

DETERMINING TEAM BRAND ASSOCIATION DIMENSIONS THAT DRIVE SPORTS ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

With the advancement of technology, digital outlook, media accessibility, and knowledge of consumers, it has become imperative for brands in product and service categories to devise engaging and personalized strategies for their customers. The same also holds for sports teams, which are referred to as brands (Gladden and Funk, 2002). Customers follow players and teams basis several factors, which induces them to watch the teams' matches on electronic media or at the stadium. The researcher deploys qualitative research to identify the dimensions of team brand associations that drive sports engagement. This study aims to help sports enthusiasts, brand managers, and sports marketers get a deeper understanding of the dimensions that impact consumer's engagement levels while watching a sports game (Cricket) at the stadium and proposes directions for future research.

Keywords: Brand Associations, Sports, Indian Premier League, Cricket, Engagement, Sports Marketing

Introduction

The evolution of social media, digital transformation, and technology has led customers to engage with brands more frequently. Today, customers are more evolved and knowledgeable about what they want. They make informed decisions about the product they want to buy, the price they are willing to pay, and the brand that offers the most features or benefits. This customer-led economy has made it inevitable for brands to think about ways to get new customers and retain the existing ones (Pandey, 2021). Here are some methods that can enhance and build stronger brand-customer relationships.

- A. Messaging: Because of messaging tools that create dialogue, customer engagement has become more about relationship building on a larger scale than it used to be. Brands need to provide value to their customers even before they purchase the brand. Now, customers prefer some sort of emotional tie-in to their lives – a sensory experience when they purchase a brand.



- B. Values & Ethics: Not only do brands need to get their brand story straight, but they also need to stand for their brand values, integrity, and ethics which are built into the brand mission and vision statements.
- C. Channels: Back in the day, customer engagement meant door-to-door salesmen and at-home parties where the product was sold directly. While those channels still exist, technology has made it possible to adopt a customer engagement strategy that uses multiple channels. Usually, success lies in the middle of the more “traditional” tactics (experiential, traditional media relations, guerrilla marketing, etc.) and newer tactics that rely on technology (like social media, influencer relations, video, mobile, apps, etc). Brands must adopt a multi-channel approach to engage customers wherever they are.
- D. Timing: Brands need to communicate promptly to keep up with changing trends. Customer service response times need to be almost instantaneous because consumers are now used to having information and solutions at their fingertips

Building long-lasting relationships can result in loyal customers who are extremely valuable to the business. They can help transform an average brand into a phenomenal success. More so, engaged customers help improve business performance (Robert and Alpert, 2010), through word of mouth which is more effective than any form of traditional mass media (Rosen, 2006).

Among all industries, sports as a sector has mastered the ability to create and cultivate brand advocates and loyalists. Sports as a sector enjoys the highest level of stickiness in comparison to other sectors like hospitality, retail, and airlines. A large base of customers are loyal to their favourite team. They spend a lot of time and money to foster their knowledge and passion and have a strong emotional connection to the team’s fortunes.

Sports has become an important part of Indian society. Government initiatives, infrastructure advancements, and the encouragement of talent have led to the industry flourishing each year. The sector is also a key source of investment through broadcasting rights, sponsorships, and franchising (Ernst & Young and FICCI, 2020). Sports has also become a key segment to invest in for brands. This rising and rapidly changing landscape has also introduced opportunities for a lot of sports and leagues besides cricket (Indian Premier League) such as hockey (Premier Hockey League), football (Indian Super League), and kabaddi (Pro Kabaddi League).

Now customers have the power and control in their hands. They chose which match to see, which team or player to follow, and on what platform to see (Pandey, 2015). Going to the stadium or watching it on television are not the only options available to them. They are watching sports on their mobile devices, social media, YouTube, and OTT platforms like Voot and Hotstar. Other social media platforms like Facebook have brand leagues pages, player profiles with followers crossing billions. This is increasing the level of engagement the customers have with the sports segment as a whole, resulting in positive word of mouth, brand love, satisfaction, and interaction.



Marketers today are left with no choice but to think about engagement strategies that will work for them. This is the same case in sports as well where sports teams are now looked at as brands (Gladden and Funk, 2002). There are marketing, branding, and advertising agencies specially created to work towards the advancement of these sports teams (brands).

The literature on sports marketing states that customers have unique relationships with teams that they build over time (Abosag et al., 2012). Yoshida et al, (2014) has associated these levels of relationships like connection, emotional value, attachment with the word 'engage' in the sports marketing context. While customers continue to support teams and often switch their favourite team due to the outcome of certain games, there is no formula to predict a game's result. Sports as a product is unpredictable where teams cannot guarantee success and therefore cannot promise delivery of expectations each time (Mullin et al., 2007). Authors like Gladden & Funk, (2002), Rosset al, (2006) and Kaynak, (2008) have attempted to connect sports to brand management literature, to identify ways and methods by which consumers can stay connected with sports teams and have a delightful watching experience.

Various studies on team brand associations in sports (Gladden and Funk, 2002; Rosset al., 2006, Bauer et al., 2008) have highlighted dimensions of team brand association that showcase how consumers engage with the team as a brand. All of these studies have been conducted in developed countries like Australia, Germany, and the USA on sports like football and basketball. Each sport is unique and has nuances that differ from other sports. Moreover, the audience is completely different and thus cannot be directly related. The researcher aims to study the dimensions of team brand associations that engage customers in the Indian context. This research will help sports marketers take decisions on how to engage customers, how to build the team as a brand, how to use media, and other avenues to build a strong relationship between brands and consumers. The next section provides a brief literature review about brand associations in sports, following which the researcher conducted qualitative research to further explore the dimensions relevant in the Indian context.

Literature Review

For this study, a systematic approach was followed to study the literature under this subject. Keywords like customer engagement, sports marketing, brand associations, and their synonyms were used to study the relevant literature from online databases. A funnel approach was then followed to identify subject relevance.

Brand Associations

Brand associations add value to a brand and can take various forms reflecting the characteristics of the product or otherwise. Brand associations give customers a reason to buy, help distinguish the brand from its competitors, and create positive feelings about the brand.

There are various perspectives on the types of brand associations in the extant literature. Aaker, (1991) divided brand associations into eleven categories, which included product attributes, intangibles, customer benefits, relative price, use/application, user/customer, celebrity/person, lifestyle/personality, product class, competitors, and country / geographic area. Biel, (1992) stated that brand associations could result from a corporate image, product image, and user image such that each of these can be divided into functional and emotional attributes. Farquhar and Herr, (1993) proposed that brand associations comprise product category, usage situation, product attribute, and customer benefits. Keller, (1993) classified brand associations into three segments which are attributes, benefits, and attitudes.

In the sports marketing context, brand associations serve as an anchor in the mind of consumers (Koll and Wallpach, 2014), and create brand value (Chen, 2001). Further, brand associations serve as indicators of brand salience and favourability and thus influence the likelihood of consumption (Romaniuk and Nenycz-Thiel, 2013). From a brand management perspective, brand associations represent an important area for sports management research because associations represent characteristics of the sports team that can be influenced through management and marketing (Bauer et al., 2008). Thus, brand associations are important to determine how consumers perceive and ultimately engage with a team.

Researchers have examined sports team brand associations that reflect the specific attributes and benefits individuals link to their favourite sports teams. Attributes represent inherent characteristics linked to a team, which help individuals form team perceptions, whereas benefits represent the meaning and value extracted from the team (Gladden and Funk, 2002).

In the USA, Gladden and Funk, (2002) developed a Team Association Model taking into consideration the concept of brand associations (Keller, 1993), and tested its relationship with brand equity. The 16 dimensions were divided into Attributes (success, head coach, star player, management, stadium, logo design, product delivery, and tradition), Attitudes (importance, knowledge, and affect), and Benefits (identification, nostalgia, pride in place, escape, and peer group acceptance).

Ross et al., (2006) developed the Team Brand Association Scale with 11 dimensions: non-player personnel, team success, team history, stadium community, team play characteristics, brand mark, commitment, organizational attributes, concessions, social interaction, and rivalry for a sports team in the USA.

Kaynak et al., (2008) provided a conceptual framework linking brand loyalty and brand associations in professional team sports based on the work done by Aaker, (1991) and Keller,

(1993). Bauer et al., 2008) modified the Team Association Model (Gladden and Funk, 2002) to develop a brand image scale and tested its impact on fan loyalty in the context of soccer in Germany.

Kunkel et al., (2016) extended the study of brand associations in sports by studying the consumer's association with a new league. This study was conducted for the Australian Football League in Australia and provided insights on how teams can form and create relationships with new consumers. This research was done over a period of time and stated that consumers form a perception of the sports team before they have played a match basis marketing communication and media.

From the extant literature, it can be said that the majority of the research is done in the USA, Germany, and Australia in professional sports (Kunkel et al., 2016). There is limited work done in this area in India, and as cricket is seen as the dominant sport in the country, the researcher feels the need to explore this concept further. Moreover, Aaker et al., (2001) stated that brand associations are context-dependent and are subject to change depending on the various factors such as a sporting game, the format, and nature of the league, type of consumers, team parameters, and other geographical, demographical and country-specific factors. This study attempts to identify dimensions of team brand associations that are relevant in the Indian context.

Sports in India

The sports sector in India has gone through recent developments in terms of technology, government intervention, infrastructure, participation, sponsorship, and the emergence of new leagues (Ernst & Young and FICCI, 2020).

Sports has always been a significant part of Indian culture and entertainment, driven by passion and love. Even though the national game for India is hockey, cricket has by far been the most loved and popular sport in the country. Introduced in India by the British, cricket remains to be deeply connected with the Indian culture. As per the Broadcast Audience Research Council report, 93% of the base of 766 million viewers have consumed cricket content in 2018. Amongst this, the Indian Premier League attracts 40% of the total viewership during the season (IANS, 2019).

The Indian Premier League started in 2008 as a professional short-format league played between eight teams, representing eight cities of India. Over the years, the league has gained high levels of viewership and following with its unique mix of entertainment, Bollywood, and cricket. The youth and the women audiences are prime followers of the league, contributing to high levels of engagement both online and offline.

Being among the most successful leagues in the history of sports, the researcher selected the Indian Premier League to further diagnose the level of engagement and association.

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to gain insights into the dimensions of team brand associations in context to the Indian Premier League. While Gladden and Funk, (2002) had developed a 16-dimension scale, this was context dependant and could not be generalized to other countries and sports. Due to the exploratory nature of the study in the Indian context, the researcher felt that qualitative research is most suitable to gain additional insights. The study was conducted in two phases consisting of focus group discussion (9 participants) and in-depth telephonic interviews (5 participants). In-depth interviews were the most appropriate way to discover real-life stories and experiences individually while focus group discussion was more relevant to discuss experiences in an open forum. The researcher deployed both these methods to discover beliefs, perceptions, and habits.

The questions pertained to knowing and understanding their experiences of watching an Indian Premier League match. Which is their favourite team and why? How do they engage with the team? What are the factors that make them watch a particular teams' match at the stadium? Which of them is the most important reason?

Focus group discussion

The researcher selected 8 participants for the focus group. The sample size is also recommended by Prince, (1978). All the participants were homogenous with little diversity to ensure differences in opinions and experiences. All of them exhibited passion and love for the Indian Premier League and had visited the stadium more than once to watch a match, showcasing the willingness to spend time and money for leisure activities. The discussion lasted for over 40 minutes, wherein the participants discussed and shared their thoughts and ideas.

Telephonic in-depth interviews

The researcher followed a semi-structured questionnaire to conduct the telephonic interviews. The participants for the telephonic interviews were selected by the researcher based on their interest, likeability, and passion for the Indian Premier League. They were asked for the willingness to participate in the research, before a mutual date and time for setup for the call. The participants were strictly advised to answer questions in the context of the Indian Premier League. Theoretical saturation began to happen after the 5th interview (Bloor and Wood, 2006). Every interview lasted for over 25 minutes and was recorded to analyze data.

Results

The results of the focus group discussion and telephonic interviews revealed several team brand associations that proved to be important in the sports context, as indicated in Table 1. The researcher followed a two-step coding process consisting of open codes and axial codes to arrive at themes and categories,



With respect to attributes, several dimensions emerged. In particular, the quality of players and the team composition including the captain was found to be extremely important. These were mentioned a couple of times in the discussion. Additionally, other factors like product delivery and coach were also spoken of. Dimensions like logo design and stadium (Gladden and Funk, 2002) did not hold too much importance. This could be because the respondents considered product-related attributes to be more relevant. The respondents kept referring to teams with the team names, showcasing the affinity towards a particular team and the associations they have formed with the team. Most of these associations were long-term. However, a few mentioned that their favourite team would change depending on which team their favourite player is a part of. There was also a high acceptance of geographical affiliation, where they supported teams based on the city they were born in or lived in currently.

The experience became a topic of discussion where everyone shared their own unique experiences. While some spoke about the fun they had at the stadium with their friends, the others emphasized the competitive spirit of the game. Overall, everyone agreed that the experience one has at the stadium is unbelievable and extravagant. There is no other medium that can give such kind of an experience.

Interestingly, several other dimensions emerged which were situational. This included factors like the match being scheduled at a suitable time and the weather being appropriate to step out to watch the match. The price for the ticket (individual and in a group) along with the selection of a seat were also points of consideration that linked brand associations to the engagement at a stadium. It can be inferred that while brand associations play a key role in delivering brand loyalty (Kaynak et al., 2008), the possibility of going to the stadium which enriches the entire game-watching experience is attributed to other situational factors that exist.

Table 1: Representative quotations and coding

Quotations	Open Codes	Axial Codes
I have been a fan of the IPL because of Ganguly. I am a big fan of Ganguly and I have always supported teams that he has played in. So initially I supported the Kolkata Knightriders then the Pune team. I have also supported Chennai as I think that it is the best team in the IPL as it has the best players and they almost always win. My favorite player should be on that team. I used to support Decan Chargers when Gill Christ was there. I think having my favorite player on the team is most important to me.	Star player	Attributes
The captain and the coach have a big role to play to make the international and Indian players interact	Captain and Coach	

together because unless and until you get together as a group, the results would not be that great. And that is something that is seen in Chennai over a couple of years and that is why they are winning the matches.		
I like going to see competitive matches. One-sided matches are boring to watch. If two teams have consequently won matches, then it becomes more interesting.	Product delivery	
I love watching IPL matches and I will always support Rajasthan Royals as that is my home place. I was born there. I am staying in Mumbai currently but my heart resides in Rajasthan.	Geographical affiliation	Benefits
I remember going to watch a Mumbai and Pune match on my birthday in April. It was so much fun. I had taken my friends to Wankhede stadium and we had a great time. The best part was that Mumbai Indians also won the match.	Nostalgia	
What better than cricket to end a stressful day at work? IPL is like a stressbuster for me. I know I can't go to the stadium for every match. But I do end up watching it on Tv. And in case, I miss it, I see the highlights.	Escape	
I have been to the stadium a couple of times with my friends. It is a different experience altogether. I prefer watching it live than on TV. Also, it's a great way to socialize with your bunch of friends. For me to go for a match at the stadium means spending quality time with friends, enjoying with friends because sitting at home I will not be able to have that much fun.	Socializing	
My friends and I follow the same team. We cheer together when we win and feel sad when the team is losing. We also play guessing games for the man of the match, wickets, runs scored to make it more exciting.	Peer-group acceptance	
I follow the statistics of the IPL matches. It's fun and insightful. Also, a great discussion to have over lunch during office hours.	Knowledge	Attitude
It was a thrilling experience.	Affect	

I was so happy after my favorite team won the match, I was disappointed that Pune lost the match.		
If the match is scheduled on a weekend, I also get time to spend with my friends which I don't get during the week. I think the good about the IPL is that it is short. It is just a 40 overs odd thing and it does not take much time so you can just head to the stadium post-work and watch the match and come back home.	Schedule	Situational Factors
Forme, the seat is very important. The view basically. If I don't have a good seat then I don't go to watch a match.	Seat availability	
Sometimes you are indecisive. You don't want to pre-book a ticket (a good seat is expensive) until your team is qualified to play the match. And at times, the prices suddenly shoot up. While I am a fan of cricket, I will not spend too much on a ticket. Only if the price suits my budget will I go to the stadium.	Ticket price	
In one of the matches I had gone to watch, it was raining but that did not bother me at all. We still enjoyed ourselves and had a good time.	Season	
Not many matches are hosted in the same city. I look out for matches that are at Wankhede stadium and not at D Y Patil stadium as it's too far to go there. It takes more than 2 hours to reach.	Accessibility to stadium	

It was found that there were some common dimensions with previous literature studies (Gladden and Funk, 2002; Ross et al., 2006; Bauer et al., 2008), based on Keller (1993) categorization of attributes, benefits, and attitude, The researcher followed a similar classification approach because of several reasons like detailing of the model, its applicability in the sports context and the level of customer orientations it offers (Bauer et al., 2008). Table 2 provides an overview of the identified team brand associations from extant literature and the qualitative study.

Table 2: Team brand associations

Literature Review	Qualitative Research
Attributes	
Success
Star player	Star player
Head coach	Coach
Management
.....	Captain
Logo design
Stadium
Product delivery	Product delivery
Tradition
Benefits	
Pride
Fan identification
Peer group acceptance	Peer group acceptance
.....	Geographical affiliation
Socialising	Socialising
Escape	Escape
Nostalgia	Nostalgia
Attitude	
Importance	Importance
Knowledge
Affect	Affect
Situational Factors	
.....	Season
.....	Schedule
.....	Accessibility to stadium
.....	Ticket pricing
.....	Seat availability

This paper is an attempt to contextualize the team brand associations in the Indian context. The qualitative research revealed that there are differences in the dimensions of brand association as per the context and applicability. Additional dimensions like captain, geographical affiliation, and situational factors emerged from the study. There is a need to operationalise these dimensions and measure its validity and reliability to gain statistical significance.

Limitations and Future Research

The research was limited in the following aspects. This research was conducted only on the Indian Premier League which is limited to cricket as a sport. There are a lot of other professional leagues and sports that happen in India which may have different brand association dimensions that affect the engagement of consumers. This study is also focused on brand associations from the perspective of a team. However, individual sports like Tennis and Badminton may showcase variations in brand association dimensions. Future research can be done to highlight differential factors among various sporting games in the Indian context.

The article is limited to those customers who have seen at least one Indian Premier League match at the stadium. With the upcoming media solutions and digital technology, the customers have other options to watch matches like at home, online streaming, outside of the home at a club or a lounge. Further research can be conducted to understand the factors that can play specific roles basis a viewing set up experience. Other factors like food and beverages, sound, the distance between the seat and the screen, place vicinity can impact decisions to watching a game outside of the home or stadium.

Conclusion

Organizations and brands must learn how to manage their customers to engage them in a way that benefits them as well as the brand. The objective of this paper is to identify dimensions of team brand associations that drive engagement in the context of sports. The researcher conducted a preliminary study using qualitative research to derive team brand association dimensions. A large-scale quantitative study is recommended to further understand the relationship between team brand association dimensions and other related constructs like brand loyalty and engagement in the Indian context.

While this study concentrated on the out-of-home (stadium) experience for watching a game, future research can do a comparison of watching a game at home v/s an out-of-home location to identify factors that play a crucial role like sensory experiences and social acceptance. Van Doorn et al., (2010) stated that customers can be segmented based on the level of engagement they have with the consumed products and services. This can also be applied to segregate sports viewers as spectators and fanatics who may highlight their level of engagement. For example, game-related factors like success, team history, star player can prove to be more important association factors for fanatics in comparison to others like escape, peer group acceptance. Sports players and athletes have their social media handles and pages and are active on various social media platforms. It would be interesting to understand how a player's social media interaction can help engage customers in sports. Would it lead to higher player affinity or loyalty? Would it impact viewership statistics? Will it help the league or the team gain awareness and imagery, impacting brand associations?



This review is a preliminary attempt to showcase the dimensions that can play a role in driving engagement levels in sports. With limited research has been done in the Indian context, this paper aims to add to the body of knowledge and highlights key issues for future research. The present study aims to help sports marketers, brand managers better understand how sports teams can be managed and leveraged to engage consumers. The findings of this research can be used by sports marketers to improve the likeability of sports teams and increase the possibility of a positive engagement

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