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PERSPECTIVE

Untapped opportunity

By Wa'qaar A Mirza 10-11-2020

The Muslim market is an investor's dream, but many children's broadcasters are ignoring the demographic.

With over 1.8 billion Muslims around the world, it's a market certainly worth tapping into. Global spending by Muslims on food and beverages is growing and by 2023 the sector is expected to be worth US\$1.9tn. Major UK fashion retailers have already invested in this growing demographic, with the likes of H&M, Asos and Nike creating their own 'modest' clothing lines. And why wouldn't they, with Muslim spending on clothing predicted to reach US\$361bn by 2023?

Yet even with all these staggering spending figures across the globe, the Muslim market is one of many underrepresented diverse markets seeing very little investment from global broadcasters. Children's networks are missing a trick, with Muslims making up around a quarter of the global population and being the fastest-growing religious group in the world.

Nickelodeon International recently announced a new venture with Nickelodeon India to create the animated series *The Twisted Timeline of Sammy & Raj*, a great investment opportunity harnessed by tapping into an underrepresented Indian market in children's content.

As well as reaping the financial rewards destined to come from a large audience hungry for such content, Nickelodeon is showcasing diverse characters with cultural differences, marking a fantastic leap forward in representing true diversity and inclusion.



The Twisted Timeline of Sammy & Raj features two BAME lead characters

Nickelodeon International's investment into this market also has the potential to have a ripple effect, hopefully inspiring other big broadcasters to do the same. Perhaps next, broadcasters will look to the English-speaking Muslim market, who are a growing population and eager for new and interesting content that represents them on a global level.

The Twisted Timeline of Sammy & Raj features two BAME lead characters, cousins who go on adventures through time using a mysterious time-travelling app. Seeing two BAME main characters at the forefront of a children's animation shouldn't be groundbreaking or newsworthy. But when a report from children's streaming service Hopster shows that BAME main characters appear in only six out of the 50 shows studied, and that BAME characters are often 'pushed' into the background of children's programmes, this truly is a massive leap forward for the representation of cultural diversity.

The characters for *The Twisted Timeline of Sammy & Raj* are to be created by animators in India, where there is fantastic talent within the animation sector and a huge audience that, until now, are not being catered for on a global scale.

According to a recent EY Indian media industry report, the animation and VFX sector in India is set to grow 18% annually to reach an industry value of US\$463m by 2022. Nickelodeon has clearly seen this opportunity to provide for these viewers and invest in the growing Indian market. Let's not forget, this decision is not driven solely by the need for diversity but also for commercial value and investment; diverse characters are quite the silver lining of this investment.



Zayn & Zayna's Little Farm centres on a Muslim family

I believe other major broadcasters could be missing out on huge revenues by not investing in the English-speaking Muslim market, and as demonstrated by Nickelodeon, they're forgoing an opportunity to feature culturally rich content at the same time. Surely this can only be a win-win investment opportunity on the cusp of discovery?

This decision from Nickelodeon International is positive progression, where we are seeing a broadcaster smartly investing outside of their usual demographics. It's a far cry from when I met with two major US children's companies two years ago to pitch *Zayn & Zayna's Little Farm*, an animation I created featuring a Muslim Family on fun adventures across their British family farm and multicultural neighbourhood.

The show aims to teach preschool age children about diversity, inclusion and sustainability through fun, relatable characters. At the time, my pitch was politely declined by the broadcasters as they didn't see themselves investing in this type of content, calling it, "too cultural and too religious." It's great to see Nickelodeon adapting to modern times and taking interest in markets which present fantastic business opportunities but also the chance to feature much-needed culturally diverse content too.

Finding a place for culturally rich content in the broadcasting schedule is a step in the right direction for diversity, as well as a lucrative business decision. For many years, broadcasters have been promising to make our screens more diverse. Perhaps this lip service could turn into a reality when the realisation hits that there is a multi-million-dollar market open to investment. Could this be the driving force to get more diverse programming on our screens? I hope so.

As *The Twisted Timeline of Sami & Raj* hits international screens next year, I have no doubt in it being popular, and I hope it opens the doors to other broadcasters spotting this overlooked investment opportunity.

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Wa'qaar A Mirza has been in the business and marketing sector for over 40 years, having worked in the corporate sector with companies such as PwC and BT, where he held several senior marketing positions. He then moved to HSBC group financial services in new product development.

He has developed various business of his own and has consulted across the world on business development. He is also a published writer, working on his second novel, a documentary filmmaker and directs the kids' animated series *Zayn & Zayna's Little Farm*.

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