



International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in Science, Engineering and Technology

(A Monthly, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Scholarly Indexed, Open Access Journal)



Impact Factor: 8.206

Volume 8, Issue 5, May 2025



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The Role of Indian Super League in Popularizing Football Among Indian Youth

Ishaan Pandey, Dr.Snigdha Singh

Student at Amity University, Business school, Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus, India

Professor Amity Business School, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus, India

ABSTRACT: The Indian Super League (ISL), established in 2014, represents a pivotal chapter in the evolution of football in India. This paper examines the role of the ISL in popularising football among Indian youth. Employing a mixed-methods approach combining secondary data analysis, surveys, and expert interviews, the study reveals the ISL's significant influence on youth engagement, football culture, infrastructure development, and career aspirations. The findings suggest that ISL has catalysed a paradigm shift in the perception and popularity of football in India, positioning it as a viable professional pursuit and a major urban and suburban youth interest. The research also identifies challenges such as regional disparities and infrastructural limitations, offering recommendations to enhance ISL's long-term impact.

I. INTRODUCTION

Football, often dubbed the "beautiful game," has been a global sporting phenomenon for decades. In India, however, cricket has historically dominated the sporting landscape, relegating football to a secondary status. This changed significantly with the inception of the Indian Super League (ISL) in 2014, an ambitious initiative by the All India Football Federation (AIFF), Reliance Industries, and Star India. The ISL was designed not merely as a football tournament but as a comprehensive commercial and media spectacle aimed at invigorating Indian football culture.

The central aim of this research paper is to explore the ISL's role in popularising football among Indian youth. The study investigates how the league has influenced youth participation in football, altered perceptions toward the sport, and contributed to the creation of football-centric communities and infrastructure across urban and semi-urban regions of India.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Indian football ecosystem has undergone several transformations, with the ISL representing the most commercially ambitious and widely marketed development. Scholars such as Bandyopadhyay (2017) and Majumdar (2019) highlight the historical marginalisation of football in Indian mainstream sports culture, particularly outside states like West Bengal, Kerala, and Goa.

Research by Sharma (2020) emphasizes the influence of media and celebrity ownership in driving interest toward football. Similarly, Das and Gupta (2021) focus on how structured leagues and grassroots initiatives associated with the ISL have enhanced the sport's accessibility. Comparative studies with global leagues (e.g., English Premier League, Major League Soccer) demonstrate that a league's success often hinges on youth engagement, localized marketing, and infrastructure.

Additionally, theories of sports development suggest that youth participation increases with greater visibility, role models, and accessibility—three pillars that the ISL has strategically targeted. However, critical literature also points to the league's urban-centric nature and its limited penetration in rural India, as discussed by Iyer and Roy (2022).



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III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research employs a mixed-methods approach to ensure comprehensive insights:

1. **Quantitative Data Collection:** Surveys were conducted among 500 youth aged 13-25 across five Indian cities: Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangalore, and Kochi. The questions focused on ISL awareness, football participation rates, and media consumption.
2. **Qualitative Data Collection:** In-depth interviews were conducted with ten stakeholders, including ISL club managers, youth coaches, and sports journalists.
3. **Secondary Research:** An analysis of ISL's annual reports, AIFF publications, and market analytics from sports marketing firms was conducted to contextualize findings.
4. **Comparative Analysis:** The paper compares ISL's youth engagement strategies with those of successful international leagues.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1. Awareness and Viewership

Survey data indicate that 82% of respondents were aware of the ISL, with 65% regularly watching matches. Viewership was highest in urban centers, particularly Mumbai and Kolkata. Respondents cited star players, celebrity owners, and improved broadcast quality as key attractions.

4.2. Participation in Football Activities

Post-ISL inception, football club enrolments for youth increased by 40% in surveyed cities. Coaching academies affiliated with ISL clubs saw a 55% rise in registrations, particularly in the 13-18 age group.

4.3. Influence of Role Models

Players such as Sunil Chhetri, Sandesh Jhingan, and foreign recruits like Ferran Corominas have become household names. Youth respondents noted a significant motivational impact from watching these players compete in the ISL.

4.4. Infrastructure Development

ISL has led to the renovation and construction of 15 major stadiums and numerous practice facilities. Youth-focused outreach programs like the Reliance Foundation Youth Sports (RFYS) and club-run grassroots initiatives have provided structured training platforms.

4.5. Social Media and Digital Engagement

ISL's strong digital presence—YouTube, Instagram, and fantasy football platforms—has emerged as a key engagement tool. 70% of surveyed youth reported following ISL-related content online, with memes, match highlights, and interviews being most popular.

4.6. Career Aspirations

Football is increasingly viewed as a viable career option. 25% of respondents expressed interest in pursuing football professionally, a significant jump from pre-ISL levels (estimated at 10%).

V. DISCUSSION

The data clearly affirm ISL's substantial impact on football's popularity among Indian youth. Several interconnected dynamics contribute to this trend:

1. **Entertainment and Spectacle:** ISL's blend of sport and entertainment appeals to young audiences habituated to IPL-style programming. Celebrity owners like Ranbir Kapoor (Mumbai City FC) and John Abraham (NorthEast United FC) help bridge sports and pop culture.
2. **Localized Engagement:** Hosting matches in footballing hubs like Kerala and West Bengal taps into existing passion, while expansion into cities like Jamshedpur and Bhubaneswar fosters new audiences.
3. **Branding and Merchandise:** The availability of ISL-branded merchandise, kits, and club paraphernalia has helped youth identify with teams and players.



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4. **Institutional Collaborations:** Ties with educational institutions, via programs like RFYS, ensure grassroots penetration. Tournaments and training camps are increasingly integrated into school calendars.
5. **Global Exposure:** Strategic partnerships with international clubs (e.g., Atlético Madrid with ATK, City Football Group with Mumbai City FC) bring global standards to Indian football, influencing coaching, management, and player development.
6. **Digital Integration:** Given the digital native nature of Indian youth, ISL's online-first strategy has proven effective. Match updates, interactive polls, and behind-the-scenes content drive continuous engagement.

However, challenges persist:

- **Urban-Rural Divide:** Football infrastructure and exposure remain limited in rural India.
- **Short Season Duration:** ISL's 4-5 month season restricts year-round engagement.
- **Gender Disparity:** Female participation remains low, despite rising interest.
- **Economic Accessibility:** Coaching academies and match tickets are still unaffordable for many lower-income youth.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Indian Super League has undeniably reshaped the football landscape in India, particularly among the youth. Through media sophistication, strategic branding, role model visibility, and infrastructural investments, the ISL has brought football into the national consciousness as both a spectacle and a career path. Youth engagement, once fragmented and regionally limited, is now more widespread and vibrant.

However, for ISL to sustain and deepen its impact, structural issues such as inclusivity, affordability, and rural outreach must be addressed. Collaborative efforts between the government, private sector, and educational institutions will be crucial. Future research could further explore longitudinal effects of ISL exposure on youth development, employment in sports, and comparative analysis with other emerging football nations.

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