Effectiveness of Social Media for fan engagement in Indian Football

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Abstract

Background: Fans are the most integral part of any club, they are the people who decide the success of the club. Now fan engagement is not just limited to the stadiums, it happens a lot more through social media.

Methods: The study was conducted through a series of questions regarding the use of social media for fan engagement in Indian Football. The questionnaire was made by asking basic questions that had a direct impact on fan engagement through social media. A total of 18 questions were asked through the research questionnaire and 100 respondents participated.

Conclusion: The research used an online questionnaire method to inculcate various responses and answers to understand the effectiveness of fan engagement happening in Indian Football via social media. Research showed that Indian Football is doing a commendably good job in terms of fan engagement through social media.

Keywords: Fan Engagement, Social Media, Commercialization, Growth

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I. Introduction:

Fans are the most integral part of any club, they are the people who decide the success of the club in terms of commercialization as well as the passion they possess [¹]. Earlier times fan engagement means engaging fans in stadium but now fan engagement has a wider scope. Now fan engagement is not just limited to the stadiums, it happens a lot more through social media. Social media is the biggest breakthrough in this century. Social media has helped almost every sporting team to interact more with fans. The biggest advantage is that social media is accessible to everyone. The growth of the club is according to how they build long term loyalty and also develop ways to build the fan base. Also, the club plays a crucial role in making fan die-hard fans of the club, that is he supports club during tough times also. Investing for fan engagement activities at the early stage of the club can yield great results in the future. So fan engagement is something that is future-oriented. Also to improve this the clubs have started to Fan engagement managers to help in improving social media platforms and improving the fan experience which helps in build loyalty and improving the brand [²].

Social media marketing is the one of core areas which the clubs keep an eye on nowadays. They have specialist teams to handle their social media account and ensure the interactions between club and fans happen on a daily basis [³].

In this research, the author tried to understand the effectiveness of fan engagement in football through social media. Fans can be classified into two basically people who support the team through all the bad phases i.e. die-hard fans and other types of fans are people who stand with the
team during good times only. The club are in a better position when it has die-hard fans so that they don’t have to bear the additional cost to find new fans, these hard-core fans can influence other fans also to be part of this club. Then there are other type of fans who support the team only during successful times but the club can’t even lose such fans also, eventually they also support the club [4]. In fan engagement, the word engage basically means the level of fandom, knowledge about the team and emotional attachment one carries towards the club [5]. Social media has made a lot of positive as well as negative changes in which a fan can support his/her team. Positive changes like more interactions and negative changes like watching matches in social media rather than going to the stadium and enjoying that atmosphere [6].

The research on fan engagement has not been a topic that has been studied a lot but there is a wider scope for improvement of fan engagement. Last few years’ social media has emerged as the biggest innovation. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and other social media handles have been growing since day one. So, the studies also prove that almost 500 million users in Facebook follow football and a study by IMG states that eight of the ten in social media interacts with a sports brand [7].

A fan can engage with the club not only the support he/she gives in the stadium; he can also interact with the help of social media as a tool to interact with the club as well as the other fans. Social media is now the main area in which all the people try to promote their business and brands, its same for football clubs also, they do all sought of promotions via their social media pages. So, when club posts all information’s about the team and other sponsorship deals, they also have to ensure that how fan engagement is also done. Fan engagement is an activity that happens online as well as offline too. So, it is the responsibility of the club to ensure they are keeping the same standards to show the same support which the fans give to the club. There are a lot of advantages like interactions with the club and disadvantages likes cyberbullying can happen as a part of fan engagement through social media [5].

In India, no study to date has been done to know how well fan engagement through social media happens. But a study done by Sam Chung about Premier League fan engagement gives us a lot of understanding of why the clubs are so much into social media. Clubs also realize that social media can be a tool in the future to expand their business [8].

Football in India has grown massively in the last 6 years after the introduction of the Indian Super League. Clubs have started to invest more in fans and fan clubs. Initially, social media was the only way in which they could do this. Because most of the places were not a football-centric place, so they had to do a lot of engagement through social media. So that Consumer Behaviour or fan behaviour can be determined where word of mouth, recruiting new fans, and collaborating with fans can be made [9].

So, this research was able to understand how effective social media engagement in Indian happens among football audiences which helps brands in deciding to sponsor these clubs or not and also building a relationship with fans of the club [10].

**Significance of the Study**

The study would be helpful to new clubs that are coming up in the country so that they can understand how to do fan engagement through social media. The study is also significant because it has shown how effectively can fan engagement be done through social media. The study is more significant because it was the first time such a type of research being conducted regarding fan engagement of Indian Football through social media.
2. Material & methods:

The study was conducted through a series of questions regarding the use of social media for fan engagement in Indian Football. The participants were from the age group of 15 and above. The age limit was set at 15 because the participants needed to have a basic understanding of social media and Indian Football, hence people above the age of 15 and that of any gender were chosen. There were both Male and Female participants who participated in the survey. Respondents had the option to select the most suitable answer they think that best suits their viewpoints with regards to fan engagement. The major aim was to collect the participant's best-expressed viewpoints and create an accurate answer as to how they think the fan engagement through social media happens in Indian Football.

Selection of the subjects

The study was conducted through an Online Questionnaire, where the majority of the respondents were male. Most of them were in the age group of 18-25. The Study was done among the Indian Football supporters, so fans of all the clubs across India responded to the questionnaire. The participants for the research were selected from the age group of 15 since for the research a basic understanding of social media and Indian Football was required. Subsequently, the age limit was 35 above because these age groups tend to have a better understanding of the sports industry scenarios. Mean of the age group was 25 and standard deviation was 14.14213. The sampling technique was random sampling method, where 100 respondents from all parts of India participated.

Selection of variable

The questionnaire was made by understanding and interpreting various research papers, articles as to how they have come up with various discussions and conclusions. Discussions were made with the social media experts working in Indian Football and also with people who have a basic knowledge of the sporting industry while making the questions and choosing the best ones for the research. The questionnaire was made by asking basic questions that had a direct impact on fan engagement through social media. A total of 18 questions were asked through the research questionnaire. Each question was followed by another which is a continuation of the former and the questions went from general to specific to give a better understanding to the respondents as to what is the actual aim of the research paper.

Data collection

The data was collected using questionnaires send to the age group 15 and above. The objective of the research was kept in mind while creating the questionnaire. Questionnaire were sent via mail so that they could be accessed anywhere at any time. Other ways of collecting data were through past research articles and also using websites. Another aim of using the survey was also to ensure the importance of fan engagement so that the respondents immediately after filling the forms can go back and look into the topic more.

3. Results and Discussion

This research paper analyses the effectiveness of Fan engagement through social media for Indian Football. Fan engagement is the main catalyst for the growth of any team. In India, Football which is getting popular day by day needs a strong base of fans for the development of the game in the country. A country with 135 crore population has a lot of work to get attention to a sport that does not have strong roots in the country except some footballing states. So this is a challenge as well as
an opportunity to develop the beautiful game in the country. So social media is the tool that is preferred by most of the teams to build their base in the country. A strong relationship between sports fans and teams is an important component of the success of the sporting brand. Social media platforms have expanded a lot in the last few years, brands have started to adjust their strategic communication and marketing efforts. Social media has helped fan engagement to be more effective and also helped to build a better relationship between fans and team [11].

A total of 100 Respondents submitted their responses to this questionnaire. The majority of the respondents spend around 2-3 hours on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and interestingly Telegram also has been app used by many of the respondents. Also, all the respondents used smartphones to get updates about Indian Football regularly. Indian Football has been on a rise in the last few years, which has reflected very well in the responses for the questionnaire. More than 75% of the respondents followed Indian Football updates daily, only 10% of the respondents were not so keen to follow the Indian Football Updates. Most of the respondents engaged more using the like button than share or comment buttons.

It was found out that 3/4th of the respondents were part of Indian Football social media groups and around 15% were keen to join Indian Football groups. This shows how well Indian Football has improved and more people are interested in joining the groups.

Research also found out that 90% of the respondents followed the Indian Super league more than any other leagues in India. It is the country's joint-premier football league competition, together with the I-League. The competition was founded on 21 October 2013 to grow the sport of football in India and increase its exposure in the country. So this shows the kind of support the Indian Super League has.

This research showers light on the importance of fan engagement in the country. India has 50% of the population below 25 age group, so clubs need to concentrate on that and build a strong foundation. Over 75% in the country uses social media, so creating interesting content surely can catch the attention of these people, and also it can attract them to the club, then one can say a new fan is born. It is also important to ensure he stays with the club with more and more interesting content using the social media page. Creating interesting stories of other fans surely can attract him to the stadiums also. It’s equally important for clubs to have a proper social media strategy, all social media should be integrated should always allow a more targeted and engaging approach towards their fans. They can surely help to create revenue streams also through social media but they need to make sure that they just don’t use social media for commercial aspects, it can be a mix of both [12]. Social media also brought a lot of change to the viewing of the sport, they started to receive more updates about the club daily from transfers to match day updates, so this has made a fan into a promoter of the club. They start promoting the club through their social media, which gives more reach to the club in every part of the country. Social media also started to become a network platform for fans to communicate with each other. They can discuss about starting lineups, match reviews, and everything that happens inside the club. Social Media also started to help to distribute the contents across different platforms. So fans started to consume more sports, which gives more passion for them to support the club [13]. Fans are the biggest assets of any club, so all the clubs and teams ensure they never lose their fans, they can try their best to ensure these fans stay with them for a longer period and then turn them into a hardcore fan who never leaves the team even when the team is going through a crisis [14].

a) New Age Social Media

Much research done previously on Fan engagements in world football showed Facebook had more impact. But in this Research more than 75% had an opinion that Instagram is the social media that they use as shown in figure 1. So Instagram has grown as better fan engagement platform for fans. The main reason behind is that, according to the Instagram survey most of the young generation use Instagram more than any other Social Media Platforms. Instagram with new features like Live, Story has attracted more users to the platform. In a country like India where 50% of the population is below 25, can surely do much better in the coming years. So now the clubs also have understood this and they are bringing Instagram specific content to attract more new users. Clubs are bringing their players to interacts with fans using Instagram live features. More engagement type posts are being posted on the story and walls by the clubs. So this is the reason why Instagram has emerged number one for Fan engagement in India in my reason. More new features can bring more users to this platform. So all clubs irrespective of any Sports can try this to attract more users to this platform.

b) Interaction is the Key

Another interesting finding in the research was most of them were to the opinion that they were interested in more interactive content than Images or Videos. 42% of the respondents felt that they like to more interactive content as shown in figure 2. So rather than posting just photos and videos, more interactive content can be key for fan engagement to improve in Indian Football. The benefits of interactive contents are; it can deliver more engagement than the normal posts. So it can create a good dialogue between the club and the fan. The social media algorithm also works in a way that when there is more interaction the post is likely to be more visible to a wider audience. Interactive contents like Polls, contests, quizzes, etc. can have more impact. Interactive social media content also helps the club to get valuable data that can help clubs in their marketing efforts also.
c) Importance of Emotional Attachment

Emotional Attachment is something that comes to us automatically when one start supporting a Football Club. They celebrate during the victories, they cry during defeats, that’s how emotionally one gets attached to a club. So there was a specific question on has social media and new technology has helped in increasing the emotional attachment between club and fans. More than 75% of the respondents agreed to this point that social media has played a vital role in connecting club with fans. It’s mainly because now they can directly comment or post anything about the club through social media, be it good or bad about the club. So fans have started to get a feeling that now they are more connected with the team than they were before. They could even watch the match from home and comment about the game. Also, other fans can give inputs and even clubs also can get feedback from the fans through this medium. Another research question was also asked related to this regarding their match day experience through social media like getting team news, lineups, and videos. 95% of the respondents were in the opinion that social media has brought a lot of change in their match day experience because now they are getting real-time data. So these are mainly the reason why emotional attachment increased more through social media platforms.

d) Effectiveness of Fan engagement in Indian Football

So our ultimate aim of this research was how effective fan engagement is happening in social media for Indian Football. Figure 3 depicts that 50% of the respondents were satisfied that their clubs are doing well in terms of fan engagement through social media. 22% of respondents were highly satisfied with the fan engagement their clubs were doing. 24% of them were dissatisfied and 4% of them were highly dissatisfied with their club’s fan engagement in social media. So from this one could understand that fan engagement through social media is going well, and in the coming years, it can be more effective in increasing the fan base for football in India.
Another question was whether the clubs are interested in improving the fan engagement experience through social media. 56% of them agreed that clubs are improving the social media experiences each year after year. To support that 30% strongly agreed to this point. Only 14% were on the disagreed side as shown in figure 4. So it’s important for any club, to keep improving their standards in social media and bring more creativity to the table.

Another most important aspect is to take suggestions and feedback to improve fan engagement through social media for Football in India. This was more a mixed opinion as shown in figure 5. 41% of the respondents felt that their suggestions are being considered and 40% of them felt rarely their suggestions are taken. 19% of them were to the opinion that suggestion or feedback are not considered by clubs, they just do their way of engagement. So for a Football Club to thrive more, it’s important to take feedback from the fans regularly. Then there can be more ideas which can help to improve the fan base.
e) Reasons to engage in Indian Football via Social Media

There should be always some interesting factors to make fans engaging in social media. So in this research, one can find out potential reasons why they like to engage in Indian Football. 71% of the respondents felt that social media brought them closer to the club. They felt like they are interacting with the club on a daily basis, so even during offseason, talking about transfer rumors, new signings they felt more to closer to the club. These are the minute impacts that social media has brought to Indian Football.

Then another reason to engage in social media was that 74% of respondents felt a community or family feeling when they are connected through the club’s social media accounts. This is one of the important factors in building a fan base online, so even people who don’t follow Football also may start following this because they feel that they have someone to interact with, so the team can generate new fans. A club or team should always have that feeling of community, then it can yield better results in the long run.

As everyone know social media is a platform that is used to engage with other members also. More than 70% of respondents enjoyed sharing club or team information with other fans online. This can also help in the online publicity of the club. Many people who are unaware of this also can get to understand what’s happening around a club. Some fans come in just during the season time and some fans are always with the club, so this can help everyone to be on the same page.

The passion that is something all football fans would have. Support the team during good times as well as a bad time. Mixed emotions of joyfulness and sadness during every time of the year be it on the pitch or off the pitch. In this research, a whopping 75% of respondents were in the opinion that Passion is what makes them motivated to stay active in social media with other fans. Each and every one has passion but the way they express passion would be different. But it’s a motivating factor to support the team forever irrespective of the results.

Participation is also an important factor. 70% of respondents felt that the reason to use social media to support Indian Football is that they want to get involved in the community to make people feel that they care about the club. Caring of the club in all the terms like supporting the team during online fights against rival fans or voting for the team in online polls etc.
Sports Marketing has become a lot easy after social media began. Clubs find it much easier to show their brand to the world using the engagement happening on their page. Commercial gains can be easily made with the help of social media engagement [15]. Social media has brought fans closer to their idols and brands, making it much easier to connect and interact with them. Interacting with their favorite players through live sessions and giving opinions via polls or comments. A lot more innovations and new ideas can be taken from the west and can be implemented here so that clubs can increase engagement with non-football followers. Indian Football is surely on the rise and this is the time to lay the best foundation for future growth. Knowledge is power, knowing the reason fans follow clubs on various social media platforms can help in marketing goals and can also make it easier to reach Key Performance Indicators.

4. Conclusion:

The research used an online questionnaire method to inculcate various responses and answers to understand the effectiveness of fan engagement happening in Indian Football via social media. Research showed that Indian Football is doing a commendably good job in terms of fan engagement through social media. In the last 6 years, Indian Football had great growth after the emergence of the Indian Super League. Fans base started to grow bigger and bigger every year, this was also reflected in this research. Most of the fans were satisfied in terms of fan engagement happening through social media. They also felt there is constant improvement in terms of contents. Clubs also need to concentrate more to hear fans, more on the suggestions they have in terms of improving social media engagement. As former FIFA Chief Sepp Blatter called India a Sleeping Giant of Football, it’s now time to prove that India is no more a sleeping giant, show the world that India as a country is improving the quality of football on the pitch and off the pitch. This research would certainly help the world to know more about Football in India.

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