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Research Paper

**Development of Indian Football:
Club Partnerships & Fan Engagement**

MASTER THESIS

GENEVA BUSINESS SCHOOL

MASTER IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

Major in Sports Management and Marketing

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Date: [4/1/2021]

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Acknowledgement

I would like to firstly extend my utmost gratitude to my family back in India who have been a pillar of strength for me both emotionally and financially. They have always catered to my needs and have always inspired me to keep pushing forward in life. That is where I got the motivation to pursue my MBA in sports management and marketing. When my father asked me to pursue engineering, I was averse to the idea of it. But eventually, I got myself to complete the graduation and found an average job. It took me sometime to understand, but after 2 years of working I realised that this isn't something I want to do forever. I then gathered courage and discussed with my parents that I would want to make a career in sports. To my surprise, they were delighted and instantly agreed upon the same. I will be grateful towards them forever for always being persistent and for their unconditional love.

A sincere credit to my friends who have always stood by me in all phases of life so far. They have also helped me learn the good and bad in things. They have played a major part in inspiring me to follow my dreams and aspirations. Geneva Business School has also given me some lovely memories and friends who I would like to retain in my life forever.

I would also like to extend my courtesy to the GBS professors who have guided me throughout my post graduation and stimulated ideas in me. They have helped me grow both professionally and personally. Major thanks to my professor and guide Mr. Frank Hendrixx for helping me through this thesis and making it a smooth journey for me.

I would like to thank my Football Coach and guide back in India, Mr. Ajay for teaching me all that he knew about football. I wouldn't have found my love for the sport, if it weren't for him and his football lessons. Lastly, a huge thank you to all my peers and team mates who have taught me sportsmanship and have inspired me with their skills and talent.

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Abstract

In this research, we will analyse the relationship between fan engagement and international club partnerships for the Indian Super League, which has developed over recent years to become the major football league in India. The primary purpose of choosing this topic is to understand how the partnership with foreign clubs will impact the fan engagement of the ISL's supporters. Usually, fans in India are less aware of the ISL clubs' tie-ups with the European clubs on any particular level. The aim was to bridge the gap by analysing if these international partnerships arouse a mass interest in the existing or potential supporters of the ISL clubs individually. Researching this area will better understand the impact and resistance of the international tie-ups for the ISL clubs, its influence on the fans, and the gap in the existing research.

I researched a survey questionnaire which was undertaken by 162 participants. The respondents were football fans based in India. Among these respondents, many do not follow the local football leagues as well as those who do. The survey's main motive was to obtain a deeper understanding of the fans' mindset, awareness of present-day schemes, and the state of football in India. Further, the survey also helped to study the fan expectations, which helped determine multiple aspects that need to be developed significantly, for the fans' satisfaction.

There was also a significant focus on fan behaviour and factors that play a vital role in determining the supporters' tastes and preferences. I came across some astonishing ideas and theories which highlighted the process more significantly. I explored which type of partnerships impacted factors such as financial condition, coaching, gameplay, infrastructural development, grassroots, etc. and the impact on the fan support in terms of all clubs. Further recommendations were provided based on the research conclusions. There are also individual owners, not neglecting the partner clubs who put a huge investment into the development of their club and the quality of Indian football in general as well. However, it still seems that there might be a lack of transparency amongst the stakeholders and limitations to ideas in terms of fan engagement with the Indian crowd.

The main methods will be explored further in the findings section as to how these partnerships affect the condition of the sport in India by all regards and details. I have also formulated a model to explain all the aspects and connect all the ingredients to the conclusions. At the end of the paper, we will justify the impact of foreign partnered entities that contribute to the development of Indian football, ISL and their fan relations. The proposed model will simplify the process and help the ISL clubs to implement fan engagement strategies optimally.

Chapter 1- Introduction

Sports have always been an integral part of my life since childhood as it is, I'm sure for many people around the world. My parents have never backed me down in any matters related to sports. I believe that having played professionally I can think and react from two different perspectives- one from the players and the other from a fan's.

One of the objectives through this paper is to analyse the development of football in India and how the foreign partnerships with Indian football clubs impact this development and then put into perspective the issues faced by these clubs to engage its fans. Through the course of the paper, we will be able to establish and understand the relationship between foreign club partnerships and fan engagement through factors such as marketing strategies, advancements in the football industry in India at physical and digital platforms, and other external factors, to determine their combined impact on the development of Indian football.

The origin of football in India dates back to the 19th century when the Durand cup was introduced by the British. It was mainly for the British troops stationed in India. The Durand Cup is the third oldest club competition after the FA Cup(England) and the Scottish cup(Scotland). The first-ever professional football league in India was set up in 1996 and was called the National Football League. After failing to meet its objective of creating a talent pool, it was relaunched and rebranded as the I-League in 2007. It had ten contesting teams in its first season. In 2014, the ISL was introduced to improve exposure to the Indian public. For the first three seasons, the tournament lasted for three months from October to December each year. It operated without recognition from the Asian Football Confederation, but it was recognised from the 2017-18 season. After its glory, the tournament was expanded to 10 teams for 6 months. The AIFF signed a 15 year deal with Reliance Industries and International Management Group worth billions. Star Sports holds the rights to broadcast the ISL games currently doing a much better job in terms of marketing the league, unlike in the case of Zee Sports had done for the I-league. The Indian Super League is a start of the expansion of football into a wide cricket fan crazy country. It is a catalyst to develop facilities, infrastructure, and football; the fan following will eventually follow. To gain fan attention, clubs from the ISL invested heavily to attract marquee players who have been legends of the sport such as Del Piero, Ljungberg, Trezeguet, and Pires. These are considered legends even in a country like India, where football isn't the primary sport. Their immense experience was crucial for other local players who gained experience by just training with these superstars. (Sarma, 2017)

At a meeting in Kuala Lumpur, the officials from the AIFF, ISL and I-league met with the AFC officials in order to discuss the consolidation of both the leagues. Currently, the ISL fields 11 teams from different cities and plans on adding more teams from the I-league in the future. As

per latest news and decisions made by the AIFF in accordance with all the shareholders, the ISL will adopt the promotion and relegation from the 2024-25 season. The outcome of this meeting states that the winners of I-league will get direct entry into the ISL in subsequent seasons of 2022 and 2023. Two of India's oldest clubs in Sporting Club East Bengal and Mohun Bagan Athletic Club have been permitted into the cash-rich ISL from this season(2020-21) itself after they were able to get investors. The presence of these two clubs in the league is an important achievement for Indian football, and it maintains the heritage of club football in India during this transitional period. Both of the clubs belong to the same city of Kolkata and have a massive fan following. Unlike most other states in India, West Bengal is known for its affiliation towards football more than cricket. These clubs have been a part of the I-league in the previous years and will continue their future journey into the ISL. It is a massive win for the ISL to have these historic clubs be a part of their present as they also attract a considerable amount of fans into the league. (SNS web, 2019)

Partnerships between clubs from different leagues have been ongoing since decades but especially in India, since the inception of the Indian Super League(ISL). There have been several well known European football clubs that have tied up with a club from the ISL. Shareholding in the ISL has been somewhat a marketing strategy of its own with many actors, business people and even cricketers having stakes in the ISL. Some of the current deals between European clubs and ISL clubs include Manchester City FC owning majority stakes in Mumbai City FC, Borussia Dortmund tied up with Hyderabad FC in 2020 and the partnership between Bengaluru FC and Rangers FC. For these shareholders, it is essential to understand the growth of the Indian football market. Despite having a vast potential, there are many limitations to the sport at this moment. Hence, to make the best out of these deals, it is necessary to learn the growth trajectory and market development. One of the main reasons for these partnerships is simple and the most important reason, the massive market potential that investors forecast Indian football to have in the future. It is no illusion that India is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, and they have invested heavily in sports infrastructure in the past decade.

This research paper will be critical to get an overview of essential theories about fan behaviours through pre-existing literature and then put into perspective how the Indian football industry is doing concerning these behaviours. We will study the developments made in the competitor leagues in East Asia, mainly China and Japan, that have done well over the past few years, and subsequently observe the strategies they used to flourish. We will also explore the literature on the Indian Premier League's development, which is India's highest level of cricket league in the T20 format and one of the most prestigious cricket tournaments in the world.

Chapter 2- Summary of Literature Review

The model of the Indian Super League is a type which allows expansion through franchising. This enables multiple shareholders to have stakes in the clubs from the ISL. There are four significant entities responsible for the development: the fans, the clubs themselves, the shareholders/ investors, and the authorities, which is the AIFF. The research will involve how all of these entities are equally responsible for football development for the next few years. Since the consumer is one of the most crucial factors in any business, let's start with fan loyalty, behaviour and engagement.

Brand Loyalty

Through their paper on brand loyalty, Chaudhuri and Holbrook(2001) relate brand loyalty to brand trust and brand effect. They define brand trust as the consumer's reliance on the brand's ability to fulfil a given objective and brand effect as the product's or service's ability to generate a positive response from the consumer. Both of these are critical catalysts leading to a loyal consumer. Further, they mention the two significant aspects of brand loyalty- behavioural and attitudinal. The former can be explained as the customer's recurrent actions to purchase a product or service. And the latter can be termed a customer's interest in a distinct proposition of a product or service. According to Yun, Rosenberger & Sweeney(2020), attitudinal fan loyalty comprises three important pointers- the commitment to a brand over some time, reluctance to change opinion about the brand, and partiality towards the brand.

Consumers often tend to take a liking to a brand based on its necessity, quality and cost. Most influential brands always seem to find a way to create a sense of need amongst consumers to feel that something is missing in their lives. The same product might not affect the consumers' life in any way, but the sense of feeling in a consumer to need the product or service. Let us liken a consumer to a football fan to understand loyalty in sport and if it differs from generic brands.

Community forms a significant part of being a loyal fan. For a fan, everything related to the club he/she supports- the team, the players, the fan community, the city, all become a part of the extended self. Once a fan, the mind will always be resistant to change its base to another club. This proves the existing nature of community development amongst sports fans. A community could be the core of a loyal football fan base. (Richardson, 2011)

Through his research, he was able to identify critical areas of fans being what they are. The general feeling of ecstasy when your team wins and to be able to celebrate the victory with several other fans gradually form a sense of community. The journey of becoming a fan and the

experience of various emotions in the game like the capacity to enjoy success or to taste failure or disappointments form a collective sense of identity throughout the fan community. (Richardson, 2011)

A perfect example of a community fan base is one of Leeds United Football Club. It is a city with just one club, unlike most other big cities in England. Most people from the town of Leeds have grown up watching Leeds United FC. It has one of the most vocal fan bases, and a lively football culture tells us precisely what Richardson tries to prove through his literature.

BIRging and CORfing

Football fans are generally a loyal bunch of people as their most profound point of loyalty comes from an inbuilt passion and joy of seeing their team perform. The desire could erupt due to ethnic or emotional ties to a particular place where the club belongs. For some, it could be just a profound connection due to their families supporting a club or because all their best players might come from the same team. A lot of new fans also start to support a team which is always winning. Here is where the concepts of Basking in reflected glory(BIRging) and cutting off reflected failure(CORfing) come into play.

BIRging and CORfing are two critical aspects of fan behaviour. BIRging is a scenario where the fans will support the winning team, start following the club rituals, wear the colours of the club kit and develop more affection towards the team. While in CORfing, it is an exact opposite where the fans will disengage from the team or stop wearing colours representing their teams due to poor performances to avoid self-image deterioration in the community. Campbell and others have touched upon two other fan behaviour concepts that aren't present in most literature- BIRfing (Basking in reflected failure) and CORsing(Cutting off reflected success. BIRfing displays a fan's constant support to their team despite not winning. These fans tend to look at the few positives that they attain out of their favourite team and manage their self-image through other means such as avoiding being one of the fickle-minded fans who only support the team when they are winning. In the case of CORsing, fans may display a defiant attitude towards their team despite success. These fans might be purists who believe in a particular style or tactical way of gameplay or scared of their team achieving success. (Campbell et al., 2004)

	Team Success	
Association	Positive	Negative
Positive	<i>Basking In Reflected Glory (BIRG)</i>	<i>Basking In Reflected Failure (BIRF)</i>
Negative	<i>Cutting Off Reflected Success (CORS)</i>	<i>Cutting Off Reflected Failure (CORF)</i>

Figure 1(Campbell et al., 2004)

In a study based on conceptualization and measurement of fan engagement by Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa & Biscaia (2014), they attain an understanding of fan behaviour and response. The primary research manifests the non-transactional side of sports. While the transactional side shows elements like ticketing, merchandising, involvement in watching the sport at the stadiums or home on TVs, non-transactional activities emphasize the fan's prosocial behaviour and tolerance on their team's performances and support towards team management. To further segregate fans' behaviour, they classified two more aspects depending on fan responses and actions- In-role and Extra-role behaviours. In-role fan behaviour displays a significant need for self-motivation to support a team. In contrast, in the extra-role behavioural pattern, it is more of a moral obligation for the fan to support their team, engage with other fans and share emotions of victory or loss. BIRGing and CORFing are two of consumer's self-enhancing pointers and hence are categorized as in-role behaviours.

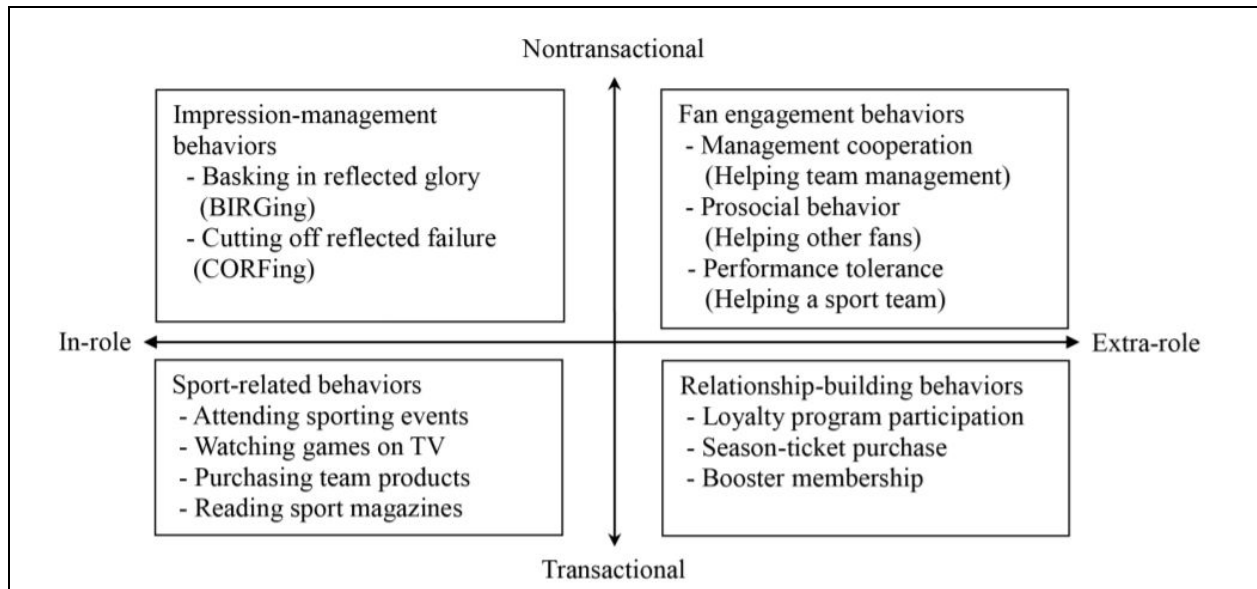


Figure 2 (Yoshida et al., 2014)

In any sport, the most important thing for a fan of a team is the game's outcome. The wide-ranging attributions in a fan's behaviour after a victory or defeat is a natural emotion that the fans feel. The extreme eagerness to watch their team win is identified in fans who are more highly recognized fans than those who aren't realized that much. The fact that fans have the enthusiasm to talk about the positives or negatives and go through each and every significant event throughout the match in case of a win or a loss is down to a general human nature. To understand specific reactions from the fans is essential for the respective team's management and manager as it helps them understand the fans' perspective and be able to improve their performance. Fans tend to show BIRGing behaviour by bragging about 'their' team, wearing the teams' logos, showing off to colleagues or friends whenever their team wins.

Similarly, fans can often show CORFing behaviour when the team does not perform up to the fans themselves' required standards. The study shows important relations between BIRGing and causal attributions through the identification of the team and the satisfaction of fans. From a team perspective, the fans should be given ample opportunities to interact with the players or other members of the staff to get identified. Passion amongst fans is derived from an unknown of what lies in the games ahead and to keep that passion alive it is the responsibility of the clubs to understand the fans. (Madrigal & Chen, 2008)

If we liken a sporting event to a product, then the fans are the consumers. It is of utmost importance for the clubs to understand fan perspective as they form a significant part of the football club. The importance of fans in football is massive, and their non-existence cannot be imagined. In a day and age where social media is a daily trendsetter, loyal identified fans can

bring in a lot of traction through non-transactional measures. Social media becomes an integral part of a football club's digital marketing presence and a perfect platform to engage with existing fans or even to become visible to a larger audience than could be potential fans in the future.

Fan engagement

There is insubstantial knowledge of how organizations can use social media to boost fan participation. Alisson (2013) talks about the need for sports organizations to understand consumer behaviour through social media. She believes that social media provides a platform for clubs to interact with their fans and the fans with each other. Social media makes football clubs more approachable and gives the fans a feeling of togetherness. She firmly believed the possibility of monetization through social media in football at the time of writing, and it is what we see today. Companies have grown to adopt social media not only as a tool to stay in touch with the consumers but get feedback from fans develop strategies accordingly to improve fan satisfaction and eventually monetize this online traction.

In the UK, football clubs have been relatively slower than the rest of the world to dive into and understand the field of social media. Although lately, there has been a realization that accurate strategies can make a presence on social media a massive prospect for them. The research comprehends four factors which form a successful social media strategy, namely content, interaction, community and monetization. Content drives social media and is subject to discussion between the fan community. Social media provides a platform for the fans to interact with each other and the clubs eventually leading to a more significant brand presence which is what the clubs aim to do. Improving brand awareness through social media leads to higher brand equity and ultimately produces substantial revenue-generating ideas. (McCarthy et al., 2014)

Over the course of studying multiple pieces of literature, it was hypothesized that fan engagement has a positive effect on the brand image of the team and on cumulative fan satisfaction. Passion for a brand arises from the depth of customer and brand bond. (Broadie et al., 2011). Fan engagement can be measured as the consumers' positive outlook and affection generated towards the teams. Satisfaction of fans is achieved through the attention of fans through different forms. There are some visible disagreements amongst many scholars' view regarding fan engagement being the driver for fan satisfaction or vice versa. The outcome of this literature forms a strong basis that brand equity and brand image are directly related to the consumer's ability to understand the product's attributes. This consumer understanding leads to better customer experience and reflects on to show better customer brand engagement. Fan satisfaction is directly proportional to the consumption level, which is again a precursor of

brand engagement. This makes the authors deduce the hypothesis, as mentioned earlier, that engaging fans directly and positively impact the image and satisfaction of the brand. (Yun et al., 2020)

Through their literature, Stander & Beer(2016) extend the fan engagement theory even further into the South African football market. They also believe that fan engagement comes from understanding the requirements and expectations of sports fans. The investment made by sports fans to watch their favourite teams week in week out, year over year forms a level of expectations in terms of success or performance. This performance is not expected just out of the players that play the game but also from the team management, the board and other related stakeholders. They further extend the previously mentioned literature of (Yoshida et al., 2014) about the non-transactional side of the sport as they describe the three dimensions of fan engagement-

Management cooperation- Sports fans always have varied opinions about the strategic decisions made by their teams, and they seem to be more involved if they are heard. Criticism is more often than not preceded by a defeat or a bad performance, and that is especially when the fans turn more hostile. Management cooperation is a fix of fan mood by considering what they have to say. Especially with fan channels, fan forums, and other social media platforms makes it easier for fans to put forward their views about individual decisions which upset them or even make them happy. While it is not always possible to satisfy fans, it is an essential factor, and management cooperation is precise.

Prosocial Behaviour- The interaction between sports fans supporting the same team develops communities within a fan base. Thus a community might form one or multiple opinions which could inspire the other sections of the crowd to follow. It begins to create a network with other fans to share analysis about their team. (Broadie et al., 2011)

Performance tolerance- The affection of a sports fan to be able to continue to support the team regardless of their performance is what performance tolerance implies. It is usually seen in the most loyal fans.

Yoshida, Gordon, Heere & James(2015) study the importance of fan community identification and its impact on brand equity, engagement, merchandising and fan responsibility. The two samples of the study were developed amongst two sports leagues in Japan which are soccer and baseball fans. Their analysis segregates team identification from fan community identification and signifies that the latter is more a part of the prosocial behaviour mentioned above. They also extend the study of Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa & Biscaia(2014) that fan engagement is non-transactional and extra-role behaviour. Further findings also provide circumstantial evidence that fan community identification leads to a sense of togetherness and

friendship amongst fans from the same communities. They are thereby enhancing possibilities to create community events and other ideas which eventually boost the image of the team and have a positive impact on brand equity. The last observation they make relates to the leaders of these fan communities which have a strong connection and incredible passion for the teams they support. They are catalysts to other low emotional fans to keep engaged with the teams through the fan communities. They have a strong influence over their followers and community members, and their word of mouth can encourage fan loyalty.

After thorough research on existing literature on the importance of fan engagement, it is clear that the Indian Super League now needs to focus on bringing fans into the stadiums and increasing viewership. There can be multiple approaches to doing this. Football has become quite popular in Asia but only in the last couple of decades, so let us take a closer look at the developments made by other professional football leagues of some other Asian countries.

East Asian Market Development

To establish and execute any idea, the most crucial aspect is to have a blueprint of the concept. Over the past few years, China and Japan have had a surge in their football, but the blueprint was created around the end of the 20th century.

Almost at the end of the century, professional leagues were set up in both countries. Soon followed the 2002 world cup which was jointly held in South Korea and Japan. China made its maiden appearance at the FIFA world cup that year. W. Manzenreiter mentions the enthusiasm of the fans from the Asian countries was 'zealous'. He stresses the commitment of the fans' support through the tournament journey to the round of 16 for the Japanese and semi-finals for the South Koreans. The loyalty of the fans towards their national teams' unprecedented achievement was a witness of the passion which would long stay rooted in Asia. At the 50th anniversary of Asian Football Confederation, FIFA president Joseph Blatter deemed Asia as the 'future of football'. (Manzenreiter & Horne, 2007)

They suggest that the rise of football in Asia is directly proportional to the commercialization of the sport, which is an integral part of the global economy. Along with global media awareness and foreign capital, American marketing intelligence was also an essential contribution to rising football popularity. In China, football icons such as Gary Lineker, Zico and Paul Gascoine were on board to get some experience and improve the quality of the teams. At the time, these were household names around the world, so it was natural that it enhanced some fan exposure to the sport as well. Although only a few Asian players have made it at the highest level in Europe, the impact of those players on the engagement of fans is massive. It is not new to buy Asian players to be able to make profitable outcomes through business opportunities that arise from

it. In 2001, when Ono Shinji signed for Feyenoord, the broadcaster obtained the rights to display matches in Japan. In 2002, when Lin Tie was loaned to Everton FC, all of their games were shown in China. (Manzenreiter & Horne, 2007)

John Connell talks about how football has acquired promise in China through globalization, commercialization and development through the concept of soft power. He says soft power is a concept where attraction comes from cultural, social and from the perspective of the interest of the people (in this case, the football fans) rather than forced military coercion. Soft power was inbuilt in Chinese history in all other aspects like films, music, and culture and lately has made its way into sports as well.

Chinese Super League was introduced in 2004 with 12 teams which was later increased to 16 teams. The introduction of the CSL fast-forwarded the process of globalization of football in China by years. China's determined effort to achieve soft power through football was enhanced during the presidency of Xi Jinping. Despite heavy investment and a thorough plan for development and globalization dreams, China's failure to reach the world cup in 2014 and a FIFA rank of 109 was a major setback. The following 2015-16 season saw an influx of big-name signing in the CSL from major European leagues. Players like Ramires (£25m) and Jackson Martinez (£31m) were signed from Chelsea and Atletico Madrid respectively. Experienced world-known managers were also brought in to improve the overall quality of the teams. The likes of Andre Villas Boas, Manuel Pellegrini, Fabio Capello among others were hired for their experience of working with big European clubs and in the hope that they would possibly bring into light the potential of young local players along with developing the quality of the existing players. (Connell, 2017)

Connell's literature is a broad understanding of how China planned their journey in the world of football through extensive measures to diversify their approach towards the development of the sport through globalization and soft power to put them on the right path for their vision. We can see that although the league was started with a heavy investment in 2004, it wasn't until the mid-2010's that Chinese football started attracting big names such as Paulinho, Alexandro Pato, John Mikel Obi and Oscar. Due to all these efforts taken by China, it currently occupies the 74th place in the FIFA world rankings. (FIFA, n.d.)

The Chinese authorities have developed a medium and long term football development plan. Through this plan they view the development through three stages- to qualify for the FIFA world cup again, to host the FIFA world cup and finally to win the FIFA world cup by 2050. Huge investments have been made by companies such as the Wanda group who own shares in Atletico Madrid along with being sponsors of FIFA since 2016. Evergrande Real Estate Group have also made investments in various fields such as the football school they run in partnership

with spanish giants Real Madrid. Other well known Chinese companies have acquired shares in various clubs in Europe and around the world. China wants to emulate in football what they have accomplished in the Olympics over the years. (Junior & Rodrigues, 2017)

Through his research, Hunter emphasizes the importance of soft power in achieving long term goals. His comparison of the Chinese economy to that of America develops a theory that in the modern world it is necessary to show an image of a peaceful, economically diplomatic and a naturally open country to source soft power. Hence, the Chinese development plan in each aspect of economic development from sport, politics to international trade makes China a lucrative destination for investment and opens enormous opportunities for global recognition as opposed to America's profuse use of military and political power on local and international agreements. (Hunter, 2012)

Indian Premier League

India is a predominantly cricket, loving country. Despite this, it is interesting to study marketing and fan engagement strategies of the Indian Premier League(IPL) which is a domestic cricket competition in India for the shortest format(Twenty20) of the sport. In September of 2007, the IPL was inaugurated by Lalit Modi and the IMG in accordance with a lot of cricket players and most cricket boards of foreign countries to allow their players to play in the IPL. The season was to commence in April 2008 and would go on for a month and a half. The first-ever Twenty20 world cup was held in South Africa in September 2007. The outcome was the most favourable thing which could happen to the IPL with India beating Pakistan in the final to pick up the trophy. The scenes in the country were erratic with people flooding the streets and shopping centres to celebrate this victory, and that is where it all began. This win sparked an interest in the mind of Indian cricket fans about the relatively new(at the time) Twenty20 format. (Kohli, 2009)

In terms of broadcasting the IPL, Modi had to find the right broadcast channel depending on budget and risk-taking capability due to the uncertainty of the success of the league. Common knowledge that the inability of a large population of the country won't be able to pay high prices to watch the league, unlike the European or American market made this a challenging task. Modi adopted the decentralized franchise structure similar to the one used in American sports. This meant he had to find buyers for the teams and explain why this investment into the franchise rights was beneficial. He decided to use the already existing stadiums under the BCCI instead of building new ones thus by cost-cutting to just the operations and maintenance of these stadiums. The potential would be easier to explain if he would have found a broadcaster, but at the time, it was all uncertain. There seemed to be a huge potential in revenue generation through the sale of tickets, merchandising, and hospitality in games apart from the TV deals

which he would eventually go on to sign. Due to his relations with Bollywood, he was able to convince a couple of stars like Shahrukh Khan and Preity Zinta to purchase two of the eight franchise teams on offer. Doing this made the IPL look even more prestigious due to the possibilities of commercial opportunities and tying Bollywood and cricket. IMG executives and Modi were finally able to make a blueprint of the plan to conduct player auctions and an auction for broadcast rights. (Kohli, 2009)

In the present day, it is practically impossible to conduct a sporting event of that magnitude with just one or two sponsors. There are over a hundred different sponsors of the IPL from individual brands to large corporations. Many market leaders are the main sponsors of the IPL or the individual teams. Still, there are also a very large number of market followers that are investing heavily in order to be noticed in the market through the medium of this annual megaevent. The companies' marketing heads to sponsor an event as big as the IPL has varying levels of prominence and hence a different level of sponsorship. (Gupta, Naik, Arora, 2013)

They continue to talk about the importance of sponsorship prominence in the league. During its short tenure, the Indian Premier League has met the expectations of a huge section of the masses. No matter the age, sex, income or another social status, the IPL has found its way into the hearts of a range of individuals. It becomes a perfect sponsorship event for business houses to build a brand image in the minds of these millions of people who witness this event. It is therefore important that the brands are able to market themselves in the right way through an understanding of the customer market. At the commencement of the league, DLF had paid the IPL \$50 million just to acquire rights to the title sponsorship for five years. (Gupta, Naik, Arora, 2013)

Hence, it was called the DLF Indian Premier League until Pepsi took the rights from 2012 until 2015. The current IPL title rights are in the hands of Dream11 after Vivo dropped out in early 2020, having been able to use the rights from 2016. The sheer volume of the event and the availability of sponsors makes the IPL a dreamland for the advertisers as well as the organizers. But does this mean the IPL does not face any criticism for its franchise-type model or even its existence?

Through his research about the sustainability of the Indian Premier League, Kadapa(2013) mentions the issues faced by the IPL despite full capacity stadiums on matchdays and a widespread viewership across the country. IPL follows a franchise model for the teams, so the significant stakeholders in the IPL are the franchise team owners along with the investors/sponsors. A bulk of the money is required for payments for the player wages, the franchise fees to the Board of Control for Cricket in India(BCCI) and other extra costs. This means that the majority of the revenue comes from TV advertisements, sponsorships, and flex

advertisements by sponsors who want to gain visibility through the IPL. Overall in 2013, the IPL does not provide any proof of being sustainable even though money has been injected into the league since its inception in 2008 and despite its popularity throughout the country.

Certain other authors have also expressed concerns over the sustainability of the Indian Premier League. Despite the drop in viewership in the 2010s, it remains one of the most prestigious domestic leagues in world cricket. The ability of the league to attract foreign players has been second to none and hence demonstrates an international presence. It has almost become a part of most households, and in spite of financial strains within the league administration, it continues to provide entertainment to cricket fans.

Chapter 3- Methodology

Research Proposition

This research's main objective is to understand what implications do partnerships of European clubs with the teams of the Indian Super League have on fan engagement amongst Indian football fans. Adding to this, we will look into how the ISL improved their fan engagement strategies with the help of pre-existing literature studied earlier in the European leagues, other Asian leagues and the Indian Premier League. These strategies will cover both offline and online prospective strategies for fan attraction. This study will mainly be qualitative as it will be an insight into fan perspective and opinions and seek to figure out the relationship between fans and club partnerships. The idea behind qualitative research is it gives an in-depth analysis of diverse fan opinions and their knowledge or lack thereof, about club partnerships. Other reasons to carry out qualitative research are coming across different points of view, which might spark ideas for further research. Since there is no existing research available at this point on the same topic, this will be an inductive approach, and a theory will be proposed after analysing the obtained data.

Model proposition

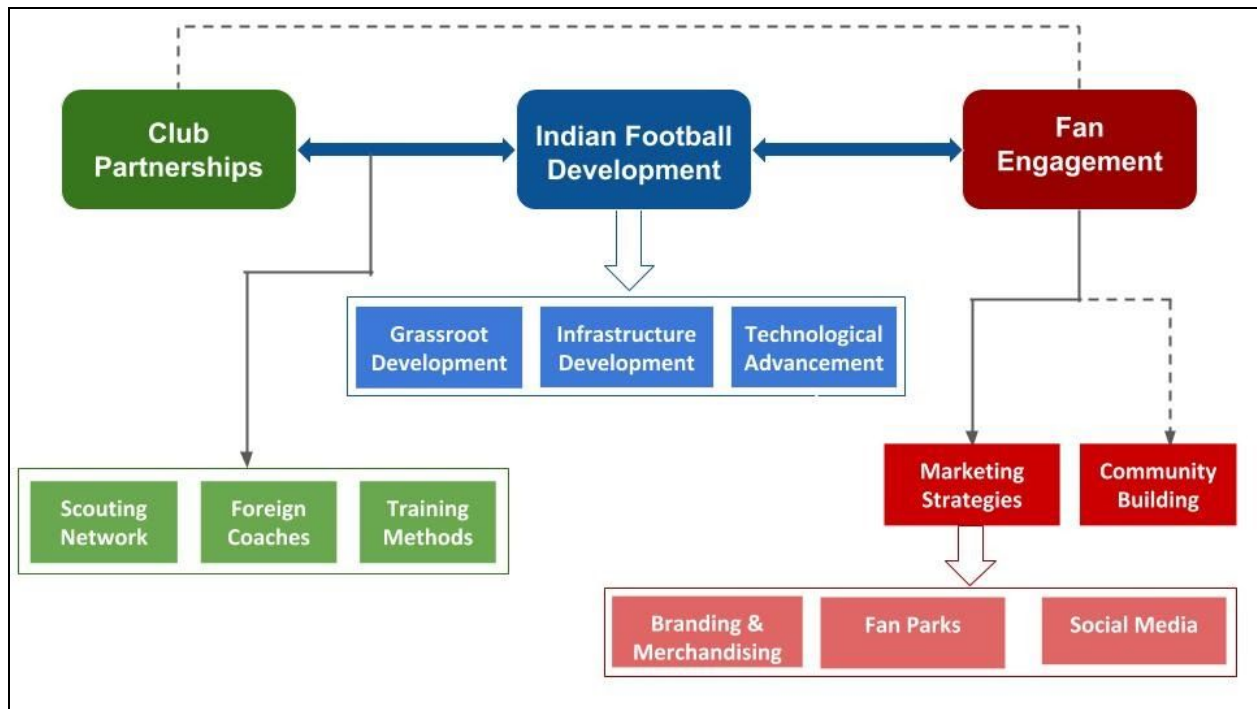


Figure 3

The above model has been proposed by the author to understand the relationship between club partnership and fan engagement alongside studying multiple cofactors responsible for this connection and eventually leading to the development of Indian football. For successful growth of the industry, it is important to develop a devoted fan base and based on the various literature studied in chapter 2, for a fan, engagement is the first step towards loyalty. We have studied the prevalence of soft power to attract fans in China. Indian football has certain aspects perfectly placed due to the investments that have been made over the past decade. There are major gaps seen in certain areas of fan interest. The dotted lines presented in the above model are areas which have a capability of developing and have not yet been explored to their full potential.

Brand equity and fan satisfaction have been seen to be interrelated and dependent on each other. To be clear in terms of the model, foreign clubs will only be interested in the Indian market if they see a potential fan base which directly hints at the importance of fan engagement. On the other hand, to satisfy existing fans and attract more attention toward the sport in India, foreign club partnerships could be the perfect move. The contents of the model have been further explained in detail in chapter 4 of this research paper.

Research Setting

The first season of the Indian Super League commenced in 2014 with eight teams. The 2019-20 season is currently underway, and it has 11 competing teams. Since it's the first season, the ISL has overseen partnerships with some European giants. Despite the quick growth and relative increase in viewership, limited literature has been published about the endless potential of fan engagement opportunities that the clubs and the league possess. With regards to the impact of foreign club partnerships on fan engagement amongst football fans in India, no literature has been published, making it a topic that the majority of Indian fans are not aware of. Hence, this study is conducted to bridge the gap in the literature on the aforementioned topic and can be built upon in the future.

Research strategy

The primary tool for research and gathering key components of the research based on the topic at interest here is through the use of survey by reaching out to fans and followers of football irrespective of their locality, age and gender. The process of carrying the research into a more detailed study is simplified through the process of conducting a survey, analysing the survey through the use of graphs, developing pie charts and the utilisation of tables to ease the process of making accurate and precise conclusions based on the data and responses derived from the survey.

The survey requires the audience to give the author a preliminary background and outset of the respondent through the questions regarding age, gender, locality and their history of following the sport and its activities, to understand the diversity of the sample. Once the background of the respondent is established, the author finds it necessary to identify the teams they support and the regionality of these teams, the history of the team in consideration and the respondents' knowledge regarding the existence of teams from their home country. The next factor taken into consideration will be that of identifying fan preferences relating to the Indian Super League in comparison to the foreign leagues of the same sport, further identifying the preferred location for fans to access viewership to the sport. Connecting to the fans at a deeper level, the author takes them to a hypothetical situation, where the fans provide insight regarding their expectations from the club they support as fans. Moreover, the survey aims to bring in light the aspects that motivate and influence the fan's perspective to support the league or their team.

Moving further, the author forms a set of questions that are an integral part of the foundation of this research paper, these set of questions appeal to fans' understanding regarding the club partnerships, collaborations and impact of these partnerships on fans. Finally, the author aims to get fans' opinion on the sustainability and their preference for the longevity of these partnerships and the importance of them in Indian football development.

Data collection

There are multiple sources of data collected for the purpose of this research. Both primary and secondary data were collected and analyzed thoroughly to display the potential of the market, and possible solutions were proposed to bridge the gap.

Primary data- This study mainly focuses on primary data obtained through a survey conducted by the author. The survey was formed by a list of questions which are created to understand the behaviour of a football fan in India. The goal of the survey was to recognize the expectations of fans from the ISL and influence those club partnerships made on their decisions. It also helped to gain an understanding of the knowledge about the awareness that the audience has on the development of the sport.

Secondary data- For the purpose of this research, secondary data was acquired from various literature on factors such as social media, grassroots development initiatives, stadium capacities and potential growth, club partnership deals and more. The idea behind studying this data is to find out what initiatives have been taken in the development of football in different aspects which are mentioned above and to recognize the gap in between the existing strategies and possible developments.

Chapter 4- Body of the Thesis

Club Partnerships

With a population of 1.3 billion people, the Indian market looks like an attractive prospect for the foreign market. The past few years have seen a massive increase in foreign capital investment in India. The ISL holds no different reading, with an interest of foreign football clubs to form tie-ups on different levels. To start with, the 2000s saw a couple of deals between English clubs and the local Indian clubs. Leicester City FC penned an agreement with East Bengal FC in 2002, and Wolverhampton Wanderers formed a tie-up with JCT FC in 2007, but unfortunately in both cases, the deals were disbanded in a few months due to lack of basis and understanding of the arrangements. A number of agreements were put in place with I-league clubs such as well- Tata Football Academy with Sheffield United in 2010, DSK Shivajians with Liverpool FC in 2013 among the most famous ones. Since the commencement of the Indian Super League, there have been a number of much more well-organised deals. Although for a short period of time, Club Atlético de Madrid was the first club to own 25% stakes in Atlético de Kolkata from the first ISL season in 2014 until 2017. As part of the deal, ATK was allowed to use Atlético Madrid's training facilities for pre-season and were helped to recruit foreign players and coaches. In spite of winning the ISL in 2014 and 2016, the deal broke down due to ATM having minority shares and opinion clashes with the other major stakeholders. In 2018, Atlético Madrid penned down a contract until the 2020-21 season with ISL club, Jamshedpur FC. For their first season in the ISL, Pune City FC partnered with Fiorentina FC selling them 15% of the club's shares. They were also allowed to use the training facilities in Italy as a part of their deal. Fiorentina FC helped to sign a number of foreign players, but the arrangement lasted just two years after disappointing performances by Pune City FC. (Kundu, 2019). Hyderabad FC signed a deal with Bundesliga club Borussia Dortmund in 2020. The agreement is signed for two years with the option to extend further if progressive development is observed. One of the first things this deal focuses on is for the Dortmund based club to oversee grassroots development of football at Hyderabad FC. (Sudarshan, 2020). In September 2019, Rangers FC formed a strategic partnership with Bengaluru FC. (Bengaluru FC Media, 2020). Swiss side FC Basel bought 26% of shares of Chennaiyin FC after they won the 2019 ISL. (Dey, 2020). In November this year, FC Goa entered into a partnership with Red Bull Leipzig to improve development opportunities until 2023. (Noronha, 2020). The City Football Group(CFG), which owns the Manchester City Football Club made Mumbai City FC it's 8th acquisition after it bought 65% of shares in 2019.

Through these newly formed partnerships amongst the clubs, most of the agenda remains pretty clear. The partnerships hope to develop the existing conditions of football in India

through on and off the pitch improvements. For the European clubs, India forms a huge market, and in order to captivate this fan base, they see necessities of early investment. From all of the aforementioned partnerships, one common factor stands out- the longevity of these partnerships and deals. Most of the deals that were made throughout recent history are short term deals which lasted for a maximum of 3 years.

In top teams of Europe, breaking through into the first team from the youth setup is a difficult task. Many top teams have had a relationship with other smaller teams in other countries for the purpose of loaning out young players in order to get some game time and experience of first-team football. This game time is also like an audition for the youngsters to showcase their talents and prove to their parent club that they are worthy of getting into the first-team squad. Like we saw earlier about Manchester City's owners, City Group Football have been involved in multiple partnerships since 2013. New York City, Melbourne City, Yokohama F. Marinos, Montevideo City Torque, Girona FC, Sichuan Jiuniu, Lommel SK, Esperance Sportive Troyes Aube Champagne are all owned by the City Group. (City Football Group, n.d.). Mumbai City FC has been their latest addition to a list of growing investments. In 2014, Manchester City signed midfielder Frank Lampard from New York City after he had left Chelsea for the United States. This is a perfect example of how clubs can benefit from their feeder clubs. Manchester United was one of the first clubs that started the trend of having a club partnership for selective purposes. In 1998, United got into an informal agreement with Belgian Club Royal Antwerp FC. During the course of this agreement, many players were loaned out by Manchester United to Royal Antwerp to experience first-team football. Johnny Evans, Ryan Shawcross, Danny Simpson and John O'Shea were all a part of United's youth setup and were sent to Antwerp for the same reason. There were other benefits of the deal as well, like in cases of Dong Fangzhuo and Souleymane Mamam who were foreign players, the loan deals were for the purpose of acquiring work permits. However, since the retirement of Sir Alex Ferguson (Manchester United's manager) in 2013, the clubs have not been involved in any kind of loan deals. Since 2010, Chelsea FC has had a relationship with Vitesse and have seen over 20 loan deals to the dutch club. Slobodan Rajković, Christian Atsu, Mason Mount and Nemanja Matic are some of the notable graduates of Chelsea's youth setup. Although the relationship has not been a fruitful one for Chelsea as opposed to Manchester United as most of the players have not been able to develop to perform at England's highest level of football. Despite some minor setbacks, more clubs are open to negotiation about tie-ups to expose their younger players to professional environments. It makes the perfect platform for the academy graduates rather than breaking the bank to buy an already established player from another club, especially looking at the inflation of the transfer market. (Bruce, 2018)

Club partnerships can be very useful in the development of Indian football but only with the right strategies and implementations. Indian football has come a long way since the inception

of the Indian Super League in terms of monetisation, the number of followers and the quality of football. There is still a long way to go to be able to match or compete with the level of football around the world. One of the main reasons why football has not developed in India has been due to the lack of interest among fans. Keeping in mind that the whole country is in a cricket frenzy, drastic steps have been taken for the improvement of other sports like football in India. Origination of Pro Kabaddi League, Premier Badminton League, Hockey India League, Pro Volleyball League, Ultimate Table Tennis are all by-products of a sports development plan to increase nationwide viewership and interest in these sports. In terms of football, the Indian Super League plans on doing the same, and since its commencement in 2014, it has come far to oversee development in various aspects. Let us take a look at some of the important elements that have experienced changes since the ISL began and how more can be done to improve the value of football further.

Grassroots

Sarma(2017) mentioned the absence of grassroots initiatives as one of the underlying issues for India's lower spot in the FIFA ranking. He further mentions that there is an abundance of talent amongst Indian kids, but the reason they go unnoticed is that they are advised not to pursue a career in this field due to the lack of professionalism at the school level. In a project adopted by the ISL to develop football at the grassroots level at the school level, it focuses on reaching out to 500,000 kids. The project aims to identify a talent pool of children and provide them with the facilities to develop their game and in the future be included in professional football clubs. Another initiative is the compulsion for the franchises to invest in the development of grassroots football. Each franchise is expected to pay a yearly fee of ₹15 crores(1,605,000 GBP) of which ₹2 crores(214,000 GBP) is separately invested into the grassroots development projects.

This is a great initiative by the ISL to promote football amongst young people in India. It is common knowledge that cricket at grassroots is an established sport that most Indian kids grow up playing and having an affection for. To create the same environment for a sport like football is a challenging task but not an impossible one. With the initiatives taken in the past few years, there has undoubtedly been a growth. Whether this actually develops into something meaningful, only time will tell, but the groundwork has been laid, and the development is in process to make a strong base in order to secure the future.

Apart from technical skill and physical attributes, another vital factor which shapes up the career of a professional footballer is mental toughness and the ability to cope with unprecedented situations. Psychological skill training introduced at academy levels can help the players to become mentally strong and eventually have a positive impact on their development.

(Katiyar et al., 2016). This is something that can be associated with grassroots development, and it has been happening across the globe for a long time. Children in a lot of top footballing nations adopt football and join the academies at a meagre age of 5-6 and along with the right training and education go on to have successful careers either as a player, coach or even in other fields.

To improve the level of sports in India, the KheloIndia programme was introduced by the government from 2018-2020. 'Khelo' meaning 'play' in the native language Hindi clearly indicates the objective of this programme. An estimated ₹1756 crore was allotted for this initiative that saw sports like badminton, football, hockey, gymnastics, swimming, volleyball, wrestling, weight lifting, archery and athletics among others to promote and encourage youngsters to opt for sports as a profession. KheloIndia youth games are held in January and February at under-21 and under-17 level to provide a platform for young kids to showcase their talents and potential. (Singh & Bali, 2020). KheloIndia is an excellent initiative by the government to realise the importance of talent in the field of sports in India. The participation of youth in the games will improve competitiveness and higher quality of sports in the country. With the set budget, it will also improve the situation of infrastructure and its maintenance capability with time. With more youngsters that want to make sports their profession, there will be a requirement for talent scouting networks and providing technical support to the coaches as well in order to improve their methods. Can grassroots development benefit from international club partnerships? Definitely yes. We have already seen the importance of a strong scouting network and the plan towards achieving it is in place. The next step would be to expose this talent to the best facilities and quality environment to learn and develop. In terms of quality of facilities and training centres, European clubs have got the best of them. In the future, it could be possible to allow the best of these young talents to travel to the training grounds in Europe in order to get exposed and motivated to work even harder.

Community Building

In chapter 2, we studied the importance of community building in fan engagement and loyalty.

Pillai & Nimkar(2020) construct points out why community building is necessary for Indian football. The most successful clubs have the largest fan bases globally, but they all started as small clubs and built from there. The author studies some behaviours of Kerala Blasters FC and Bengaluru FC fans and gathers their perspective on community building. Development of local businesses and tourism opportunities help in the development of football clubs. Successful football clubs worldwide are known through a community in their city represented by the club. They identify social, health and economic contributions as the three parameters for a strong community. If the clubs are able to contribute a small percentage of their time and effort into

the development of these parameters for the betterment of the community, there is more trust and connection emerges within the community and with the club as well.

For example- **Social contributions-** Fulfilling social responsibilities like promoting women empowerment, education for children and others.

Health contributions- Spreading awareness about health-related issues in the city through social media and advertising campaigns.

Economic contributions- Lending a helping hand to support some local businesses, cafes, bars, restaurants.

For a new league like the ISL, the clubs must focus on community building as a part of their development plan. For the clubs to have recognition throughout the country or even globally, first it has to take steps to become popular amongst its locals. The three contributions mentioned by Pillai & Nimkar(2020) puts into perspective the possible opportunities for community involvement in the long run. Most of the ISL teams belong to different cities with the exceptions of ATK Mohun Bagan & East Bengal (both belong to Kolkata). With no other competition to develop self popularity, these clubs should be looking at the potential market that they could target to increase their fan following.

Social media

A study done by IMG shows that 80% of social media interacts with a sports-related brand. A digital presence in its place is effective, but only when it is backed by ideas to engage the followers on a regular basis. The clubs have to find ways to make the fans feel like they are all a part of the project and show them a bigger picture. Social interaction has its demerits as well. In case the team does not perform well, the fans are quick to show their displeasure and might turn hostile, but that is a part of a bigger picture. If used correctly, clubs can discover new ways to market the brand of the club. (Prathap & Raizada, 2020)

As we studied in previous literature, fan behaviour is an essential aspect of football, and social media becomes the perfect platform to analyse this aspect. Fan engagement has become an extensive part of sports, and its integration into the industry has been amplified with the rise in social media technology. In this day and age, attracting crowds into the stadiums is not the only ulterior motive anymore. The physical presence of fans in the stadium is necessary, but to tackle the fact that there are always more people watching the games outside of the stadiums than inside it, it is essential to build a strong digital presence. The ISL is a relatively new concept and league compared to other football leagues and even the IPL. Thus, it becomes paramount

to entice fans and keep their interest high for these initial years until the club's symbol gets embedded in their hearts. There is a huge potential market out there, and the best way to reach out and keep them within touching distance is to build a brand on social media. Let us take a look at ISL clubs' presence on some of the social media platforms and their potential to develop digitally. Here is a brief table of the Instagram, Facebook and Twitter followers of all the current ISL clubs-

Name of the club	Instagram Followers	Facebook Followers	Twitter
Mumbai City FC	162k	568k	174.9k
Bengaluru FC	234k	358k	281.2K
Chennaiyin FC	297k	464k	875.9K
Kerala Blasters FC	1.8M	1.16M	1.8M
FC Goa	303k	455k	340.7K
Hyderabad FC	56.2k	34k	11.6K
ATK Mohun Bagan FC	239k	1.1M	481.7K
SC East Bengal	83.6k	1.31M	251.4K
NorthEast United FC	173k	346k	429.9K
Jamshedpur FC	123k	118k	26.5K
Odisha FC	51.7k	21k	13.5K

Table 1

Through the reading of the table, it can be clearly seen that there is a huge difference in the number of followers for some clubs compared to the other clubs. In a country of 1.3 billion people, and just over 50% of them using social media (Keelery, 2020), the numbers mentioned in the table seem a bit too less. But at the same time, this goes to show the potential in the field. ATK Mohun Bagan FC and SC East Bengal have Facebook following of over a million, but a very strong reason for that could be the fact that they are two of the oldest clubs in Indian football history. ATK Mohun Bagan was founded in the 19th century whereas SC East Bengal was founded in the early 19th century, both under different names. On top of that, both clubs belong to the city of Calcutta, which is one of the few places in India where football is the major sport. Although they have a strong Facebook following, other platforms don't seem to have

improved since their inclusion in the Super League. Kerala Blasters FC makes the top social media presence in the league. One of the reasons for that is the strong community feeling that the state of Kerala follows. Additionally, the fact that it is owned by cricket legend Sachin Tendulkar helps its own cause. It would be unfair to compare the teams from the ISL to some of the European giants in football, but certainly, the clubs which do have partnerships with their counterparts can be taken into account.

ISL team	Partners	Instagram		Facebook		Twitter	
		ISL	Partners	ISL	Partners	ISL	Partners
Mumbai City FC	Manchester City	162k	21.8M	568k	39M	174.9k	8.8M
Bengaluru FC	Rangers FC	234k	443k	358k	721k	281.2K	585.3k
Chennaiyin FC	FC Basel	297k	199k	464k	1.8M	875.9K	24.1k
FC Goa	RB Leipzig	303k	892k	455k	573k	340.7K	120.8k
Hyderabad FC	Borussia Dortmund	56.2k	12M	34k	14M	11.6K	3.5M

Table 2

Taking a look at the table, it is pretty evident that most of the ISL clubs with partnerships have a below-average social media presence, especially with a consideration of the total population of the country. With exceptions of Chennaiyin FC which exceed the number of followers on Instagram and Twitter, and FC Goa which exceed the number of followers on Twitter, all the other clubs have a social media presence which can be improved further. Even if comparisons are made between the ISL clubs with some of the IPL teams from corresponding cities, it is clear that football visibility in India has not quite reached its full potential. Instagram which is the most used social media platform for the age group of 18-35 according to Kellogg(2020) shows that in the IPL teams Mumbai(6.1M), Bengaluru(5.2M), Chennai(6.2M), Hyderabad(2M) have all got followers in millions. The same can't be said for most of the ISL clubs; hence, the idea of community building and marketing to get this attention at this stage is necessary to create a culture amongst locals. In terms of partnerships, they can use this as a strategy to develop significant interest amongst local fans. The social media platforms of the clubs barely display a presence of these deals which have taken place for reasons unknown.

Infrastructure

For the 2019-20 season, there were 10 teams participating in the tournament. Here is a list of their stadium capacities and average attendance per game-

#	Stadium	Capacity	Spectators	Average	Matches	sold out	Capacity
1	 Vivekanada Yuba Bharati Krirangan ATK	85.000	200.917	22.324	9	-	26.3 %
2	 JRD Tata Sports Complex Jamshedpur FC	24.500	181.218	20.135	9	-	82.2 %
3	 Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium - Kochi Kerala Blasters FC	41.000	157.641	17.516	9	-	42.7 %
4	 Sree Kanteerava Stadium Bengaluru FC	25.810	131.592	14.621	9	-	56.7 %
5	 Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium - Goa FC Goa	25.000	117.057	13.006	9	-	52.0 %
6	 Indira Gandhi Athletic Stadium NorthEast United FC	30.000	63.280	15.820	4	-	52.7 %
7	 Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium - Chennai Chennaiyin FC	40.000	57.277	9.546	6	-	23.9 %
8	 Gachibowli Balayogi Athletic Stadium Hyderabad FC	30.000	52.599	8.767	6	-	29.2 %
9	 Kalinga Stadium Odisha FC	60.000	51.081	6.385	8	-	10.6 %
10	 Mumbai Football Arena Mumbai City FC	18.000	40.639	5.806	7	-	32.3 %
Total:		379.310	1.053.301	13.859	76	0	40.9 %

Figure 4 (transfermarkt, 2020)

A thorough reading of the data from the 2019-20 season reveals that 13k supporters were present at the stadiums on an average with around 40.9% capacity of seats being filled throughout the season. In terms of stadium capacities and structure, much can't be said in terms of investment required to be made. However, there has been significant evidence around the globe that stadium renovations can have an impact on the economic value and attractiveness of the club. The best example that comes to mind is the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, which was built last year to hold a crowd of 62,000, with 65 food and drink outlets and a microbrewery inside the stadium. The pitch is retractable, and a new surface emerges which is used for NFL games and other events such as concerts. The stadium has uplifted the excitement amongst fans and brought people around the world to visit and experience the stadium atmosphere, especially on matchdays. (Tottenham's new stadium, 2019)

Of course, the solution to attract crowds into stadiums isn't to build a billion-dollar stadium, but it is certainly within reach to increase the hospitality for the fans. Local food and beverage caterers can be allowed to set up their stalls around the stadiums and facilities can be provided to them where they could benefit from the crowd as well. Hosting concerts and shows can also have a feeling of familiarity with people coming to witness various types of events at the stadiums. Although football seems to be still a developing sport in India, it is not impossible to

think about the possibilities within the next few years especially after the world's largest cricket stadium was inaugurated in February 2020 in Ahmedabad, Gujrat.

When one talks about sports infrastructure, the first thing that crosses the mind are the stadiums and training facilities, but there is more to it than that. The evolution of sports science has seen how important it is to monitor athletes performance from time to time. Data analysts are a huge part of the sport in the present day and age. This technology, along with investment in sport science is an integral part of sports infrastructure.

Fan park experience

Fan Marketing any idea in a suitable way, is the most important pointer in attracting a bunch of people into any place. To market the idea, it is important to be able to sell it to yourself. If an average flea market can attract thousands of people, it is not out of boundaries to think that the idea of fan parks cannot workout. In 2017, the premier league hosted fan parks around the world, one of which was held in Bengaluru. It was held over a weekend and matches were showcased on the big screen for people to enjoy. It saw appearances from premier league stars Alan Shearer and Shay Given amongst others. It was a joy for thousands of premier league fans in India to witness such an event. (FC Jamshedpur, 2019)

Jamshedpur FC has managed to organise a few fan parks for the 2018 and 2019 seasons. Football has not yet reached a level in India where a lot of fans would be willing to travel to another city only for the purpose of watching their favourite team play. In order to maintain excitement for fans for away games, Jamshedpur FC organised fan parks at their home stadium for their away games so that the fans don't miss out on the opportunity to enjoy the away games together. The fan park experience brings a carnival-type atmosphere, and apart from the 90 minutes of football, people can be entertained through food stalls and get their hands on merchandise at the stalls located at the park.

Chapter 5- Findings

This section focuses on the analysis of the primary data collected through google forms. The survey was completed with a total response from 162 football fans. Subsequently, the analysis will aim to generate a link between the engagement aspects of fans and their opinions on football developments to the club partnerships, and to make significant recommendations to the preexisting factors in the ISL. The set of responses obtained from the football fans is the basis of understanding transactional and non transactional points. Let us now study the samples derived from the survey.

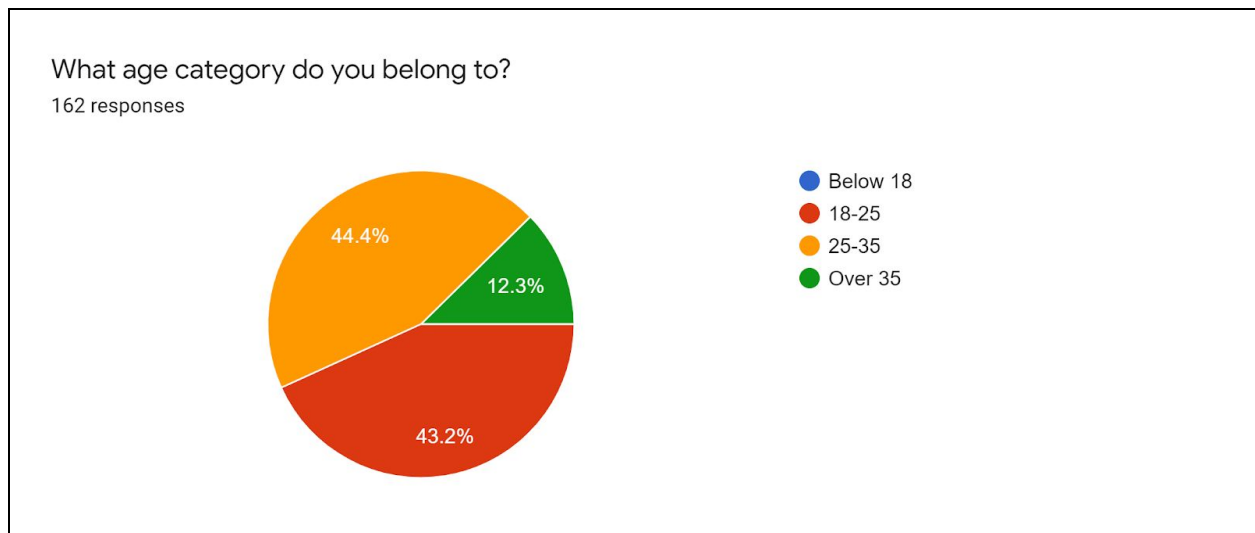


Figure 5

Although there are enough responses from all age categories as can be seen from the pie chart, the best part of the sample (87.6%) ages from 18-35 with almost equal responses in the 18-25 and 25-35 age group. Having a majority in such a young age group is important as they are the future so to get their inputs on these matters means an important contribution in the analysis of the survey and for future studies on the matters of Indian football. There were 12.3% of respondents above the age of 35 as well and their opinions will show diversity amongst the age groups. Each group will have a different view towards the sport and these views will help to organise a structure for recommendations.

For the diversity of the sample the data collection was spread out to fans from across the country with the respondents residing from over 25 different cities providing their feedback through the survey.

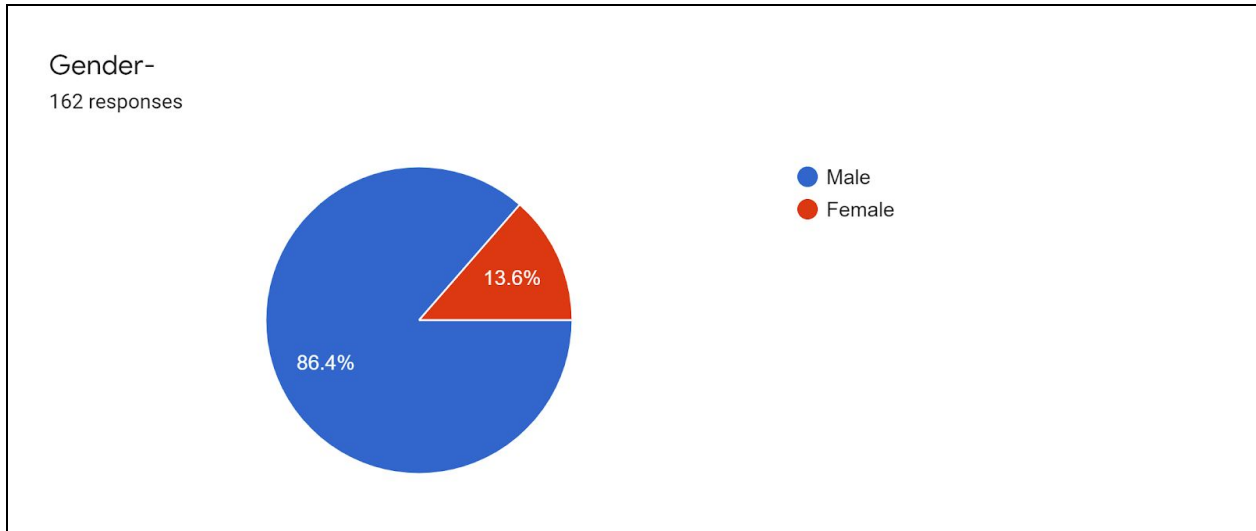


Figure 6

Amongst the 162 respondents merely 22(13.6%) were females, which is in itself a testament to the fact that efforts need to be made to make the sport aware amongst girls, especially the younger generation. The purpose of gender was mainly to understand the interest of girls who watch the sport as well and value their presence in the game. With women’s football coming up strongly around the globe, it will be an important aspect in the future of football in India as well.

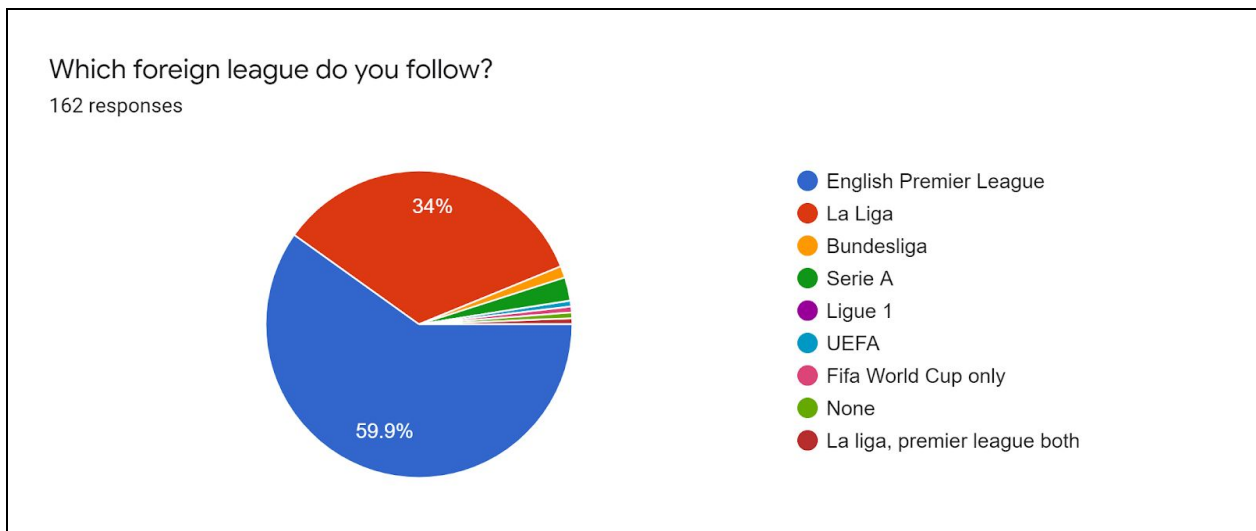


Figure 7

A staggering number of respondents have chosen their favourite leagues as the English Premier League(59.9%) and the La Liga(34%). Although it does not come as a surprise simply because of the quality they both possess. It is of utmost importance to understand this among our sample

as we are studying club partnerships and although a total 93.9% of the sample has picked their clubs from these two leagues there is just one club(Atletico Madrid) which has had partnerships with the ISL clubs over the years. The rest of the leagues along with the UEFA Euros and FIFA World Cup combine to make up the rest 6% of the respondents preference.

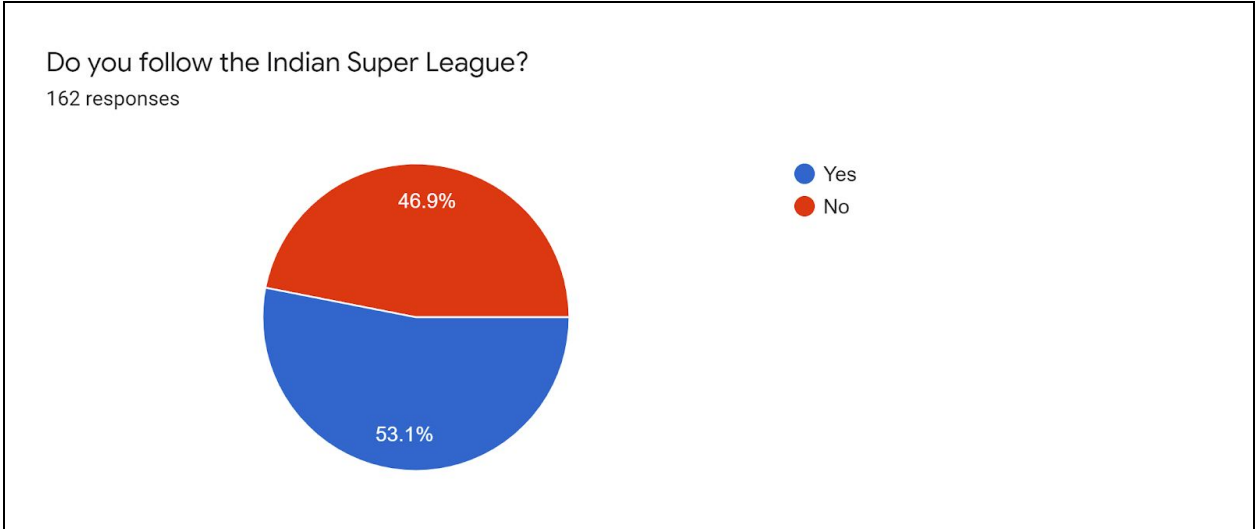


Figure 8

For the most important question as a part of the thesis, it is seen that 46.9% of the respondents who are football fans do not follow the highest ranked football league in the country. This shows a clear lack of interest of football fans in Indian football. A further set of connecting questions were asked to understand the preference amongst foreign league and the local league and also to understand why or why they do not follow the ISL. A few common factors were consistent throughout the respondents' opinions.

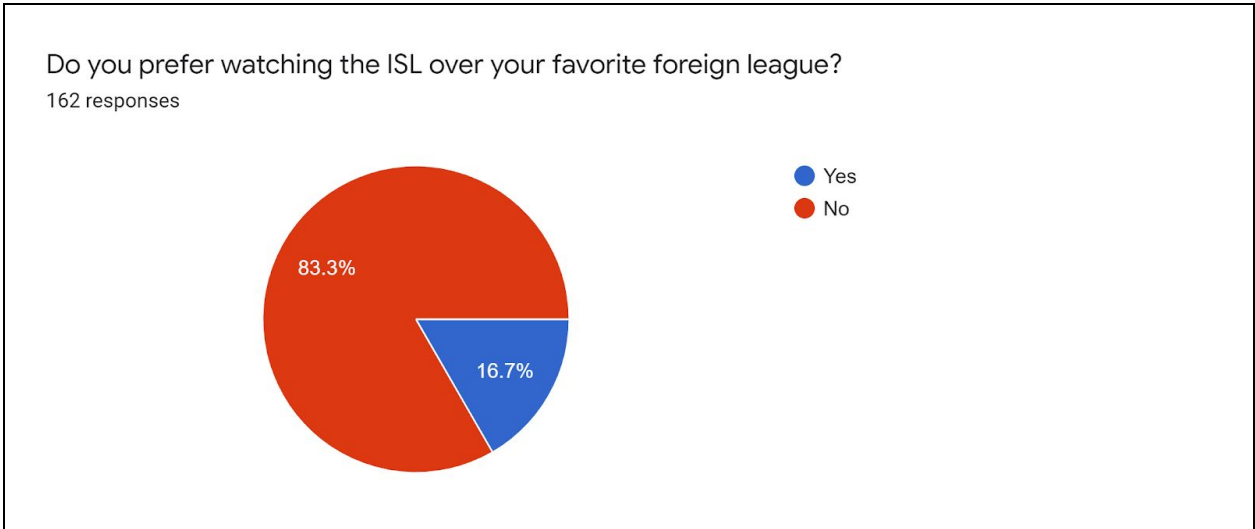


Figure 9

As for the preference of the football fans, 83.3% of the respondents chose the option of watching the Foreign football league as opposed to 16.7% of the respondents who preferred the Indian Super League. This goes on to amplify the previous question as well as to get an honest opinion about the viewership of the ISL. The succeeding question asked was why or why they do not follow the ISL. The most consistent points to be noted through these fan responses was the quality of football, the speed of football was too slow to the fans liking as they are used to watching European football and that has set a high standard. The next most important factor was the quality of football players as most of them are Indians and brought up playing football without the most common facilities such as grass grounds and lack of basic infrastructure. Some fans went on to say that the ISL does not provide the level of excitement that they achieve from other leagues and even cricket. For some others, the intensity of ISL is too low for a football game. The fact of the matter is that football is a 90 minute sport as compared to cricket which lasts for a longer time and hence for that 90 minutes fans expect a high intensity game which they do not get in the ISL.

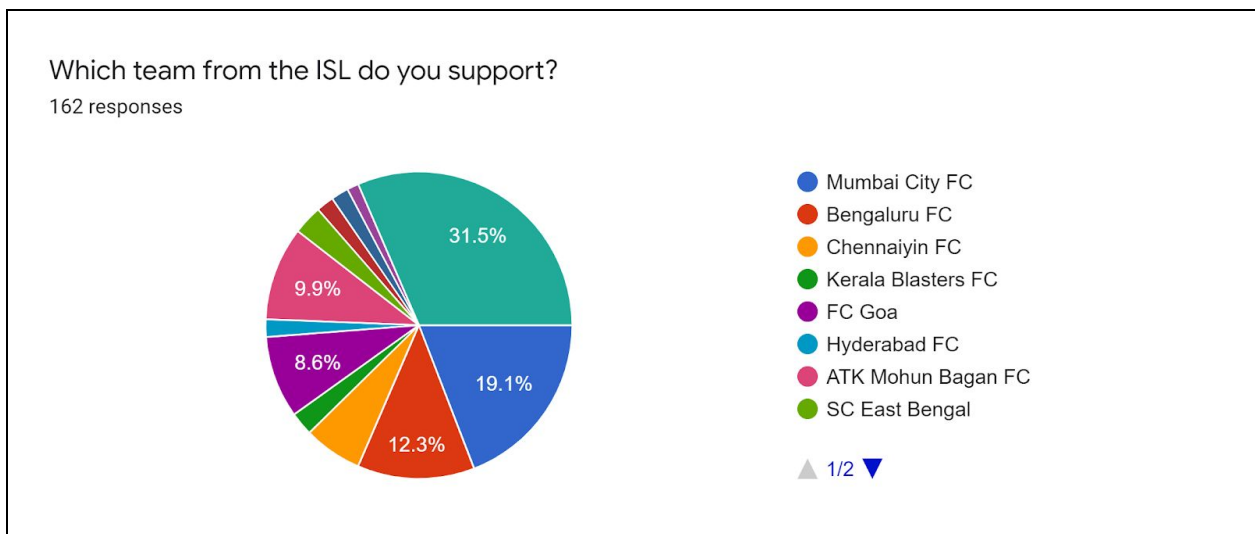


Figure 10

As the graph suggests, 31.5% of the overall sample population did not support any particular club from the ISL. Mumbai City FC had the largest percentage of followers with 19.1% and Bengaluru FC coming in second with 12.3%. Mohun Bagan FC and FC Goa were the next closest with 9.9% and 8.6% of followers respectively. The followers of the rest of the clubs made up the rest of the 18.6% minority. Taking into account the sample was taken from various cities, and majority of the sample population came from the state of Maharashtra which has Mumbai as the capital city, it can be seen that the regionality of the fans also makes an impact on the popularity of the local clubs. Mumbai City FC is the only club in the state and hence it should be

no surprise that it has a larger part of the sample as its fans as compared to the rest of the clubs.

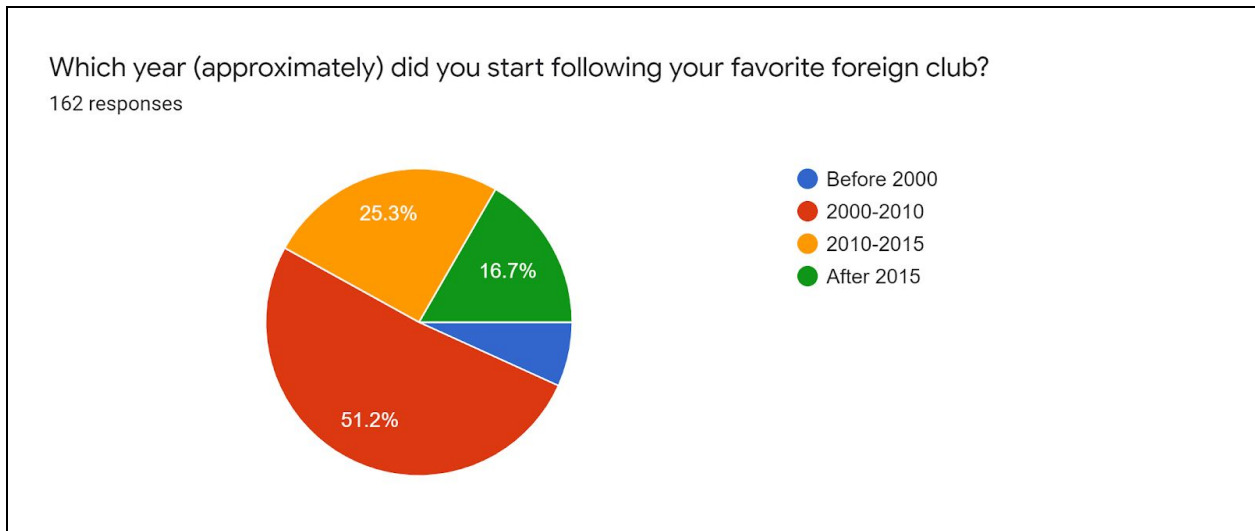


Figure 11

The purpose of this question was to get an insight into the fan dedication. Based on responses derived from the age category question, it is of less surprise that 51.2% of the respondents started following their football clubs between 2000-2010. The next largest set of fans started watching football in between 2010-2015 (25.3%). A small percentage (6.8%) of people have been involved in the sport since before 2000, it is apt if we compare it to the age group of above 35(12.3%). In terms of the ISL which originated in 2013, it is relatively new compared to the pre existing football fans as seen in the pie chart. It can thus be proved that the majority of fans in the sample (83.3%) started following the sport before the inception of the ISL. These fans have developed interest in football watching foreign football leagues and hence their expectations are high, as it is mirrored in their preference of leagues.

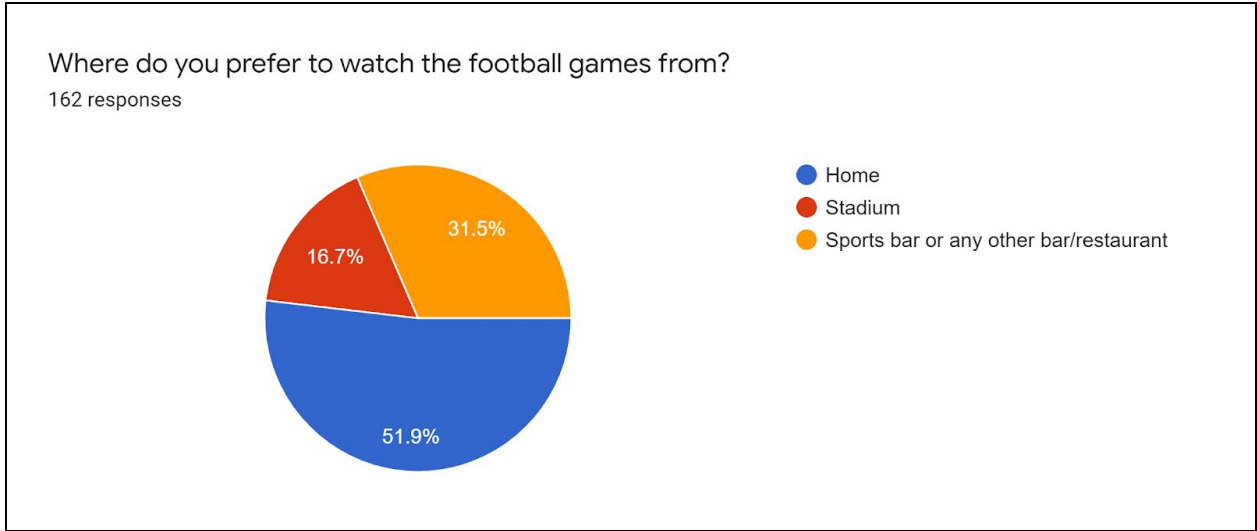


Figure 12

The importance of this question cannot be stressed enough. It provides valuable feedback through which many businesses could benefit from. The crowd in the stadiums has not been upto the mark in the ISL over the years. The reason for lesser footfall in stadiums has been mainly due to the fact that fans do not want to travel to the stadiums and spend to watch an average league. 51.9% of the sample chooses to stay at home to watch the matches while 31.5% would rather go to a sports bar instead of the stadiums. It gives into the fact that Indian football needs improvements in stadiums to excite more fans as only 16.7% have chosen the option that they prefer watching games from inside the stadiums.

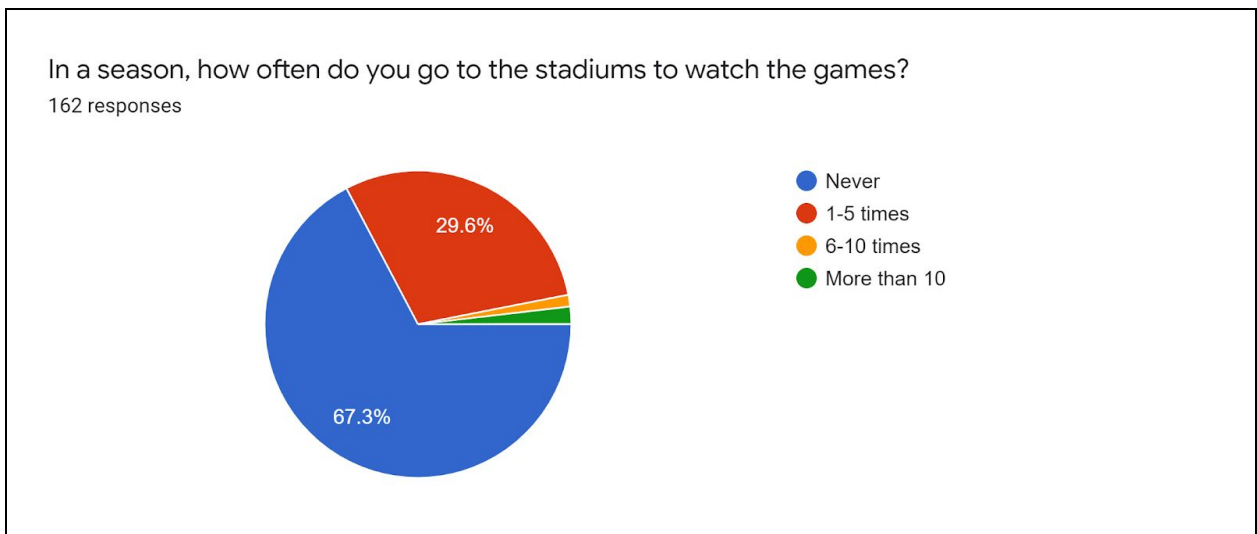


Figure 13

Reflecting back on the previous question of where the fans prefer watching games, it is no shock that a staggering 67.3% of the sample population never go to the stadiums to watch a game of football. Even amongst the rest of the lot, 29.6% of the fans visit the stadiums only 1-5 times in a season. To sum it up, there are only 3.1% of the sample which will watch matches in the stadiums more than 5 times. From the above pie chart we can say that the clubs and the ISL need to come up with new strategies to encourage more fans in the stadiums. Digital platforms have become an essential part of sports and have made sports easily accessible to large parts of the country but the essence of enjoying a football game is in the unreal vibrations that a game can provide in the stadium through the atmosphere.

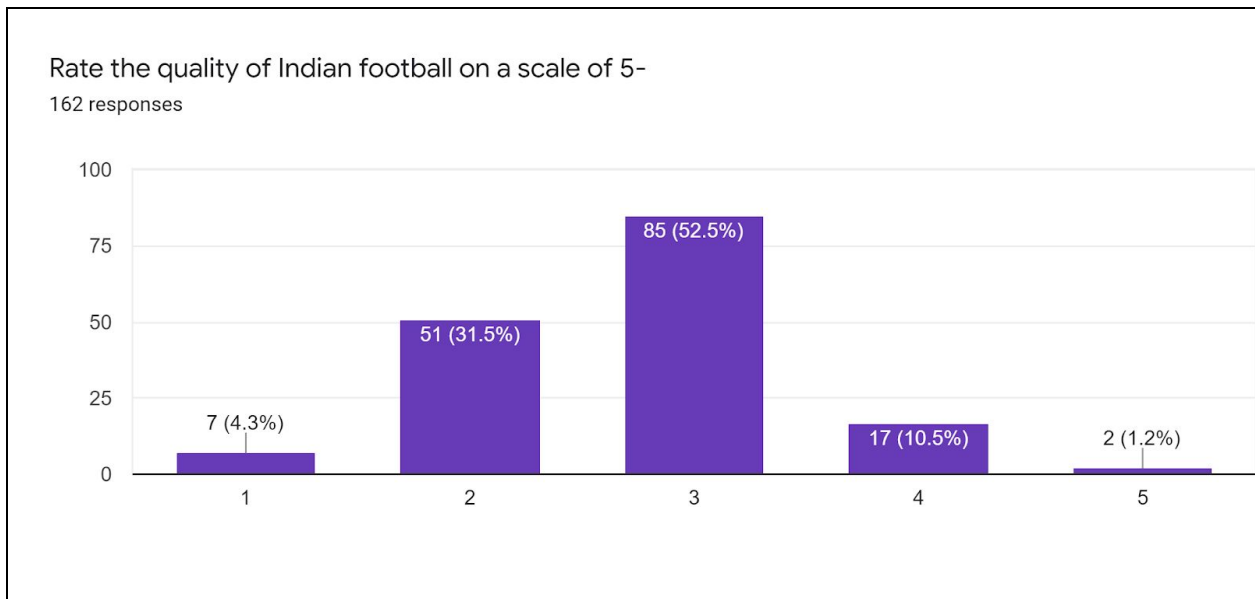


Figure 14

As an important part of the thesis, the audience was asked to rate the quality of Indian football on a scale of 5, with 1 being poor and 5 being excellent. The response was considered to be mostly average with 85 of 162(52.5%) of the audience opting to give a score of 3. Further, 31.5% of the audience rated the quality of Indian football to be below average and 4.3% saying it is poor. 10.5% had an opinion that the quality can be rated above average and a meagre 1.2% of the audience maintained their loyalty towards Indian football. To summarize this, a major ratio considered the quality of Indian football to be average or below average, leading to a proof that much improvements are needed to increase the quality of the football and help to satisfy the fans which form the basis of this sport.

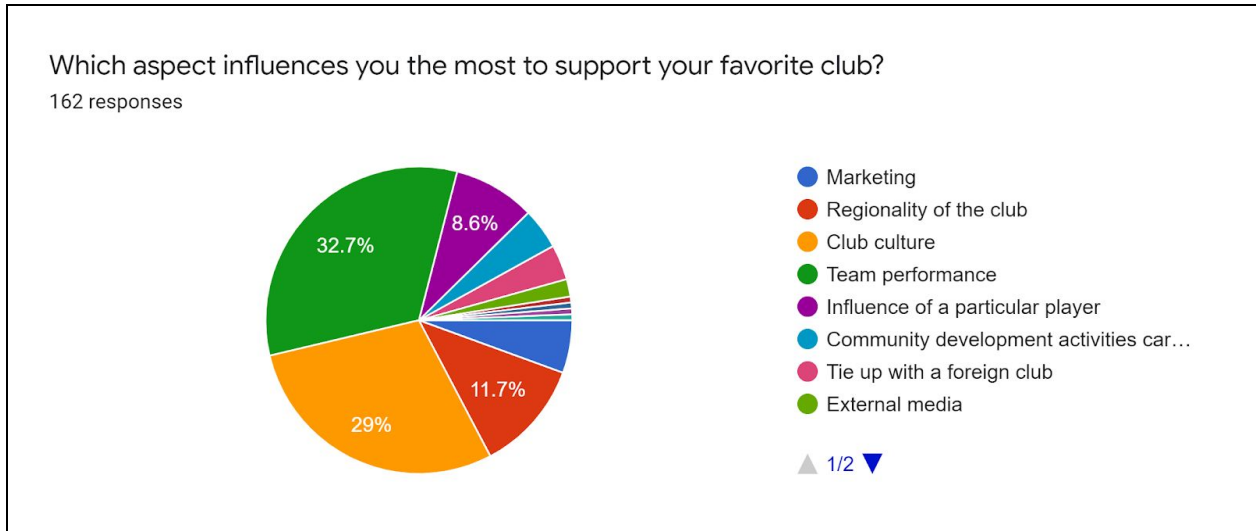


Figure 15

Fan satisfaction is derived from fan expectations as spoken about in previous chapters. To understand these expectations, football fans around the world are being influenced by multiple external factors. The most important factor influencing fan satisfaction was the performance of the team with 32.7% votes. A close second factor to this was the culture of the club with 29% votes. Regionality of the club was the third most preferred choice with 11.7% votes. With club culture(29%) and regionality(11.7%) of the clubs making 40.7% of the votes, it can be understood that the ethnicity of a fan impacts largely the reason to follow a club. Furthermore, influence of a particular player received 8.6% votes which goes to show the needs for signing high quality marquee players to improve the teams. We have already studied the impact marquee players can have on the league through the study of the Chinese football.

A number of ISL clubs have formed strategic partnerships with European clubs. How did you hear about these partnerships?

162 responses

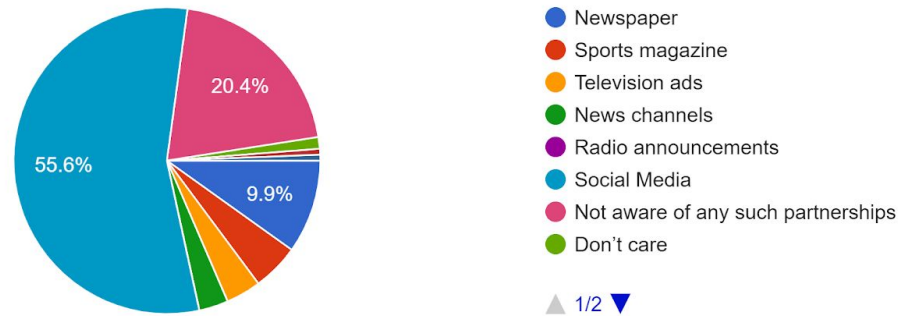


Figure 16

Moving on, the audience was asked a few questions regarding the foreign club partnerships to realise their awareness, knowledge and opinions about the same. A majority of the audience (55.6%) is aware of the partnerships through social media and 9.9% of the audience is aware of the same because of traditional newspapers. 20.4% responded that they are not aware of the club partnerships itself. This is an important point, especially for the foreign stakeholders. It is essential to understand that there is a potential market in India for the foreign clubs to exploit by partnering with the ISL clubs, but if the news of the partnership is not able to create a hype amongst fans, then it's going to be an opportunity lost. It is not possible to convert every fan, although just the news of the presence travelling to the country and reaching the fans ears is important for the foreign clubs.

The rest of the minority audience responded that they heard about the partnerships through various channels like whatsapp groups, online sports articles, television ads and through sports magazines.

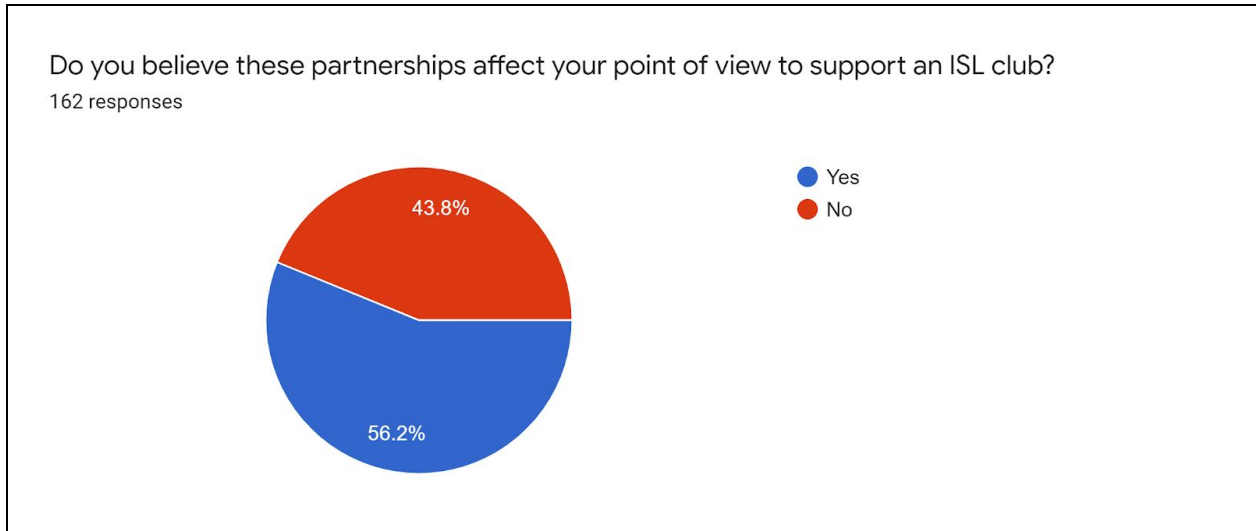


Figure 17

56.2% of the audience believes that a club partnership could affect their point of view to support a club. The other 43.8% believe that it will not make a difference to their opinions. A question was asked to the audience where they were asked to type down their favourite foreign club. The purpose of the question was to know how many survey respondents are fans of foreign clubs which have partnered with ISL teams. It turned out that there was just 1 Atletico Madrid fan and 3 Manchester City fans, out of 162 respondents, hence it makes us think that the 56.2% who think that the partnerships will affect their point of view towards an ISL club purely because of the excitement brings, possible quality improvements or any other experiences which these deals bring to the Indian market. The majority of the people who believe in the impact of these deals comes in accordance with figure 15, where we saw how various steps taken by the club can influence fans. Adding to it roughly 40% of the audience backed regionality and club culture as the only influencing factor. Naturally, if the fans are supporters of their local clubs, no foreign club partnership will be able to influence their mind and it can be mirrored in the 43.8% of the audience in figure 15.

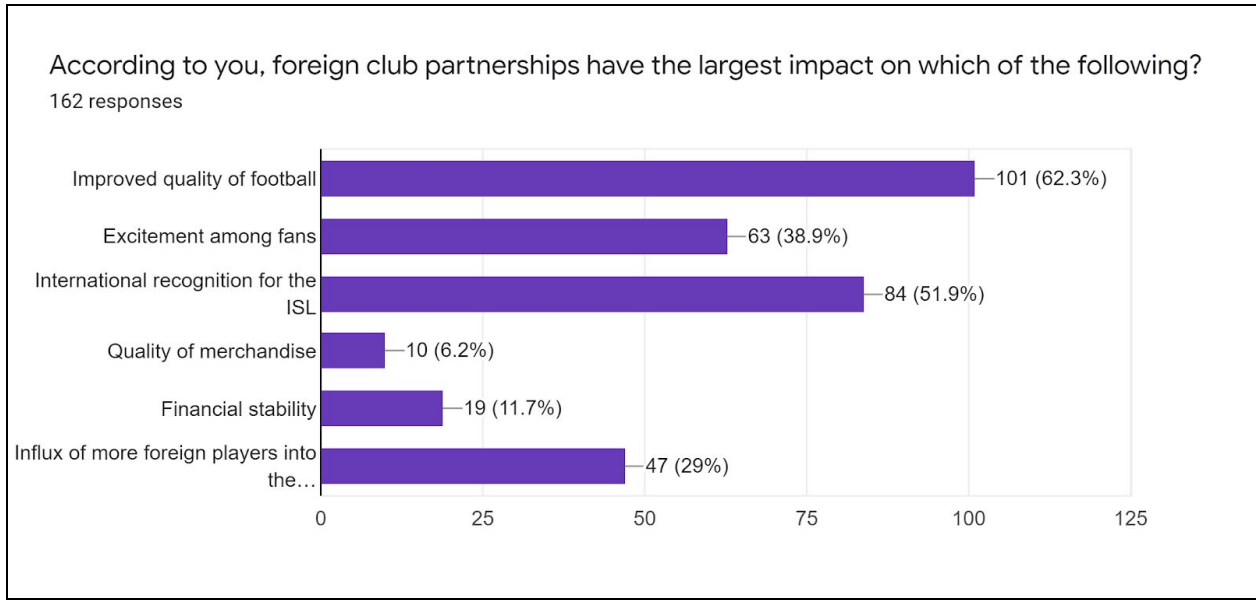


Figure 18

The fans were further asked to pick two of the above factors which they think are being most affected by foreign club partnerships. It can be seen that the fans feel that the quality of football has undergone some positive changes because of these partnerships with 101(62.3%) preferring this factor the most. 84 out of 162 (51.9%) respondents thought that the partnerships have made the ISL known on a global scale. Fans have further expressed the increase in their excitement levels as their next best factor with 63(38.9%) people voting for this aspect. To add to this, 29% of the fans believe that the partnerships have a massive impact on getting more foreign players in the league to improve the quality of the league further. Financial stability(11.7%) and quality of merchandise(6.2%) had relatively less votes compared to the rest of the factors, although there were some who believed they have been impacted as well.

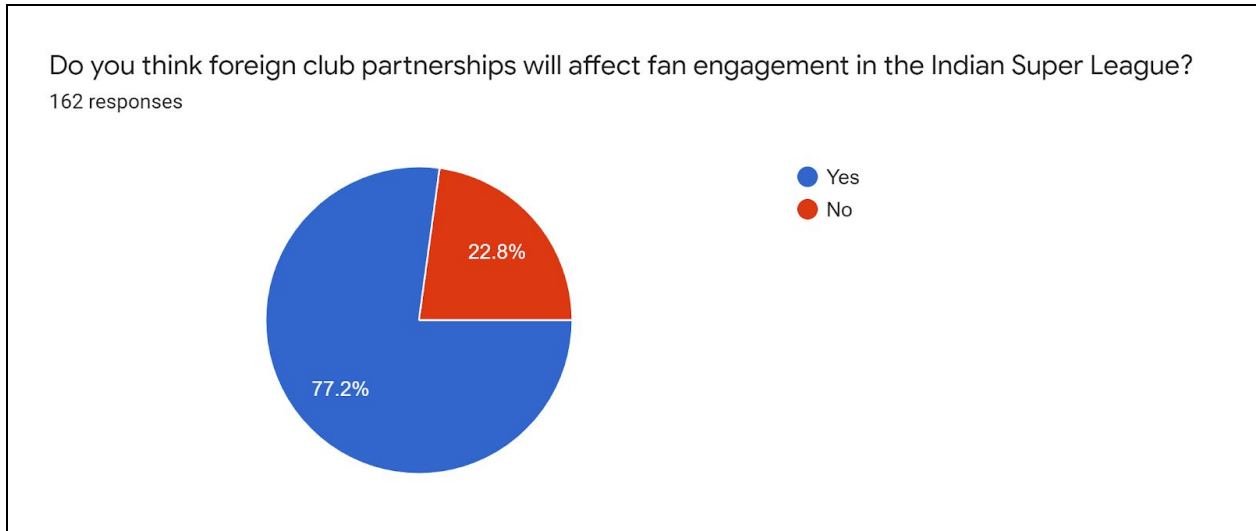


Figure 19

For the next question, it was asked what the fans thought about the partnerships affecting fan engagement. Majority of the fans (77.2%) thought that fan engagement can be affected by the foreign club partnerships, The main aspect to understand here is that there is a potential to engage fans by marketing the deals in the right manner to the right audience. However, 22.8% of the respondents claimed that it does not have any effect on the fan engagement in the ISL. This is one of the most important questions in the survey as it completes the data taken from all the previous questions. To have a large part of the respondents give positive feedback on club partnerships and their impact on fan engagement answers one of the most important questions of the research paper. It proves the relationship between fan engagement and club partnership and it is possible to establish a direct bond between the two with certain initiatives.

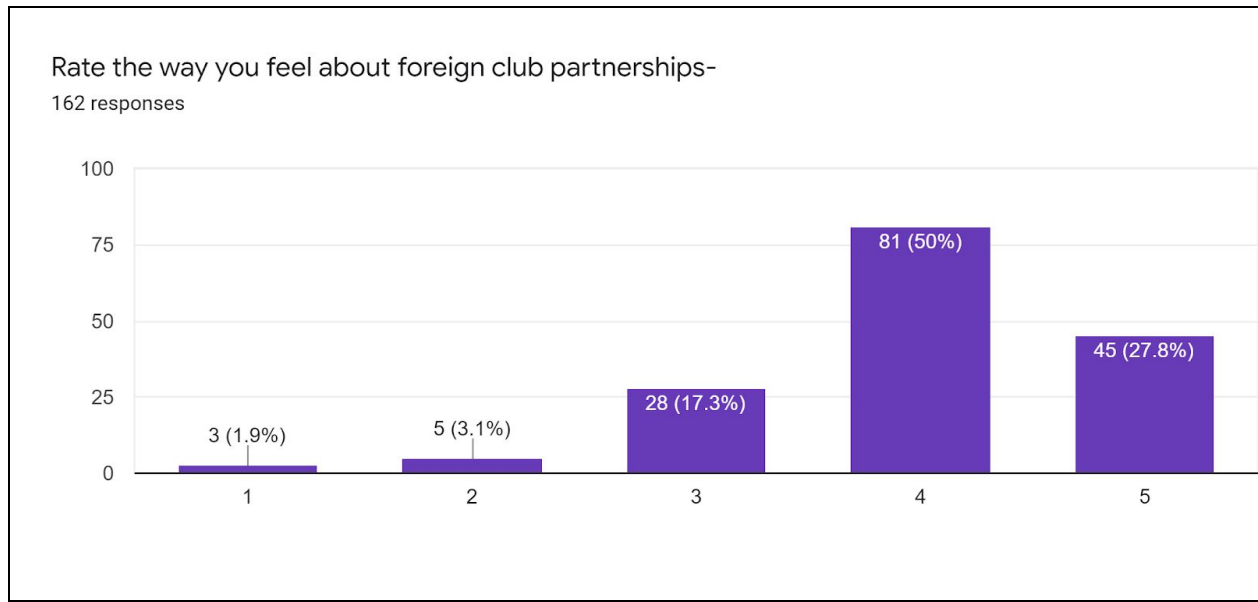


Figure 20

The public's opinions about their club expanding their horizons and going further in improving the football and sporting culture in the country shows a positive response from more than 75% of the respondents, who feel the collaboration and the partnerships with foreign clubs and clubs who have a good fan base and built foundation of operating in more than their home country not only helps the development of the particular club they support or follow, but will definitely improve the standard of football in the country on the whole. These partnerships provide a positive motive for younger athletes to explore and take up football more actively and professionally. Apart from the impact and effect the partnerships have on athletes, it shows major development promise in the aspects of technological development, better facilities and resource allocation for the development of these athletes. The partnerships with foreign clubs and well known clubs attract more fans increasing the awareness of the local clubs due to the market influence of the foreign clubs. These collaborations also prove as a potential opportunity to set up and develop the grassroot level of the sport in the country, allowing the sport to grow and be more competitive in the future.

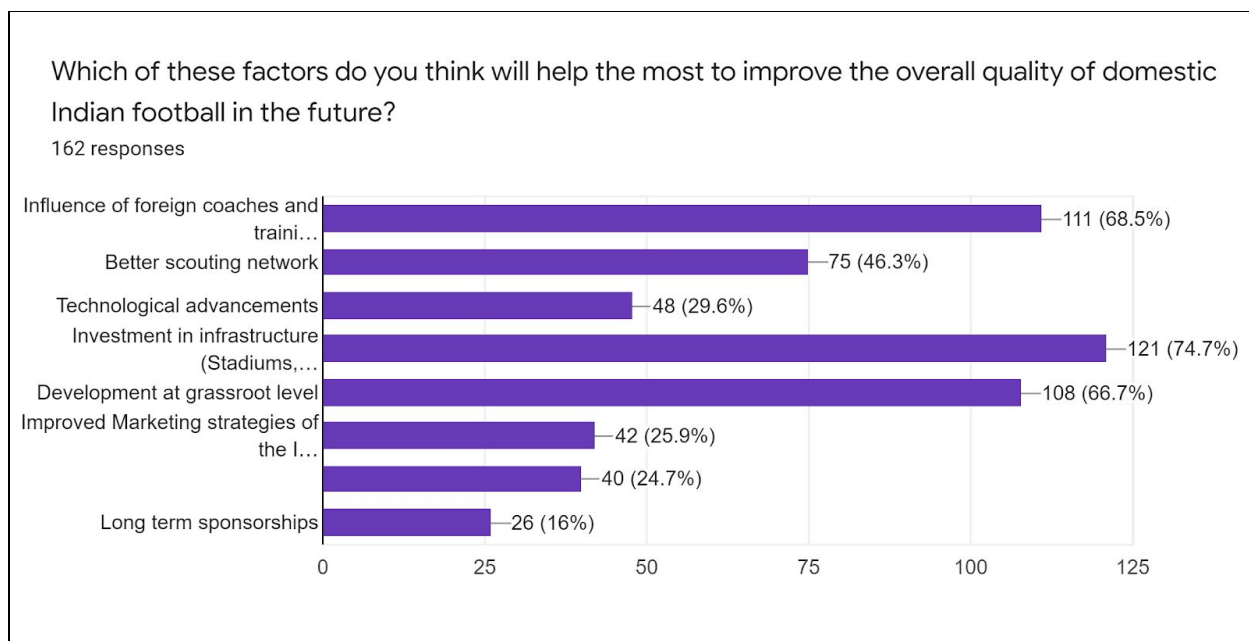


Figure 21

Given the opportunity to pick up to a maximum of 4 factors that influence and could lead to a potential development of the domestic leagues for football in the country, majority respondents feel the need for development of infrastructure, the immediate field requiring attention. 74% respondents feel the development and better allocation of resources to improve the club's infrastructure would have the best positive impact in improving the domestic leagues. Respondents who follow foreign leagues and also watch the domestic leagues in the country feel the need to bring in foreign coaches and technicians could improve the level of competition to rise up or show an upward growth to the levels of the foreign leagues. Their experience and close interaction with already established and well to do leagues, gives them the freedom to work with Indian clubs to bring them up to the same levels or similar levels as the foreign leagues. 68.5% of these respondents have similar or the same ideology regarding the influence of foreign professionals in the field. 66.7% of the respondents feel the development of grassroots level football to be the best in aspects of improving the domestic leagues, encouraging and promoting athletes to be given the right platform and facilities at a young age. 46.3% respondents also feel the importance for developing a better scouting network plays a major role in the development of the domestic leagues. Technological advancements (29.6%), improved marketing strategies (25.9%), fan engagement (24.7%) and the long term partnerships (16%) also show significant response as factors that influence and play a major role in the development of domestic leagues in the country.

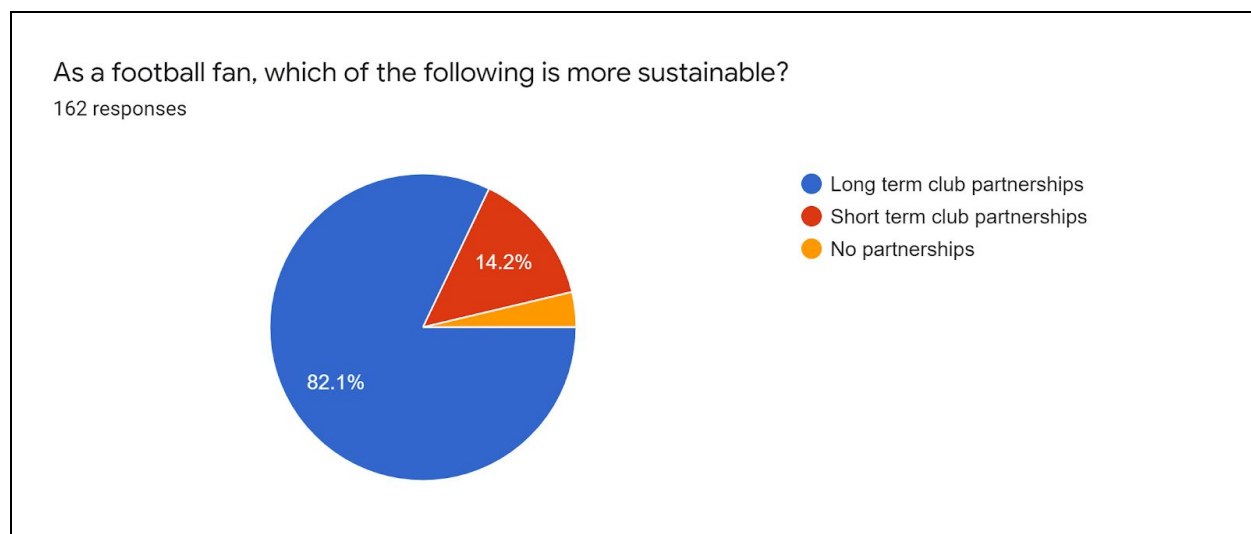


Figure 22

Last but not least, the survey audience was asked what they thought about the longevity of the foreign club partnerships to have an optimum impact on the Indian fan market. It was noted that 82.1% of the respondents chose long term club partnerships to be more sustainable in the long run over 14.2% of the respondents who chose short term club partnerships and 3.7% of them opting to have no partnerships at all. In general, short term partnerships are better for clubs which do not seek to have long term goals and feel the investment in India is just an experiment to boost their brand equity. But in my experience of sports, it has been noticed that a long term plan or project seems to reap benefits more often than short term. The constant change does not allow an organization to settle down to allow their plans to be executed but it applied pressure on the people in charge to display results. Long term plans on the other hand, take time to develop into their own and provide more stability to achieve success in the long run despite initial failures. As we have seen in the ISL, no club partnerships have lasted longer than 2-3 years. The purpose of this research is to analyse relationships between fan engagement and club partnerships and develop ideas which could lead to the improvement of the same. The vast majority of respondents who voted for long term partnerships, is a testament to the fact that fan engagement is a complex process which required years of planning and targeting the right audience. Thus, it shows that the best possible way to increase fan attraction is to give it more time to develop over the years through the concept of soft power as studied through other literatures in chapter 2.

In the final question of the survey, the respondents were asked to provide their thoughts and feedback on the development of Indian football and what methods they thought were the best to bring out optimum output. To sum up their responses, the fans believed that multiple areas of Indian football need simultaneous improvements. To start with, at least the clubs present in

the ISL should be investing to improve the quality of the stadiums, which will help them attract more fans to the stadiums to experience a good atmosphere. Many believed that the referees and sports officials should be trained more extensively to be able to perform at the highest level. One of the most talked about points was the development of football at grassroots level as the future of the country's football is the youth so it is important to give the best possible infrastructure and facilities so they are able to develop at a young age. There are a lot of talented football players in the country but they are not scouted early enough or sometimes are not scouted at all. The fans believe the need for scouting these players at grassroots level itself so they have enough time to develop on the pitch as well. Another one of the most talked about factors was the need for right marketing strategies which enforce an excitement throughout the fan base and keep them motivated to watch the sport. They believe that the ISL should analyse the marketing strategies from the world's successful leagues like the English Premier League or the La Liga and develop these strategies to suit the Indian market. Others also believe that more iconic names should be signed as it is being done in China, which will again help to bring a lot more quality to the games and subsequently increase the excitement among fans. Social media is a place where the fans are the most active and their feedback has mentioned the irregular use of social media channels by the ISL clubs and needs for improvement on the digital platforms.

Overall although the fans have given their opinions on how football can develop in India, they also believe that it is a matter of time and patience. The ISL has done well since its inception, but it is not an overnight thing but a process over a long period of time. Developments need to be targeted strategically to provide the best results in overall aspects of the sport.

Chapter 6- Conclusion and recommendations

Analysing and understanding the fan behaviour, mentality, pro-social behaviour and the thought process behind a fan's mindset that influences his/her affiliation to a league or club the author brings to the conclusion that the relationship between club partnerships and fan engagement is established and not paid enough attention to in the subcontinent of India, making club partnerships the foundation to build upon through this research. The mentality of fans in the country is based either on the success of their club or the regulatory achievements and fame the club goes on to bring to the community. Improving these communities and fan bases majorly depends on the country's approach to developing the football culture it carries and its response to the demands of fans and viewers across the country, which hopefully could go a long way to address the demands of viewers across the globe.

In response to the football culture and the development of football in the country, the respondents from the survey feel that certain factors carry more importance and influence in the development as compared to other factors. The factors, according to fans, that would experience the best improvement phases through international club partnerships can be put in order of importance as: 1. Infrastructural development of football in general, 2. Grassroots initiatives, 3. Marketing strategies. Since the inception of the Indian Super League, the league has set a foundation to build upon. The constant increase in the number of international club partnerships through the years has created a platform for teams in the ISL, and the league itself to expand its horizons by exploiting and utilising the resources of foreign clubs in Indian leagues. Through the survey, the author comes to an understanding that regular football fans feel multiple factors mentioned in the proposed model show the promise of development at the highest order for the league within the country before it attains further recognition.

The author has compared the Indian Super League to the Chinese Super League due to its rise in popularity over the last decade, as it attends to a very similar fanbase, market and follows a similar franchise model. The Chinese Super League attained fame at the highest level due to its international partnerships with clubs and their financial capability to bring in a plenty of world-known players from clubs in well-developed leagues. The ISL has brought in well-known players but at the twilight of their careers and not during their peak years, which results in a reduced intensity and level of competition that the fans find themselves disappointed compared to the European leagues. The reason the ISL has not been able to attract at the peak of their careers is due to the quality and lack of popularity of the league. The shortage of resources in the league creates a further disadvantage for the league.

It is observed that the Indian Premier League attracts a larger audience and is considered to be the best cricket league in the world despite being from the same country only because of the number of cricket fan followers and their excitement towards the sport. Following similar strategies in ISL such as fan parks, social media interaction and transparency of social life within the franchise seems to attract more fans to be a part of the club community. This further provides satisfactory evidence that there is a need to develop communities within the Indian footballing world. The international club partnerships and fan engagement are correlated with one another, as proposed in the model. The partnerships have a potential to attract more followers for the sport due to the hype it can generate in the country, vice versa increase in fan following attracts international partners due to the large market potential it carries which could boost their brand equity.

Recommendations

As studied throughout the paper, there is a large potential for development in the Indian Super League and Indian football in general. To shut down the gap in this potential market, here are a few recommendations which could be used to enhance the performance and quality of the sport in the country.

- Football club partnerships are great initiatives when it comes to bridging the gap between the quality of Indian football with that of European football. But in order to get the best out of these deals, it is important to make sure that the fans are well informed about these partnerships. Being a football fan and looking through their perspectives and adding valuable information retrieved from the conducted survey displays a lack of hype and buzz created through these deals. These are deals which should be making fans jump up with excitement to allow them to follow the sport. While the deals are done, there is a lack of clarity about what each deal aims to provide for Indian football fans.
- The ISL clubs need to start using social media in a much more effective way which makes fan interaction an important part of their digital marketing plans. Through social media, the clubs should be able to analyse their fans' prosocial behaviour and other non-transactional aspects, which are an important indicator of fan satisfaction, and eventually leads to determining the clubs brand value.
- Fans should be able to feel a part of a reason and form an emotional relationship with the club and other fellow fans. To fulfil this purpose, the clubs should come up with innovative ideas like the use of chants for every player, player interaction sessions with fans, enabling personalised merchandise and providing season tickets at discounted prices to fans, so they go to the stadiums more often than not.

- Most of the survey audience decided that they prefer to watch the games from home or a sports bar/ restaurant. If the clubs find it difficult to attract enough fans to the stadiums on matchdays, they could tie-up with sports bars or open their own sports bars in their cities. For clubs which are the only teams from their state, they have an option to open bars into other major cities in their own state where they could find a huge pool of fans who might not be able to travel cities in order to watch the games. This will help in developing fan groups at these bars/restaurants over a period of time. Fan forums and other fan platforms should be given regular content about the clubs' development and plans in order to make them reach a larger audience.
- Majority of the survey audience also believes that the partnerships are more sustainable and impactful if it is a long term goal that they wish to achieve. Having short term partnerships of less than five years is not the ideal solution to develop football, and it affects the stability of the clubs. When the people in charge of overseeing development schemes and operations are constantly changing with changes in club partnerships, it affects the linear growth line, which is obtained through long term partnerships.
- There is a major need for the development of infrastructure of football stadiums to entice football fans to come and watch the sport live. When a sport like cricket which is a game that goes on for hours can have packed stadiums with larger capacities than the football stadiums in India, then it is not impossible to find ways to attract the crowd into football stadiums. The marketing strategies and improvements in stadiums facilities should help create that interest among fans.
- The future of Indian football is in the hands of the kids who probably have not even started playing yet. It is paramount that grassroots level initiatives are given equal if not more importance to allow the budding footballers to enjoy and learn the art of football and hone their skills under the right conditions. This includes improvements in training facilities and scouting the right talent to move forward. The kids should not be allowed to worry about the injuries which they suffer at an early age, and education should be provided to these kids about nutritional and dietary habits as well.
- There is a large market potential for the fan parks, and ISL should be taking into account their massive return on investment it might attain through these ventures. Having a fan park is like having a carnival for football fans, and many would be interested if they are organised by event management professionals who have the ability to make these events a huge success.

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Survey

1. What age category do you belong to?

- Below 18
- 18-25
- 25-35
- Above 35

2. Gender-

- Male
- Female
- Other

3. Which city do you belong to?

A- _____

4. Do you follow the Indian Super League?

- Yes
- No

5. Which team from the ISL do you support?

- Mumbai City FC
- Bengaluru FC
- Chennaiyin FC
- Kerala Blasters FC
- FC Goa
- Hyderabad FC
- ATK Mohun Bagan FC
- SC East Bengal
- NorthEast United FC
- Jamshedpur FC
- Odisha FC
- None of the above

6. Which European/foreign league do you follow?

- English Premier League
- La Liga
- Bundesliga
- Serie A
- Ligue 1
- Other: _____

7. Which foreign football club do you support?

A-_____

8. Which year (approximately) did you start following your favourite foreign club?

- 1990's
- 2000's
- 2010-2015
- After 2015

9. Do you prefer watching the ISL over your favourite foreign league?

- Yes
- No

10. Why or why not?

A-_____

11. Where do you prefer to watch the football games from??

- Home
- Stadium
- Sports Bar or any other bar/restaurant

12. How often do you go to watch matches at the stadiums?

- Hardly ever
- 1-5
- 6-10
- More than 10

13. If an ISL club you support recognised you as a special fan, what would you expect from your club?

- Personalised merchandise
- Player interaction
- Free stadium tours
- Discounted tickets for games
- Other- _____

14. Which aspects influence you the most to support your favourite club?

- Marketing
- Regionality of the club
- Club culture
- Team performance
- Influence of a particular player
- Community development activities carried out by the club
- Tie up with a foreign club
- External media

15. Rate the quality of Indian football on a scale of 5-

16. A number of ISL clubs have formed strategic partnerships with European clubs. How did you hear about these partnerships?

- Newspaper
- Sports magazine
- Television ads
- News channels
- Radio announcements
- Social Media
- Not aware of any such partnerships

17. Do you believe these partnerships affect your point of view to support an ISL club?

- Yes
- No

18. According to you, foreign club partnerships have the largest impact on which of the following? (Pick any 2)

- Quality of football
- Excitement for the fans
- International vibe

- Merchandising
- Financial stability
- Influx of more foreign players into the ISL

19. Do you think foreign club partnerships will affect fan engagement in the Indian Super League?

- Yes
- No

20. Rate the way you feel about foreign club partnerships?

21. As a football fan, which of the following is more sustainable?

- Long term club partnerships
- Short term club partnerships
- No partnerships

22. Which of these factors do you think will help the most to improve the overall quality of domestic indian football in the future?

- Influence of foreign coaches and training methods
- Better scouting network
- Technological advancements
- Investment in infrastructure (Stadiums, training facilities etc)
- Development at grassroot level
- Improved Marketing strategies of the ISL (Merchandising, branding etc)
- Fan engagement strategies for the ISL
- Long term sponsorships
- Other- _____

23. Any feedback you would like to provide on the Indian football development, initiatives to be taken by the ISL to improve fan attendance and engagement, and your opinions on strategic partnerships with foreign clubs-

A- _____

