

A CRITICAL STUDY ON INDIAN PREMIER LEAGUE (IPL) AND ITS MARKETING IMPLICATION TO OVERCOME THE CHALLENGES OF CONTROVERSY, CLUTTER AND SIGNIFICANCE BEYOND CRICKET

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Premier League (IPL) is a decade old, electrifying cricket league organized by BCCI (Board of Control for Cricket in India) and played out in India from 2008 onwards. The main aim of the paper is to understand the marketing implication to overcome all sorts of controversy, challenges and clutter impacting the overall brand image of the league. The paper has discussed the major controversies and challenges faced by the league in every season like slap-gate controversy, ban on Pakistan players, sacking of Lalit Modi, players testing positive for drugs, fixing scandals, ban on Lankan players, ban of CSK & RCB franchises, League's fixture & societal responsibility issue and fair-play issues, which had highly tested the credibility of the league. In the marketing perspective, the impact of various clutters of leagues (many emerging leagues) is critically examined to overcome the competitive threats posed before the league. The IPL's nexus with Bollywood industry is discussed critically and significant marketing & promotional efforts to connect effectively with film industry of down south can help to enhance the brand value of the league. The paper also accentuated the IPL's revolutionary role to influence other games in the country to start own leagues and making it to grow bigger every year. The challenge of scheduling IPL season 2020 amidst the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic is also discussed in the paper. Finally, the paper concludes with the need for strategic marketing efforts to counter the above challenges looming the league.

Keywords: Marketing Implication, IPL, Cricket, Covid-19.

INTRODUCTION

The Indian Premier League (IPL) is a cash rich cricket league from the Board of control for cricket in India (BCCI). Since 2008, it has made its impact globally and one of the most celebrated cricketing leagues around the cricketing world. The members of BCCI also believed the league as one of the best platform to find the right talent for the national team. The domestic competition like Ranji trophy, Vijay Hazare Trophy which always records low viewership relatively to IPL, did not provide the right platform to assess the players talent because of cricket fans least importance attached to it. But stages like IPL, when players

deliver their best in front of million people, the selection committee holds the responsibility of selecting the right players to be played in the national team.

Priyadharshini (2015), cited the need for innovation to overcome the challenges of corruption, player conduct, match fixing and other outside influences affecting the league. The other challenge highlighted in the article is with the question of IPL nourishing other games in the country. Witnessing the success model of IPL, games like Kabaddi, Badminton, Boxing, and Hockey has started similar leagues over the years. But the possible challenge is that it may split the viewership and fan base among different sports. The interesting fact explained in the article is the timeline of corruption timeline and spot fixing timeline which means that IPL body is not taking enough preventive measures to combat the above issues.

Naha (2013) highlighted various cricketing controversies took place in the past and damaging the credibility of the sport. The paper discussed on a test match incident between India Vs England in 1977 at Chennai, where John Lever, the England fast bowler was suspected to use some greasy substance on the ball. The reports confirmed the presence of vaseline like chemical substance, but officials were unable to confirm whether it was a deliberate action to take unfair advantage by the bowler over batsmen. The paper also highlighted another type of controversy in 2011 between the same two nations, involving an allegation of using Vaseline in bat, in which the technology unable to discover a edge of ball hitting the bat. These two incidents clearly reveal that controversy has been a part and parcel of the game, but testing the true spirit & fairness of the game.

McCleneghan (2006) identified the role of sports columnist is more challenging with regard to managing sports controversy. The author observed various source variables for writing controversial column in sports. It discussed on identifying the strongest and weakest sources in writing the controversial column. Radio sports talk, TV sports talk and sports agent were identified as weak sources and intuitive feelings, sporting event were used as strongest source to write sports column. This clearly shows that how a controversy was presented in the column also likely to influence the readers and viewers in interpreting the controversies involved in any sports.

Gupta (2011) *The IPL and the Indian Domination of Indian Cricket, Sport in Society; Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics* addressed the success and significance of IPL beyond cricket. The author has addressed the power shift happening in international cricket because of IPL. Earlier the cricket world was dominated by countries like England and Australia. But soon after IPL becoming a mega event in 2008, India has started to dictate terms in world cricket. This has been clearly evident with key members of India occupying the positions in International Cricket Council (ICC) in the recent years. Another significance of IPL is that, the Indian cities are getting familiar around globe and it opens the gateway for other business too.

Rowe & Gilmour (2009) *Global sport: Where Wembley Way meets Bollywood Boulevard, Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group clearly explain the changing complexion of the game. The model of IPL is not happening on its own, but a shared model of most popular English Premier Leagues (EPL). But understanding the culture, complexion and other background of the nation, IPL has broken all the barriers and emerged successfully now. With effective marketing campaigns in planning TV media, globalization has made the sport to reach globally.

Gupta (2009), *India and the IPL: Cricket's globalized Empire, The Round Table*, believed that India has realized the merits of globalization and the BCCI has applied exactly in its IPL model. The way they have attracted and signed the contracts with overseas players, sometimes it has tempted the players to give importance to IPL rather than playing for their national team in International matches. Though it is an Indian league, he argues that IPL as a game has a truly international characters to blend and attract the viewers of all cricketing

nation. He understood that if a game has to get popular worldwide, it needs to put the value on time factor. The youngsters and current demography of population doesn't have the patience to sit for whole 5 days in watching a test match and one full day sparing 50 overs match. This nuance has been rightly struck by the BCCI and launched IPL very successfully to become the emperor in the game of cricket.

Rasul & Proffitt, (2011) *Bollywood and the Indian Premier League (IPL): the political economy of Bollywood's new blockbuster*, Asian Journal of Communication, found the nexus between IPL and the Bollywood industry. India is a very big market for cine industry. India is known to outside world by some of the bollywood biggies like Amitabh Bacchan, Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan, Akshay Kumar, Salman Khan etc. The IPL as a brand got bigger, once these movie stars claimed stake in franchises like Kolkatta Knight Riders, Rajasthan Royals, Kings XI Punjab. The author believes that it has created a synergy and helped the league to expand rapidly at global level.

Maguire (2006) in his paper explained the various kinds of appeal that strengthened the brand World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). The author cited that the portrayal of star wrestlers image of '*good and bad fellows*' engaged the audience to patronage the brand for many years. This proves to be that for any branding techniques to be working effectively, the icon or stalwarts presence is very significant to enhance the brand value of the products and has a huge marketing implications in making a strategic decisions.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the paper is

1. To critically analyze the marketing implications to overcome challenges and controversies looming the IPL league.
2. To understand the significance and role of IPL beyond cricketing spectrum
3. To identify and discuss the IPL's competitive challenges posed by clutter of cricket leagues.

IPL & Controversies Go Hand in Hand

Slap Gate Controversy

Naha (2013) cited the impact of controversy on cricket in testing the spirit and fairness of the game. The popular league IPL though remained strong in consolidating the fan base and revenue every season; it also has landed in series of controversy from time to time. In the very first edition 2008, incidents like slapgate controversy involving Harbhajan Singh and Sreesanth didn't put the league in proper light. Harbhajan Singh, the mainstream spinner of the franchise, slapped the opponent pacer Sreesanth during a customary handshake in the end of match. After handling a thorough investigation on this issue, the spinner was found guilty and was handed over a ban for rest of the IPL matches in the season. It is worthwhile to be noted that the same player was earlier landed in a monkey gate controversy with an Australian cricketer Andrew Symonds, during India's 2007-2008 tour of Australia. Thereafter, the Australian player went under a lot of trauma and medical treatment after the issue and he was never able to return to the international game as the prime of his past. Seeing the notorious behaviour of the Indian cricketer, the IPL should have taken much more stringent action against the player rather than just a ban. This would have restored the league's credibility and would have sent a stern message to the players who involve themselves indisciplined practices of the game.

Ban on Pakistan Players

Gupta (2011) explained the importance of IPL getting more popular due to contracts signed with foreign players. This issue could be connected with the ban on Pakistan players, and may hinder the popularity of league in Pakistan. The author cited that a league like IPL received its global attention because of foreign players prioritizing the league for its hefty salary package. Though the previous one helped the league to gain more publicity and media light, after the 26/11 terror attack, the league also got politicised as well with serving ban on Pakistan players to participate in the league. For the people with cricket outlook alone, sometimes felt the need to include Pakistan players, because they believed that cricket can be one of the important ties to overcome the strained relationship between the two countries and improving the ties gradually. To some extent it was true in the pages of history. In a presentation ceremony, Pervez Musharaff, former president of Pakistan, made a witty comment on Dhoni to not have his hair cut, the day became unforgettable in the pages of India-Pakistan cricket history. In early 90's, the players of both teams have treated the matches more than just cricket rivalry and believed it to be the nation's pride to win the battle. But in the mid-2000, the game's enmity and ferocity gradually changed not only in the minds of cricketers, but the people of both nations as well. Though the spirit of the game remained intact, the players displayed mutual respect towards each other and the two nation's people witnessed a friendly atmosphere in the game. This paradigm shift was greatly appreciated by true cricket fans and therefore felt the need to keep the politics away from the gentleman's game. In this context, the ban of Pakistani players never helped the two nations to improve the ties between them.

Sacking of Lalit Modi

In 2010, the IPL's credibility was very badly hit when the governing body decided to sack Lalit Modi, the Ex-chairman of IPL who was instrumental in starting the league in 2008. He was ousted from BCCI and IPL when he was found guilty on multiple charges levied on him. With implication to IPL's credibility, the most important charges were found to be rigging the IPL bidding rights auction for adding two new franchises in 2010. He was also found guilty on financial irregularities and unexpectedly had a dramatic exile from the league.

The sack of Lalit Modi on various charges cannot be simply seen as a one man's crisis. It has a lot of implication (Priyadharshi, 2015) on the result and outcome of the matches played in the league. It is also believed that he had a nexus with one of the franchise of the league '*Rajasthan Royals*', which emerged as winner in the inaugural edition of the tournament in 2008. Initially many treated the franchisee as an under dogs and many never believed as a favourite to lift the trophy.

Fixing Scandals

In 2012 and 2013, the league was loomed with the biggest controversy of corruption charges. The signs of spot fixing, match fixing and betting charges were seen as the headlines of the news medium. In this allegation, three players were arrested on spot fixing and even some key members of the CSK management were involved in the betting charges and having links with bookies. The unpredictable outcome of the game remained the true spirit of the league, but the fixing and betting charges (Priyadharshi, 2015) caused a serious damage to the league.

Chennai City Banning Lankan Players

In India, cricket cannot be separated from politics. Similar to the case of Pakistani players banned from participation in the league, ban of Lankan players in Chennai due to regional politics in the state of Tamilnadu in 2013, is another case to be analysed. The key ministerial position of the state strictly instructed not to allow the Lankan players in Chennai soil to play the matches and warned otherwise to shift the matches outside Tamil Nadu. This restricted the rights of franchises to go for the Lankan players at selection. This issue tested the true spirit and fair conductance of the league by pushing the franchises to be at disadvantageous position, since the bidders put a lot of stake on buying specific players, especially the overseas.

Ban on CSK & RCB franchises

In 2015 the ban on two important franchises Chennai Super Kings (CSK) and Rajasthan Royals over match fixing scandal (Aditya Priyadharshi, 2015) have affected the league in all fronts. In 2014, it was also rumoured that the report submitted by Mukul Mudgal Committee to the apex court had some big names involved in the match fixing scandal. Due to lack of transparency in the probe, probe was not properly conducted and the fate of the issue is hardly known to people. Due to this scam, the franchises Chennai Super Kings (CSK) and Rajasthan Royals were banned for two years from participation. The fair conductance of investigation and trial by internal committees must restore the confidence to uplift the spirit of the game.

Fair Play Issues

It is no doubt that IPL has taken steps to check the misconduct and inappropriate behaviour of players every season. But apart from those rankings in the fair play table, players have not conducted themselves well (Naha, 2013) which have tested the credibility of the sport at times. In the earlier editions of the league, the ugly spat between players like Virat Kohli and Gautam Gambhir, Wayne Parnell and Rahul Sharma testing positive for drugs, Luke Pomersbach's charges on molesting a cheerleader were to name a few. To cite the latest, In 2019 Chennai Super Kings skipper MS Dhoni lost his temperament by scampering out from the dugout to question the on field umpires call. The conduct of the captain was totally contradictory to his natural behaviour and this incident proved to be a severe breach of code of conduct from a high-profile player and set as a wrong precedence to the young players. In the same season, the league got further heated up with controversy of Mankading issue. Ravichandran Ashwin, the Punjab franchise captain dismissed a Rajasthan player Jos Butler by '*Mankading*' technique, a method of run out by dismissing a non striker if he steps out of the crease, even before releasing the ball. Players and critics were equally divided on this issue in making their stance and justification. At times the league has realized the need to impose fair play on the part of poor umpiring decisions too, which has changed the complexion of the game many times.

IPL – Overcoming the challenge of Clutter

The success of IPL has revolutionized the cricketing world and is always seen as a frontrunner in terms of revenue generation and gives upper hand to BCCI in any cricketing decisions. Priyadharshi (2015) cited the importance of need for innovation to beat the emerging competition in the game of cricket. In recent years, many foreign cricketing leagues are getting significant attention from the fans. The Cricket Australia's BBL, Pakistan's PSL,

England's NatWest T20 Blast, West Indies CPL, and Bangladesh's BPL have managed to rope many stalwarts from foreign nations and gained popularity. Even though IPL has edge over rest of the leagues, now it's getting clutter that viewers are exposed to so many leagues around the world. Cricket Australia's Big Bash league (BBL) is a same sort of league like IPL from the island nation. The first edition of BBL was seen in the year 2011. It is imperative to talk about BBL to define the success of IPL. Though these leagues cannot be seen as a direct competitor to each other, the success and the impact on the game of cricket is worthwhile to mention here. Before the advent of IPL, Australia and England were the cricketing boards to influence any ICC's decision mattering cricket. After the success of IPL in the global arena, BCCI has started to dictate the terms strongly than any other cricketing boards in the ICC's decision, say related to revenue sharing model, fixtures etc. The two cricketing boards, who dominated the ICC and cricketing decision for a long time, embraced BCCI and accepted the new power shift of BCCI in any affairs related to cricket. After witnessing the success of IPL and BBL, most of the cricketing nations have started their own leagues today. Later, West Indies joined the league and started its Caribbean Premier League (CPL) in 2013 and it is getting popular among the foreign players to join it. The professional T20 Blast was established by English and Wales cricket in 2014. Though English cricket board was the first to start this format in 2003, it needed a complete revamp in the format to compete with IPL at global level to attract viewers and sponsors. Later, Pakistan started its Pakistan Super League (PSL) in 2015, but the league is seen as a single entity in which investor manage and control the franchises. Among all, the success of IPL even motivated the countries like Bangladesh to start its league "*Bangladesh Premier League (BPL)*" and has completed seven editions so far.

Rowe & Gilmour, (2009) highlighted the need for revolutionary change in its format making the game more popular. Similarly, the cricket's popularity is gripping even in non-cricketing nations like Canada and it is evident through the inauguration of its popular league GT20 in 2018. Many inform and retired cricketers were part of this league and have received decent viewership for a non cricketing nation like Canada. Another dimension of cricket emerged with the inauguration of T10 or Abu Dhabi T10 owned by T10 sports management which is played for 10 overs each side. In this age of clutter of leagues, the big challenge for IPL is to retain the same lustre and brand power for a longer time. The founder and Chairman of Abu Dhabi T10 league Shaji ul Mulk opined as follows,

"Though we have many outstanding stars like Eoin Morgan, Andre Russell, Shane Watson, Keiron Pollard and some of the biggest names in the world making a global impact, however, one individual that stands out from the rest is Yuvraj Singh" (The Quint, 2019)

From the above statement we can see that big stalwarts after retiring from the national team may find it lucrative to join these foreign leagues. IPL is a kind of tournament where individuals can create a difference on the viewership record. In IPL, it was alleged that stalwarts like Yuvraj Singh (Gupta, 2009) was not given fair chance to play in the last few seasons of the league by his franchises. This would have disappointed many of his fans across the country when they can't see their stalwarts in the league anymore. The southpaw after retiring from IPL and joined another '*Global T20 Canada*'. Another similar case is on the cards, when icon player like MS Dhoni who retired recently from all international formats, may opt to join any of the other popular league, if offered with lucrative pay check. IPL is sometimes about big guns and the league may lose the lustre, once the big guns switch to play other popular leagues. The above fate has resulted for another popular wrestling brand WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) in the recent years. WWE was able to dominate the wrestling industry for many decades (Maguire, 2006). Once the popular wrestlers like Stone Cold Steve Austin, The Rock retired and few signed off to join rivals, it failed to retain the

same lustre in the years. Hence, IPL as a global event should be wary of such threats from foreign leagues and they need to retain the icon & stalwarts even after retirement and can strike a coaching or administrative contract to improve the brand image of the league. This marketing implication can help to retain the fans and stay connected with the league for many more years to come.

IPL – The Significance beyond Cricket

IPL and Bollywood Nexus – Can they connect deep to down south?

Rasul & Proffitt, (2011) highlighted the strong connection of IPL with Bollywood industry and its stalwarts. IPL is a global brand but still many feels that IPL has strong nexus only with Bollywood industry (Rasul & Proffitt, 2011) of the country. The league's close association with Corporate and Bollywood industry have really helped to pool fund to it. The Bollywood stalwarts like Sharukh Khan, Preity Zinda, Shilpa Shetty own a big stake in franchises like Kolkatta Knightriders, Kings XI Punjab, Rajasthan Royals respectively. McCleneghan, (2006) stressed that media like sports columnist can influence the readers and people in presenting the controversy. When satellite media highlights bollywood connection with the league often, this creates an image of IPL as most synonymous with specific industry alone. The presence of many Bollywood celebrities in the stadium has really helped to attract more viewers to the league. But this has always drawn the impression subtly that IPL as a brand is synonymous with only Bollywood industry to the people of down south in the country. At times, people might have witnessed movie stars from Tollywood, Kollywood, Mollywood and Sandalwood getting embraced with IPL and showing their support to home teams. But their presence is not evidently noticed as Bollywood celebrity by the media and rarely makes the headlines on next day. The limelight enjoyed by the south movie stars is not the same as Bollywood industry. Maguire (2006) stressed the importance of sociological factors playing an important role in influencing the people in patronizing sports and games. Hence, IPL body can take this as a marketing implication to promote the brand further in down south by associating more southern movie stars more in the leagues promotional campaign. Since south Indian actors like Rajinikanth, Prabhas (Bahubali fame) are in par with Bollywood actors in terms of popularity and remuneration, they can add more value to the league. Hence the IPL can take a conscious effort in their marketing campaigns to associate with south movie stars of the country and can stay as a truly pan Indian league to its name.

IPL Fixtures and Social Responsibility

IPL has its regular fixtures in the months of April and May every year. As a marketing implication to gain more viewership, this has a great significance with the students' community to get rid of academic workloads and fully engaged with IPL. But In 2016, IPL faced another serious charge by the environmentalist when the state of Maharashtra was hit badly by serious drought during april and may. When the issue was taken to Mumbai high court, the court's verdict went against IPL and called as "*criminal wastage*" to use water for pitches in the stadium. Eventually, the state missed 13 matches to be played and shifted to other venues of the country. In India, not only Maharastra, majority of the state and districts faces acute shortage of water to look upon their crops and cattle. This raises serious questions on BCCI's social responsibility, when the nation as a whole undergoing serious drought in the months of April-May every year, IPL's window of schedule is least sensitive to the problems of agriculture, farmers and other economies which depend a lot on water for their life blood. Since the league has got its own power to influence

the international schedule, they can look for a permanent solution to make their fixtures other than April and May.

Promoting sports and leagues of non-cricketing community

The IPL as a league has been truly inspirational to start leagues in games like Kabaddi Hockey, Golf and Badminton in India. Some of the cricketers and actors own their stake in these leagues. This is the kind of impact IPL has created in the sporting society when other games are hardly noticed in the country. Hockey Indian League (HIL), the first edition was played in 2013. In the same year, the Premier Badminton League (PBL) was founded in India and invited overseas player to be a part of the league. The success of IPL has really served as the platform to inspire other games in India.

Ethics and IPL 2020 reschedule during outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic

The IPL season 2020 was earlier scheduled to start in march 2020 and was hit badly by the global outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. This has resulted in postponing the 13th edition of the league to September by organizing outside India. With International Cricket Council (ICC) finally postponing the Men's T20 world cup schedule (month of October) in Australia, it has opened the gateway for IPL to fix its schedule. But the ethical question remains on IPL is the schedule during Covid-19 pandemic which even reported 13 CSK players tested positive in the next few days after their arrival at UAE. The decision and approval to conduct IPL 2020 in this pandemic time has raised serious questions on players safety, when ICC even was barred to conduct the significant T20 world cup event in this critical time period.

CONCLUSION

The organizer of this popular league needs to realize the marketing implication on countering the challenges, controversies and clutter posed before the league. IPL is a stand out event in cricket that none other leagues come closer to it in terms of popularity and revenue generation. Though the popularity is steep and steady for the league, the IPL governing members should be wary of emerging cricket leagues played in many countries. They need to address the problems on fixtures and display a socially responsible behaviour which is irking the environmentalists on drought issue which will help to project a positive image in the marketing perspective. Through effective branding tools and techniques, the IPL bodies can take further initiatives to promote other games and sports in the country. Since many competitors have emerged in the field, the current period of time remains very critical for IPL to understand the above challenges & opportunities at the earliest and marketing efforts like differentiation & innovation will help to retain the same lustre of the league in the future too.

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