

Received on: 02 February 2026

Revised on: 06 April 2026

Accepted on: 12 April 2026

**Breaking the Offside Trap: A study about gender visibility in
football media coverage and an analysis about the representation of
Indian Women's League Athletes on I League's Instagram page**

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the representation of women athletes currently playing in the Indian Women's League (IWL) on the official Instagram page of the I-League. Despite growing global advocacy for gender equality in sports, female athletes in India continue to experience significant underrepresentation and limited media coverage. The study aims to investigate the extent of this underrepresentation, focusing on Instagram as a key social media platform for promotion and fan engagement.

The research adopts a mixed-methods approach that combines content analysis of the I-League's Instagram posts with a survey examining public perceptions of the visibility of male and female footballers in the media. The content analysis evaluates the frequency and type of posts featuring IWL footballers compared to those featuring players from the men's I-League. It also examines visibility indicators and thematic elements such as images, captions, and narrative focus to understand representation patterns.

The survey targets active and occasional football fans as well as general media consumers. It explores public perceptions of the visibility of women's football and the level of audience interest in female athletes. The findings reveal a clear disparity in media representation, showing that IWL athletes receive significantly less exposure and engagement on social media compared to their male counterparts.

Keywords:

Indian Women's League, I-League, Instagram, media representation, gender equality.

1. INTRODUCTION

The arrival of internet and social media has largely transformed the space of media representation of sports (Litchfield, 2019). From team updates to individual player updates a large section of information are based on the information that are circulated through social media. Media companies have grabbed this opportunity as the social media platforms are more consistent in reporting every information up to the minute in sports (Litchfield, 2019).

1.1. Background and context

Traditional sports media such as radio, television and print media have continued disregarded female athletes (Osborne, 2015). If we look at the women's football coverage, the media coverage is extremely poor (Black, 2015). The difference is more widely seen if we compare the coverage of men's and women's football (Doehler, 2019). Media has traditionally represented women's athletes as weak, hyper feminized and infantilized (Osborne, 2015). There is also a notion that women's football is tactically weak and is played with less intensity and are boring in nature (Pappalardo, 2021).

If we talk about India, the participation of women in domestic and international sports are always less in number compare to men (Akoijam, 2017). With the increasing use of social media and users, a change in narrative is expected. (Narasimhamurthy, 2014). But a dominant narrative is still exists which stereotype the gender identities with the sports (Akoijam, 2017).

The current paper tries to find a comparative study about the representation of athletes playing in the Indian League (I-league) and the Indian Women's League (IWL) from the official Instagram page of I-league.

1.2. Problem statement

The representation of athletes in the media plays a significant role in shaping public perception and popularity of different sports. In India, football has gained attention in recent years, but an imbalance still exists in the visibility and portrayal of female athletes. This research seeks to find the representation of Indian Women's League's (IWL) athletes on the Instagram page of the I-League. Despite the growth in popularity of football in India, the basic observations suggest that IWL athletes receive significantly less coverage and visibility compared to their male counterparts.

1.3. Objectives of the research

The main objectives of this research are:

- 1) To understand the landscape of Indian women's football and their representation on the basis of equal opportunities and coverage on media platforms.
- 2) To understand the difference of equal visibility, promotion and social media push between the men's and women's league in social media platforms.
- 3) Identifying the role of gender stereotypes, if any, involved with the representation of men and women in the Indian football league and the Indian Women's League of football, pertaining to their social media accounts.
- 4) Examining the aspects of gender roles in the context of I league and IWL's official Instagram account.

2. Literature Review

Different Media organizations have covered women sports in different part of the world. To understand how different media has covered the men and women sports we can segregate them based on the media outlets.

2.1.1. Gender and Sports in Media

In the United Kingdom 100 most circulated news articles in six months were taken for data analysis during the period of COVID-19 (Parry, 2023). The news articles were taken from March 2020 to September 2020. News related to women football athletes were significantly less in number compared to male football athletes. In those articles, the news regarding women athletes and the challenges that they were facing at that time were not properly covered. Few articles tried to draw attention to the well-being of women players and their inferior conditions, but mostly the articles tried to show how sports are male-dominated and the athletes who are mostly male have a moderately comfortable lifestyle despite being in the middle of the pandemic.

Another research paper showed how traditional English print media covered the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup and the fan's perception and response to this coverage (Pope, 2023). The news that is covered by the most circulated newspapers in the United Kingdom is significantly less in number compared to the print articles of the men's World Cup held in 2018. The research paper also looked after the quality and details of the news which is also not as detailed as the news related to the men's world cup. Other than these it also analyzed the negative comments on the players based on gender stereotypes and unnecessary dig into players' personal lives to make the content look more interesting for the people. The news which is covered by the media does not look like sports news but is mostly treated as a Human-interest story by the media.

Another research was done in the United Kingdom about the number of articles written by the British media about women athletes during the time of England's summer sports 2017 (Biscomb, 2020). The research paper tried to shed light on the representation of women through the newspapers around the country. The articles substantially increased as England's women's football team progressed in the knockout stages. The Articles are progressive considering what they were back a few years but there are still a lot of places for improvement. The research also shows that the recognition of women's sports increased based on the performances in the knockout stages whereas if we considered the male sports the print outlets gave recognition without any conditions.

Gender representation in social media coverage is also seen very vibrantly. Research has been conducted on active athletes' of the 2016 Australian Olympics team through their official Twitter handle (Litchfield, Team GB and the Australian Olympic Team: representations of gender in social media spaces., 2019). The focus is on two Twitter pages: 'Team GB' which is the Great Britain Olympic team and 'Australian Olympic Team'. The research paper focused on the stories and photographs that are sports stories covered and the languages used by the admin on different athletes based on their genders. The research paper also differentiated two types of shots active and passive shots. Active shots are the shots which are during the game and the passive shots are prior or post games. The outcome of the research is a greater number of male posts compared to female posts and another notable point is that the number of active posts on male athletes is much more than that of female athletes. The photographs which cover both male and female athletes also had male athletes in the dominant position than the female ones.

Another research paper is about the post of both NCAA male and female athletes (Burroughs, 2022). Female athletes are mostly underrepresented throughout media, making the sports mostly male-dominated. The multimedia posts are also given to the male athletes, which results in more engagement and it sidelines the existence of female athletes present in the sports. This creates the idea that sports are normal to men, whereas women play it as a hobby, not as a profession.

2.1.2. Gender and Sports in Indian Media

The participation of women in domestic and international sports is always less (Akoijam, Participation level of Indian women in sports in National and International Arena., 2017). However, now the numbers are increasing but it is a long way to go. In the Commonwealth Games, the participation of Indian women was nil till 2002 but in recent times the number of participations has significantly increased and so the number of times they are ranked in the top 3. But still, there is a long way to go as

the stereotypical thinking of gender and sports still exists. This results in less participation of women in domestic and international sports.

In the case of Indian newspapers which are published in the area of north India seventy-four per cent of photos are of male athletes which are displayed in the sports section (Pradeep, 2016). The news which is covered is also mostly about male athletes performing on the domestic and international stages. Whereas the representation of female athletes is very low in number creating a stereotype that only male athletes participate in the competitive sport.

2.2. Research Gap

The existing body of literature on gender visibility in football reflects the Western perspectives. This research aims to find the gender disparity of football in India. There is a lack of research which focuses on the representation of Indian women's footballers on social media platforms. This study focuses on this gap by conducting a comprehensive analysis of the social media presence and the type of content that are showcased related Indian women's footballers compared to their male counterparts.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

The theories that can be used in this research are hegemonic masculinity, emphasize femininity. Hegemonic masculinity means how men showcase their as dominant masculinity and physical power through aggression, courage and strength in the society (Whitehead, 1999). Men are associated with aggression which is also reflected in sports, that is the reason male athletes showcasing their physicality and aggression is normal for the game and also for the audience who are consuming it.

Emphasize femininity is how a woman is expected to behave depending upon the traditional norms of the society (Projansky). Woman throughout the world is expected to do in-house works, sports as a field for occupation and passion are not expected from females. This the reason why participation of female athletes is largely underrepresented by the media.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

To conduct this research, qualitative research design was used. Qualitative research is a kind of research that involves in-depth understanding about the social phenomenon inside their natural setting (Fossey, 2002). Under this qualitative research design, qualitative content analysis and a qualitative survey was done.

A content analysis is a research tool which is used to find certain word, concept or themes from a qualitative data (Harwood, 2003). For this research a time span is taken from 1st December 2023 to 31st March 2024. The timespan is taken for three months as the IWL starts from 8th December 2023 and ends on 24th March 2024. This study investigates the gender representation of male and female athletes from the official Instagram posts of the I-League which includes a detailed analysis of images and the captions used. This analysis will provide a glimpse how All Indian Football Federation (AIFF) promotes the women's football and the women athletes compare to men's football and male athletes.

A survey is a systematic method of collecting information through relevant questions that are asked to a sample of people with an aim to understand the population as a whole (Scheuren, 2004). For this research a qualitative survey method was taken to understand are people aware of women's football in India and how they are able to get information about the women's football.

3.2. Data collection

For the content analysis we will calculate the number of female athlete's Instagram posts that are available in the I league official Instagram account starting from 1st December 2023 to 31st March 2024 and what are their visual representation through the images and the captions used in the respective Instagram posts. We need to observe how much visibility and space is given to female athletes and then need to thematically understand what those post is trying to convey to the society and creating a perception about women and sports.

A survey questionnaire is done for both active and occasional football fans along with the general media consumers. The survey is done to analyses people's perceptions about visibility and interest in women's football.

For this research, Instagram as a platform is chosen because the greatest number of Indian youths are the users of Instagram (Sharma, 2022). Approx. 74.70% of Indian internet users use Instagram as their social media platform, which is around 516.92 million active Instagram users in India (Jain, 2024).

4. DATA ANALYSIS

A total 1175 Instagram posts of ILeague official account has been taken for analysis during the span of 1st December 2023 to 31st March 2024. The total number of posts on male footballers during this period of time were 458 and the number of posts on female footballers were 277, the rest 440 have been categorized as others as shown

in the total table. This other section is based on the posts that are related to I League 2, IWL2 and Kalinga Super Cup.

Participants	Number of posts
Male	458
Female	277
Others	440
Total	1175

Table 1: Break down of total Instagram posts of ILeague (1st December 2023 to 31st March 2024)

If the total course of four months is segregated on the basis of each month, then we can see the percentage of shots used for male, female and others in the following table 2.

Percentage of shots used in each month	Male	Female	Others
December	47%	14%	39%
January	2%	21%	77%
February	69%	26%	5%
March	66%	30%	4%

Table 2: percentage table

Now if we further subdivide these posts on the basis of what kind of photographs and videos in the reels are used then we can subdivide it on the basis of two parts one is active shots another is passive shots.

The Active shots are the shots which show the athletic positions like sprinting, heading, catching or kicking the ball. These active shots can be more subdivided on the basis that is they showing aggression or not. This category is formed based on the shots which show a physical dominance in the posts. The other category is Passive shots, these are those shots which show the non-athletic motions. These passive shots can also be sub-divided which reflects happy or positive emotions in the posts.

In the month of December there are a total of 422 Instagram posts that are posted, out of which there are a total of 199 male post and 60 female posts. These posts are

consisting of both photographs and reels. The percentage of men's posts in December is 47%, women's sports is 14% and the other related posts are 39%, as shown in the table 2.

DECEMBER

Type of emotions portrayed in shots (in percentage)	Male (in percentage)	Female (in percentage)
Aggressive emotion	19%	5%
Happy emotion	81%	66%
Caption (in total figures)	20	18

Table 3: percentage table of December

In the month of December, number of active shots present in male athletes are 57 and for female athletes they are 20. Now if we closely monitor the aggressive or active shots are 11 out of 57 for male athletes, which is 19%. In case of female athletes, the number of aggressive shots is 1 out of 20 which is 5%. This shows that males are more aggressive on the field than females in the month of December, as shown in the table 3.

In case of passive shots, the male athletes have 58 posts and the female athletes have 20 posts, posted by the official I-League Instagram account. For males these happy emotions posts are 17 out of 21 which is 81%. For females these happy emotions pots are 38 out of 58 which is 66%, as shown in the table 3.

Throughout the month of December, the team positions on the table are showcased more for the men's league than that of female's league. For men's league the league position are showed for 4 times but for females it did not showcase once. Posts related to press conference for men's league are 4 and for females' league are 0. Post related to individual players, for male athletes who are currently playing in I League are 3 and for female athletes who are currently playing in Indian Women's League it is 0. Total number of captions consists more than ten words, for male are 20 and for females it is 18.

January		
Type of emotions portrayed in shots (in percentage)	Male (in percentage)	Female (in percentage)
Aggressive emotion	67%	42%
Happy emotion	33%	51%
Caption (in total figures)	10	17

Table 4: Percentage table of January

In the month of January, the total number of posts that are posted by the ILeague official page are 537. Out of which there are 11 posts related to male athletes and 112 posts related to female athletes. The rest 414 posts are related to others. The percentage of men's posts in the month of January is only 2%, for women's sports is 21% and the other related posts are 77%. On January 2024, ILeague official Instagram page covered all the updates regarding Kalinga Super Cup, which was held from 9th January 2024 to 28th January 2024, as per shown in the table in table 2.

In the month of January, the number of active shots present in male athletes is 3 and for female athletes they are 36. In case, of aggressive or active shots for male athletes it is 2 out of 3 which is 67%. In case of female the number of aggressive shots is 15 out of 36 which is 42%, as per shown in table 4.

In case of passive shots, the male athletes have 6 posts and the female athletes have 41 posts, posted by the official ILeague Instagram account. For males these happy emotions posts are 2 out of 6 which is 33%. For females these happy emotions posts are 21 out of 41 which is 51%, as per shown in table 4.

The team positions on the table are showcased once for the men's league and for the female's league the team position is showcased twice. Post related to press conference for men's league are showcased none on the other hand for the females' league the post are showcased 5 times throughout the month. Post related to individual players, for male athletes who are currently playing in I League and for female athletes who are currently playing in Indian Women's League is 0. Total number of captions consists more than ten words, for male are 10 and for females it is 17.

February

Type of emotions portrayed in shots (in percentage)	Male (in percentage)	Female (in percentage)
Aggressive emotion	55%	36%
Happy emotion	50%	87%
Caption (in total figures)	54	11

Table 5: Percentage table of February

In February, the total number of posts that are posted by the ILeague official Instagram page are 198. Out of which 137 posts are related to male athletes who play or associated with I League and 51 posts are related to women's athlete who plays or associated with women's league. The rest 10 posts are related to others. The percentage of posts that are related to male athletes are 69%, for female athletes the percentage is 26% and for the others it is 5%, as shown in table 2.

The number of active shots present in male athletes during the month of February is 47 and for female athletes they are 22. In case, of aggressive or active shots for male athletes it is 26 out of 47 which is 55%. In case of female the number of aggressive shots is 8 out of 22 which is 36%, as shown in table 5.

In case of passive shots in the month of February, the male athletes have 58 posts and the female athletes have 15 posts, posted by the official ILeague Instagram account. For males these happy emotions posts are 29 out of 58 which is 50%. For females these happy emotions pots are 13 out of 15 which is 87%, as shown in table 5.

The team positions on the table are showed 3 times for the men's league and for the female's league the team position is showcased twice. Post related to press conference for men's league and females' league are showed none throughout the month. Post related to individual players, for male athletes who are currently playing in I League is 1 and for female athletes who are currently playing in Indian Women's League it is 0. Total number of captions consists more than ten words, for male are 54 and for females it is 11.

Type of emotions	Male (in percentage)	Female (in
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portrayed in shots (in percentage)		percentage)
Aggressive emotion	54%	43%
Happy emotion	63%	88%
Caption (in total figures)	78	28
March		

Table 6: Percentage table of March

In the final month that is in the month of March, the total number of posts are 168. Out of which the number of posts related to men athletes who play in the I League are 111 and a total of 51 posts re related to female athletes. The rest 6 posts are related to others. The percentage of male posts is 66%, for female athletes the percentage is 30% and for others it is 4%, as per table 2.

In the month of March, the number of active shots present in male athletes is 54 and for female athletes they are 23. In case, of aggressive or active shots for male athletes it is 29 out of 54 which is 54%. In case of female the number of aggressive shots is 10 out of 23 which is 43%, as per table 6.

In case of passive shots, the male athletes have 27 posts and the female athletes have 24 posts, posted by the official ILeague Instagram account. For males these happy emotions posts are 17 out of 27 which is 63%. For females these happy emotions pots are 21 out of 24 which is 88%, as shown in table 6.

The team positions on the table are showcased twice for the men's league and for the female's league the team position is showcased once. Post related to press conference for men's league are showcased none on the other hand for the females' league the post are showcased 3 times throughout the month. Post related to individual players, for male athletes who are currently playing in I League are 2 and for female athletes who are currently playing in Indian Women's League is 1. Total number of captions consists more than ten words, for male are 78 and for females it is 28.

For survey analysis, response of 50 participants is taken who are both active and occasional football fans along with the general media consumers.

The responders are mostly of an age limit from 20-25 which is 78%, and 16% are from an age limit 15-20 years. Rest above 25 years, as shown in the figure 1.

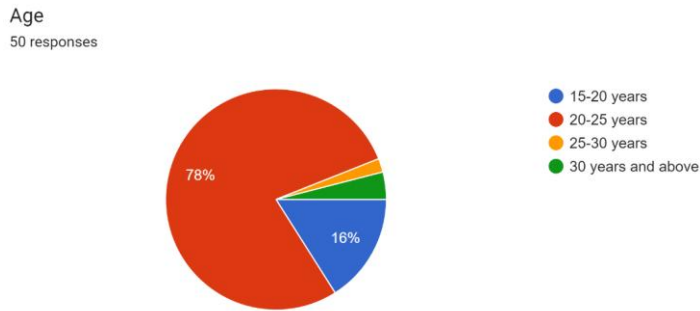


Figure 1: Showcasing the age of the participants

Majority of the survey respondents have highest education qualifications of graduation which is 50%. In the remaining 50%, 38% have masters as their highest educational qualification, 8% as PhD their highest educational qualification and the 4% given school as their highest education qualification as shown in the figure 2.

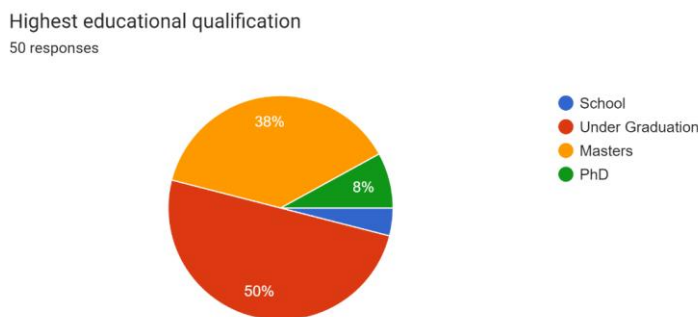


Figure 2: Showcasing the highest educational qualification

The place of residence for most of the participants are city which is 44%, then town which is 42% and the rest 14% is village as shown in figure 3.

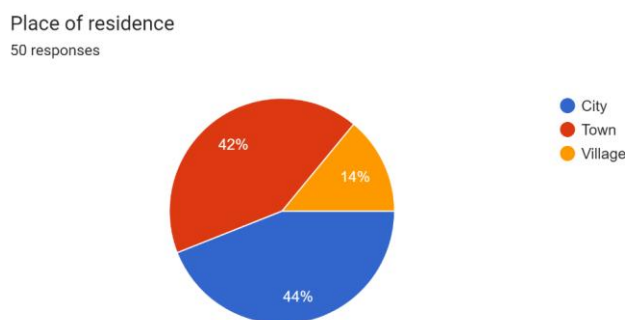


Figure 3: Showcasing the place of residence

The majority of the respondents identify themselves as females which is 62% and others identify themselves as male which is 38%, as shown in the figure 4.

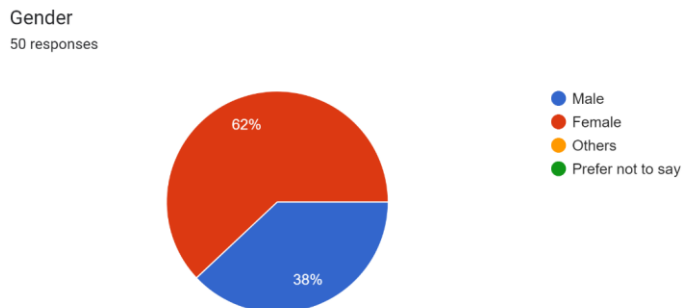


Figure 4: Showcasing the gender of the participants

On asking do the respondents watch Indian football? A mixed response has been recorded. 58% of the respondents said yes, that they watch Indian football. Whereas 42% of the respondent responds no, they do not watch Indian football as shown in the figure 5.

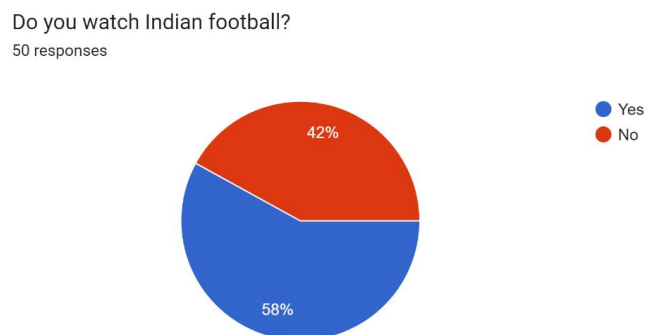


Figure 5: Showcasing the response of the question "Do you watch Indian Football"

On asking what do you mostly follow in a Indian football, a mixed response has been recorded. Out of 50 responses, 22% responded football players, 18% responded Indian national team, 12% said international teams of other countries, 14% responded national clubs, 4% responded international clubs, 26% responded all the above and the remaining 32% responded they do not follow anything, as shown in the figure 6.

What do you follow the most about Indian football ? (you can select multiple options)
50 responses

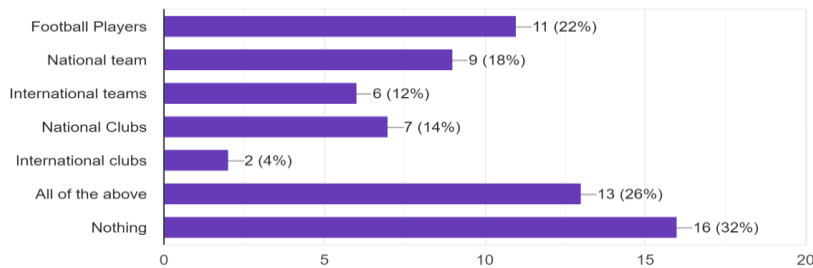


Figure-6: Showcasing the response about what they mostly follow about Indian football

On asking what their gender about their favorite football athlete is, 66.7% responded male 31.3% responded 'None' and 2.1 said female, as suggested in figure 7.

Identify the gender of your current favorite footballer
48 responses

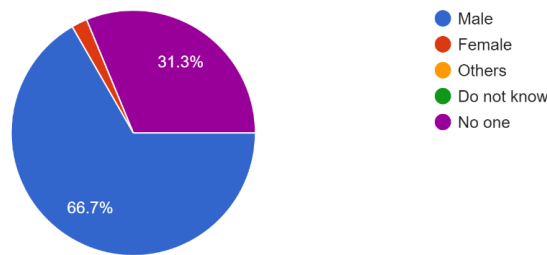


Figure 7 showcasing the respond of "Identify the gender of your current footballer"

The response of current favorite footballer shows that most of the respondents watch international football as Lionel Messi marked the highest with 21.9% then Cristiano Ronaldo and Sunil Chhetri both at 9.4%. Out of 32 responses as shown in the figure 8.

Name of your current favorite footballer (if any) -
32 responses

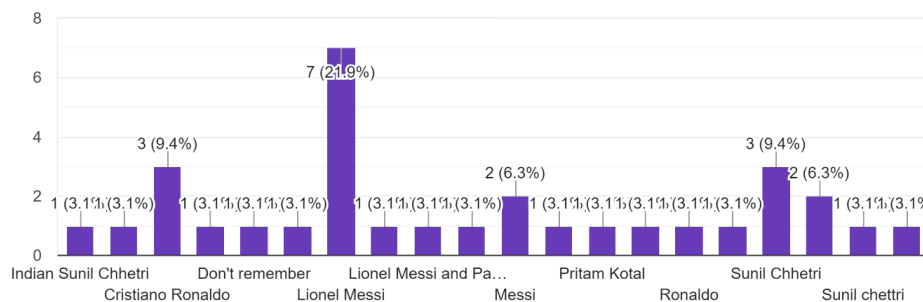


Figure 8: Showcasing the response of “Name of your current favorite footballer”

The survey questionnaire asks more detailed gender related questions to the respondents. On asking whether the respondents followed any women sporting events in the past few years, 48.9 % said no, 36.2% said yes and 14.9% said can't remember out of 47 responses as shown in figure 9.

Have you followed any women's sporting events in the past few years?
47 responses

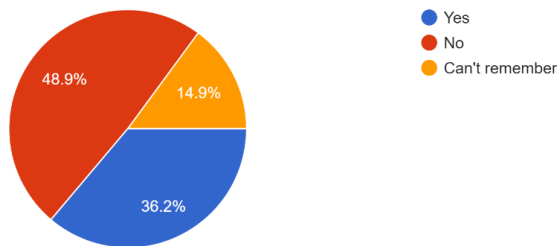


Figure 9 showcase the percentage of respondents follow any sporting events in the past few years.

Respondents on asking which sporting event they follow the most recently gave a mixed response. Out of 30 respondents 23.3% said cricket, 10% said nothing and 6.7 % said not sure, as shown in the figure 10.

Which women's sporting event did you follow most recently?
30 responses

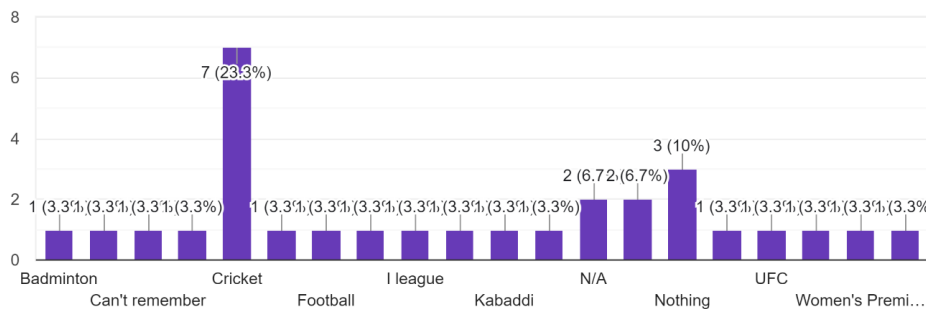


Figure 10: showcasing the response of “which women’s sporting event do you follow most recently?”

On asking the respondents are they aware about India women’s football? Out of 41 responses 9.8% said yes, they do know about Indian women’s football. Whereas 29.3% they do not know about women’s football and 29.3% responded they partly know about Indian women’s football, as shown in figure 11.

How strongly do you agree with the following statement - "I am aware about Indian women's football"
41 responses

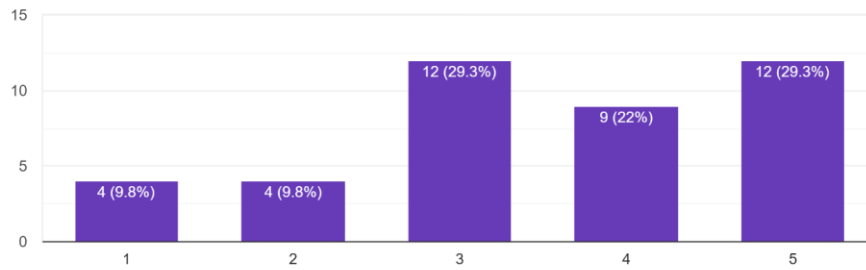


Figure 11: Showcasing a bar graph about the response on awareness about Indian women’s football.

On the question whether they are aware about the Indian women’s league or not, 60% said no and 40% said yes as shown in figure 12.

Are you aware about Indian Women’s League?
45 responses

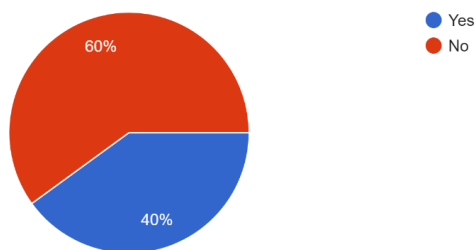


Figure 12: Showcasing the response about whether they are aware about Indian Women’s League.

Out of 23 of 50 responded to the question what they follow the most about Indian women’s league. They respondents gave a mixed response, as 7 respondents gave response they follow women footballers, other 7 follows women’s team, other 7 follows I league social media page and the last 7 respondents follow other things about Indian women’s League as showcased in the figure 13.

If yes to the above question What do you follow the most about Indian women's league?
23 responses

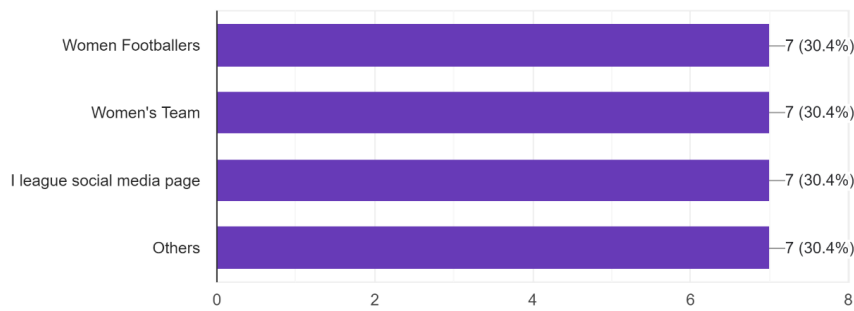


Figure 13: Showcasing the response of the respondents on asking what do they follow most about the Indian women’s League.

The final question was asked, how do they come to know about Indian women’s league? 28 respondents out of 50 have responded to it. 39.3% responded that they came to know through social media, 25% responded through news media, 21.4% through word of mouth and remaining 14.3 % from other sources as per shown in the figure 14.

How did you come to know about Indian women’s League?
28 responses

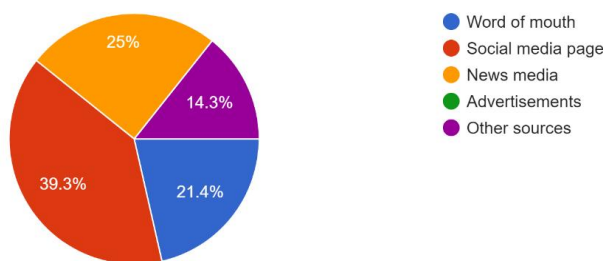


Figure 14: Showcasing the response of the respondent, how do they come to know about Indian women’s League.

Findings

The analysis of the research finds that in India women’s football face a significant amount of underrepresentation compare to their male counterparts. Despite attempts of All India Football Federation (AIFFA) women’s football are largely get less media coverage and hence there is less awareness about the sport. For instance, we can see a significant amount of difference between the number of posts dedicated to male footballers compare to the female footballers from the official page of I League.

The shots are also mostly passive shots which are dedicated for the female athletes, this results a perception among the audience that women's football are less competitive and players are not dedicated enough. On the other hand, the shots dedicated for the male athletes are active shots which exert the idea of domination and physical presence. Another crucial thing is that we cannot find posts related to players in case of women footballers in the official page of I league compare to the male counter parts. This makes the individual players anonymous for the viewers and as a result we know less about the female football players of Indian Women's League and Indian women's national team. This also been reflected on the survey as when question was asked about their favorite football players, most of them were male football players and the names were also of male players.

The underrepresentation of women's league is also found in the survey analysis, as out of 50 only 28 respondents said they know about Indian Women's League whereas rest doesn't have the idea of women's league. Although we cannot suggest that the representation of all the women's sports is less as when we ask the respondent's whether they are aware of any sports related to women athletes 36% of the respondents said yes and when they are further asked about which sports out of that 36% 23% said cricket. This shows cricket and Indian women's cricket has more visibility than the Indian women's football team.

5. CONCLUSION

The above study has provided insights about the representation of female athletes in media, especially from the official Instagram page of Indian football league or the I-League. This study is done by conducting a thorough content analysis of Instagram posts related to the Indian Women's League.

The study reveals that there is lack in both visibility and recognition for women footballers in India. Although there are some recent growths in coverage of the Indian Women's League or the IWL but still the social media presence remains marginalised. The social media coverage is mostly overshadowed by the focused coverage of men's football and male athletes.

This creates an imbalance about the sporting culture and also generates a societal biasness regarding the gender roles and capabilities of the female athletes. Their achievements are only seen in a lighter term due to this gender-based stereotype.

This underrepresentation of female athletes not only deprives from showcasing talents of the individuals, but also it snatches any kind of opportunity to get any recognition these athletes. This discourages the young talented athletes from

pursuing football as their career and it ultimately hinders the growth and development of women's football and women's sports in India.

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