Batting Outside the Field:
Examining E-Engagement Behaviors of IPL Fans

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between cognitive awareness and perceived knowledge of sports fans’ social media engagement behaviors. Data were collected through an online survey of 236 adults from India who identified as Indian Premier League (IPL) fans. The findings of the study suggest that perceived knowledge and cognitive awareness of sports are precursors to social media engagement behaviors of sports fans. Further, sports fandom mediates links between perceived knowledge and cognitive awareness with social media engagement. The findings hold special significance for contemporary COVID scenarios because physical engagement is being substituted by digital engagement.

KEYWORDS

Authenticity, Cognitive Awareness, COVID, E-Engagement, Perceived Knowledge, Social Media Engagement, Sports Fandom

1. INTRODUCTION

Sports fans share a unique relationship with their favourite sports teams (Hassan & Nambudiri, 2021). Engagement, in both real and virtual worlds, is expected to co-create value for individuals in such a relationship (Popp, Germelmann, & Jung, 2016). Sports organizations have positioned themselves on social media to benefit from fans’ engagement with their favourite sports teams, athletes, and sports entities. These electronic engagements (e-engagements) take various shapes, from “liking” pictures on Instagram to engrossed sports-related discussions on Facebook and Twitter (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Interestingly, the literature on e-engagement of sports fans is at a nascent stage. The current study addresses the lacuna in the existing literature on sports and e-engagement by exploring and examining factors that foster e-engagement of sports fans with their favourite sports teams.

The COVID pandemic has changed the way we play and watch sports. The unprecedented pandemic, as well as the lockdowns to arrest its spread, has impacted sport teams and entities with immediate financial losses due to the lack of live spectators (Grix et al., 2020; Nasajpour et al., 2020). To illustrate this, session 13 of the Indian Premier League (IPL), a popular India-based cricket league, had to move to foreign shores owning to the health crisis and losses incurred (Sahni, 2020). Stadiums

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are deserted as spectators remain in their homes, sticking to their television screen or computers for a comfortable, safe place to watch sporting events (Goldman, 2020).

In fact, COVID has affected nearly every live sporting event. Unfortunately, the effects will continue far longer than what was anticipated. Participation in physical spaces like stadiums creates and supports an atmosphere that is conducive to fans’ formation of a group identity (Mastromartino et al., 2020). Still, the same seems to hold true for virtual spaces like social media platforms. For example, these digital platforms allow fans to engage in everyday discussions on their favourite sports teams or athletes (Weinberg, 2009). Although the pandemic’s scenario has restricted physical movement of fans, virtual platforms serve as an alternative option. Social media platforms facilitate in the communication, connection, and collaboration between fans on a larger scale (Mastromartino et al., 2019). Through these digital spaces, fans have their voices heard in ways that were not possible through physical interaction or other traditional means (Mastromartino et al., 2020). Therefore, fans’ e-engagement seems unavoidable.

The current study uses e-engagement and social media engagement interchangeably. The study holds significance for research and practice in contemporary times as more sports entities use social media platforms to disseminate information about athletes and teams. Similarly, sports fans will continue to indulge in discussing and sharing sports-related information with other social media users. Sports markets and entities can benefit from examining factors that foster the e-engagement of sports fans. Understanding these factors will help these entities strategize ways to strengthen their relationship with sports fans (potential consumers of products and services). Study also holds theoretical implications for research on topics such as authenticity in sport (Hassan & Nambudiri, 2021).

The current study was developed as part of a larger research project, which began with a qualitative study through which authors explored the factors that foster social media engagement for sports fans. A theoretical model was developed based on qualitative interviews conducted with 57 sports fans. The model has been hypothesized (based on the existing literature) and tested using primary data in the current study.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. E-Engagement Through Social Media and Sports

Three broad ranges of engagement literature were identified through student engagement (Pandey & Nagesh, 2013), work/employee engagement (Pandey, Gupta, & Hassan, 2020), and customer engagement (Hassan & Pandey, 2019). Social media is one of the most powerful tools for effective communication as it affords a deep and meaningful relationship between users and other stakeholders (Dessart, 2017). Organizations are increasing their products and services promotions via social media because such platforms create more sustainable, intimate user relationships, which benefit the organization (Sashi, 2012).

The literature has defined e-engagement behaviour as the behaviour “that reflects engagement with social media, including customers’ creation of, contribution to, or consumption of brand-related content within a social network” (Dolan et al., 2019, p. 2216). Engagement of any form goes beyond participation in an activity. It encompasses an interactive relationship with the brand (i.e., person, place, or object). Further, such interactions are voluntary and discretionary in nature. The e-engagement of users can be understood as behaviours that add both experiential and instrumental values through interactions over social media platforms (Dolan et al., 2019).

This e-engagement strategy, which stems from the pervasiveness of technology (Gupta, Pandey, Gaur, & Vohra, 2019), can also be seen in app-based aggregators (Pandey & Sohani, 2020). Past studies examined e-engagement of sports fans. For example, Vale and Fernandes (2018) examined the e-engagement of football fans in the European context. Similarly, Pronschinske, Groza, and Walker
(2012) used the econometric model to examine the engagement of sports fans. A significant number of these studies focused on the outcomes of engagements, such as increased viewership (Achen, 2016). However, factors fostering such a relationship require more research.

Markets and researchers value e-engagement because social media avenues empower fans and generate a sense of “belongingness.” Sports fans’ e-engagement ranges from the viewing of content related to their favourite teams (no active participation) to the discussion and sharing of information (active participation).

2.2. Sports Fandom

Sports fandom refers to a fan’s active involvement in sports without special skills (Borland & MacDonald, 2003). Sports fandom has also been defined as fans’ social interactions in terms of belongingness or identity as a member of a particular sports team or body (An, Kim, & Di Benedetto, 2020). It is important to distinguish sports fans from sports spectators. The former are not just interested in sports as an activity; they actively engage in following sports-related news, activities, and other developments (Wann & James, 2019). However, a sports spectator’s engagement with sports is limited to watching or witnessing a sports event.

The process of displaying fandom behaviours begins with the identification process. Fans must feel a psychological connection with their favourite teams or athletes. The extent to which a fan associates themselves with their favourite teams or athletes determines the degree to which they connect with that brand (Osborne & Coombs, 2013).

Studies on sports fandom have discussed fans’ interactions with their favourite teams, interests, and behaviours (Hassan et al., 2021). However, research on sports fandom does not occupy a place in mainstream discussions on fans’ engagement. In fact, most studies on sports fandom focus on collegiate and university sports teams (Melnick & Wann, 2004, 2011; Theodorakis & Wann, 2008). Further, research on sports fandom in emerging markets is almost missing.

Research on sports fandom holds significance for sports brands, such as a team or athlete (microlevel), and the community (macrolevel). Scholars have observed the cultural value of sports fandom in unifying communities because fan identity interacts with other identities like socio- and economic status, race, sex, and/or nationality (Osborne & Coombs, 2013). Owning to its relevance for society at large and businesses and individuals (Yeravdekar and Behl, 2018) in concise terms, the current study examines sports fandom in the context of e-engagement of sports fans.

2.3. Awareness and Perceived Knowledge of Sports

When comparing awareness and knowledge, the former refers to a state of consciousness and the latter refers to the “knowing” of something. The role of cognitive awareness is to increase one’s level of consciousness for the surrounding environment (Eski, 2019). Awareness is an essential element of the human automatic process, which involves the conscious or unconscious course of one’s actions (Chartrand, 2005). Cognitive awareness of sports forms an important component of social identity for sports fans. This awareness includes not just the public and private evaluation of the group to which sports fans identify, but also the interconnectedness fans experience in the group.

Fans’ awareness of the history and legacy of their favourite sports brands shapes their behaviours (Heere & Katz, 2014). Similarly, perceived knowledge facilitates fans’ decisions to further associate with their favourite sports brands. The more perceived knowledge one has about their favourite sports brand (e.g., athletes’ statistics, information about the game), the greater their sense of control and confidence (Kwak & McDanie, 2011). Studies suggest that perceived knowledge acts as a source of empowerment for fans, resulting in the adoption of systems and practices that encourage positive opinions and behaviours among sports fans (Kwak & McDaniel, 2011).
3. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The current study examines the relationship between awareness, knowledge, fandom, and e-engagement using the social identity theory and the Uses and Gratifications theory (U&G) (Levy, 1985; Tajfel, Henri, & Turner, 1979). The social identity theory states that certain intergroup behaviours can be determined based on perceived differences in group status, legitimacy, and the stability of a group (Tajfel, Henri, & Turner, 1979). In other words, members of a group shape their behaviours on the status and privileges attached to their groups. This behaviour is done to gain legitimacy and acceptance by the group, as well as avoid conflict and exclusion (Tajfel, Henri, & Turner, 1979). Being a member of a group (for example, a fan group for a sports team) has certain implicit and explicit motivations, which encourages individuals to try to achieve and retain the status of belonging to that group.

The U&G theory argues that technologies, such as digital platforms, are determined by individual objectives (Levy, 1985). The U&G theory assumes that digital platforms are a product and the users are consumers of those products. An underlying assumption of the U&G theory is that it holds users responsible for choosing a digital platform to meet their needs. According to the theory, gratification is the ultimate desire and need of the user (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973).

4. HYPOTHESES

The literature on e-engagement and consumer behaviour suggests that the degree to which individuals indulge in activities like technology adoption or its use is determined by subjective knowledge (Kwak & McDaniel, 2011). This understanding of e-engagement also appears to hold true for sports-related activities. Regarding sports, fandom is associated with the knowledge of sports. Wann and James (2019) distinguished between sports fans and sports spectators, noting that sports fans are individuals who are interested in sports as an activity and engaged in following sports-related news, activities, and other developments. In other words, sports fans are motivated to learn the aspects of a sport. Sports spectators, however, have limited engagement, merely watching or witnessing a sports event. Sports fandom (i.e., an individual’s social interaction in terms of belongingness or identity as a member of a sports team) is associated with “sports fans” (An, Kim, & Di Benedetto, 2020). Intuitively, it is difficult to imagine sports fandom without having knowledge about sports.

Theoretically, the relationship between perceived knowledge and sports fandom can be explained using social identity theory (Tajfel, Henri, & Turner, 1979). According to the theory, being a member of a group (for example, a fan group for a sports team) has certain implicit and explicit motivations that encourage us to put efforts toward achieving and retaining the status of belongingness to that group. The status of belonging is achieved through participating in activities like discussing, learning, purchasing, or promoting things affiliated with the group. In the case of sports fans, learning, discussing, and disseminating information about a favourite sports team is an activity through which belongingness is achieved (An, Kim, & Di Benedetto, 2020). The idea that one has knowledge about a favourite sports team can enhance an individual’s degree of engagement with that team, which equates to fandom (Kwak & McDaniel, 2011). Based on this discussion, the first hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 1: Perceived knowledge of a sports team is positively related to sports fandom.

This article has highlighted how perceived knowledge of sports is positively associated with fandom. The literature suggests that the degree to which an individual identifies with the group can enhance one's engagement and commitment to the group. Katz and Heere (2016) extended this discussion by suggesting that the cognitive awareness of sports can act as a precursor to the interconnection and interdependence of fans. Here, cognitive awareness can be distinguished from perceived knowledge. The former refers to an individual’s “stored information about human thinking, especially about the features of his own thinking” (Kluwe, 1982, p. 201). Similarly, Heere and James
(2007) defined cognitive awareness as “the degree of knowledge a person has of a group that directly implicates his or her identity with the group as a whole” (p. 70). In contrast, perceived knowledge is one’s self-assessment of a feeling of knowing something (Park, Gardner, & Thukral, 1988).

Relevant to the current discussion on sports, cognitive awareness of fans refers to the range of a fan’s knowledge regarding the history of success or failure of their favourite sports team (McDonald et al., 2016). Cognitive awareness is a precursor for team identification; therefore, we may conclude that an increase in cognitive awareness should enhance the degree of fandom for sports fans (Lock et al., 2014). The above relationship can also be understood from the fact that the identification process results in feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction; hence, fandom would be perceived by individuals as a way to attain well-being (Toder-Alon, Icekson, & Shuv-Ami, 2019). The following hypothesis can be proposed:

Hypothesis 2: Cognitive awareness of sports teams is positively related to sports fandom.

Extending the discussion on fans, studies (e.g., Hu, 2019; Yoo, 2014) have found that perceived knowledge can result in behaviours like knowledge sharing and evaluation of perceived benefits. Other studies have linked sports with the internet, highlighting the role of perceived knowledge in promoting a sense of control and confidence among sports enthusiasts (Davis & Duncan, 2006; Kwak & McDaniel, 2011). The underlying argument of these studies is based on assumptions that individuals with more perceived knowledge about the subject (like a sports team) are more intrinsically motivated to engage in activities associated with the dissemination of information related to that subject (Cabrera, Collins, & Salgado, 2006; Hu, 2019).

Engagement can also take place on virtual platforms like social networking sites. Contemporary virtual engagements have emerged as the most prevalent channels through which both organizations and/or entities (sports teams and leagues) and consumers (the fans) can engage (Dolan et al., 2016). It is expected that sports fans would engage in sharing information about their favourite sports team on these platforms. Further, perceived knowledge of a favourite team would intrinsically motivate fans to enhance their degree of engagement with social media platforms to share their knowledge.

Based on the above arguments, the following hypothesis can be proposed:

Hypothesis 3: Perceived knowledge of sports teams is positively related to e-engagement behaviours.

The relationship between perceived knowledge of sports and social media engagement of fans can be extended by examining cognitive awareness using the U&G theory proposed by Blumler and Katz (1974). The theory argues that internet users engage in activities on social media platforms to gratify their cognitive, affective, personal, or social needs (Robert, 2017). Cognitive awareness of sports is expected to create a cognitive need of knowledge as curious sports fans acquire information, understand the social environment, and explore details (Robert, 2017). Cognitive awareness as a component of identity encourages sports fans to engage in repeated consumption of sports-related information on social media platforms. These consumptions take place in the form of accessing team-related information and disseminating the information to other social media users (Liu & Xiao, 2013). Therefore, this article draws the following relationship between cognitive awareness and engagement for sports fans:

Hypothesis 4: Cognitive awareness of sports team is positively related to e-engagement behaviours.

Fandom is often perceived as “sticking together to do great things.” Studies have discussed how fans and celebrities use social media platforms to mobilize the population in support of a personal, political, or social cause (Bennett, 2014a, 2014b). There are instances of fans acting crazy when
discussing Lady Gaga on social media platforms. The same may hold true when a sports team or athlete (viewed as a brand and celebrity) are discussed on social media platforms (Waters, 2015). Social media outlets develop compelling relationships between celebrity (brand) and their fans because of its accessibility to over 3.81 billion people across the globe. Content (i.e., photos, videos, interviews, or discussions) can be shared and made available to the billions of people at the same. This instant connectivity is likely to occur only on virtual platforms. Feil (2013) observed that sports fans are proactive in interacting, debating, discussing, and sharing about their favourite sports team or athlete. Such engagements are rooted in fans’ cognitive, affective, social, and personal needs (the U&G theory). Social media platforms are effective channels for interacting and sharing information; therefore, fans are motivated to indulge in social media engagement behaviours.

Hypothesis 5: Sports fandom is positively related to e-engagement behaviours.

This article has highlighted the positive relationship between perceived knowledge, cognitive awareness, and social media engagement behaviour. The authors have also discussed the relationship between fandom and social media engagement behaviour. Next, the article introduces the following hypotheses to identify the mediating role of sports fandom:

Hypothesis 6: Sports fandom mediates the relationship between perceived knowledge and e-engagement behaviours.
Hypothesis 7: Sports fandom mediates the relationship between cognitive evaluation and e-engagement behaviours.

5. CONTEXT

5.1. Indian Premier League

For the current study, data were collected from individuals who identified as Indian Premier League (IPL) fans. IPL, founded in 2007 by the Board of Cricket Control in India (BCCI), is one of the most popular and successful T-20 leagues in the history of cricket. IPL has remained as the most attended league in the world (Barrett, 2016). In 2019, the IPL brand was estimated to be worth US$6.7 billion. As of 2020, 13 seasons of IPL had been organized. According to a report, the television viewership for 2020 seasons crossed 31.57 million average impressions (Sports Star, 2020). IPL matches are telecast live across 120 nations (Malu, 2020).

IPL’s eight teams represent their respective franchisees. Each team has a maximum of four foreign players. Athletes participate from India and abroad, giving a multicultural identity to the league. Only first-class cricketers are auctioned for the IPL seasons, which invariably ensures standardization and uniformity in the selection and retention of athletes.

The popularity of IPL can be understood from the fact that IPL has over 86 million fans located across the world. IPL teams like Rajasthan Royals have over 6.7 million followers on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (together) alone. Similarly, Chennai Super Kings (CSK) has over 26.8 Million fans. The Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB) reported had 13.3 Million fans by early 2020 (CA, 2020). Even during Covid pandemic, the league has continued to be organized, though the location of the event has been moved from India to Dubai. Among the 86 million IPL fans, adults in the age group of 22-30 comprises of 18 percent of the fan base (Keelery, 2020).
6. METHODOLOGY

6.1. Sample and Measure

The data for the study was collected through an online survey. A short query form was sent to 700 individuals ranging in age groups, education, and professional backgrounds. The participants were asked whether they follow IPL teams and athletes on social platforms. Of the 700 participants, 487 responded “yes” to the question.

Next, the researchers shared a detailed questionnaire with the 487 positive-response participants. This group returned 249 survey forms. Thirteen forms were incomplete or redundant; hence, they were not included in the final sample. A total of 236 survey responses were used for the analysis.

The mean age of the sample was 26.8 years of age. The mean work experience was 40.5 months. Educational qualification of respondents ranged from undergraduate to doctoral degrees. The sample had 139 males (58.9%) and 97 females (41.1%).

All the constructs in the study were measured with established scales. Responses were recorded using a seven-point Likert scale. A draft questionnaire was shared with 10 respondents and 3 subject-matter experts for face validity before it was shared with the respondents.

The cognitive awareness of sports teams was measured using a scale developed by Heere et al. (2011a). Sample items included: “I am aware of the tradition and history of my favourite IPL team.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.91.

Similarly, data on perceived knowledge of sports was collected using the scale developed by Kwak and McDaniel (2011). Sample items included: “Rate your knowledge of cricket compared to the average cricket fan.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.92.

Fandom was measured using the scale developed by Absten (2011). A sample item for the fandom questionnaire included: “Being a cricket fan is very important to me.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.90.

Social media engagement behaviours were measured using the scale developed by Vale and Fernandes (2018). A sample item included: “I read the content posted by IPL teams on social media platforms.” The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was 0.92.

7. DATA ANALYSES

The two-step approach (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) of ensuring discriminant and convergent validity was employed through a measurement model and testing of hypotheses through the structural modelling. Social media engagement behaviours were dependent variables. Perceived knowledge and cognitive awareness were independent variables. Sports fandom was a mediator; age, gender, work experience, and educational qualification were control variables. The use of these controls are consistent with prior studies (Bakker & Sanz-Vergel, 2013; Bakker, Demerouti, & Lieke, 2012; Mishra & Mohapatra, 2010).

Table 1 shows that the composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach’s alpha were greater than 0.7 (Malhotra & Dash, 2011), establishing reliability. The average variance extracted (AVE) was greater than 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), establishing convergent validity. The maximum shared variance (MSV) was lower than AVE and the square root of AVE was greater than interconstruct correlations. These facts establish discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2010).

7.1. Common Method Bias

The Harman single factor test showed that the variance of the constrained model was less than 50%. In addition, the study employed a more rigorous marker variable technique (Lindell & Whitney, 2001). The marker variable was not significantly related to the variables of this study; hence, common method bias is less likely a big concern in the data.
8. RESULTS

All CFA and SEM models were assessed against generally accepted fit indices: χ2/df < 3, TLI > 0.90, CFI > 0.90, and RMSEA < 0.08 (Hair et al., 2010; Jackson et al., 2009. See Table 2. Table 3 shows the results of the structural model. Perceived knowledge of sports teams is positively associated with sports fandom (β = 0.396, p < 0.01), thus supporting hypothesis 1. Cognitive awareness of sports teams is positively related to sports fandom (β = 0.537, p < 0.01), thus supporting hypothesis 2. Perceived knowledge of sports teams is associated with social media engagement behaviours (β = 0.134, p = < 0.1), thus supporting hypothesis 3. Cognitive awareness of sports teams is positively related to social media engagement behaviours (β = 0.544, p < 0.01), thus supporting hypothesis 4. Sports fandom is positively related to social media engagement behaviours (β = 0.187, p < 0.05), thus supporting hypothesis 5. The indirect effect of perceived knowledge on social media engagement behaviours via sports fandom is β = 0.074, lower bound = 0.019, and upper bound = 0.152, thus supporting hypothesis 6. The indirect effect of cognitive evaluation on social media engagement behaviours via sports fandom is β = 0.101, lower bound = 0.060, and upper bound = 0.305), thus supporting hypothesis 7.

9. DISCUSSION

The e-engagement of sports fans through social media platforms has become an important aspect of sports business, primarily because e-engagement encourages nontransactional behaviours (e.g., word of mouth) among fans and contributes to value creation (Vale & Fernandes, 2018). Fans display high enthusiasm, forming a classic example of a loyal companion in both good and bad times. Undoubtedly, research on the engagement of sports fans holds significance for businesses that attempt to identify potential market avenues in sports-related goods and services (vanDoorn et al., 2010). Further, the pandemic has generated a need and demand to understand how the sports fans relationship is sustained, even when physical interactions among fans and teams are at a standstill.

The current study highlights how real-world engagement is being replaced by digital experiences. Findings suggest that a major contributor toward e-engagement and sports is cognitive awareness.
and perceived knowledge of sports. Further, the study discusses the mediating role of fandom in strengthening the relationship between awareness, knowledge, and e-engagement.

The literature on e-engagement suggests that social media platforms offer ubiquitous, real-time communication between brands (sports teams or athletes) and consumers (sports fans). Sports have been acknowledged for creating a stronger sense of belongingness for social media users (Tsai & Men, 2017; Vale & Fernandes, 2018), as sports fandom mediates the degree of e-engagement for sports fans. Although sports generates a stronger sense of belongingness for social media users, not all users would display a high degree of passion and emotional significance in their association with sports. Sports fans (vs. sports spectators) perceive digital platforms as a new and more meaningful landscape for their fandom (Dionísio, Leal, & Moutinho, 2008; Vale & Fernandes, 2018). The former acts as the empowered co-creator and co-owner of the brand’s reputation (sports teams or athletes).
10. IMPLICATIONS

10.1. Theoretical Implications

Findings of the current study extend discussions on the U&G theory and social identity theory. The U&G theory states that the use of social media is contingent on the needs and goals of the user, which are defined by the user. Active participation of the user on social media can limit, facilitate, or influence the gratification of exposure to social media (Levy, 1985). However, the theory does not merely examine how social media impacts the user. It also follows a holistic approach to understand how and why individuals use social media, as well as what the user does with the platform and information (Vale & Fernandes, 2018). The literature on the U&G theory has suggested four needs associated with gratification: (1) cognitive; (2) affective; (3) social; and (4) personal.

Findings of the current study suggest that the motivation for sports fans to engage on social media platforms is derived from a need to display fandom. Fandom can be understood as the idea of belonging to one’s favourite sports team. The degree of fandom is determined by fans’ cognitive awareness and perceived knowledge of their favourite sports team. In other words, knowledge and awareness help fans shape their personal identity and generate a sense of belongingness for sports. This belongingness, in turn, motivates fans to engage in social media to gratify their favourite teams. They may do so by indulging in a continuous process of sharing and learning about the team (Muntinga, 2018). Over time, the process fulfils important personal and social needs like peer recognition (Jensen Schau, & Gilly, 2003; Vale & Fernandes, 2018).

Previously, social identity theory and the U&G theory were individually used to examine the e-engagement of sports fans. The current study contributes toward theory building by combining these frameworks (see Figure 2). Social identity theory, when used in the context of fans, suggests that the identification process with sport teams allows individuals to identify with other social groups (Heere & Kartz, 2014). Here, team-related identity for fans refers to a self-concept derived from fans’ knowledge of their membership to a sports team, as well as the value and emotional significance attached to such memberships (Heere & James, 2007). Findings of the current study indicate that the process of social identity creation for fans is fostered by perceived knowledge and cognitive awareness of their favourite team. Further, the identity creation process results in an effective display of fandom and e-engagement behaviours among fans. As illustrated in Figure 2, the process of identity creation and fandom can be explained using social identity theory. Similarly, the process of fandom and the
e-engagement behaviour of fans can be explained using the U&G theory. While the former focuses on the process resulting in the feeling of belongingness to a sports team, the latter highlights the motivations to extend the feeling of belongingness into a more serious, committed relationship. Social media remains at the backdrop to facilitate the whole process.

The current study also opens doors for further discussion on concepts such as authenticity in the context of sports. Authenticity has been defined in the literature as “being one true or real self and acting in congruence with one self and values” (Ménard & Brunet, 2011, p.332). Authenticity can significantly determine one’s behaviour and actions. For example, Pronschinske, Groza & Walker (2012) suggested that authenticity is effecting in attracting and retaining sports fans on virtual platforms. Since, individuals continuously thrive to retain their authentic self, engagement of athletes or fans on virtual platforms should also be determined by their perception of being authentic while engaging in such interactions over virtual platforms.

### 10.2. Practical Implications

This study offers important implications for managers, marketers, and academic institutions. Social media, a powerful tool for communication, can facilitate the dissemination of information to a larger population in an effective manner, especially considering geographical barriers (Pandey, Singh, & Sohani, 2018). Social media can also be used to create and promote products and services, encouraging consumer consumption. Through social media, customers can engage in brand-related activities like word-of-mouth publicity and the creation of social awareness (Hollebeek, Conduit, & Brodie, 2016).

Sports teams are utilizing non-traditional technologies like team chat rooms and e-newsletters as they follow a service-dominant logic to cocreate value for sports fans (Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012). The underlying idea is that individual sports fans are potential customers for products and services of their favourite sports teams. The current study suggests that fans armed with the...
knowledge and cognitive awareness of sports will experience enhanced engagement with technologies. Therefore, engaged fans will be more willing to purchase and promote products and/or services as compared to other technology users.

This study also holds significance for contemporary times when physical mobility was restricted due to a health crisis. Social media platforms hold paramount importance in such scenarios as they have become a major source of sports-related information gathering and sharing. Further, the pandemic has given rise to new forms of technology-based sports activities, such as e-sports events and fantasy sports leagues (Ruihley & Chamberlin, 2020). Physical spaces, such as stadiums, have served as a core brand association; however, these are being replaced by virtual platforms. Mastromartino et al. (2020) emphasized that practitioners must consider the implications of these new sports landscape on brands. The way athletes, teams, and sports entities navigate the new and evolving sports landscape will depend on an understanding of the factors that foster or impede the sports-fan relationship. The current study opens doors for discussion on these issues.

11. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The current study’s limitations can be addressed in future research. First, the study examines the relationship between perceived knowledge and cognitive awareness for e-engagement behaviours in the context of IPL teams (cricket teams). Future studies may explore similar relationships between individuals and other team sports and/or events. Here, it is also important to highlight that the authors have examined sports related engagement only from the fans’ perspective (fandom). However, it is equally important to examine the other side of the story i.e. Athletes’ interaction with sports fan through social media and other platforms. Future studies can examine concepts such as authenticity that may play a critical role in determining athlete’s genuine interest in engaging with his or her fan and how authenticity can further enhance or obstruct such engagements for athletes.

Second, the study identifies and examines two major antecedents of e-engagement (perceived knowledge and cognitive awareness). Other factors may foster the engagement of sports fans and should, therefore, be examined in future studies. Third, the current study explored the positive side of e-engagement. The literature on engagement has highlighted the dark side of social media. The same should be explored in the context of sports. The current pandemic scenario has increased the use of digital platforms and will result in undesirable outcomes (Király et al., 2020), which should be examined in future studies. Finally, the current study examined e-engagement from the fans’ perspectives. These fans are part of the larger community and play a role in development (Chen et al., 2020). Future studies may look at how COVID has enhanced e-engagement and sports, as well as how these can drive social consciousness among the masses.
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