Social Media Marketing and Sports in India

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ABSTRACT

With increasing globalization, the marketing in sports have changed drastically since past three decades. India being the 7th largest country consisting of 17.74% of world population with 1.34 billion people residing (National portal of India, 2018) is a huge market for any industry. Additionally, Cricket being considered as religion and emerging market of Indian Premier League (IPL), Indian Super League (ISL) and Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) are evidence of the blooming sports market in India. On the other hand, with the Digital India initiative started by Government of India, digital marketing also got a boost to a great extent in the past few years. Moreover, 98% out of the total population exposed to internet uses different social media platforms (WARC, 2017) in India. This paper aims to conduct a comparative study on the utilization of social media platforms by European and Indian sports market. This paper will also contribute towards the emerging literature on how the social media platforms are utilized within sports market from marketing and networking point of view specially in India, hence revealing additional opportunities to increase fan base online for the managers.

Literature Review

Sports Market in India

India is the only country where one of the Sport is treated like a Religion-Cricket (Duff and Phelps, 2018). It is the most liked sport by far in India. Considering its increasing popularity, Board of Cricket Control in India (BCCI) started Indian Premier League (IPL) in 2008 where players from different nations participated (IPL, 2019).
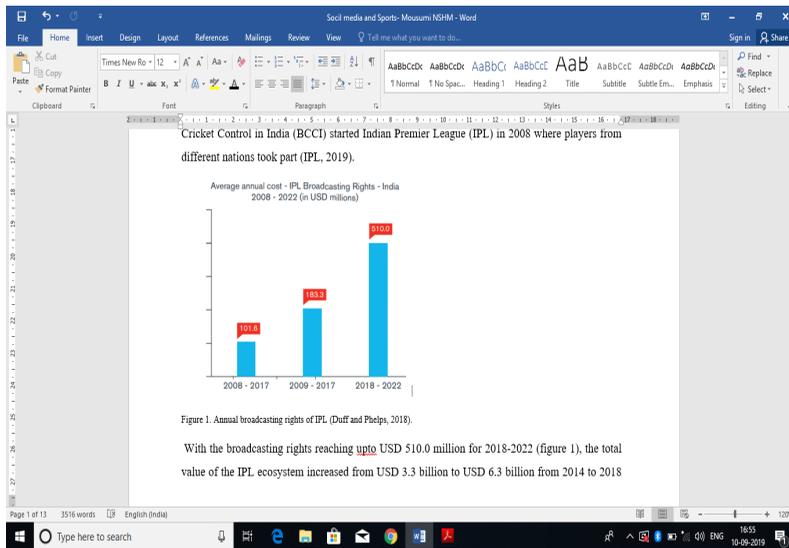
With the broadcasting rights reaching up to USD 510.0 million for 2018-2022 (figure 1), the total value of the IPL ecosystem increased from USD 3.3 billion to USD 6.3 billion from 2014 to 2018 (Duff and Phelps, 2018) which clearly shows the success of IPL. Later, two more sports leagues named Indian Super League (ISL) for football and Pro Kabaddi league (PKL) were launched in the market in 2014. Again, two leagues showed tremendous growth in the past few years. With 2 billion USD gross revenue target for ISL season-4, and 3 billion USD worth 5-year contract in 2017 for PKL, the profit is outstanding for non-cricket sports (Khanna, 2017). Later Badminton Premier league (BPL) and Hockey India League also came into market. However, despite shuttlers like Saina Nehwal, P.V. Sindhu and Srikant dominating the international market, the sport could not catch the attention of Indian public through BPL (Khanna, 2017). Same can be said for Hockey India League as the 2018 league was cancelled due to different controversial incidents (Khanna, 2017).

On the other hand, athletes from different individual sports displayed outstanding performance at international level. 19-year-old, Hima Das clinching 5 gold medals in July 2019 during different International tournament (News18, 2019) was one of the most trending news of the year. Additionally, Adidas endorsement deal with her doubled due to her phenomenal performance from Rs. 30-35 lacs to Rs. 60 lacs per year (Bhushan, 2019). Likewise, Boxer MC MaryKom winning her 6th World Championship title, Manika Batra bringing home the first Gold medal from table-tennis discipline during Asian games and Shuttler P.V. Sindhu winning the BWF World Tour finals in 2018 (Nithya, 2019) are some of many international achievements by Indian athletes. With the flow of sponsorship deals for these athletes, Indian sports market has benefitted from individual sports as well. It is important to note that with the implementation of programmes like

Target Olympic Podium (TOP) and Khelo India by Government of India (MYAS, 2019), there are lot of opportunities for sports managers across the country.

Internet Penetration and Digitalization in India

Figure 2. Internet penetration in India (WARC, 2016)
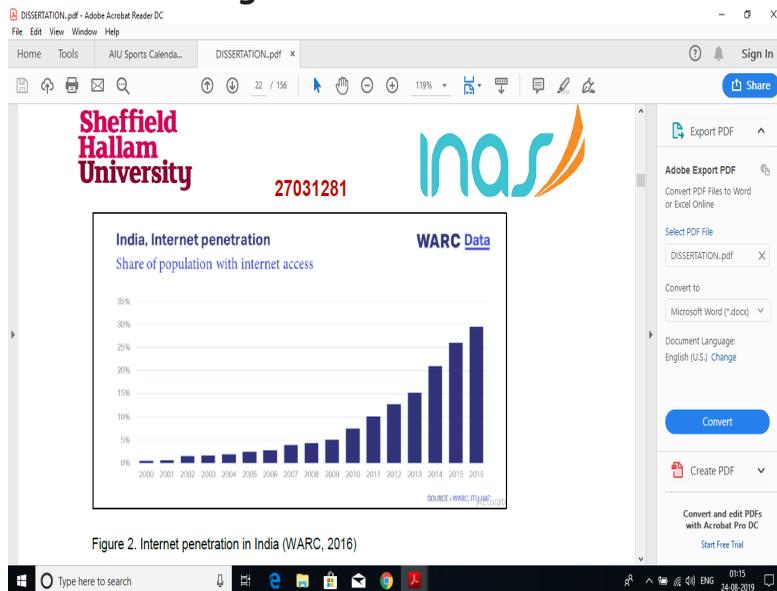
According to WARC (2017), 29.5% of the Indian population (386.8 million people) had internet access which increased from 3.5% in 2000 to 29% in 2015 (Figure 2). Additionally, growth in internet penetration has averaged to 3.9% points over the last five years from which it can be predicted that it will increase in the next few years at a constant rate.

Moreover, from 2012-2017 the time spent daily by users increased from 01:44min to 02:27min which is 43 minutes more per day. Furthermore, share of mobile internet subscriptions in total mobile subscription will rise to 47.6% by 2020. Competition among multiple operators has reduced tariffs and increased voice penetration while young and tech-savvy urban consumers have driven mobile internet and smartphone uptake, new player Reliance Jio, which is providing data services at the cheapest rates (Passport, 2018). These factors play a very important role towards the efficient and effective implementation of Digital India (DI) programme.
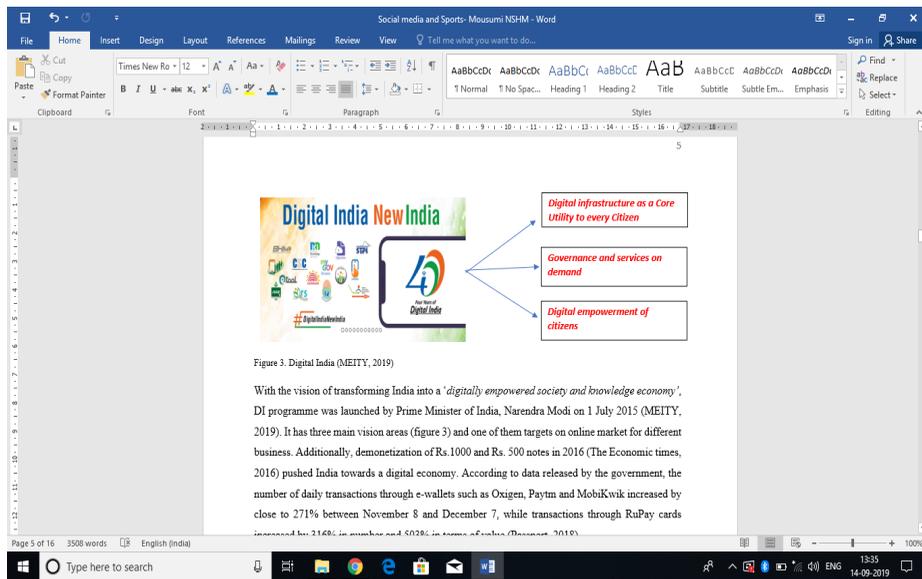
With the vision of transforming India into a 'digitally empowered society and knowledge economy', DI programme was launched by Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi on 1 July 2015 (MEITY, 2019). It has three main vision areas (figure 3) and one of them targets on online market for different business. Additionally, demonetization of Rs.1000 and Rs. 500 notes in 2016 (The Economic times, 2016) pushed India towards a digital economy. According to data released by the government, the number of daily transactions through e-wallets such as Oxigen, Paytm and MobiKwik increased by close to 271% between November 8 and December 7, while transactions through RuPay cards increased by 316% in number and 503% in terms of value (Passport, 2018).

Social Media Marketing and Sports : Fan Engagement & Branding

According to literatures on sports marketing, Sports consumers and their favourite team shares a unique relationship (Abosag, Roper, & Hind, 2012). These extreme level emotional attachment, team identification and fandom for their sports clubs have been related with term 'engage' (Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa, & Biscaia, 2014). For example, reading team related news, positive word-of-mouth, displaying fandom, interactions between consumer-to-consumer (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; deRuyter & Wetzels, 2000). This unique pattern of behaviour in spectator sport beyond product purchase can be considered as important exhibition of Customer Exhibition Behaviours (CEB) as a result of motivational drive (Vale and Fernandes, 2017). Keeping the fan base and their sport fandom in mind, sport organizations can ideally benefit from Social Media (McCarthy, Rowley, Ashworth, & Pioch, 2014). Social media changed the way followers engage with athletes, sport teams and other fans (Ioakimidis, 2010). Functions of Facebook (FB), Instagram and Twitter like comments, shares, posts,

and uploading stories which is (added recently where short videos or pictures stays up to 24hrs on the page), retweet, might lead to more complete CEB perceptions (Vale and Fernandes, 2017).
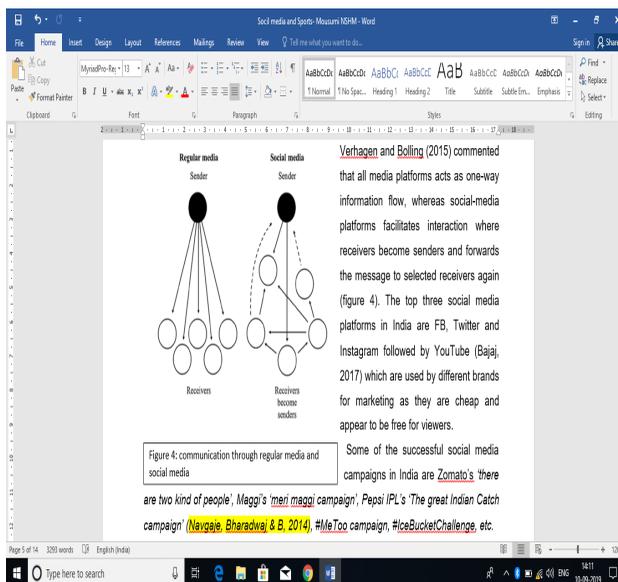
Verhagen and Bolling (2015) commented that all media platforms acts as one-way information flow, whereas social-media platforms facilitates interaction where receivers become senders and forwards the message to selected receivers again (figure 4). This creates a chain among the audience and works as two-way communication for the companies. The top three social media platforms in India are FB, Twitter and Instagram (Bajaj, 2017) which are utilized by different brands for marketing as they are cheap and appear to be free for viewers. Additionally, in 2017, among the 29.5% of internet users, 98% were between the age 16-64 years and operate social media (WARC, 2017). Focusing on the increasing internet reach, social media marketing can be beneficial for Sports companies and athletes. Similarly, Moore commented that the hike of broadband and mobile network made videos popular portion in the experience of internet users' (cited in Jarboe, 2011). Some of the successful social media campaigns in India so far were Zomato's 'there are two kind of people', Maggi's 'meri maggi campaign', Pepsi IPL's 'The great Indian Catch campaign' (Navgaje, Bharadwaj & B, 2014).

In this paper, engagement level of athletes and sports related organizations on social media will be compared between Indian and European market. Recommendations for sports managers will also be provided on how to boost their marketing via social media.

Methodology and Findings

For this study, use of different social media platforms by European and Indian region were compared where Fan engagement, Branding and marketing strategies practiced by sports governing bodies, athletes and sports clubs were analysed. FB, Instagram and Twitter were focused in this study. Availability of official page, number of followers and total number of posts shared were compared for all the categories.

National Governing Body (NGB): From Indian market, NGB of the most famous sports like Cricket, Football, Hockey Badminton, Boxing and Kabaddi were selected (Das, 2019) Ministry of Youth affair and Sports- India, Olympic and Paralympic committee, Sports Authority of India (SAI) which are the government authorised sport organizations were also included in the study. From European market, International Olympic and Paralympic committee (since they are based in Europe), Paralympics GB, GB Hockey were selected randomly.

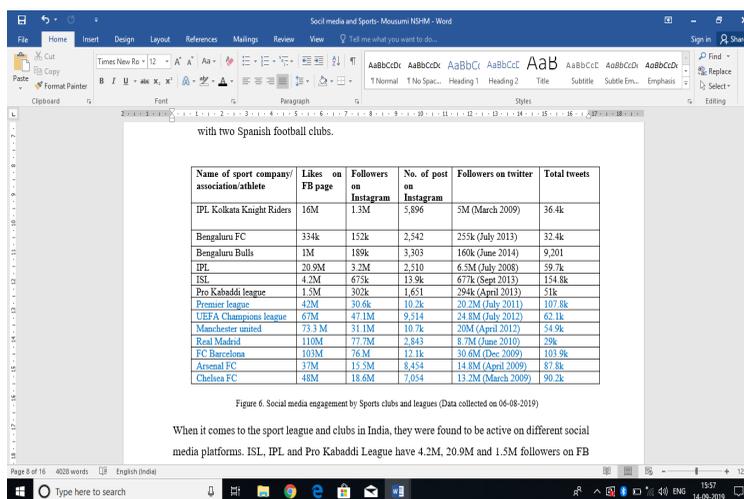| Name of sport company/ association/athlete	Likes on FB page	Followers on Instagram	No. of post on Instagram	Followers on twitter	Total tweets
BCCI	No official page	No official page	N/A	9.5M	803.2k
Hockey India	4M	63.5k	5,273	292k (July 2012)	28.8k
Indian Football	1M	541k	4,505	505k (Dec 2013)	58.7k
Badminton Association of India	108k	24.5k	1,367	No official page	N/A
Amateur Kabaddi federation of India		No page	-	No official page	N/A
Boxing Federation of India	55k	13.2k (not verified)	1,059	5,128 (not verified)	5,803
Indian Olympic committee	517k	No official page	N/A	-	N/A
Ministry of Youth affairs and sports	42k	No official page	N/A	63k (June 2016)	10.9k
SAI	45k	No official page	N/A	43.7k (Oct 2014)	17.3k
Paralympic committee of India	No official page	No official page	-	5,064 (Feb 2010	1,019
Olympic games	19M	2.3M	3,167	6.13M	8,401
Paralympics games	67.8k	109k	2636	242k	32.2k
Paralympics GB	230k	23.4k	1,268	229K	18.6K
GB hockey	91k	48.2k	1,379	42K (Feb 2012)	19.3K

Figure 5. Social media engagement data of different Sport Governing bodies

Fan engagement through sports governing bodies in India was found to be very poor (figure 5). In a country which worships Cricket like a religion, no official page of BCCI on FB and Instagram will be disappointing for its followers. Likewise, no official page on Instagram was found for Indian Olympic committee (no twitter page as well), Paralympic committee of India (no FB page also), Ministry of Youth affairs and sports and Sports Authority of India which are the most important parent organizations for majority of the national governing bodies of different sports. Similarly, Boxing is one of the most popular sport in India and during Commonwealth games at Gold Coast 2018, Indian Boxers topped the medal tally. Surprisingly, Boxing Federation of India does not have verified Instagram and Twitter page. As there are many fan-made pages existing on different social media

platforms nowadays, getting an official page verified is one of the very basic step an organization should complete first. This ensures delivery of authentic and official information related to that particular sports directly to the viewers. Kabaddi being one of the indigenous and popular sport in India, not having an official page on any social media platform was totally unexpected.

Additionally, Hockey India and Indian Football association page on FB with 4M and 1M likes, and 292k and 502k followers on Twitter respectively, the fan counts changes drastically which shows that Twitter is preferred by most of the supporters. One of the reason could be that only 280 characters are allowed on Twitter which keeps the post short and to-the-point (Digitalspy, 2017).
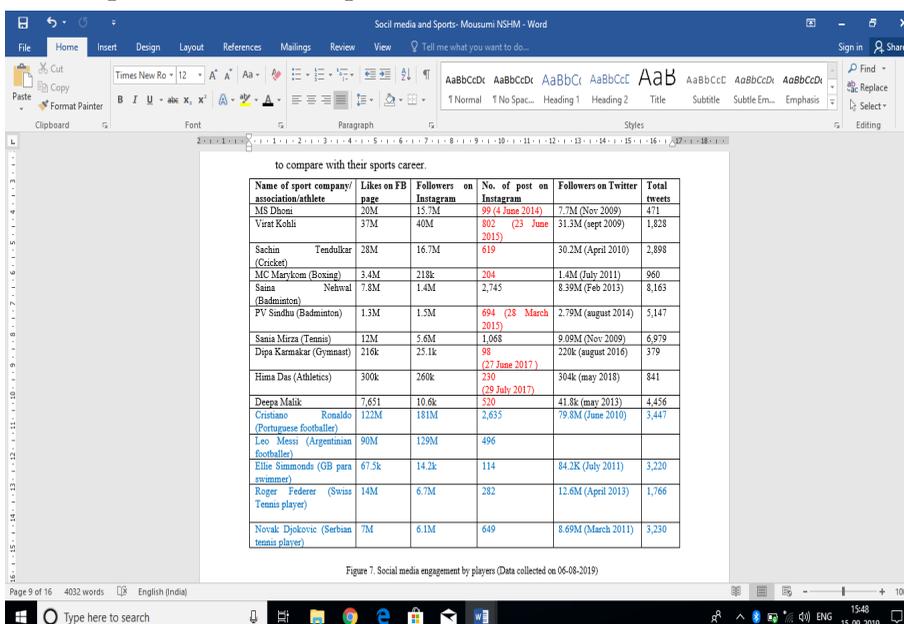
Fan engagement by clubs/leagues: From India, leagues like ISL, IPL, Pro Kabaddi league, and the winning team/club of all these leagues from recent season were included. From Europe, the top three English premier league clubs according to their 'all-time premier leagues stats', Manchester United, Chelsea and Arsenal were selected (Premier league, 2019) along with two Spanish football clubs.

Name of sport company/ association/athlete	Likes on FB page	Followers on Instagram	No. of post on Instagram	Followers on twitter	Total tweets
IPL Kolkata Knight Riders	16M	1.3M	5,896	5M (March 2009)	36.4k
Bengaluru FC	334k	152k	2,542	255k (July 2013)	32.4k
Bengaluru Bulls	1M	189k	3,303	160k (June 2014)	9,201
IPL	20.9M	3.2M	2,510	6.5M (July 2008)	59.7k
ISL	4.2M	675k	13.9k	677k (Sept 2013)	154.8k
Pro Kabaddi league	1.5M	302k	1,651	294k (April 2013)	51k
Premier league	42M	30.6k	10.2k	20.2M (July 2011)	107.8k
UEFA Champions league	67M	47.1M	9,514	24.8M (July 2012)	62.1k
Manchester united	73.3 M	31.1M	10.7k	20M (April 2012)	54.9k
Real Madrid	110M	77.7M	2,843	8.7M (June 2010)	29k
FC Barcelona	103M	76M	12.1k	30.6M (Dec 2009)	103.9k
Arsenal FC	37M	15.5M	8,454	14.8M (April 2009)	87.8k
Chelsea FC	48M	18.6M	7,054	13.2M (March 2009)	90.2k

Figure 6. Social media engagement by Sports clubs and leagues (Data collected on 06-08-2019)

When it comes to the sport league and clubs in India, they were found to be active on different social media platforms. ISL, IPL and Pro Kabaddi League have 4.2M, 20.9M and 1.5M followers on FB

When it comes to the sport league and clubs in India, they were found to be active on different social media platforms. ISL, IPL and Pro Kabaddi League have 4.2M, 20.9M and 1.5M followers on FB which is quite high as compared to their Instagram and Twitter page (figure 6). Similarly, Premier football league clubs like Manchester United, FC Barcelona also had high number of followers on FB than Instagram or Twitter. Additionally, European clubs & leagues were active on both Twitter and Instagram as per their total number of tweets and posts whereas Indian clubs/leagues were more active on Twitter (figure 6). Moreover, being consistent with updates can significantly gain more followers. For example, ISL and IPL joined Twitter in Sept 2013 and July 2008 respectively (figure 6). Despite

joining Twitter 5 years later, ISL tweeted 154.8k times, i.e. 95.1k times more than IPL (figure 6). On the other hand, IPL being able to gain more followers despite of being less active displays transfer of field and market success of the league. But, considering the population of India exposed to internet and the sport fans, the number of followers on social media is surprisingly less. Furthermore, Premier league clubs' pages were found to be active throughout the year using different fan engagement contests and updates from on and off field news while the Indian sport league pages were found to be more active during the league season.

Fan engagement by athletes: In terms of athletes, famous players from different sports were selected randomly from Indian and European sports who gained popularity since the last 2 decades. The first post uploaded in case of athletes with less than 1000 posts on Instagram and Twitter account opening date was also recorded to compare with their sports career.

Name of sport company/ association/athlete	Likes on FB page	Followers on Instagram	No. of post on Instagram	Followers on Twitter	Total tweets
MS Dhoni	20M	15.7M	99 (4 June 2014)	7.7M (Nov 2009)	471
Virat Kohli	37M	40M	802 (23 June 2015)	31.3M (sept 2009)	1,828
Sachin Tendulkar (Cricket)	28M	16.7M	619	30.2M (April 2010)	2,898
MC Marykom (Boxing)	3.4M	218k	204	1.4M (July 2011)	960
Saina Nehwal (Badminton)	7.8M	1.4M	2,745	8.39M (Feb 2013)	8,163
PV Sindhu (Badminton)	1.3M	1.5M	694 (28 March 2015)	2.79M (august 2014)	5,147
Sania Mirza (Tennis)	12M	5.6M	1,068	9.09M (Nov 2009)	6,979
Dipa Karmakar (Gymnast)	216k	25.1k	98 (27 June 2017)	220k (august 2016)	379
Hima Das (Athletics)	300k	260k	230 (29 July 2017)	304k (may 2018)	841
Deepa Malik	7,651	10.6k	520	41.8k (may 2013)	4,456
Cristiano Ronaldo (Portuguese footballer)	122M	181M	2,635	79.8M (June 2010)	3,447
Leo Messi (Argentinian footballer)	90M	129M	496		
Ellie Simmonds (GB para swimmer)	67.5k	14.2k	114	84.2K (July 2011)	3,220
Roger Federer (Swiss Tennis player)	14M	6.7M	282	12.6M (April 2013)	1,766
Novak Djokovic (Serbian tennis player)	7M	6.1M	649	8.69M (March 2011)	3,230

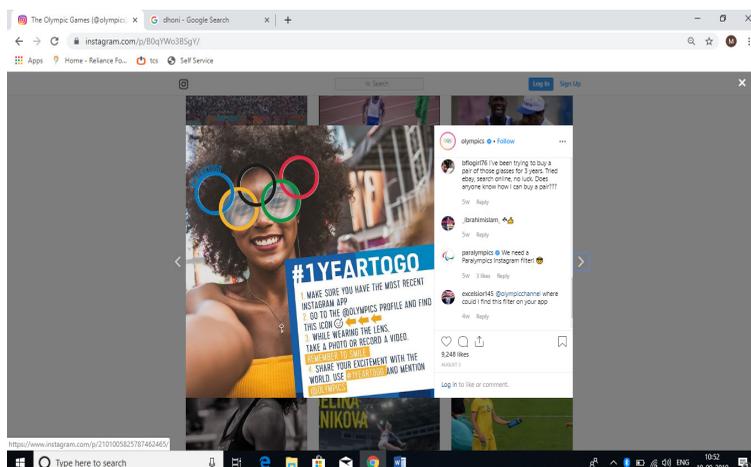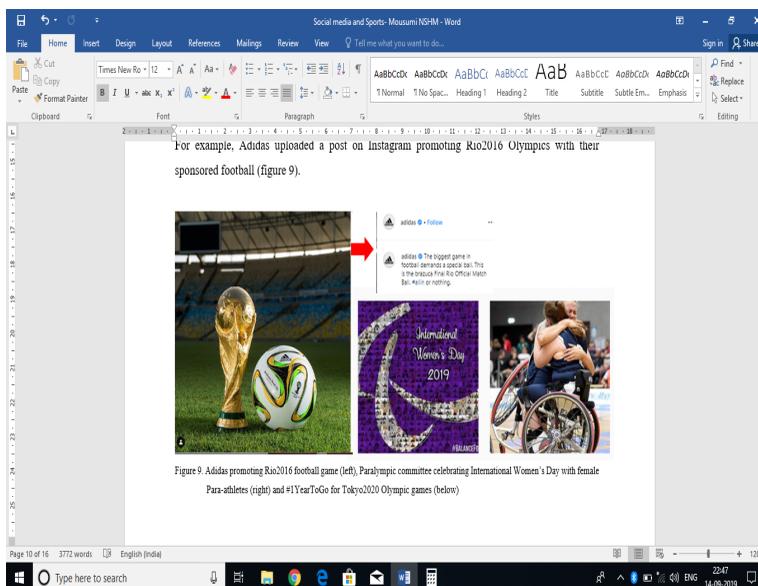Figure 7. Social media engagement by players (Data collected on 06-08-2019)

In terms of fan engagement by Indian athletes, players displaying remarkable performance from 2000s gained large number of followers on different social media platforms like Virat, Hima, PV Sindhu, Saina (figure 7). They were also more active as compared to senior athletes such as Sania and Dhoni. For example, Saina was found to be the most active with 3-4 tweets per day while Dhoni was the most inactive with only 4 tweets per month approximately since they joined twitter (figure 7). The European athletes such as Ronaldo, Djokovic and Ellie were found to be most active on Twitter. It is important to note that audience follow their sport icons to know about their off the field activities mostly. But, sadly it has also become a platform where celebrities get trolled where offensive comments on their personal life and views are made by public. For example, Commonwealth

games Gold medallist Jwala Gutta, was regarded as 'anti-national' as her mother is from China (FP sports, 2017). Calling an athlete who is representing India at International tournaments can be very stressful and discouraging for any athlete which can severely affect their psychological health which is vital for their performance. Similarly, Hima Das confessed being anxious and stressed due to trolls which lead to her disqualification from 200m race and the athlete shared a video urging people not to give negative comments as it affects players were mentally affecting her and putting negative psychological pressure (Kanwar, 2018).

Branding and Marketing Strategies on Social Media Platform
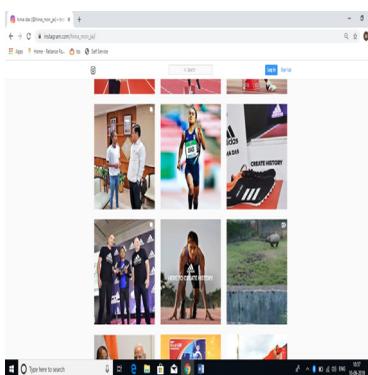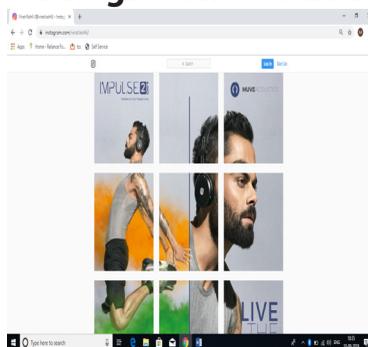
Indian players were noticed promoting companies endorsing them on their social media platforms like Virat- Impulse2Pro headphones, Hima- Adidas (figure 8). This trend is widely used across European market as well such as Ronaldo supporting Nike football boots (figure 8) which is a paid partnership as it shows in the picture above. Likewise, sports companies also shared the events they were sponsoring. For example, Adidas uploaded a post on Instagram promoting Rio2016 Olympics with their sponsored football (figure 9).

Figure 9. Adidas promoting Rio2016 football game (left), Paralympic committee celebrating International Women's Day with female Para-athletes (right) and #1YearToGo for Tokyo2020 Olympic games (below)

Additionally, it is important to note that keeping the audience engaged is very vital for any form of marketing. Online contest, win giveaway prizes by tagging friends, uploading a picture with specific Hashtags are commonly used social marketing strategies. Many companies also introduce their unique Hashtags

before special events or occasions to increase participation. For instance, Olympic committee made a frame with Olympic rings in the form of lens and asked people to click pictures and upload them with #1YEARTOGO both on Twitter and Instagram to promote the upcoming Tokyo2020 Olympic games (figure 9).

Being considered as the most successful league and hosting the 10th edition in 2019, IPL is noticed not using fan engagement strategies. Uploading the first post on 2nd Dec 2013 (figure 6), IPL announced it's the first ever contest on Instagram in 2019 (figure 10). This clearly shows lack of using innovative strategies for fan motivation and engagement.

Figure 10. Contest by IPL on Instagram
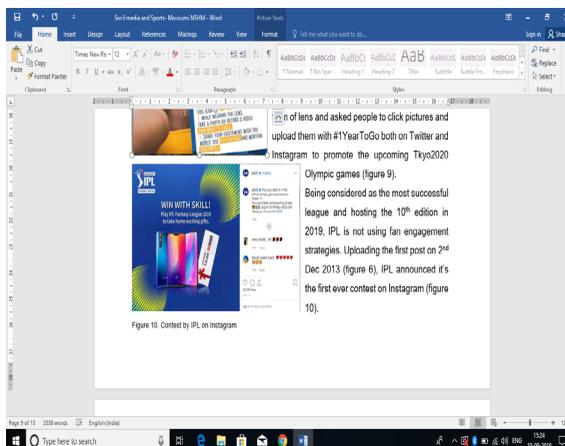
Moreover, international sport apparel and goods company like Puma, Reebok and Asics made separate accounts on Instagram for Indian market which has gained 332K, 289K, 46.9K respectively already. They are noticed using the fame of renowned Indian Bollywood celebrities and sportspersons to boost their regional market. A two-way fandom exchange was identified in these cases. Similar strategy is utilized in leagues like IPL, ISL and PKL where the owners of the teams were well-known businessman, Bollywood stars, or public figure (ISL, 2019; IPL, 2019 and Pagar, 2019). This helped both the parties to attack each other's audience.

The peak hours of engagement differ from one platform to another. For instance, best days to post on FB and Instagram was found to be Wednesday, and Tuesday and Wednesday for Twitter (figure 11). Similarly, late night and early morning time was found to be least engaging for all three of them. The most effective time for marketing on these three platforms will be during weekdays approximately between 9am-3pm (figure 11). Special attention must be given to the time-zone difference in case of international markets.

Discussion

Majority of the people across the globe are fascinated by different social-media platforms due to its features, connectivity and popularity. In India, 98% internet users operate social-media which can be the target group for marketing of sports on these platforms. With the increasing social media popularity, sports clubs are investing significant amount of time and resources to promote online engagement using their fan's nature of high involvement (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015; Hur, Ko, & Valacich, 2007). Sport market in India was found to be lacking behind in quite a few areas. Firstly, not having officially verified pages of governing bodies, being more active during particular season by clubs and not using different engaging methods. These problems can be rectified by confirming the official pages/accounts of governing bodies and uploading recent updates from time-to-time. This will ensure passing authentic news to public and keeping them engaged. It will also provide a two-way direct communication between the organization members/ athletes and fans. Secondly, various occasions/events were utilized to boost customer participation. India is a culturally diverse country with 80.5% Hindu and 13.4% Muslim population (National Portal of India, 2019) which celebrates many festivals like Diwali, Holi, Dussehra, Eid, Christmas, etc. throughout the year. Sport organizations can benefit from these events to upsurge the engagement with audience. Third, as majority of the IPL, ISL or PKL league team owners are renowned personalities and Bollywood stars, their fame can be used very efficiently

and effectively in various marketing strategies.

In order to benefit from social media, clubs need proper guidance on how to manage their presence online, namely by gaining more insights about their fans, motivations and behaviours. Aboulhosn (2019) listed ten tips which can be practiced by marketing managers for all social media platforms. They are:

- ❖ Being consistent
- ❖ Prompt message reply
- ❖ Being updated with trending news
- ❖ Investing in video content
- ❖ Using different headlines/captions while sharing same post multiple times
- ❖ Joining/making communities
- ❖ Interacting with the audience
- ❖ Collaborating with micro-influencers or public figures
- ❖ Sharing behind the scene, core team pictures
- ❖ Posting during peak hours
- ❖ Specific recommendations according to platform's feature were also stated. Such as-
- ❖ FB- Use of Promoted posts and FB ads, going Live, community building with FB group, FB messenger utilization.
- ❖ Twitter- joining conversations, appropriate usage of hashtags and advertisement.
- ❖ Instagram- uploading more stories, hashtags, promoting IGTV were suggested.

Additionally, different online engagement strategies like play-to-win contest, like-share-comment, on-and-off field moment, behind-the-scenes, etc. can be used to attract viewers on their page and keep them involved. With right tactics and approach, Indian sport market can benefit a lot from Social media marketing. It will be quite interesting to see how future sports managers adapt their strategies with evolving technologies and yield its potentials to generate revenue from them.

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