

Esports as a Career in the Indian Context

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Abstract

In the last decade, the number of people taking up Esports has increased manifold. This increase has been observed globally and has inspired many Indians to take up Esports. This research paper examines the motivators and the barriers that players face as they choose Esports as a career in the Indian context. The research paper also investigates the influence of environmental factors, including prominent influencers and personalities, access to technology, cultural factors, and support that players receive as they embark on their journey. The research paper surveyed Esports players to examine their motivators, and Chi-Square statistical technique was used to narrow down the most significant factors that affect them. The paper aims to understand how people perceive esports as a career in India. Thus, the paper examined the preferences of Indian Esports players and touches upon how players learn and adapt to esports games. It was found that players are emotionally involved in the games they played and watch various people play to enhance their skills. The esports industry in India is in its nascent stage, and people are willing to explore it as a career option and with the growth of this industry, we might be able to see newer types of jobs coming up.

Keywords: Esports, knowledge, skill, emotions, team, and motivation

Introduction

Esports is an organized way of playing video games. In recent times Esports industry has received recognition and is considered as sports entertainment; however, despite this recognition, there is still debate on considering Esports on par with the traditional sport. Esports has similarities with traditional sports. Esports also have professional teams and players, coaches, managers, leagues, competitions, and events like traditional sports (1).

Over the last decade, India has seen an increase in access to computing technology. This increase has given an impetus to Esports and has allowed it to emerge as one of the fastest-growing platforms for casual users and passionate sports enthusiasts. With the increasing varieties and numerous platforms to view Esports, it has engaged a wide range of audiences across the globe, especially in India. Esports has five prominent genres: Multiplayer online battle arenas, First-Person Shooter, Fighting Games, Real-Time strategy games, Racing, and Sports Video Games (2).

As the interest in Esports has increased, it has translated into an increase in casual players, individual professionals, and professional enterprises with teams across multiple formats. Esports tournaments have also begun to become comparable to traditional sports tournaments in terms of viewership, the prize pool, and the celebrity status of the participating players.

The number of viewers tuning into the major Esports tournaments has a multiplier effect on new players to take up Esports as a career. Viewership has seen a consistent and steep increase in the last decade, the global games live-streaming audience will reach 728.8 million by the end of 2021, with a 10% year-on-year increase, and the global Esports audience will grow to 474.0 million in 2021, an 8.7% year-on-year growth (3). Esports audiences watch the events through the devices over the Internet and attend the events in packed stadiums such as the Madison Square Garden. For example, the League of Legends World Championship was held in front of a sold-out crowd in the Madison Square Garden in 2018.

Esports players have an advantage of flexibility. Unlike traditional sports, Esports players participate in tournaments both remotely and in person. The prize pool of online tournaments has also helped esports, as

large Prize pools incentivized players and help them make a career. 'The International (TI)' is the largest and most popular annual Dota 2 tournament conducted by 'Valve,' the developers of Dota 2. 'The International' held in Shanghai in 2019 had a prize pool of \$34.33 Million. This prize pool was the largest of any Esports tournament. The prize pool was significantly larger than that of Traditional Sports. E.g., the NBA in 2019 had a prize pool of \$ 22 Million (4). The prize pool of such Esports tournaments is likely to increase in the future consistently, and the viewer base is forecast to expand. The Global esports revenues will be valued at close to \$1.1 billion by the end of 2021, a 14% year-on-year growth from 2020 (3). While there is considerable scholarly debate regarding the classification of Esports as a sport, (5) there is an inextricable link between Esports and traditional sport management. Esports scholarship can advance by studying its governance, marketing, and management and theorizing about Esport (6). For example, the rapid growth of Esports has been fueled in part by emerging partnerships between traditional sport and Esports teams (e.g., The Philadelphia 76ers and Dignitas), and a growing number of professional sports teams have hired Esports personnel for full-time roles (7).

From an Indian context, the increased interest in Esports has been enabled by the availability of low-cost, high-speed Internet, and low-cost computing devices, including mobile computing devices. India has rapidly expanded its infrastructure in the last decade and has been working to provide access to the Internet and information to its most remote areas. These initiatives have resulted in India having the lowest cost of Internet per GB of data worldwide (8). This expansion of infrastructure has aided the larger population to get access to games and subsequently Esports. The expansion of the user base has been aided further by the ability of these games to be universally available for their audience. A large number of users makes the game more acceptable and relatable to both casual and dedicated players. This reliability is the driving force behind the rapid update and growth of Esports.

Esports streaming on popular channels such as Twitch and YouTube has seen rapid growth. Viewers tend to watch games they could relate to, and many of these games, especially those in the mobile gaming genre, have seen rapid acceptance. For example, PUBG Mobile tournaments like PMCO 2019 Fall South Asia had an average viewership of 63.6K and a peak viewership of 249.8K. Garena Free Fire India Today League had an average viewership of 7.5K and a Peak Viewership of 86.3K (9). Some of the popular streamers and professional Esports player like Naman 'Mortal' Mathur has an audience of more than sixty-eight lakhs subscribers on their YouTube streaming channels. These changes have been enabled by the availability of cheap data for all remote customers.

The demographics of India support the growth of Esports. The average age of a top-ranking Esports player globally is 24 for male players and 27 for female players. India in 2019 had 27.9 years as the median age; because of this, it enjoys the demographic advantage for the growth of online gaming. This factor would be attractive to both streamers and sponsors. In 2021, it is expected that about 61 per cent of India's population will be under the age of 35. The access to the cheap Internet and increasing income levels of Indians with every growing digital infrastructure clubbed with the young population would help Indians adopt online gaming (10).

There is increasing scope for sponsors to take advantage of the growing popularity of Esports. Avenues for sponsors include Esports teams, events, and individual players. To boost their presence and make economic sense, large companies can participate in Esports, especially if they are trying to tap into the segment of young and tech-savvy individuals. However, it would require agility and adaptability (11).

This research paper aims to enumerate the motivation of Indian Esports professionals and Esports fans. In addition, the study connects with the Esports audience to understand what keeps them motivated to watch and play their favourite game. Finally, the study also seeks to understand the barriers that Esports faces from a cultural perspective in the Indian context to map the acceptability of Esports as a career choice in India.

Methodology

Selection of the Subject:

The study enumerates the motivation of Indian Esports enthusiasts. This research involves Esports users between 18 to 29 years of age with at least 1 year of experience in playing any Esport. Of the initial 180 esports users, the research had 149 male (age = 23.97 ± 3.6 years) responses to the survey. The subjects were selected by using a non-probability snowball sampling method.

Data Collection: The data was collected through a self-constructed questionnaire (15 questions) built using Google Forms. Questions were a mix of both open (4 questions) and closed-ended (11 questions). The questionnaire was designed to obtain demographic (2 questions) and esports related information (13 questions).

Statistical Techniques: SPSS version 24 was used to investigate the descriptive statistics and to perform Chi-square goodness of fit to compare the preferences, the extent to which the chosen factors influence the adoption of Esports in India. The level of significance was fixed at .05 level.

Results and Discussion

A survey was rolled out to record the respondents' preferences on motivation, support received, the influence of professionals, preference, and emotional involvement. Their response was used to determine the most significant factors that influence players taking up Esports. The below table shows the significance of factors that influence Esports players.

Table 1. Chi-Square statistics with the effect size

S. No.	Questions	Chi-Square	D f	p-value	Effect Size (Phi)
1	What is your primary motivation to play the Esports game?	62.579	2	0.00	0.648
2	Passing time is my primary goal while playing Esport games	53.114	4	0.00	0.597
3	How emotionally involved are you while playing Esports	41.705	4	0.00	0.529
4	I watch professional players improve my game?	20.564	4	0.00	0.371
5	I simulate strategies before playing games to improve my performance	56.403	4	0.00	0.615
6	It is important to me to be the fastest to learn and become the most skilled Esports player on the team	59.490	4	0.00	0.631
7	I play Esport games (Eg Fifa, NBA, Cricket, etc.) because I like to play the same game outdoors	21.973	4	0.00	0.384
8	I feel I need to play Esport because others play	31.676	3	0.00	0.462
9	Can Esports be considered as a career option in India?	133.389	3	0.00	0.946

The above table shows (table 1) the statistical representation of Chi-square value, Significance value, and Effect size (Phi). The Chi-square coefficient depends on the strength of the relationship and sample size; the

effect size shows the magnitude of an effect. The significance level of 0.00 shows that there is a significant difference between the responses. Significant values (<0.05) were observed for all the questions, with a large effect size (>0.25) found in all cases.

The responses show that there was a significant difference in the motivation of players to play the game. The study also concluded that watching other players was an essential part of the process followed by the Esport players to improve their skills. Players learn and improve strategies through simulation. Most players preferred to play both as individuals and a part of a team, and that there are very few players who play only as a part of a team and not individually. The study concluded that individual achievement's emotional driver is a crucial motivator though their preferences may differ.

The study sought to understand the motivation of Esports players and their inclination towards Esports as a career as a professional athlete. The necessary mechanical and mental aptitude required to become an Esports player, the economics, and the opportunities available, how Esports could be encouraged at the grassroots level, and the barriers Esports players face.

Esports' popularity is growing in India. The low-cost internet service coupled with the increased availability of devices is aiding the Indian youth to take up Esports as a profession and recreation. A study conducted by KPMG discusses the context of the Indian Esports industry in India. The study details the prospects of Esports in India and discusses the factors that drive the growth, adoption, and challenges the Esports industry faces. It highlights that the growth of Esports is because of improvement in access to technology and devices, growing investment with the increasing interest of national Esports organizations. However, it also uncovers the challenges Esports faces in India, like the penetration of leagues and tournaments limited to the national level. In addition, it was challenging to enter the local level, getting monetization and how the market and brands still show the reluctance of advertisers (10).

The Esports industry has very few barriers to entry. For most Esports, the only equipment required will be the computing device(hardware), the installed version of the game (Software), and an internet connection. It has also allowed for the Esports industry to be unorganized and undocumented. There are stories of youth who grew in small towns making an impact on a national and global stage, like Tirth Mehta, who a bronze medal at the Esports demonstration event in the 2018 Asian Games in Hearthstone, a popular Esports game. These success stories pave the way for people to try Esports and engage with players and brands as fans and enthusiasts. The rising popularity has also helped create a space for advertisers, including prominent brands and companies, to collaborate with players, fans, and sports organizations (12). This lower barrier to entry helped to create an industry with a large user base. However, the low barrier to entry has also created its challenges.

There are personal and social factors that motivate someone to take up Esports as a career. To identify players' motivation, Lee et al. (13) compared Esports with traditional sports on parameters such as participation, why would anyone attend any event, buy merchandise, and what Esports the participants consumed on the Internet. They found three motivating factors that help people take up esports: competition, peer pressure, and skill-building for actual playing. To attract more players, they suggested that the game designers and producers adapt the concept of team and player rivalries. As this study was conducted for only one demographic, its results cannot be generalized to other regions, but it gives an idea about the motivation (13). Bányai et al. (14) investigate the process of becoming an Esports player and the mental skill and motivation required to be successful. The researcher uses the mental state of gamblers as a benchmark to compare the mental state of the Esports player.

In our research paper, the emphasis was to understand the drivers behind players' motivation and narrow down on the statistically significant ones. This study found that recreation is a significant motivator for people, with 60.4% of the respondents seeking to take up the game for recreation. However, the number of people taking up the game for competitive and professional reasons is 28.2% and 2.7%, respectively. The Esports

arena serves as a break from reality where they can dawn a role that they enjoy and strive towards achieving the objectives. The games also provide emotional gratification as they compete with other players and compare themselves, and feel good about winning or competing. These roles that players dawn while playing Esports allow them to experience things that they otherwise could not in day-to-day life. With this factor, we see that many esports players see that passing time is their primary goal.

One of the drivers for participation from youth was the availability of tournaments and communications at a local or college level. Youth often participate in local tournaments, and the success in these tournaments allows them to take up Esports professionally. Though the respondents look at Esports as a recreation activity, they tend to watch the online content of streamers to improve their skills.

The preference of these players to take up Esports professionally is also driven by their preference to take up the game individually or as a part of a team. The study found that 50% of the respondents played both individually and in teams and that only 34% of them played alone.

Fans and audiences are integral parts of sports, and their engagement is equally beneficial for both parties; this is also true for Esports. Hilvert-Bruce et al. (15) discussed why audiences watch Esports through a study on Twitch Users, a streaming platform for gamers. The authors divide the audience motivation into five categories viz: tension release, social, personal, cognitive, and effective. Their research found a positive correlation between the number of hours the audience watches the streams play and the various streamers they watch, with the strategies they learn from watching and the information they gain about the games. Although, the study found that Social integration was the primary motivator. Though the study captures the motivation levels of the audience, the paper falls short on explaining the segmentation based on the demographics and geography of the audience.

Even though the respondents look at Esports as a recreation activity, they tend to watch online content related to Esports to improve and get better. In addition, players find it essential to keep themselves updated with the latest strategies and changes in the games. One of the ways they achieve the two is by following their favourite players on various streaming sites and platforms. Due to the increased availability of professional streamers and professional tournaments over easily accessible streaming platforms, players watch the professionals play, which helps them improve their own game. From the research, 45.7% of respondents agree that they watch streams to learn and improve their game. A couple of platforms that are the famous ones in India are youtube and twitch. These platforms also provide streamers to interact with the community and other players.

Esports also help individuals improve their mechanical skills and cognitive ability. Mechanical skills and cognitive ability are important factors to enable success while playing Esports, and players who play Esports can improve their mechanical skills and transfer these skills to real-world applications. Esports help build superior mechanical skills of using the keyboard and mouse when they perform numerous challenging scenarios. These games often demand good hand and eye coordination, react to changing scenarios, and multitasking skills (16). The study also found that motivation to watch Esports was two-fold. First, this allowed them to improve their skill sets and perform better when playing with their friends or colleagues. Secondly, it also provided similar gratification as watching traditional sports. The audience feels connected with the game as their favourite players play and compete. A majority of the participants said that they like to devise and simulate strategies before the games they play that might help in overall performance improvement.

Professional Esports athletes trained for 5.28 hours per day or 37 hours a week (17). These athletes are the ones who compete in tournaments and take up Esports as a career. When the respondents were asked how many hours they played during a week, 62% responded that they played less than 5 hours, and 18% responded with more than 10 hours a week. On the other hand, a majority of the non-professional respondents played games for fewer than 5 hours. This factor allows for a clear demarcation between competitive and recreational players.

Though the respondents play Esports for recreation, the data also suggest that they like to be competitive and prefer games with clear and measurable objectives. They compare themselves against others. The comparisons drive them to improve and to consume more content. Furthermore, it was found that it is crucial for players to be the fastest learner and the most skilled. Therefore, Esports players on the team even when they played recreationally, as 40.3% of respondents agree that it was important to be the fastest and most skilled player.

There are many skills that a player learns and training in Esports. Esports players, similar to traditional sports, employ various competencies as suggested by the model of Nagorsky et al. (18) The model suggests that skills such as sensorimotor control like spatial perception and reaction and anticipation, cognition like problem-solving and strategic thinking, emotional skills like stress control and causal attribution, etc. are essential. When someone plays these games for an extended period, they develop or fine-tune these skills to better perform. The research also tried to understand how emotionally involved a player feels when playing games, with 1 being the lowest level of involvement and five being the highest. The study found that, among the people who responded, 49% agree they have high emotional involvement, and 34% had a moderate level of involvement. Behnke et al. (19) found a link between emotions and performance and concluded that in esports the performance is enhanced by pleasant emotion.

Another factor that the survey studied was to understand the correlation between the preference of Esports games to the games that they played outdoor. 49% of people agreed, and 29.6% of people disagreed. It was significant that many people tend to like such games and take those games up. At times these games become educational and help the players understand the game better, from various aspects of the games to rules, etc. Another statistically significant factor is that participants played the game voluntarily and were not under peer pressure while playing Esports games. As 71% of the research participants disagreed and said they played these games, they wanted to and not because of others or their influence.

The study concluded that both competing at a professional level and becoming a streamer are considered a career option among competitive and professional players. The study also enumerates that there is a higher acceptance of Esports as a career option. Less than 15% of the respondents do not think that Esports is not a viable career choice. However, there are many roadblocks for this industry to pick off in India as a mainstream industry. When asked about what was the hindrance that stops individuals from pursuing a career in Esports in India. The participant pointed out that the two prime issues were lack of family support and monetary stability. These factors highlight one of the intrinsic cultural barriers Indian players face. Traditionally, Indians have preferred to take up stable jobs, and the volatility in the income earned through sports acts as a demotivator. However, consistent sponsorships for players, better recognition at a university level, higher rewards for streamers, higher rewards for players in smaller tournaments, and more organization among sports organizations that gives a safety net for players can help overcome this volatility.

Further to improve the situation of the Esports industry, the EY report (12) suggests the government has to make changes to the untapped potential that India has. The reports suggest regulatory changes and inclusion of grassroots. As the Esports industry in India is highly unstructured, there has to be a support system for these athletes. A majority of them said that the industry has unstable monetary stability, mechanisms have to be made so that these athletes can draw monthly salaries when they play Esports.

Across the globe, these games are played simultaneously. There are various ways to interact with the team or your rivals. More often than not, while playing these games, there is a lot of negativity and toxic behaviour, and for this, there has to be an algorithm built to detect and classify a behaviour as toxic. Currently, any toxic behaviour reported in the game requires human intervention. Blackburn et al. (20) consider the specific case of the crowdsourced tribunal to test the algorithm's efficacy. Though this approach would help the game make censor content and be a scalable mechanism to check improper behaviour, the model limits the data set used to the North American servers only. Additionally, the specific linguistic nuances of different regions like South

East Asia, China, etc., that do not usually speak English would limit the algorithm and would be a detriment to its scalability. Also, the sponsors involved with Esports have to be regulated, as the target audience of this industry is youth, the problems associated with sponsors of products with sin goods such as Alcohol and Tobacco on an impressionable Esports audience (21). These trends highlight the increased interest from audiences and individuals looking to take up Esports professionally. This increase in interest would also help get large organizations looking to connect with the young and tech-savvy audience segment (22).

Though the market is prime for expansion, one of the factors that must be considered above all else would be the cognitive load on players. Therefore, it is essential to understand the mental aptitude and temperament required to succeed in Esports. Just like traditional sports, the athlete's mental state could be the differentiator between success and failure. Though coaches of high-performance athletes swear by the importance of mental strength and resolve, it is often the fact that this is the factor that is given the less importance at a grass-root level. Failure to address these softer aspects at the early stage of the career would lead to inconsistency and underperformance at a larger stage in their career.

A factor that is often overlooked is the support that Esports players receive from their families and friends. This support is an essential motivator in the cultural context. The uptake of Esports as a profession is essentially a new phenomenon and challenges the prevailing culture. This lack of support is particularly true in India, where even pursuing a career related to traditional sports is not readily accepted. The support from family, peers, and acceptance from society are prominent factors affecting a player's motivation. The development of structures and mechanisms that support players and is also influenced by cultural factors. The absence of structures and mechanisms would make an individual's journey more challenging and could lead to attrition of talent, leading to a vicious cycle.

Conclusion

This study focuses on how Esports is looked at from an Indian standpoint. Though this industry is in a nascent stage, it is quickly grabbing the attention of the youth. Just like any traditional sport, to excel in esports requires a significant amount of practice and dedication. The research finds that people view esports as a recreational activity that helps them relieve tension and stress. Even though people look at esports as a recreational activity, they tend to try to learn the game better to develop at these games and stimulate strategies before they play. Through this research, we also understand that people have a high emotional involvement when they play games. The significant barriers that Indians feel are understood from this research are family support and the lack of monetary stability.

Further, people who play these games also like to watch many professional players when they stream or at tournaments and follow them. This factor helps them visualize the game better, improve and learn various new things despite frequent updates. The people who play these games have a zeal for becoming the best and the most skilled player in a team. People also like to play esports games of the traditional sports they play. The paper also explored that Indians think that esports can be taken up as a career option, but there are many barriers like they lack family support and monetary stability. Some people like to become professional players to compete at various tournaments or become a stream to showcase their skill on various social media or gaming platforms to entertain the audience. As the industry grows, we would see various professions coming up like Coaching, Esports Journalism, Game designing, team managers, tournament managers, and many more.

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