Factors Influencing Team Loyalty Amongst Indian Sports Fans

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Abstract

Background: The emergence of the domestic franchise based leagues has changed the structure of Indian sports and how people view them. Franchises in leagues like the Indian Premier League and Indian Super League have been successful in creating a massive fan following and are able to get them to fill in their stadiums match after match. Fans are one of the most important stakeholders when it comes to franchises/clubs/teams as they are an essential source of revenue for every club or team. The main purpose of this research was to try and understand the factors that influence an individual to identify themselves as a fan of a certain team in the Indian sports sector i.e. Indian Premier League.

Methods: A total of 86 subjects were selected using a purposive sampling technique. A questionnaire consisting of questions pertaining to fan loyalty was used for the data collection. The research conducted was only restricted to the IPL as it is the only league that has been in existence for more than 5 years.

Results: It was observed that 26.2% of the respondents supported Mumbai Indians (MI) and 26.1% supported Chennai Super Kings (CSK). On the other hand, least support was for Kings XI Punjab (KXIP) i.e. 2.9% only. The results also indicated that 76.8% fans have been following teams since the inception of the franchise which would interest franchises in other leagues as capturing them early could lead to retention and less cost spent on acquiring new fans later on.

Conclusion: Factors influencing fan loyalty such as celebrity involvement, team performance, in-stadia experience and Star players were identified. The fan sector in Indian Sports is in its nascent stages presently and it will help the franchises in generating a significant amount of revenue if they can convert individuals into fans.

Keywords: Brand loyalty, Cricket, Fan loyalty, Indian premier league

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1. Introduction:

Sports in India have been dominated by cricket over the last few decades; however, the changing scenario of Indian sports has brought its fair share of challenges for team/marketing managers. The emergence of the domestic franchise based leagues has changed the structure of Indian sports and how people view them. Franchises in leagues like the Indian Premier League and Indian Super League have been successful in creating a massive fan following and can get them to fill in their stadiums match after match. Every year thousands of fans flock to the stadiums wearing their favourite team’s/players jersey or consume sport at home on television or the internet, the advent of technology has now made it easier to consume the sport and content related to the sport as it is easily available online.

Fans are one of the most important stakeholders when it comes to franchises/clubs/teams as they are an essential source of revenue for every club or team. However, not all fans are equally motivated and it is important for team/marketing managers to understand the factors that encourages one to be a die-hard fan.
and leverage that to the best of the advantage of the franchise in increasing sales and creating repeat
customers (brand loyalty). Most of the fans are described as casual fans when attending sports events. Not
all fans are considered as die-hard fans. A huge difference lies between the casual sports fan and a die-
hard fan. The die-hard or highly identified fan puts a tremendous amount of investment into his or her fandom (1).

Loyal fans and revenue generation has a high linkage. The investment takes place through various
mediums such as match tickets, season passes, club merchandise such as jerseys, flags etc. Nevertheless,
providing exclusive access to players, other team members and executives, as well as coaches, can serve
as a successful means to offer value to a highly committed fan (2). Aspects such as peer group acceptance,
escapism, identification, nostalgia, emotion, socialization/companionship and entertainment are the
factors which motivates fan loyalty (3).

Customers’ preferences and their association with the brand is known as Brand Loyalty. The consumers’
perception about the brand offering the right product features or quality at the right price translates into
repeat purchase resulting in loyalty (4). The use of a product for a longer duration develops a trust that
results in loyalty towards a brand. Jacoby and Keyner (5) defined brand loyalty as the biased, behavioural
response, expressed over time, by some decision-making unit, with respect to one or more alternative
brands out of a set of such brands, and is a function of psychological decision-making, evaluative
processes.

A marketer’s greatest asset is the high degree of loyalty and therefore it is vital to find out the factors that
contribute to attract loyal consumers. Increase in the expenditures, competition from various
entertainment alternatives, escalating tuition and legislative enactments are critical for the organizations
to avoid fluctuations in their fan base (6).

Someone who perceives himself or herself attached to a team or a sport is defined as Fan (7). Apart from
behavioural characteristics, fans can be differentiated by their level of attachment to a team, which is their
attitudinal loyalty to the team”. The construct of loyalty can be operationalized via two dimensions;
behavioural and attitudinal and includes repeat purchase behaviour like attendance in the game and team
jersey purchase (5). Strengthening of the features of psychological commitment towards a team provides a
stable foundation for the brands which leads to increase their fans’ behavioural loyalty (8).

Attending or watching sport events fulfills various psychological, social and cultural needs and leave an
indelible mark on fans. For Die-hard fans those needs are something special and unique. The fanatical
nature of some fans helps in re-creation of their self-identity is an adage of sports fandom proposed by a
few fan motivation literatures (9).

The dualistic model of passion proposed by Vallerand, Ntoumanis, Philippe, Lavigne, Carbonneau,
&Bonneville (10) posits that people spend more time and energy in the activities they like and value. They
have an inclination towards those activities which can be termed as passion. Harmonious and Obsessive
passion are the two types of passion identified by the researchers. By using a short passion scale, the
study found out that there exists a relationship between harmonious passion and positive affective life of
fans, their self-esteem and life satisfaction, and displays of adaptive behavioursin the public during the
2006 FIFA World Cup whereas obsessive passion was related to maladaptive affective life (e.g., hating
opposing team’s fans) and behaviours (e.g., mocking the opposing team’s fans).

Kang (11) investigated the mobile-content use by young pro sports fans and the relationship with fan
loyalty, identification, and fandom. This study demonstrates motivational theories’ utility in
understanding fan support when fans seek and consume specific mobile content about pro sports. The
results found that mobile content consisted of information, service, and interaction dimensions. Attitudinal loyalty was predicted by information dimension whereas behavioural loyalty was reflected in the service dimension. Interaction and Information dimensions corresponded with team identification. On the whole, a series of analyses confirmed a significant role of mobile content in accounting for fan support. Pro sports fans’ goal-directed use of the mobile phone empirically explained the development of fan support, congruent with previous research on online-content use and fan support\(^{(12)}\). The inferential test results demonstrate that sports fans selectively use content dimensions to develop different types of fan support. In data-reduction analyses, three mobile-content dimensions---information, service, and interaction---were found. These dimensions are analogous to previous research on web site content dimensions for organizations and social media\(^{(13)}\). However, the distinction of the current study from other UGT research about pro sports lies in the content items used. Given the findings, the young fans sampled actively seek information about team rosters, coaches, executives, schedules, team statistics, players, photos, injury reports, and social media pages. Furthermore, in seeking service, young fans consume financial data, stadium services, or the team’s community connection services. The young fans use calling, e-mailing, and particularly texting features to communicate about pro sports. Therefore, the sampled respondents are active consumers of mobile content, and such consumption plays a role in accounting for fan support. These findings suggest that mobile content meets the sampled young fans’ needs for pro sports. Such formation of mobile-content motives reflects young fans’ subjective choice of media content, which can explain outcomes or vice versa.

An examination of Social identity–brand equity (SIBE) model by Boyle & Magnusson\(^{(14)}\) suggested that factors like venue/stadium, history and teams’ performance help in enhancing an individual’s identity to a team. The social identity of an individual is likely to be affected by various characteristics of the fan’s experience. Brand equity is assumed to be built on this strong relationship between a fan and a team. Servicescope dimension like group experience, history, physical facility role and rituals can strengthen a fan’s social identification with a team.

Most of the research on fan loyalty revolves around fan identification with the team. The fans’ behaviour can be explained effectively with the help of team identification. Team identification is the individuals’ involvement and psychological connection with the sports team which help people attach to a group and develop social identity\(^{(15)}\). Fan loyalty can be attributed to factors like entertainment value, authenticity, fan bonding, history of the team and tradition, fair weather or bandwagon fans and die-hard fans\(^{(16)}\).

Loyalty is the feelings towards the team. Sports fans have strong emotional connections with their teams\(^{(17)}\). In order to create meaningful associations with the fans, successful sports brands go beyond on-field involvement and keep them involved. Loyalty is a developmental process. According to Bee & Havitz\(^{(8)}\), committed fans show high levels of behavioural loyalty by involving in the sport and exhibiting psychological commitment.

Tokmak & Aksoy\(^{(16)}\) found out that the brand image of a football club largely depends upon the effective management of the football players, the coach, uniforms, stadiums, and brand associations which in turn develop loyalty towards the football club. Loyalty programs also shape fan attachment which helps in promoting attendance and adding value to the game-day experience. As Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer & Exler\(^{(19)}\) stated that brand loyalty can be affected by the brand image.

The main purpose of this research was to try and understand the factors that influence an individual to identify themselves as a fan of a certain team in the Indian sports sector i.e. Indian Premier League. It tried to cover as many elements as possible to gain a fair understanding of what makes an individual a fan...
of the team. Knowing what a fan really wants will make it a whole lot easier for teams and their marketing departments to focus on those areas and not only retain their previous fans/customers but also get more people to convert from casual fans to die-hard fans. The objective of this research was to understand the factors that motivate the average Indian to be a loyal fan in the Indian Premier League.

2. Method and Materials:

2.1. Selection of Subjects:

The purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample for the study. A total of 86 subjects were selected. An age bracket of 18 and above was selected as the majority of individuals identify with a sports franchise only after the age of 18 and many stick to the team they identified with early on in life. 95.7% of the people responded to the questionnaire were in the age group of 18-30, 2.9% were in the age group of 31-45, and 1.4% were in the above 40 age group. To consider stadium experience, only those who have watched at least 1 match in the stadium of the Indian Premier League (IPL) were considered.

2.2. Selection of Variables:

The variables selected for the study were merchandise purchase, celebrity involvement, star players and in-stadia experience.

2.3. Data Collection:

The self-administered questionnaire of 12 items pertaining to the factors influencing fan loyalty was sent to 100 people over various social media platforms out of which only 86 responded. A questionnaire is a research instrument that consists of a series of questions to gather information from respondents.

The questions related to the age of the participants, an IPL team they follow, preference to live matches, their association as a fan with the franchise, purchase of team merchandise, celebrity involvement, star players, team performance and in-stadia experience were included in the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions i.e. the respondents have to respond in yes or no. The questionnaire was formulated based on the literature search, experts’ opinion that are in the field for more than 5 years and personal experience.

2.4. Statistical Analysis:

Chi-Square Goodness of fit was used for data analysis. SPSS version 24 was used for applying statistics and checking for the required assumptions. The level of significance was kept at 0.05. Microsoft Excel 2016 was used for creating figures by using data.

3. Results and Discussions:

The following shows the data gathered from the questionnaire sent out to find out what factors the teams should focus on more while trying to capture the fans interest and try to convert them to into a die-hard fan (repeat customers) and to convert new individuals (new buys). Significant differences (p<0.05) were found in all the variables with medium to large effect size.

It was observed that 26.2% of the respondents supported Mumbai Indians (MI) and 26.1% supported Chennai Super Kings (CSK). On the other hand, least support was for Kings XI Punjab (KXIP) i.e. 2.9% only. The findings can help in looking at what the teams are doing right to capture their interests and retain them as fans or convert new individuals as fans. The results also indicated that 76.8% fans have
been following teams since the inception of the franchise which would interest franchises in other leagues as capturing them early could lead to retention and less cost spent on acquiring new fans later on.

![Figure 1. Percentage of fans prefer to watch live matches in Stadium or Television](image1)

52.2% support teams by watching all matches on TV, 21.7% watch some of the matches on TV, whilst 21.7% would watch a few matches in the stadium. These numbers can increase depending on each team’s strategy.

![Figure 2. Purchasing Team Merchandise](image2)

46.4% people would straight up not buy team merchandise whereas 23.2% would and 30.4% would consider it. Merchandise market in India requires a lot of work and this could help franchises in pricing and targeting the right people keeping in mind that more than 50% of the market would buy or be interested in buying franchise merchandise.

The IPL is a star-studded event in India and has some franchises owned by Bollywood celebrities. A staggering 68.1% say that celebrity involvement does not influence their loyalty towards a team which indicates that getting a Bollywood celebrity to turn up for your franchise has little effect in the fan choosing your side. 66.7% fans feel that their team’s performance will not affect their loyalty and they would remain loyal to their team, this would interest franchises as it means, once an individual is converted to a fan, team performance wouldn’t be likely to sway them away.

The inclusion of Big established players has a considerable impact on fans and teams should be keen on building a good team base at the start of the season to get more fans to support them, a prime example of this can Rising Pune Super giant’s who roped in M.S.Dhoni and got the benefit of his fans as theirs.72.5% of fans felt that YES a big players’ presence in their team would influence their support.Unsurprisingly 81.2% feel in-stadia experience plays a major role towards their loyalty and it is up to the franchise to ensure that every aspect is taken care when it comes to the fan experience in the stadium which includes hospitality, food and beverages, housekeeping, entertainment etc. All of this combined and more make fans experience more likeable and hence increasing the chances of them returning for another match.

From the above data, it can be concluded that as a marketer for a franchise in any of the sports leagues in India would come in handy whilst using the fans to generate revenue.

“Catch them Young”

The age bracket to target for the franchises should be 18-30, as majority followers fall in that category. Keeping in mind the different income levels of people in this category, they can price their tickets, merchandise and also base marketing campaigns on this.The age bracket in which the respondents fall predominantly belonged to 18-30 age range, suggesting that the average individual following the IPL and to watch a match in the stadium fall in that bracket.Alper&Argan(20) studied the relationship between the demographic features and the factors that influence the purchase of licensed merchandise. The results indicated that the income status has correlation among identification with the team-support, atmosphere (p < .01), and devotion to the team (p < .05). Fans belonging to different income status purchase licensed merchandise in order to show their team-support and devotion to the team. Majority of the respondents were 18-30 years of age and hence the focus should be to try and capture the audience in this group,
which contains everyone ranging from students to working people which means that income levels also vary significantly.

**Be Pervasive**

Majority fans lie in the 18-30 bracket and most of them support their teams by watching ALL matches on TV. With the advent of technology, most of these individuals would be on social media sites and using streaming apps. Developing more engaging content for them on team’s social media handles and partnering with streaming apps for special team-based content such as behind the scenes footage, interviews, team news at a nominal rate could help in engaging them as well as generating revenue.

**Merchandise**

50% would not buy merchandise at all however, 23% would and the rest would consider it, keeping in mind that the age bracket is 18-30, designing some price-sensitive packages including some merchandise like a cap, fan t-shirt could help generate revenue and draw some interest from the rest 50%. The devotion to the team can be enhanced by sportive success and creating or transferring star players. A well-designed store where the licensed merchandise sales are executed may play an important role in increasing the purchase rate.

**Get Big PLAYERS, not Celebrities**

The loyalty of a fan will vary significantly if the team can pick a few big-name players at the start of a season and can ensure their loyalty for a long time, whereas celebrity involvement has little influence over fans loyalty and would hence be not advisable to spend money on getting celebrities to endorse the team. Dynamic and influential players should be the face of the franchise. Star power can improve the appeal of the team and bring the fan to the stadium to see the player play.

**Improve In-Stadia Experience**

A staggering 79.1% said that In-stadia experience affects their loyalty, ensuring that the customer has a smooth, flawless experience from the very start goes a long way in getting their support to your team. It can include everything right from easily available nearby parking, audio/visuals, hospitality packages, housekeeping, food and beverage quality and price, apps, Wi-Fi etc. All of these things and more combine together to form an unforgettable stadium experience which will help in getting people to the stadiums again and again. Sports managers should work to develop a continued interest in consumers by creating incentives/discounted ticket prices to make them want to come back and re-live the experience.

As the Indian sports industry continues to grow at an unprecedented rate and the emergence of numerous sports leagues provides them with an option of not only which team to support but also the option of choosing between different sports, it is imperative to understand what are the factors that majorly influence individuals to support one team or many across leagues as it will help in understanding fans better than before and use that information to better the fan experience related with a team/sport. Marketers can use the information provided in this study and use it in other sporting leagues in India.

**4. Conclusion**

The main aim of this research was to try and understand the basic elements that influence an individual to become a fan of a specific sports team. Keeping in mind that the Indian sports industry is growing significantly and has multiple new leagues that have started in the past few years, it is essential to understand what influences a fan to sway. The research conducted was only restricted to the IPL as it is...
the only league that has been in existence for more than 5 years, and the idea was to try and understand what has worked for the franchises in IPL and what hasn’t. Factors influencing fan loyalty such as celebrity involvement, team performance, in-stadia experience and Star players were identified and some were common across leagues irrespective of different sports and hence it would help the franchises in other leagues to understand how to use this information and focus on the factors that make a difference for a fan. The fan sector in Indian Sports is in its nascent stages presently and it will help the franchises in generating a significant amount of revenue if they can convert individuals into fans.

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