

Professional paper

DIGITAL HABITS OF GENERATION Z – STUDENTS OF SPORTS¹

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Abstract: The new virtual reality of today's society and its interaction with members of the younger population is an increasingly common subject of research. The question is whether and to what extent it is possible to stop the domination of the digital. Is sport an activity that can compete with the new virtual reality and the world of video games? The paper presents online habits and inclinations towards video games of the first-year students of the Belgrade College of Sports and Health, not only qualitatively – in order to examine the time spent on video games and compare it with the time spent on sports and recreation, but also qualitatively, in terms of content – topics that occupy this particular segment of population, talented in sports and sports-oriented, but at the same time digitally-oriented.

The paper has demonstrated, on a selected sample of sport-oriented members of Generation Z, some deviations from the digital characteristics of the generation they belong to demographically, the generation in which the use and application of technology is dominant in obtaining any practical information, as well as in communication and entertainment. The sample consisting of students of sports academic courses has demonstrated that a very high percentage of these students practice sports on a regular basis defying the current sedentary lifestyle. Many of them do not belong to the present-day youth subculture – ‘the gamers’ community’, and even those who do belong to the pop culture of computer games prefer sports computer games as their choice of virtual content.

Keywords: *Generation Z, sports, video games*

INTRODUCTION

Sport has built a reputation as a significant factor in society since its inception and is considered a social and cultural phenomenon whose effects extend even beyond the boundaries of sports arenas, stadiums and sports halls (Bratić, 2016). Children usually take part in sports activities to have fun, to try a new activity, to be in the company of their friends, but also because of the sense of satisfaction that sports success creates for them (Allender et al., 2006). During adolescence, which is a kind of transition between childhood and adulthood, education through sports can be crucial for the formation of a healthy adult. The period of adolescence is characterized by very intense biological, social, emotional and psychological development, so some psychologists call this period a period of "storm and stress" (Arnett, 1999). The presence of video games is evident in the culture of young people today. This phenomenon affects all young people, regardless of whether they are members of the gaming community or not, because the narratives and topics of video games have intertwined with pop culture in general, and the world of the Internet is inconceivable

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separately from the virtual world of games (Mazić, 2019). One of the main characteristics of young people today, born in 1995 and after, the so-called members of Generation Z, is that they are constantly connected, that they are permanently online and that they are present in both the virtual and real world. Such a way of life and the mentioned processes take place so fast that science does not manage to provide an answer as to how it all affects the brains of young people, their body, their emotions. It is clear that video games dictate a sedentary lifestyle. The fact is that the content of video games is usually violent, aggressive. Young people equally consume action games and their subgenre of "action games and shooters", then role-playing games, strategy games, puzzles, races, sports games, board games, and many others. The subject of research in this paper are members of Generation Z, born before 2012, before the alpha generation, i.e. current freshmen, born mostly in 2002 and 2003. This is a generation that values respect, responsibility, restraint, and these are young people with plans, structures and self-control. They value authenticity, save the money they receive for holidays and birthdays, embrace traditional values, and value the family that stays together (Labi, 2008, as cited in Williams et al., 2010). The most important characteristic of this generation is the use and application of technology for the use of all life information, communication and entertainment. Freshmen born in early 2000 live in a time of modernization and strong innovation of mobile digital devices that are developing in parallel with the aging of this generation. One of the key features is the need for peer acceptance, and one of the important "tools" used in this process are video games, in addition to music, fashion and cosmetics. Matic (2018) considers Generation Z an ambitious generation of distinctive individuals, which is becoming increasingly important in the research and thinking of the entire communication industry. The same author states that this generation lives the digital world in exactly the same way as the real one, knows no boundaries between the local and the global, and for them athletes, musicians, YouTubers, influencers and everyone else are equally important. Recognizable characteristics of this generation are that they are more tolerant toward others than any other generation, take less risk, they are less religious, more independent and do not care about institutions such as the Church or the Government, and they spend more time on Instagram than on Facebook and other social networks. It is a generation that prefers texting rather than "eye to eye" communication, reads books, newspapers and magazines less, grew up more protected than any other generation and often feels depressed and lonely (Daljevac, 2020). There are many characteristics of this generation, but certainly the ubiquity on the Internet and belonging to the "video game" community is one of the dominant ones. The American Psychological Association has developed criteria for characterizing internet gaming disorders. Of course, it does not mean that all gamers are "addicts" or that all members of Generation Z are gamers, as the results of research in this paper will show. It is important to point out through these criteria what should not be the main cause of video game consumption. Escape from negative moods - a game for the sake of getting rid of unpleasant feelings such as guilt, anxiety and depression. Playing video games despite the negative consequences - not getting enough sleep, being late for college, neglecting obligations. The need to play longer and longer, more and more exciting with more and more powerful equipment. Feelings of anxiety and sadness when there are no opportunities to play games. The existence of preoccupation, thinking about games and when not to play, planning when to play next time. Loss of interest and reduced participation in other recreational activities because of video games (Petry et al., 2014). Nurturing a healthy lifestyle today in the modern world of communications and modern technologies certainly includes regular physical activity. Sport is the most widespread form of modern physical culture. It is manifested in various forms of movement games and physical exercises, which are marked by great emotional satisfaction, as well as competitions between individuals or teams (Đurđević, 2010). We were interested in whether and how members of Generation Z, especially students in the field of sports, resist the pop culture of video games, the world of the Internet, and whether there are coincidences between the real world and the world of games. Is age and generation dominant in the choice of leisure activities or is the commitment to sports and recreation as the dominant lifestyle what differentiates students of sports, future sports coaches and managers, from other members of their generation.

METHOD

The subject of the research was the examination of preferences towards the contents of video games among students of sports in order to determine how much their habits in digital activities affect their sports activities. The starting point was the assumption that first-year sports students are members of Generation Z, one of the fundamental characteristics of which is that they are present on the Internet around the clock and permanently use its various contents and possibilities and that they are members of the digital gaming community. The first hypothesis was set, which was supposed to confirm that students of sports regularly play

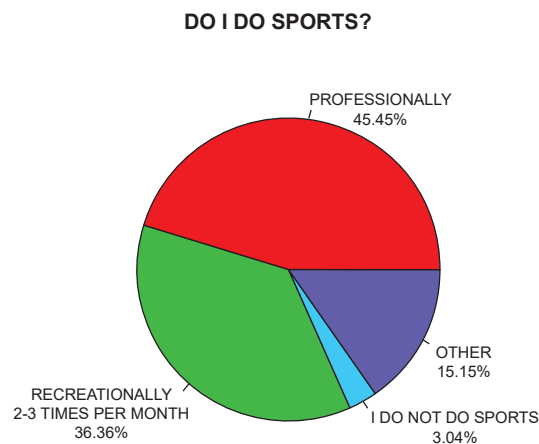
sports, professionally or recreationally. The second hypothesis was to examine whether first-year students from sports study programs play video games and to what extent they do so quantitatively. The third hypothesis was to examine qualitatively which video games students from sports study programs choose and to confirm or refute the assumption that they prefer to choose video games with sports content. In this scientific research, applied research, methods of theoretical analysis, descriptive method and comparative analysis were used. The analysis of different characteristics of Generation Z in today's time of parallel virtual and real reality and their life habits was performed. Previous research, scientific papers, professional papers, studies and textbooks directly related to the research problem were consulted. The descriptive method was used throughout the survey process and was used to gather students' views. A questionnaire especially constructed for research purposes was used as an instrument. Three special semi-closed type questionnaires were formed. The offered answers were given in each of them, but the possibility was left for the respondent to write their own answer. The questionnaires were filled out by 69 students of the College of Sports and Health in Belgrade, who enrolled in study programs for sports coaches and sports managers.

The surveys used for the research are available here: <https://www.tvojestav.com/input/9Gtqwift5uKFP791wSSW>. The Internet service of the Bureau for Social Research was used for statistical data processing. Questionnaires were delivered to students by e-mail at the beginning of January 2022, and their answers were recorded in the online database BIRODI - service Tvoj stav, Research Center.

RESEARCH RESULTS

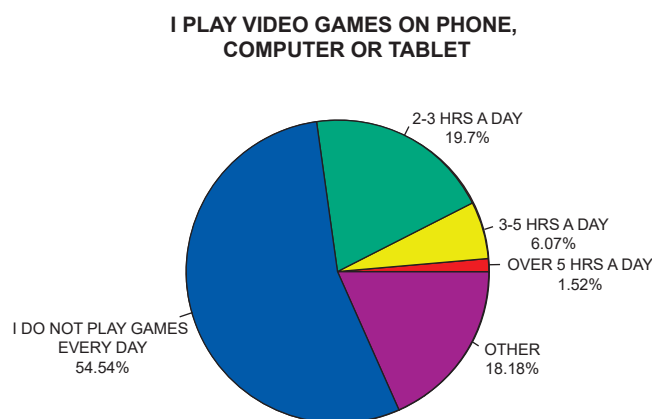
Research in the field of sports science indicates that not only is engagement in sports important, but also the intensity and scope of that engagement (Simpkins, 2005). On one hand, those who spend more time in sports and invest more effort in sports activities achieve greater benefits not only in sports but also in school, work and life in general, while on the other hand active professional athletes often cannot keep up with academic education. After finishing high school, some athletes decide to continue their education and acquire academic knowledge in the field of sports and continue with the sports lifestyle adopted in childhood. We were interested in the extent to which and in what way the students of sports are involved in sports. Graph 1 shows that 82% of students in these fields professionally or recreationally do sports two to three times a week, and to this percentage we can add 15% of those students who circled the answer "something else" because there are students who do recreational sports more than two to three times a week, i.e. daily or four to five times a week and there are also students who engage in sports through coaching. So 97% of students - future coaches and sports managers regularly play sports, regardless of the dominant characteristic of Generation Z, also known as zoomers, as the demographic group with the most intensive use of the Internet in the world, who have surpassed millennials and all previous generations regionally in the number of hours spent daily on social networking platforms and other digital content.

Graph 1. *Frequency of students' engagement in sports activities*



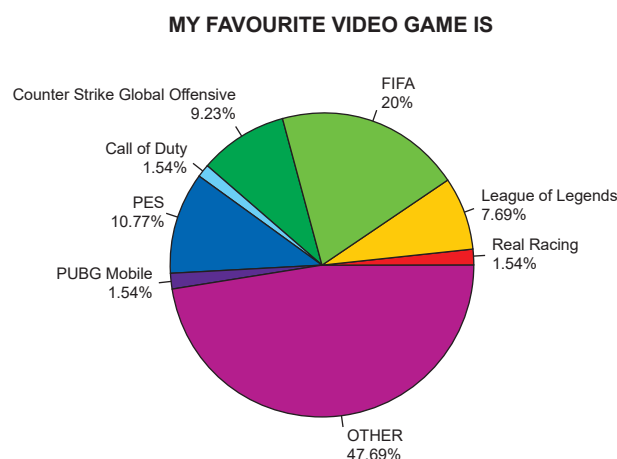
The high percentage of regular sports engagement among students of sports indicated in advance that this is a part of the population of Generation Z whose digital habits are somewhat different. Thus, in testing the second hypothesis (Graph 2), we received the answer that 55% of students do not play video games every day and 18% of those who circled the answer "something else" stated that they mostly never play video games or play them less than one hour. However, 26% of them play games every day for two to five hours a day, and 2% of them play video games for more than five hours a day. A study conducted in 2019 in Serbia for the needs of UNICEF, on the use of the Internet and digital technologies by children and young people showed that high school students spend four to five hours a day on their digital devices (phone, tablet, console, computer, etc.), and on weekends that number exceeds seven hours a day (Kuzmanović et al., 2019). Therefore, it is encouraging that in the selected target group of sports students, in the first year, we have 73% of those who do not play games every day or do not play them at all.

Graph 2. Amount of time students spend playing video games



The gaming community is becoming more numerous, the FIFA series is available in 18 languages and in 60 countries and it has been sold in more than 320 million copies (Konatarević, 2021), and every year, even in the current 2022, a new edition, FIFA 22, is published, which speaks in favour of it being the most popular as well as the best-selling video simulation of football. The increase in the number of gamers is continuous, although the World Health Organization published its new, 11th version of the International Classification of Diseases in 2018, which includes addiction to playing video games in its mental illness and addiction section (Zorić, 2021). Such data further provokes thinking about what the future of new generations will look like. The biggest fear of gamers' parents is that they might become addicted to video games, suffer from increased aggression or violent behaviour and numerous negative physical health consequences such as vision problems, neck pain, curvature of the entire musculature due to several hours of improper body position, formation of clots in the legs due to excessive sitting and many others (Vorobjev, 2020). All of the aforementioned symptoms are the result of a continuous gaming life and behaviour, when someone has already become addicted to a particular game like the aforementioned "Fortnight" which is classified as a survival game, where each game begins with players jumping off a "flying bus" and aiming to find weapons as soon as possible and eliminate other players. According to training sites, professional gamers have certainly invested more than 500 hours of play to reach the master level (Kako Reši Lako, 2022). What interested us in the third hypothesis of the paper is to note not only the consequences, i.e. the current choices and habits of young people in the world of video games, but also to find out whether their previous choices in life habits and styles, especially sports, affect their choice of online content. Does the commitment to sports in real life mean that they will choose the same content in the virtual world? They were offered seven popular video games with different content (Graph 3) to choose their favourite, with the possibility to add their own favourite. The largest number of sports students, 20% of them, said that their favourite video game is "FIFA" (a football video game).

Graph 3. *Video games that students play most frequently*



In second place of favourite video games with 10.77%, there is also a video game with sports content "PES", which is a series of football video games. In third place is "Counter Strike" (Counter Strike) shooting video game, which was chosen by 9% of students as their favourite game. In the sea of video game offers, it is not surprising that a high percentage of those, 47.69%, mentioned something else as their favourite video game. The answers include 30 different titles such as: "Dota 2", "Halo 2", "Call of Duty", "Warzone", "Rocket League", "GTA San Andreas", "Sudoku", "Assassin's Creed Valhalla", "International Basketball Manager 2022", "Forza Horizon", "Mortal Combat 11", "Naruto Shippuden Ultimate Ninja Storm 4", "Rocket League", "GTA", "NBA 2K22", "Need For Speed", "SlaGalica", "F1 2021", "World of Warcraft", "NBA", "Outlast" and others. What is important to note is that this percentage also contains a high percentage of sports content games that relate to basketball or to a particular series of football games, car races, or action games. Apart from "LOL" (League of Legends), video games, battle arenas, action strategy video games, which were also chosen by students as a favourite with 7.67%, other offered games do not exceed 1.54%.

DISCUSSION

The selected sample of first-year sports coach and sports management students showed that 97% of students - future sports coaches and managers regularly engage in sports, while 73% of them do not play games every day or do not play them at all. Among the favourite video games in the highest percentage, more than 31% are sports content games, football and basketball games, while other favourite, strategic, shooting and other games range in percentages from 1.5% to 9%. Very few studies address exclusively the sports habits of Generation Z. According to the 2019 survey of CeSID in Serbia, 38% of young people did not engage in sports activities, while 62% of respondents engage in sports either professionally or recreationally. Among those who do sports, 35% of them do only occasionally, 23% regularly but recreationally, and 4% also do sports professionally. The sample included 1,500 young people aged 15 to 30. Unfortunately, the same research shows that sports and recreation decrease in this population with older age. However, the mentioned results show that the majority of the youth population is involved in sports, even though they are members of the Generation Z, which is characterized as digital. Among those who do sports, 35% of them do it only occasionally, 23% regularly but recreationally, and 4% also do sports professionally. The sample included 1,500 young people aged 15 to 30. Unfortunately, the same research shows that sports and recreation decrease in this population comes with older age. However, the mentioned results indicate that the majority of the youth population is involved in sports, even though they are members of Generation Z, which is characterized as digital.

It is indisputable that sports students are also members of Generation Z and that digital activities are largely present in their lives. They transferred part of their habits and preferences from real life to virtual reality, which confirms their choice of sports content in video games. According to Mazić, a football player who misses a crucial penalty is frustrated in a similar way as a player when he "dies", i.e. loses a life in a

crucial place in the game. Most single player games allow for the possibility of correcting mistakes, however multiplayer games work on the same principle as team sports, as does the anger and nervousness that results from playing in a team sports game. It is possible that the digital generation is looking for the same feeling from sports fields in a virtual environment and gaming - the global entertainment industry is very successful in meeting such needs of young people. What is encouraging are the results of research on a sample of sports students from the College of Sports and Health, that such a digital offer did not reduce the percentage of regular engagement in sports in the selected category of students and did not increase the percentage of those who are regular consumers of video games.

This once again confirms sport as a real lifestyle and in the future even more virtual times to come, the commitment to sport in the broadest sense of the word is transferred to similar choices in the digital world.

CONCLUSION

Regular moderate physical activity is a way to preserve and improve health, relieve stress, improve the growth and development of young people, increase self-confidence, self-esteem, a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction, which all together affect the quality of life. Even in the periods of the COVID-19 pandemic, where the consumption of digital content increased globally, sports habits in the population that has such preferences and developed awareness of the importance of physical activity have not diminished (Markov Čikić, Ivanovski, 2021). Research shows that playing sports can be very useful and encourage responsible social behaviour, better school success, adoption of moral values and healthy lifestyle habits. For children and youth, sport is a chance to learn: it is a space where you practice for your life (Bačanac et al., 2009). If "practice for life" is practiced in early childhood, on sports fields, and the same preference is encouraged in youth, it becomes an accepted healthy lifestyle. What is characteristic of the local generation born in the last two decades, Generation Z or the so-called zoomers is certainly that they are the demographic group with the most intensive use of social networks, the Internet and all digital content in the world across the planet, and what remains unchanged is that games and sports are anthropological constants of their childhood and youth.

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