Digital gaming market and rising health crisis | Geeta Sinha

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The technological advancements in the 20th and 21st centuries, particularly the revolution in the information technology (IT) sector, have had a negative influence on health, food consumption, nutrition intake and fitness as a result of incorrect usage. Because of this, there is a rising trend in people who lead deskbound lifestyles, have bad eating habits, postural deviations, muscle disorders and injuries, stress, and social marginalisation, to name a few. It is well established by researchers and health specialists that using electronic devices, such as television, computers, mobile phones and video games, lead to physical inactive lifestyles with less physical activity, lower metabolic rates, more consumption of low-nutrient meals and restricted in person socialisation skills.

The consequences of the introduction of technological advancements including digital platforms and online gaming into people's daily routine are crammed with several negative health concerns. For instance, the global digital gaming market alone is valued at USD 166 billion in the year 2020. It is estimated that the online gaming market is expected to grow at a CAGR of 9% in the forecast period of 2023-2028 to attain a value of USD 278 billion by 2026. Globally, North America contributes significantly to the market growth for digital games while Europe stands second. Additionally, it is anticipated that the economic growth of developing nations like China and India would further fuel the global expansion of digital games. The market is stimulated by a number of factors, including an increase of gamers, pandemic (stay at home), rising disposable incomes, and technical advancements. Another important aspect that needs attention is the number of children playing video games which is estimated to be 91%.

One of the most important concerns and problems arising out of this gaming industry is the rapidly growing video game addiction. Approximately 0.3% to 1% of the general population face this problem of addiction. For instance, more than 600,000 youngsters suffer from video game addiction which prompted South Korea to declare it as a public health crisis. According to Vladimir Poznyak, an expert on substance abuse and addictive behaviour at the World Health Organization (WHO), claims that a person's geographic location is not a reliable indicator of their risk of being addicted to video games. According to statistics, video game addiction is expected to affect the majority of people worldwide.

The health concerns inflicted by the digital gaming market has been envisioned as a critical global health crisis. Sadly, the digital gaming market has triggered and significantly contributed to several non-communicable diseases that are concomitant to physical inactivity owing to the gaming habits. According to the World Health Organisation, almost 500 million people will develop heart disease, obesity, diabetes and other non-

communicable diseases attributable to physical inactivity between 2020 and 2030. It has further informed that the cost of inaction and staying on the couch will be severe and is estimated to account for approximately USD 27 billion every year in extra healthcare costs.

The recent Global status report on physical activity 2022 measures the extent to which the governments are implementing recommendations to increase physical activities across all ages and abilities. The data from 194 countries highlights the slow progress made by countries and recommends countries to accelerate the development and implementation policies to increase heart rates and prevent associated diseases to reduce the burden on already overwhelmed health services due to pandemic. The report further highlights some of the key challenges that require immediate attention and action. The statistical information exposes the extent of the challenges facing the countries globally including less than 50 percent of countries having National Physical Activity Policy (NPAP) of which lees that 40 percent are operational; only 30 percent countries have national physical activity guidelines for all ages; approximately 40 percent of countries have road design standards that make walking and cycling safe for people (referring to transport policy terms); less that 30 percent countries monitoring physical activities in children under 5 and so on. For instance, India has "Fit India Movement" to promote people to remain healthy and agile by including physical activity and sports in our daily lives. 'Fit India' includes fitness protocols and guidelines for 18+ to 65 years. The rising incidence of health crisis including physical inactiveness due to digital gaming habit calls for immediate attention and action globally.

Globally, the countries need to create a more enabling environment for all age groups through policies, social networks and electronic media to lead more active and healthier lifestyle. Unfortunately, the policies remain on paper with limited communication on different platforms as compared to advertisement for online games that remain in profusion. The companies in gaming industry/ market invest and spend heavily to promote their online games thus creating greater base of players or customers, also referred as customer acquisition. Several brands in the gaming industry are spending more than 80 percent of their marketing budget on advertising to create buzz and attract more customers on board their platforms. The same social networks, gaming platforms and electronic media is used for advertisements and promotion of online games. Moreover, the digital gaming market very much conforms and aligns with the idea of capitalism and neoliberal policies. This in the process will contribute to shaping and expanding the gaming culture which in turn will give rise to crisis more specifically health crisis. Both capitalism and crisis go hand in hand.

The digital gaming industry also corresponds with the theory of asymmetric information. The industry hires most popular celebrities from film industries and cricket world to propagate and boost the digital gaming market while the risks associated with it are left with the individuals to explore, understand, and manage. The entertainment part of the online games is explicitly stated in advertisements while the associated risks are never stated or communicated overtly, thus shifting the burden of risks and consequences on

customers/ players. This to me is unethical and irresponsible business that treats people as customers for profits and more profits only. In this context, the gaming business is a boon for capitalists while the associated public health crisis is analogous to curse. In an environment where businesses give rise to crisis that are life threatening calls for greater role of regulation, more pro-people policies and intervention strategies that are capable of transforming attitudes, perspectives and practices resulting in healthier and happier societies.

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