gap of brand behavior towards mega sports events within the millennial generation can be noticed. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore and identify the sports consumption traits of Indian millennials with respect to the Olympic brand and recognize the brand reach in India. The study will aid in improving Olympic brand reach and can be used to enhance the relationship between the consumers and the Olympic brand and the investigation can be additionally utilized for an alteration of current or the making of new marketing techniques with respect to millennial fans, spectators, athletes and non-athletes. The objective of this study is to study and understand the Sports Consumption Behaviors and Brand Perception of The Olympics among millennials in India.

2. Material & methods:
From the onset of the early 2000’s, sport marketing has become a widely researched and articulated domain (13) with the study of brand being identified as a key yardstick for the valuation of a business entity within macro sport industry. Traditional Research methods have distinctively been qualitative or quantitative and scholars have often researched them as individual fields with quantitative methods being more reoccurring in pattern (14,15) A mix methods research has only picked up and been accepted within the field of sport marketing during the last few years while it has been existent in the field of sociology for the last 3 decades (16,17) The mix methods technique offers an intersection of data collection and analytical techniques, that can be argued to provide a more comprehensive understanding into the subject of interest.

The Olympic brand has been previously identified as an iconic brand with widespread global presence. The overarching objective of the research is to explore brand characteristics with relation to the Olympics within the restricted data set of millennials. Gender is not a factor of influence within the prescribed data set and will not be considered for the generalization of the data.

The process of data collection involved two primary tools; online survey for quantitative data collection; expert interview for qualitative data collection. The number of respondents for the survey (n= 100) are all millennials and therefore provide a restricted age bracket to collected data. Geographical significance of data within the country has also been identified as non-contributing factor because of the nature of online surveys as a tool of data collection.

Qualitative data has been collected through expert interviews with four respondents. Identification and validation of experts has been done based on ‘analytical construction’ as per Bogner&Menz(18) under the following parameters: 1) technical Knowledge; 2) process knowledge; 3) interpretative knowledge.

3. Results and Discussion:
The brand equity model was used to analyze brand behavior of the Olympics within millennials in India. Individual factors under brand image, brand knowledge, brand communication and brand loyalty have been measured on a Likert scale while considering limitations of the method due to the range differential between points of response (19).

Utilizing descriptive statistics, individual brand factors have been measured and summarized to describe what has occurred with relation to the overall sample. The descriptive analysis has been used in tandem with thematic analysis of qualitative data from subject matter experts from the ecosystem of branding and Olympics in India.
4.1. Brand Image

The Olympic brand enjoys considerable popularity amongst the Indian millennials with 73% of the respondents rating the Olympic logo to be highly recognizable. The phenomenon remains consistent with the overall image of the Olympic logo globally which can be traced to the history and legacy of the brand as one of the oldest socio-cultural multi-sport events. The Olympics are synonymous with sport pave the way for the brand’s positioning within society.

Fundamentally, brand positioning influences consumer choice by “shaping and maintaining a specific brand’s image in the consumer’s mind” (20).

Qualitative data suggests a lack of awareness about the Olympic brand within nonsporting population attributing it to limited brand presence. The Olympic brand is a wider umbrella which also covers the Winter Olympics, The Paralympics and The Youth Olympics yet expert 2 points out, “The Winter and Paralympics do not figure as much in the Indian Mindset. When anyone says Olympics people instantly tend to associate it with Summer Olympics.”

Another theme that emerged consistently with relation to brand image was the seasonal nature of brand consumption and the lack of commitment displayed by the Indian population specially when compared to cricket. Expert 3 argues, “If 10 percent of people know about sports in India (Exclusive of Cricket) then only 1 percent will know about the Olympic brand and will genuinely think about it. The sheer scale of population in India presents a big challenge as well as an opportunity and with a sound brand strategy, the reach of the brand could be maximized.

The Olympic brand is also represented by its torch, hymn etc. which promote the core values of the brand i.e. excellence, respect, and friendship. Expert 1 suggests, “These representations motivate athletes to an exceptionally large level. The Olympic rings are highly recognized throughout however an athlete will identify significantly more to these elements of representation as compared to the non-athletes”, thereby an association with the brand and its various tools adds significant value for professional athletes.

The tools of the Olympic brand are an extension of the ideology of the brand and is indicative of a lifestyle which can be a part of general virtues of life with expert 1 even suggesting, “Many people are not even aware about the Olympic Hymn. These representations possess great significance and the Indian population needs to understand and recognize it.

The Olympic logo is highly recognizable but its direct correlation with regards to brand awareness can be argued upon as only 24% of the respondents showed high understanding of the brand. It can be considered be a fall in absolute values but 53% of responses also showed considerable understanding which showcases a higher mean value towards understanding of the overall brand. Similar themes have emerged with the expert interviews also indicating lack of knowledge with respect to brand policies and initiatives. Considering the strong positioning of the Olympic brand, respondents also highlighted its influential nature with 53% indicating a good degree of influence and 24% indicating an excellent degree of influence. The influence of the Olympic brand is a wide scoped concept with multiple impact zones and will require further investigation.
4.2. Brand Knowledge

A deeper analysis of brand awareness highlighted the awareness of Olympic brand and its policies and initiatives was also done to inquire the consideration of brands as knowledge \(^{(21)}\). The respondents showed a more balanced range with 48% responding with moderate awareness towards the advanced knowledge of the brand, while only 24% of them showed high degree of awareness.

While information transfer is important for a brand, the popularity and reach of the Olympic brand allows for a higher degree of willingness to consume information about it with 26% of the respondents showing moderate willingness, 38% showing high willingness and 21% showcasing extreme importance towards brand knowledge consumption.

A further exploration into the consumption of the Olympic brand with regards to information in the future resulted in 95% of the respondents showing active willingness to consume brand information. High degree of willingness towards brand consumption and fundamentally informed brand behavior also indicate the attribute of the brands as relationship partners \(^{(22)}\).

4.3. Brand Communication

Platforms of consumption of the Olympic brand have over the years evolved because of technological advancement. Traditionally, live engagement was the only platform of brand engagement and remains one of the most watched events throughout the world. Consuming Olympic content in the current era is distributed mainly between digital media and social media with a distribution of 43% and 45% respectively. Social media is new and dynamic with its active application within the Olympic brand starting from the Vancouver Winter Olympics 2010 and progressively evolving by London Olympics 2012. Expert 1 also highlighted the increased presence of social media and combining that with the relaxation of the Rule 40 (IOT, 2020), consumption trends on social media to evolve. Popular mediums included Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and IOC and athlete specific handles.

Live engagement, while still argued as the best spectacle falls short with only 11% of respondents making a case for it. In consideration for the Indian populous, factors such as ticket availability, travel and accommodation, monetary constraints, lack of national representation may impact the direct live engagement capability of the Olympic brand.

The data set of the respondents also highlights the elasticity of recommendation capability of millennials with respect to the Olympic brand which see is its main distribution between the range of sometimes with 27%, often with 37% and absolutely with 26%. The higher variance towards brand recommendation, allows for the customer to co-create value and utility with the brand ensuring a promise of quality \(^{(23)}\). On the contrary, experts argue that the millennials in India showcase weak relationship towards the Olympic brand with their interest only peaking during the Olympic year and again conditionally depending on the number of Indian athletes competing. Expert 1 suggests, “There is not a strong push for private channels to broadcast the Olympics because Indian representation is still relatively low and Indians don’t tend to go in the final stages of the events and therefore that aids in keeping the interest further low.”

Quality of content in terms of broadcast media, online streaming and social engagement are potential indicators of fundamentally sound programming and strategy. Sport is one of the few
fields which provide moments of physical and mental prowess showcased within the packaging of the Olympic brand. At 53% of the respondents, the general notion of content quality from the Olympic brand is rated good in quality while 27% of them rated it mild in quality however, experts argue that, “there is a dearth of quality Olympic content when it comes to Indian athletes and audience. Quality of content depends on the point of access.”. A common theme of brand strategy and creative engagement towards the Indian masses particularly reflected in the expert interviews.

Expert 2 shared an experience, “India has very less content again with selective exceptions. For e.g. When I went to the Bridgestone office, they had launched an initiative with certain Olympians and had Cardboard Cut-outs of these Olympians at their office and some presence on their website that they are sponsoring these athletes, but that was the extent of their information. There was no mention of what the brand is doing? What is their connection with these athletes? There is no deeper connect to the Olympic brand in India.”

One of the most iconic brands in the world having mild content quality is something that needs to be further investigated from a point of impact on consumption behavior as the turning of the era transforms the concept of brand as a stakeholder driven social and dynamic process (24,25,26,27).

Visibility of Olympic brand has been generally identified as good on social and digital platforms by the respondents however, further research is required to analyze seasonal as well as non-seasonal brand strategy with specific orientation towards the Indian population under the category of millennials. Expert 3 suggests, raising awareness for Olympics through mass media platforms (Movies, Television, print media) is essential as it caters to all age groups be it millennial and above and across rural and urban population.”

Rural India has emerged as a key theme within the scope of brand awareness and development. Indian Central and State governments along with corporates, private institutions and NGO’s are reaching out with sport policies targeting rural talent. Apart from talent identification, the significance of the Olympic brand within the rural population is fairly unexplored in India and could provide an opportunity for brand engagement with a higher volume of population covering almost 70% of the Indian population.

4.4. Brand Loyalty

Understanding recommendation patterns also provide an indication of brand loyalty which can be witnessed better based on the repetitive nature of Olympic brand consumption. In terms of repetitive consumption choices, the respondents chose often in frequency as the main behavioral pattern followed by 34% siding with sometimes and 14% keen on repeating their choices. Higher loyalty towards a brand also requires its management to consistently add value and innovate the brand (28). New product diversification and pricing strategies also benefit from brand loyalty as consumers understand brand credibility and are less sensitive about price because of quality assurance.

The platform for consumption of brand content on social and digital media requires further investigation due to their ever-evolving nature. For a brand to be relevant in terms of communication, it can be argued that it must evolve along with the existing communication platform. Information transfer is also dependent on the ease of access, which in turn requires constant adaptation towards varied platforms of content consumption. Among the respondents, 40% believe the access to brand information about the Olympic brand is good while, 33% rate its accessibility as mild.
4. Conclusion:

The objective of the research was to explore brand characteristics with relation to the Olympics within the restricted data set of millennials. Olympic brand equity is not as significant towards the Indian millennials and they lack holistic awareness about the Olympic brand, its policies and initiatives while enjoying its iconic brand status all round the world. The study also highlights a lack of awareness with respect to the Olympic brand amid non sporting population also suggesting inadequate brand presence. The influence of the Olympic brand is a broad scoped concept with multiple impact zones and will require further investigation, however through the medium of a well-constructed brand strategy which resonates with the Indian millennials, the reach of the Olympic brand can be amplified. Further investigation into strategic brand behavior of the Olympic brand could also provide further information about its integration with the rural population of India. For e.g. brands link Nike are considered a lifestyle, the same is the value with the positioning of the Olympic brand which further dictates its consumption capability among a diverse demographic pertaining to India. Marketers could look for more progressive approach towards brand building with respect to the Olympics in India as compared to the seasonal approach which is being followed currently. A deeper exploration of brand building capabilities could offer more accurate consumption pattern not just among millennials but the overall demographic which presents a good opportunity to push people up in brand loyalty ladder.

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