Constituents of Successful Sports Leagues in Emerging Markets

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Abstract

Purpose*: The purpose of this paper is to understand and identify the factors that contribute to the success of sports leagues in emerging sports markets.*

Design/ Methodology/ Approach*: This paper uses a mixed methodology qualitative approach. It relies on qualitative inputs from key informants through focus group discussions of sports followers and interviews of experts from sports domain such as team officials, league administrators, etc. The research is further supplemented by secondary data from scholarly articles on related subjects and media reports pertaining to the phenomenon under study.*

Findings*: Based on the inputs from key informants and prior research, this research identifies fan acceptability as a measure of success for leagues in the early stage of their development. Findings of the research indicate that the success of leagues is dependent upon the sport and its fan base, national team performance for that sport, design of the league, quality of players, initiatives to build fan experience, relationship of league with relevant sports federation and involvement of celebrities in the league.*

Originality/ Value*: Sports leagues are appearing for the first time in many new sports markets, especially in developing countries. It is possibly the first study that has been carried out to understand sports leagues in initial phases of development and to identify factors that contribute to their success. Almost all previous studies on this subject are restricted to North American or European market, this study is one of the few ones conducted in an emerging sports markets. This study identifies some novel factors such as role of celebrities and relationship between leagues and national federations and enhances the current understanding of leagues.*

Implication/ limitations*: A number of sports leagues are being started in emerging sports markets. The findings of the research have implications for academicians who want to study the complex dynamics of sports leagues as well as practitioners who wish to apply these findings to improve the chances of success of their leagues. The study is done in India and can be improved if data from other emerging markets is also incorporated.*

Keywords: *Sports leagues, sports marketing, sports industry, sports stars, success factors*

Paper type*: Research paper*

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1. Introduction

The last decade has seen large growth in the sports industry, as there has been a rise in marketing of sports as well as rise in sports being used for marketing (Fullerton and Merz, 2008). Development of sports has also received support from the governments as it is said to increase societal and economic welfare of the country, as well as a chance to promote the nation on a global front (Nauright, 2004). Another reason for such growth is increased economic activity associated with sports, which involves leveraging sports to market goods, as well as marketing of sports itself to create consumer (fan) value. As per AT Kearney report (Collignon, Sultan and Santander, 2011), the sports industry in both mature and emerging economies has been growing at a rate faster than the GDP. As of 2011, the size of the industry was estimated at 620 billion US$ growing at a rate of 6%. While the sports industry has traditionally been strong in the developed countries of North America and Europe, lately, a major push has been coming from the emerging markets. As per AT Kearney report (Collignon, Sultan and Santander, 2011) on the sports market, all the BRIC nations have shown impressive growth (India-17%, China-20%, Brazil-7% and Russia- 53%). The growth of sports in developing countries has also been marked with the rise of sports leagues in several sports. These newly emerging leagues, besides providing recreation for fans and opportunity to new players, also present an opportunity to create new businesses and economic value for all the stakeholders.

The professional sports leagues have achieved great level of success in North America (US and Canada) and Europe, with leagues like MLB, NBA, NFL, NHL, EPL etc. commanding worldwide popularity. Over the years, these leagues have inspired multiple sports leagues in developing nations. In the last decade, a number of sports leagues have started in emerging nations such as India, South Africa, Sri Lanka, etc. In India alone, in the last decade, about ten different sports leagues have started across seven different sports and at least another four are expected to start by 2015 (refer Table 1). Some of these leagues such as Indian Premier League (IPL) have enjoyed tremendous success, while some others such as Indian Cricket League (ICL) and Premier Hockey League (PHL) have shut down. The other leagues have had varying level of success in generating fan support, sponsorships and interest of team owners and in achieving financial sustainability and profitability.

Sports leagues have been an important area of research, with interesting studies on league structures (Andreff, 2011), revenue sharing models (Peeters, 2012), brand relationships between leagues and teams (Kunkel, Funk and Hill 2013), competitive balance (Mongeon and Winefree, 2013) etc. However, there has been little research on the range of factors that can lead to success of a league. One possible reason why this topic has not received much attention is possibly the fact that most of the existing research in this domain has focussed on North American and European leagues. An ideal study on factors that drive the success of leagues should be able to observe leagues in various phases of development i.e. from inception to maturity and possibly compare leagues within the same environmental context. However, the leagues in North America and Europe are fairly matured and these contexts do not provide an adequate sample of leagues that are in different phases of development. Also, the authors could not find any significant

research on sports leagues outside Europe and North America or any research which studies the leagues in the crucial phase of initial development.

This research is aimed at studying sports leagues in developing countries and to identify the factors that help drive the success of leagues among fans. More specifically, this research focuses on initial stages of a league development i.e. from design (conceptualization) stage to early maturity stage (less than ten year old). The study of the initial stages of a league is relevant because this is possibly the most important phase when interventions can have a significant impact, and also when the perception of fans, sponsors, media, players etc are shaped. So, if the league is not well received in initial stages, the chances of achieving success are reduced. On the other hand, once a league reaches maturity stage, interventions may not have a large impact.

India is chosen as a setting for this research as the country, with a number of new leagues, provides a rich context for the study. A number of new leagues in India have started in last decade, while all of them are just a few years old, there are some interesting differences. While some of the leagues are in infancy, few others are already defunct and there are few which seem to have attained some degree of maturity. Also, in India, different sports are followed by specific segments of population and each sport is going towards the path of professional sports leagues at its own pace, and this also allows the researchers to draw interesting insights by comparing across these different leagues. Moreover, as per Beinhocker, Farrell and Zainulbhai (2007), it is estimated that in India, the proportion of spending by average household on education and recreation will go from 5% to 9% from 2005 to 2025. This, coupled with the rise in middle-class segment (from 4% to 41% in 2005 to 2025), will present a huge opportunity for business of sports to cater to recreational needs of such a large population. Hence, these situational parameters in India provide a unique opportunity to understand the dynamics of sports leagues. Finally, development of leagues in an emerging country like India poses challenges unique to countries with similar environments (like infrastructure facilities, professional sports as viable career options etc.). A study in this context helps generalize the findings to other similar contexts. The authors hope that researchers and practitioners can build upon this study to understand the intricacies of sports leagues in changing environments.

The structure of the rest of the paper is as follows. First, we provide a context of the Indian landscape of sports leagues, which facilitates the understanding of the paper. This is followed by literature review in the related domain. Subsequent to this, there is a description of the research methodology. Next, the detailed findings are presented along with propositions. Lastly, theoretical and managerial implications are discussed, along with limitations, suggestions for future research and conclusions.

2. Context:

The research context of this study is the professional sports leagues in India. To appreciate the findings, it is important that an understanding of the research context is developed. Accordingly, this section provides a brief overview of the Indian sports landscape by describing the developments in key sports and important professional leagues in those sports.

India, with a population of 1.2 billion, is the second most populous country in the world and seventh largest country by area. Such a large population has interests in various sports. India is home to few traditional sports like *Kabadd[i]i*, *Kho Kho[ii]* etc. The other major sports that are followed in India are Cricket, Hockey, Football, Badminton, and Tennis. Sports industry in India has started to grow with development of overall economy and rise in education and income levels of Indian society. This development is marked by the growth of sports industry and rise of sports leagues. A brief overview of major sports in India, and the leagues operating within the sports, is as follows:

Hockey- Hockey has a rich tradition in India and has been played at various levels as a part of national tournaments. Popularity of Hockey started declining from 1970s due to rise of cricket and poor performance of national team in international events. A number of different leagues have started in Hockey. Premier Hockey League was started in 2005 but stopped operating in 2008. World Series Hockey was started in 2012. These leagues were able to attract fans as they presented a more exciting format through minor rule changes (for penalty shootouts, four quarters instead of two halves) and better packaging. However, they failed to sustain the interest, and the reasons for the failure of these leagues are largely attributed to the fact that there are two rival hockey national federations which were involved in disputes and this affected the participation of players in the leagues. Hockey India League, started in 2013 by Hockey India (National Federation), has run for two seasons and has performed better than the two earlier leagues and has enjoyed a sustained response from the fans and sponsors.

Cricket- Cricket is the most popular sport in India and has a large fan following. The first league, Indian Cricket League (ICL) was started by Zee group, a TV broadcast company. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), the national federation of Cricket, did not endorse ICL and banned the players contracted with BCCI to play in ICL. It also exerted pressure on International Cricket Council (ICC), the intentional cricket federation, to stop other national federations (NFs) from supporting ICL. ICL closed in 2008, three years after it started. The Indian Premier League (under aegis of BCCI) launched in India in 2007 changed the face of professional leagues in India and its success has inspired a number of other professional leagues across the country. It has been able to attract the best foreign players from across the globe. As cricket has a busy international season, one of the concerns related to IPL has been its scheduling, so as to allow cricketers from various countries to take part in tournament.

Football- Football has been a fairly popular game in India. I-League was started in 2007 by All India Football Federation (AIFF) to replace National Football League which had run for 10 seasons without success. I-league has two divisions and does not have salary caps. The league has been criticized for the fact that the teams are concentrated in select pockets. The popularity of the league has been low. Indian Super League, expected to start from October 2014, is the result of a partnership between AIFF, Reliance Industries Limited and International Management Group. It will be played with 10 teams. The league, even before it started, has received lot of media coverage because of signing of well known foreign players and the presence of celebrities.

Kabaddi - Kabaddi is a contact sport that originated in India and has travelled to other countries in the region. Eight international teams participated in the 2014 Asian Games at Incheon, South Korea. The game is fairly popular in the rural areas of India. The Indian national team has been dominating the event and has won ever since the game was included in the Asian Games in 1990. Pro *Kabaddi* League (PKL) was started in 2014 with eight teams from different cities. The league is supported by the national and international *Kabaddi* federations. It follows a system of salary caps and the teams are owned by owners who are a mix of people from industry, movies, and sports businesses. The first season of PKL enjoyed unprecedented viewership and support of fans. Another league in *Kabaddi*, World *Kabaddi* league is expected to be played between 14 teams across 4 countries. A number of movie stars own teams in this league.

Badminton- The popularity of badminton saw an upsurge in India as a result of emergence of some world class players. Indian Badminton League is managed commercially by a sports management firm and has the backing of Badminton Association of India. It started in 2013 and was fairly popular as it was able to attract some foreign players including the men's world number one, but was not able to get some of the best Chinese players. The tournament has been facing scheduling issues with other international tournaments.

Table 1 presents a summary of professional sports leagues in India.

Name of Sports League (Sports)	Year of Inception	Status
Premier Hockey League (Hockey)	2005	Closed in 2008 after three seasons
I-League (Football)	2007	Finished 7 seasons
Indian Cricket League (Cricket)	2007	Defunct
Indian Premier League (Cricket)	2008	Finished 7 seasons
Super Fight League (Mixed martial arts)	2012	One season held, current status uncertain
World Series Hockey	2012	Closed in 2013 before the second season
Hockey India League (Hockey)	2013	Completed two seasons
Indian Badminton League (Badminton)	2013	One season completed, second season facing scheduling issues
Pro *Kabaddi* League (*Kabaddi*)	2014	First season held
Indian Super League(Football)	October 2014	First season to start
Indian Wrestling League (Wresting)	Nov 2014*	First season to start
International Premier Tennis League (Lawn Tennis)	Nov 2014*	First season to start

Name of Sports League (Sports)	Year of Inception	Status
World *Kabaddi* league	2014	First season to start
Pro Basketball League (Basketball)	Sept 2015*	First season to start

Table1. Major Indian sports leagues and respective year of inception (*Expected launch dates)

3. Literature review

Sports business has witnessed significant changes in last few decades. Globalization has fuelled a shift in dynamics of sports industry, with the rise of developing countries as major stakeholders (Gupta, 2009). Sports provide a unique opportunity for internationalization as it surpasses the barriers of verbal communication and provide common language for communication (Ratten, 2011). Apart from providing common appeal to mass public, sports business also add significant economic and societal value (Madichie, 2013). Ashton, Gerrard and Hudson (2011) studied links between national sporting successes and its economic impact. The impact of sports on tourism, human capital development and infrastructure has been studied by many researchers (Kurtzman,2005; Shmanske, 1992; Jones, 2001; Baade, 1990), and because of such variety of influences, the governments have actively sought sports as a means of development and a way to highlight nation's capability (Nauright, 2004). Sports contribute to nations in their economic, social, cultural and political developments (Houlihan and White, 2002) and performance in sports at international level has become a matter of national and political prestige (Čustonja and Škorić, 2011). Apart from being an economic engine, sports business also provides opportunity for entrepreneurial ventures (Ratten, 2011) by providing platform for innovation and value creation. This has also been emphasized that sports (as a business) has now matured to be systematically studied and should not be relegated only to sociology or psychology (Madichie, 2009). It has been felt that this academic discipline is under studied and prominent researchers have emphasized that more research needs to be done in this domain.

Sports leagues provide a rich context for research and there have been a number of studies in this domain. Most of the work has examined the difference between the various types of league formats. Andreff (2011) investigated the differences between open and closed system of leagues and studied the impact of structure on overall economic outcomes. Similarly, there is also research on the extent of social welfare created by profit-maximizing and win-maximizing leagues (Deitl, Lang and Werner, 2009). Cyrenne (2009), in an interesting research, compared sports leagues with industrial organizations from the perspective of market structure, labor, compensation etc. Revenue sharing is an important aspect of the league's financial structure. Models of revenue sharing between league and teams have been studied by Peeters (2012) which highlights the cartelization of game by successful leagues. Such league structures can also lead to problems of overinvestment (and hence poor financial management), depending upon balance of competition, exogenous prizes etc (Dietl, Franck and Lang, 2008). The impact of several revenue

sharing policies on competitive balance has also been studied by Feess and Stahler (2009) where authors emphasize the relation between competitive balance and revenue sharing. Apart from revenue sharing models, research on spending and its relation to promotion/ relegation of teams in open system of league has been studied by Jasina and Rotthoff (2012). Likewise, models proposed by several researchers (El-Hodiri and Quirk, 1971; Quirk and El-Hodiri, 1974; Fort and Quirk, 1995; Vrooman,1995; Szymanski, 2003; Szymanski and Kesenne , 2004) have added to the literature related to sports marketing in the areas of salary caps, revenue sharing, competitive balance, economic competition etc.

Marketing aspects of sports leagues have also attracted the attention of researchers. The research by Kunkel, Funk and Hill (2013) highlights the brand relationships between the parent league and associated teams. It emphasizes the need of complementary association between brands of leagues and teams. Further work done by Kunkel, Funk and King (2014) identifies several brand associations that are attributed to sports leagues. Moreover, it was found that consumers of major and minor leagues have different preferences and cognizance of such differences can help leagues be more effective in reaching out to their consumers (Robinson and Deschiver, 2003). The aspect of merchandising and revenue management from ticket sales has been studied by Titlebaum and Lawrence (2010) and Kelley, Harrolle and Casper (2014) respectively. There are studies that have examined competitive dynamics across leagues. Robinson (2012) studied the allegiance behavior of fans for European football teams, showing that allegiance is not restricted to teams within leagues but also across leagues. Moreover, there is research to suggest that competitive dynamics across leagues influence fans loyalty and fans substitute preferences across leagues (Winfree, 2009;   Rascher et al.,2009). Winfree, McCluskey, Mittelhammer and Fort (2004) studied the impact of new league introduction in a city to current attendance levels

There has also been some research on other aspects of sports leagues. The impact of league structure on team efforts, persistence etc. has been studied by Medcalfe (2009). The aspect of scheduling and optimization of various time and distance variables has been studied by Nurmi et al (2010). Moreover, the problem of corruption and match fixing has always haunted sports. The reasons and facilitating factors that induce and promote corruption in sports leagues was illustrated in work of Hill (2010).

While there is research that supports that there is a degree of competition across leagues, there is very little literature on what contributes to success of leagues. Mongeon and Winfree (2013), suggested only one such aspect, that the consumer loyalty to particular league is dependent on competitive balance between teams, as well as level of cross ownership of teams across leagues.

A detailed literature review on sports leagues indicates that there are some topics which have not received sufficient attention. The research on factors that contribute to success of a sport league, especially in crucial phase of initial development, has not received as much attention as it deserves. Secondly, most of the studies have been set in a North American or a European context

and the emerging sports markets have largely been ignored. Thus, looking at such research gaps, this paper attempts to add to current body of knowledge by systematically studying such factors.

4. Research Methodology

The study is exploratory in nature and therefore follows a qualitative methodology. It uses a mixed method approach based on in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with key informants (sports fans, experts from sports industry such as managers from leagues, team officials, sports journalists and media houses). The findings were also supplemented with secondary data gathered from news articles, cases on sports leagues, internet and various industry reports.

The insights were gathered through in-depth interviews with experts in the field. The experts were involved with sports leagues in different capacities and had an in-depth understanding of the subject. There were two reasons to involve expert as informants in the study. Firstly, they had an in-depth understanding of sports league fans and would be able to add to the findings from the fans. Also, the insights of the experts would help to triangulate and validate the insights from sports fans. A total of eight in-depth interviews were carried out. The sample had administrators from two different sports leagues, two team officials from different leagues, vice-president of the largest sports broadcaster in India, sports journalist from a TV news company, national director in India for sports, entertainment and live events of one of the major media investment companies and the Indian vice president of a global FMCG company in India that is a major sports sponsor in India and across the world. The respondents were selected using a snowballing technique (Goodman, 1961).

Moreover, to get an understanding about sports consumers, insights were gathered from a sample of sports fans. The sports fans were recruited from business school students who were taking part in a marketing festival at a well-known business school in India. A total of twenty four students (in six groups) who were taking part in a competition related to sports marketing were recruited. These students identified themselves as sports fans and had done substantial research on sports leagues as part of the competition. The students were requested to share (as a group) their understanding of sports leagues in India, identify some of the successful and unsuccessful leagues and share the reasons that made a league successful. These observations were recorded by the authors. The findings were also supplemented by a focus group discussion of six sports fans in which they discussed about the factors that lead to the success of leagues. Another set of eight separate in-depth interviews was conducted with another set of sports fans. These sports fans were selected using a snowballing technique (Goodman, 1961). The interviews were continued till a theoretical saturation was reached (Glaser and Strauss, 2009)

Moreover, extensive secondary data regarding inception, development and maturation of several sports leagues in different sports was collected from news articles and online sources. Subsequent to all insight collection, all the probable factors were listed down for further synthesis. It was the

attempt of authors that all items, when combined, produce an exhaustive list of possible factors. These factors were then segregated into different categories based on relatedness and similarity.

5. Findings

The qualitative inputs shared by key informants provided rich insights for the phenomenon under study. The intent of this research is to identify the factors related to the success of sports leagues, but in the absence of measures related directly to the success of leagues in early stage, we first define the success and then we work towards identifying the factors. The findings are divided into two parts, in the first part, we report the findings related to the definition of success of league in early phases from the perspective of fans and experts. In the second part, we discuss the findings related to the factors that impact the success of sports leagues.

5.1 Success of Sports Leagues

Before the factors related to the success of a sports league are identified, it is important to define the success of the league. Defining the success of sports leagues is complex, as it can have various dimensions like profitability, fan following, sponsorship etc. Moreover, there is no consensus on any parameter among academicians and practitioners. For mature leagues, financial stability is easy to evaluate but for leagues which are in the early stage of their lifecycle, this assessment of league's success is not easy. Given the paucity of literature on emerging leagues, we decided to rely on the experts to help define the success of the league and this was supplemented by inputs from fans.

5.1.1 Experts

The experts had a greater understanding of leagues, had access to relevant facts and were conversant with data related to the leagues. However, the experts conceded that defining success of leagues (in initial phases) based on financial figures was premature. They opined that the key to the success of a sports league were the fans and the success of the league was dependent on the league's acceptability to the fans. Once a league had a loyal and a large base of fans, this would automatically impact various revenue streams through gate money, broadcast rights and sponsorships etc. Essentially the experts suggested that in the early stage of a league, the fan's acceptability of the league was a good predictor of the success of the league. The experts felt that the leagues differed in the way fans had accepted them and thus different leagues had varying level of success. The experts also classified various leagues on their degrees of success.

5.1.2 Fans

Sports fans are aware of a large number of leagues, with most fans claiming to be aware of at least 7-8 leagues. However, they also differ in how they relate to different leagues. For some leagues, a fan may just have a minimal knowledge but for other leagues there is almost a religious following. Remaining leagues fall somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. The fans were

asked to indicate the degree to which the fans had accepted various sports leagues and engaged with them. The fans indicated the degree of acceptability of various sports leagues based on their personal experiences. The fan ratings of the degree of acceptability of various leagues mapped strongly with the extent of success as indicated by the experts. Fans were also asked to share their perceptions on the success of various leagues. Even though the fans lacked concrete facts about various sports leagues in terms of financials, profits, size of sponsorships, etc. they were still able to make observations related to the success of leagues. The decision was easy for the leagues which had ceased to exist and all such leagues (Indian Cricket League, Premier Hockey League) were termed as failure. However, even for the other leagues that were in existence, fans were able to make confident observations based on a mix of personal experiences, media coverage and discussions within like-minded community. Moreover, the assessment was not biased by the leagues that the fans followed, i.e. a fan who did not follow Pro *Kabaddi* League claimed that the league was a successful league based on overall observations. Therefore, the assessment of the success of leagues was based on the fans perception of the degree to which the league had been accepted by the fans.

There was a remarkable convergence on the experts' and the fans' perceptions related to how the leagues had been generally accepted by the fans. Both the experts and the fans concluded that Premier Hockey League and Indian Cricket League were failure, agreed that Indian Premier League and Pro *Kabaddi* League were successes and other leagues fell in between. I-league was rated as being closer to a failure whereas Hockey India League and Indian Badminton League were termed as mild successes.

The findings above indicate that during the early stage of a league, a good measure of the success of a league is the degree of fan acceptability. It is also intuitive as fan acceptability is precursor to all other factors like profitability, sponsorships, media attention, sustainability etc. Hence, if a league is able to generate high fan acceptability, other parameters of success will follow. Moreover, the interviews and focus group discussions indicated that the leagues differed significantly in acceptability among fans. Thus, the parameter of fan acceptability was observable as well as differentiable among various leagues.

Based on the above finding, it can be proposed that:

P1: During the early stage of a sports league, the success of a sports league is dependent upon the fan acceptability of the league. More is the fan acceptability; higher are the chances of success of the league.

5.2 Factors that make a League Successful

The insights from the key informants provided a number of factors related to what drives the success or the fans acceptability of leagues. A number of different factors were identified these have been classified under six different categories.

5.2.1 The 'Sport' in the League

There are two findings related to the sport with which the league is involved.

5.2.1.1 Fan base for the Sport

All the sports are not equally popular, it was seen that fans that played a particular sport currently or in their childhood were more likely to be a fan of that sports league. Thus, people who currently played Cricket or had played it in their childhood were more likely to be a fan of Indian Premier League (a cricket league). The connect to league became easy when the fans could relate to the sport as a personal experience. The experts also supported that a sports league was more likely to succeed when the sport has a large base of population playing that sport. A sport with low penetration would need to build awareness, and spend much more time to attract fans and thus, the league operating in such a sport will struggle.

The analysis of the current leagues also indicated the impact of fans and player base on specific sports. In India, Cricket, undoubtedly, has the largest number of followers and players as the game is played all across the country. As such, Indian Premier League tends to have the largest fan base and is considered to be the most successful league in the country. The Pro *Kabaddi* League (PKL) has been one of the surprises as it generated record viewership. On the very first day, PKL attracted 22 million viewers, ten times the number of viewers who tuned in to the first match of the recently concluded FIFA World Cup. Also, within twelve hours, PKL related issues received 150 million impressions on Twitter along with substantial Facebook activity (Malvania, 2014). The experts indicated that one of the reasons for the success of the PKL was the fact that though the sport was not as popular as cricket, it enjoyed immense popularity in rural India and also had a following in urban India.

5.2.1.2 Performance of National team/stars in the Sport

The performance of the national team or the national stars was a strong factor in attracting fans to leagues. Fans indicated that they were more likely to watch a sports league when the Indian team or the Indian stars were doing well at international level. The experts also supported that the fan interest in leagues was dependent on the performance of the national team for that particular sports. Fans were not as enthusiastic towards Hockey league as the Indian team had not been doing well in recent times. On the other hand, they followed IPL as the Indian Cricket team had been doing well. Even in Badminton, for the Indian Badminton League fans, one of the reasons to follow the league was that the league had some Indian stars that were doing really well at the global stage and had generated their interest in the sports. National team performance/ National stars bring forth the sport in front of Nation's consciousness and hence make it easier for large population to connect to league.

The findings suggest that number of fans and the intensity of engagement are dependent on the number of people who play or follow that sport and the performance of the national team. It is

pertinent to note that both these factors may not be under the control of the league. However, the first factor becomes important for managers when the choice for a particular sports league is made and they may also need to be sensitive to the second factor.

So, the following propositions are in order:

P2: Higher the fan base of a sport; more the fan base for the leagues of that sport.

P3: Better the performance of the national team of a particular sport; higher the acceptability of that league.

5.2.2 Design of League

The design elements of the leagues can have a large influence on the acceptability of the league among fans.

5.2.2.1 Salary structure

Sports leagues can be classified on the basis of the salary structure. Globally, leagues are classified as ones that have salary caps (most of the North American leagues, MLB NHL etc.) and the ones which do not have salary caps (most of the European leagues, EPL). All the leagues in India have a salary cap structure. The experts (at least three of them were involved in the design of the league from inception) indicated that while there were merits and demerits to both the systems, one of the most important aspect for any league was competition. Salary caps tend to distribute talent across teams and therefore result in a high level of competition. Healthy competition plays a vital role in longevity of league as it improves the quality of basic product i.e. the sport, hence offering fans a strong reason to continue the association. The fans were aware of the salary caps for the teams but were generally unaware of the alternative salary structures (i.e. no salary caps). They were also aware of player auctions and associated it with salary caps. The fans identified player auctions as a key attribute of the leagues and also claimed that these auctions generated interest before the start of the season. The experts from the media also supported the role of salary caps and auctions. Thus, the salary cap serves two functions for the leagues: first, it results in even competition resulting in good quality sports in the league and second: it also creates excitement even before the games start.

5.2.2. 2 Team Location

India, with a big geographical spread and a large population, provides rich opportunities to choose team locations. Two important aspects related to team locations emerged. Firstly, a team representing a particular region commands strong fan following from that region. There was high fan intensity when teams from regions which were known to be strong competitors (in socio, cultural, geographic aspects) competed. The fans and the experts indicated that having teams from distinct regions helped in forming fan affiliation for the teams and also drove the intensity of fan following during matches with rival teams. Secondly, creating regional teams can help in the

'character building' of the teams. Thus, regional team locations enable association with fans of that particular region, resulting in captive fan base while also providing a competitive spark with respect to other regional teams.

5.2.2. 3 Game Format

Another theme that emerged was related to the format of the game. Fans tend to appreciate novelty in the game format. In the Indian leagues, typically, this has been done by making changes in the game duration, breaks between the games, or by packaging innovations for the game such as rock bands, cheer leaders etc. The experts agreed that the format of game in the leagues needed change vis-à-vis the traditional format. This helped differentiate the league, generated fan discussions and improved awareness. However, they also indicated that the changes should not be so radical that they turn off the hard core sports fans that do not identify with the game anymore. Also, they preferred minor alterations related to the breaks and packaging rather than rule changes. Rule changes make it difficult for people to understand and follow the game, cause confusion and alienate the fans. Moreover, breaks between the games are helpful for the TV broadcasters, and even within the stadium, this time could be used to create an engaging environment for the fans. Packaging the game through exciting innovative themes and other contests around the game, was considered helpful as it did not turn off the purists and was able to attract the fun loving crowd. In India, many leagues have adopted such innovations. While most of them have retained the basic nature of the game, they have tweaked around it through breaks, minor changes in rules etc.

5.2.2.4 Scheduling and Timing of Games

Another important factor that emerged during the research was the importance of timing and scheduling of games. The fans indicated that an important consideration in following a game was the timing of the match. Weekend games and prime time slots generated larger following. However, some leagues were unable to adhere to these slots due to multiple factors (improper planning, over-crowded schedule, lack of artificial lights). The experts also indicated that the scheduling impacted the gate attendance, viewership, and sponsorship. They also indicated that the Indian leagues were still leaning the art of scheduling matches and it would take some time before they achieved a level of expertise on this. Finally, the timing of league in a calendar of sports events was also a factor in the following of a league. The fans as well as the experts suggested that the timing of other sports events had an impact on the leagues. Major sports events not only took away the audience but also affected the participation of sports stars in the leagues. The league should be well spaced between other major events of particular sport. This ensures that any prospective clash with major events is avoided and availability of players and fans is secured.

Based on the findings above, it can be proposed that:

P4: Salary cap for teams makes the league more competitive and attracts more fans.

P5: Locating teams at regional levels has a positive impact on the engagement of fans with the league.

P6: Fans respond positively to minor changes in the game format but are alienated by major changes.

P7: The timing and scheduling of games can impact the success of the league.

5.2.3 Players

Players are the heart of any league and the quality of players involved in the league can significantly affect its success and acceptability among fans.

5.2.3.1 Top Class talent

Top class talent (i.e. top players) emerged as a strong success driver for a league. They increase visibility of the league, improve competitive intensity and attract fans, sponsors and media. The fans tend to have an attachment with top stars and follow them passionately. To draw top class players in the league, a number of leagues have a system where they identified specific players as Icon/Marquee players. These players received high base price for auction (e.g. Indian Badminton League), or they are sold at a premium over auction price of other players (Indian Premier League). Sports leagues which lack top stars are not likely to attract fans. A top class talent does not mean the best talent available in the country; rather it implies talent comparable to the best in the world. Fans indicated that one of the reasons they followed a league was to watch top class players. As a specific illustration, fans indicated that they would rather watch club football from Europe (which has the best football talent) rather than the I-League (Football League) which has only Indian players. The experts were also unanimous that the star players were able to transfer some of their popularity to the teams and parent league.

The now defunct Indian Cricket League was not able to attract the fans as the players were retired or were on the verge of retiring. It also had players who could not make it to the national team and hence had little visibility and popularity. Even the I-League (Football League) has not been able to have the sustained interest from fans although the players are said to be best in India as they don't match to global standards. Recently launched Pro Kabaddi League has received great success and availability of the top class talent which contributed to its success (India, being the world champions in *Kabaddi*, is home to the best players in the world).

5.2.3.2 Foreign Players

Another strategy that has been adopted by the leagues in India is to get foreign players to come and play in the Indian leagues. Getting foreign players increases the visibility of the league at an international level, enhances perception and improves the competition. The fans indicated that the presence of foreign players helped in generating interest and giving the league a global status. A popular foreign player also attracts his/her fans to the league. The experts also supported that the

presence of foreign players benefitted the league in multiple ways. It lifted the competition, resulted in global coverage, and gave a strong positive perception to the league. Presence of foreign players specially helps when the country does not have the best global talent. For example, the Indian Badminton League, Hockey India League and the Indian Super League have got foreign players to help raise the level of the competition as well as to raise the stature of the league. Even the Indian Super League (Football) which is starting shortly has been attracting some of the international football stars, especially those who have had a fan following in India.

5.2.3.3 Regional players

Most of the Indian leagues have teams which belong to distinct regions. As has already been discussed, having regional teams is an important ingredient for the success of any league. To reinforce this, it is important for the leagues to choose players from specific regions that they represent. The fans indicated that the presence of regional players in the team helped provide a regional character to the team. The experts also supported that the presence of regional players helped in establishing a local connect and in getting fans to identify with their regional teams. Indian Premier League, which has been the most successful league in India, has made it mandatory for teams to have players from their own regions by specifying a catchment area.

Thus, the findings suggest following proposition:

P8: Participation of world class talent, foreign players and regional players (in region specific teams) has a positive effect on fans and increases the league acceptability.

5.2.4 Fan Experience

Leagues need to engage with fans in multiple ways. Fan experience is a factor that is under the control of the leagues. A number of factors relevant to the fan experience emerged from the research.

5.2.4.1 Social Media Experience

Social media experience of fans is an important factor that helps in establishing fans' connect with the leagues. Most of the fans are present on social media and like to engage with friends in discussions related to league results and latest happenings. The fans indicated that they engage in discussions on social media with like-minded fans. The experts also supported the important role of social media engagement for creating the fan experience and said that it was vital for leagues to have a strong media presence to generate buzz in fan community. Most of the teams of successful leagues have strong presence on social forums, where the latest happenings of the team, players or league are shared with fans community. Star players also maintain online presence and interact

with fans, thus providing fans a strong platform to engage with the league and thus enhance acceptability.

5.2.4.2 Television Experience

The infrastructure and stadium facilities in India are often not of the desired quality and deter fans to come to the stadium. As a result, majority of the fans watch the league matches on TV, rather than attending the matches in the stadium. As a result, the TV friendly format of the game and the quality of game coverage becomes important for fans. Both the fans as well as the experts stressed the importance of TV experience for the fans. Leagues which invest in providing a better television experience are likely to have better fan acceptability.

The experience from the leagues showed that the appeal of Indian Premier League (Cricket) and Pro *Kabaddi* League was significantly enhanced by packaging it in exciting TV friendly format. For example, the success of Pro *Kabaddi* League which achieved record TV viewership was attributed by experts to the way the game was packaged on TV. *Kabaddi* had been a rural sport and seldom seen on TV. The league and the broadcaster worked together to make the sport TV friendly, by calling in experts of other contact sports like National Football League, Ultimate Fighting Championship and Rugby, to identify the right camera angles for the coverage.

5.2.4.3 In-Stadia Experience

Interaction with fans and experts revealed that in-stadia experience, i.e. overall experience of fans with sports product inside the stadium is crucial in creating and sustaining excitement for the league. A number of fans shared that though they had been following specific sports for years and watched it on TV; they visited the stadium for the first time to watch the league matches. A number of factors related to in-stadia experience emerged from the fans and the experts. The amenities during the league games were better as compared to that during other matches. Also, the league games often had a festive environment with events before and after the games. The game was also much more colourful with music, theme-songs and cheerleaders. The experts also agreed that the emergence of leagues has led to jump in the stadium attendance. Teams had worked towards improving and creating an experience for the fans. They cited specific cases where teams had invested in providing a distinct experience to the fans and had reaped rewards through higher gate collections.

The fan experience is vital to a fan's acceptability. Based on the three factors discussed above, the following propositions are in order:

P9: Higher the social media initiatives by the league; higher the fan acceptability.

P10: Better the TV experience through engaging broadcast; higher the fan acceptability.

P11: More the in-stadia engagement with fans; higher the fan acceptability of the league.

5.2.5 Celebrities

The presence of celebrities is a distinctive feature of Indian leagues. A number of movie stars are actively involved with specific leagues, often as owners or co-owners. Fans identified involvement of celebrities as an important reason for their interest with specific teams and sports leagues. Involvement of celebrities not only helps in attracting their own fans to the teams and the league, but also generates additional publicity in the media and also brings in the sponsors. The experts also supported that celebrities were helpful in bringing fans, sponsors and visibility in media coverage. Essentially, utilizing celebrities is like brand endorsement (brand being a particular sports league) but how it is unique from normal endorsement is the fact that celebrities, being owners or partners, are deeply involved in success of their leagues/ teams and therefore actively utilize their stardom to create necessary buzz for their teams/ leagues. This uniqueness of type and level of celebrity involvement differentiates sports leagues in countries like India as compared to developed countries. Table 2 highlights major celebrities involved with various leagues.

S. No	Name	Profession	League
1	Shahrukh Khan	Film Star	Indian Premier League
2	Priety Zinta	Film Star	Indian Premier League
3	Juhi Chawla	Film Star	Indian Premier League
4	Shilpa Shetty	Film Star	Indian Premier League
5	Abhishek Bachchan	Film Star	Pro *Kabaddi* League
6	Akshay Kumar	Film Star	World *Kabaddi* League
7	Sonakshi Sinha	Film Star	World *Kabaddi* League
8	Honey Singh	Singer, Composer, Film Star	World *Kabaddi* League
10	Nagarjuna	Film Star	Indian Badminton League
11	John Abraham	Film Star	Indian Super League
12	Ranbir Kapoor	Film Star	Indian Super League
13	Salman Khan	Film Star	Indian Super League
14	Sanjay Dutt	Film Star	Super Fight League
15	Mithun Chakraborty	Film Star	Indian Cricket League

Table 2: List of celebrities involved in Indian Sports leagues.

Based on the findings above, the following can be proposed:

P12: Higher the celebrity engagement with leagues; more the fan acceptability of the leagues.

5.2.6 League-Federation Relationship

The experts indicated that another important factor that could impact the success of league was the relationship between the federations and the league owners. In US, for most of the sports, the team owners came together to form the leagues in the early stage when the sport was evolving or when the federations were not as powerful. However, in India, the leagues have evolved when the federations are already in place and have full control on the sport. Therefore, the relationship between the league owners and the federation becomes vital and can indirectly affect the success of the league. The experts also stressed that the relationship between the league owner and the federation was vital to the success of the league. As the federations exercise control over the players, as well as infrastructure, the league has to work closely with the federation. The failure of the two leagues, Indian Cricket League and Premier Hockey League, has been attributed to the fact that the league owners did not have a working relationship with the federations; as a result the leagues were starved of players, infrastructure and even sponsors. Even the fans were aware of the issue and though the relationship did not have a direct effect, it impacted the fans as they knew that a good relationship meant that the federation would extend full cooperation and ensure the participation of the best players in the league by sorting out scheduling issues. Based on the findings above, the following can be proposed:

P13: Relationship between the league and the federation can impact the success of the league.

6. Contribution

The field of sports, sports marketing and sports business, being relatively new, present a rich context for research. With the growing size and uniqueness of the sports industry, the research interest in this topic has increased. Although substantial work has been done in various areas related to this field, overall depth and width of research is still in developing phase as compared to other academic disciplines. With new sports markets developing across emerging countries, sports leagues are becoming a common medium of sports development and are receiving due share of investment. Though these leagues are an important component of the sports industry, they have not received as much attention from the researchers. Specifically, there is little research on factors that contribute to success of the leagues, especially in early phases of development. Further, most the available work is set in the North American and European context, and there is

a dearth of literature on leagues in developing nations. Given the growing importance of the sports industry, the large fan base and the fast paced growth of sports leagues in emerging countries, the research on sports leagues in such markets stands a chance to add significantly to extant literature.

The contribution of this study is at multiple levels. Firstly, it contributes to the literature on the success factors of sports leagues. It touches on diverse factors related to the league format, players, fans, fan experience, etc. It identifies some factors which possibly appear for the first time in the literature, like relation of celebrities to sports leagues as owners or sponsors or the impact of regional diversity of teams in influencing the prospective fan base. Secondly, this is possibly one study of its kind that has examined the leagues in their initial stages, a phase which is vital to the growth. Thirdly, this is possibly the first study on sports leagues in a non-European and non-North American setting. Finally, since the study captures insights across sports, it presents factors that are fairly generalizable to the overall conception of sports leagues and thus, is not restrictive in interpretation and application.

7. Theoretical and Managerial Implications

Theoretical implications: The literature on sports marketing and its multiple dynamics is still in infancy as compared to other disciplines within marketing. Such a stage of development calls for a judicious balance between theory creation and theory testing. This research paper aims at creating theory by identifying factors that can lead to success of sports leagues. So far, research has been done on multiple aspects of sports industry, but this is for the first time that a research is aimed at identifying factors that increase the chances of success of sports leagues. The authors attempt to add to extant literature by studying the sports leagues in a holistic manner and provide a basis for future researchers/academicians to build on this work and add to developing body of knowledge in sports management. To the best of our knowledge, it is for the first time that a research has identified factors such as regional distribution of teams, importance of celebrity owners, role of national performance of team etc. The authors hope that the factors identified in this research can be studied further by the academic community to sharpen the understanding of sports leagues and their complex dynamics.

Managerial implications: Sports industry presents a significant business opportunity, and it also attracts a lot of sports entrepreneurs that hope to create successful ventures by capitalizing this opportunity (Ratten, 2011). One such method is by creating and sustaining successful sports leagues. But, as we have seen, the mechanics of successful sports leagues can be complex and multifaceted, and it can be difficult for sports entrepreneurs and managers to grasp all the variables in totality. This research can provide clarity to practitioners in identifying and addressing the factors in a systematic and sequential manner so that the chances of success for their ventures can be improved. The research has identified certain factors that can help increase the acceptability of leagues and make it successful. League owners may need to take into account the popularity of the sports in which the league is based. A league which is based on a sport with

limited popularity faces more challenges and they would need to keep this in mind while designing strategies for their league. Also, owners may need to pay attention to the design and format of league structures; specially salary structures which improve competitiveness and bring publicity. Leagues may also need to pay attention to regional diversities in selecting the location of the competing teams and thus increase competitiveness in the league. Similarly, league administrator/owners or teams may like to proactively reach out to celebrities to get them to be a part of the league/team. They may also have to provide a social media experience of the league, and also consider working with broadcasters on the TV content, especially for a new sport which till now has not received extensive coverage. The take-away for practitioners is to consider multiple factors summarized in this study that can improve the chances of success of sports league in varying degree, depending on immediate context and other specific variables of particular sports league.

8. Limitations and Future research

Although the authors, within the given constraints, have tried to make the research as robust as possible, it has some limitations. The research was set in India as it provides a relevant context with complexities of an evolving sports market i.e. A large fan base, growing economy and a large number of sports leagues in different stages of life cycle. However, while this has its own merit, observations from similar settings in other countries could have made the findings more robust. Secondly, given that most of the leagues are not publicly listed, there was dearth of secondary data that could have provided more depth to the findings. Thirdly, even though the focus was on understanding the factors of success, it was done by getting perspective of multiple stakeholders such as fans, league officials, team officials, broadcaster, sports journalist, sponsor etc., and one perspective that has been missed from this is the players' perspective. Getting the insights from players could have provided additional perspectives. Fourthly, the perspective of role of celebrities was restricted only to movie celebrities, but impact of sports celebrities could also be incorporated to understand the phenomenon better. Finally, the fans in our sample were young fans (age 21-28 years) and may not be representative of the entire fan population. However, young fans form a large part of the fan population and given the additional perspectives taken from the experts, we are confident that there should be no biases as a result of limiting our sample to young fans.

This study suggests few interesting areas for future research. This research can be extended by collecting information from sports leagues across different nations. Also, the factors which are considered relevant in given context can be build upon by doing further research in validating and modifying the parameters and prioritizing them on the basis of their importance, thereby leading to hierarchical model of priorities. Future research can also include the players' perspectives in understanding the league dynamics and role of sports celebrities in influencing fan acceptability. Researchers may also like to study whether the factors that drive the success of leagues differ across different segments of fans. Lastly, researchers can also consider identifying causality/ correlation between several factors identified by this research, so as to make a strong

model of prediction. This research is a qualitative study for theory building; a validation of observed parameters through quantitative/ experimental methods will be a logical extension of this work.

9. Conclusion

Sports leagues have contributed significantly to the development of sports industry. This paper adds to current literature on sports management by identifying factors that contribute to the understanding of successful sports leagues, especially in emerging sports markets like India. Using an exploratory qualitative research, this study suggests that in early stages of a sports league, the acceptability amongst fans can be a good measure of the league's success. The research also identifies a number of factors that can help improve the acceptability of leagues. It was found that some of the crucial factors include the sport and its fan base and the performance of national team in that sport. Other crucial factors include design variables of league like salary caps for teams, team locations and format of game, involvement of top class players (National, International and Regional), and initiatives by the league and the teams to improve fan experience. Lastly, collaboration with federation and involvement of celebrities also play a crucial role in the success of the league.

The authors hope that this paper can provide a platform to researchers and practitioners of sports marketing/ sports management to further build on this and apply it for better understanding and performance of sports leagues.

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[i] *Kabaddi* is a contact sport played primarily in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and is popular in the rural parts in these countries

[ii] *Kho Kho* is a tag sport popular in South Asia