



**A Study of the effects of web-based media platforms
and how they can be of benefit for League of Ireland
(LOI) football clubs in increasing fan loyalty/
engagement and fan community.**

By Liam Feeney

Supervisor: Dr Michelle Kelly

Submitted to National College of Ireland, 2021

Abstract

The FAI are the governing body for football in Ireland. It encompasses all aspects of football from schoolboy leagues to semi-professional/ professional teams. The League of Ireland (LOI) represent the semi-professional / professional teams who play in two leagues. This paper aims to test whether The FAI and League of Ireland premier division clubs are using web based platforms effectively for fan engagement, fan loyalty and fan community.

A detailed literature evaluation explains the elements obtained from multiple sources broken into headings :

1. League of Ireland Research
2. The use of media in larger leagues
3. Rationale for the current research
4. Fan Engagement
5. Fan Loyalty
6. Fan Communities/Fan Experience

Method

The researcher will be conducting a quantitative approach by use of an online survey open for a month through google forms.

Declaration

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

National College of Ireland Research Students Declaration Form (Thesis/Author Declaration Form)

Name: Liam Feeney

Student Number: x17330553

Degree for which thesis is submitted: MSc in Marketing

Thesis Title: A Study of the effects of web-based media platforms and how they can be of benefit for League of Ireland (LOI) football clubs in increasing fan loyalty/engagement and fan community.

Due Date: 18/08/2021

Material submitted for award

A. I declare that this work submitted has been composed by myself.

X

B. I declare that all verbatim extracts contained in the thesis have been distinguished by quotation marks and the sources of information specifically acknowledged.

X

C. I agree to my thesis being deposited in the NCI Library online open access repository NORMA.

X

D. **Either** *I declare that no material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.

Or *I declare that the following material contained in the thesis formed part of a submission for the award of

(State the award and the awarding body and list the material below)

X

Acknowledgements

First off, A huge thanks to my supervisor Michelle Kelly, she was an fantastic supervisor throughout the duration of the dissertation process. Ever since our first virtual meeting I have always left our online meeting feeling reassured and confident.

Furthermore I would like to thank the personnel of National College of Ireland throughout the year for their support and their web based platforms to improve my work. To the IT staff in particular for preserving a great library and database to use to further my research study, thank you.

An enormous thanks to the die hard and passionate league of Ireland fans who took time out of their day to participate in my study in hope of progressing the game as a whole.

Finally I would like to say thanks to my family especially my parents who have been enormous support throughout the year and my friends for continuously putting up with me chatting about League of Ireland and web based media platforms.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Declaration.....	3
Acknowledgements	4
<i>List of Abbreviations.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>List Of Figures.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>List of Tables.....</i>	<i>7</i>
Chapter 1: Introduction	8
1.1 Introduction.....	8
1.2 League Of Ireland(LOI)/ FAI.....	10
1.3 LOI TV / WatchLOI.....	11
1.3.1 Women’s National League (WNL).....	12
Chapter 2: Literature Review	13
2.1 Introduction to Literature	13
2.2 League of Ireland Research	18
2.3 The Use of Social Media in Larger Football Leagues	19
2.4 Rationale for the Current Research	20
2.5 Fan Engagement	22
2.6 Fan Loyalty.....	23
2.7 Fan Experience & Fan Community	25
2.7.1 Fan Channels.....	25
2.8 Conclusion	26
2.9 Research Question	27
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	27
3.1 Research Design	28
3.2 Participants.....	28
3.3 Consent/Ethics.....	29
3.4 Procedure	29
3.5 Materials	31
Chapter 4: Analysis and Findings	31
4.1.2 Frequency of Using Web Based Platforms	33
4.1.3 Other Relevant Data on Using Web-Based Platforms.....	34

4.1.4 Interest in Gaming.....	36
4.1.5 LOI Clubs	37
4.1.6 Research Question 1	37
4.1.7 Research Question 2.....	39
Inferential Statistics	39
4.2.1 Tests for Normality	39
4.2.2 Research Question 3.....	40
4.2.3 Research Question 4.....	41
4.2.4 Results Summary	41
Chapter 5: Discussion.....	42
5.1 Detailed Summary	42
5.1.1 Web based media Effectiveness	42
5.1.2 Fan Engagement / Fan Loyalty in LOI	44
5.1.3 Fan Experience & Fan Community	45
5.2 Suggestions for future studies	46
5.3 Limitations of Research & Future Directions.....	47
5.4 Implications	48
5.5 Conclusions	49
6 Appendices	50
6.1 Google Forms Survey Questions	50
6.2 Screenshot of SPSS Data.....	53
6.3 Web-based media platforms which do participants use most to engage with Irish football on a whole.....	54
References.....	55

List of Abbreviations

LOI = League of Ireland
FAI = The Football Association of Ireland
EPL = English Premier League
WNL = Women’s National League
NIFL = Northern Irish Football League
NBA = National Basketball Association

AFTV = Arsenal Fan Tv
NFL = National Football League

List Of Figures

Figure 1: How often do you use social media platforms for engaging with Irish football news and content	33
Figure 2: How positive do you feel your fan experience is overall	35
Figure 3: If there was an internet game on LOI would you be interested.....	36
Figure 4: What Irish football club out of the premier division do the participants follow	37
Figure 5: Do consumers/sports fans believe that web-based media is being used effectively to promote football in Ireland	38
Figure 6: Which could improve Irish football fan experience of football engagement	39

List of Tables

Table 1: SSE LOI Airtricity League premier division teams 2020/21.....	12
Table 2: LOI Premier Division teams are on which Web based Platforms	13
Table 3: Excluding 99 year old	29
Table 4: Per CSO Census 2016, Most populated Settlements	33
Table 5: Spearman's Rho Correlation Coefficient	40

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Football is by far the biggest common game on the planet “Soccer is the world's most popular sport, played by over 250 million people in more than 200 countries.”(Bundesliga,2021).The history of organised football matches on the island of Ireland is traceable as far back as 1878. This game became largely enjoyed in Northern Ireland within its formative days however it then eventually expanded to Dublin the capital of the Republic of Ireland around 1888. As of 2021 web based media has increased dramatically and provided enormous amount of followers whether it is for news, engaging, communicating and or information. As football is observed in over 200 countries the volume of information created by the game is huge which shows the ceiling for web based media platforms.

Recently, new technological advancements has become one of the key subjects in different sectors, and its influence on activities, investment and marketing. Digital transformation such as web based platforms, notably in the corporate environment, will proceed to be a subject of study. It is a subject of important study as it can be durable, rewarding and lucrative. The use of new technologies in the game of football worldwide continues to increase year upon year.

“Internet, social media, mobile apps, and other digital communications technologies have become part of everyday life for billions of people around the world. According to a recent statistics for January 2020, 4.54 billion people are active internet users, encompassing 59 % of the global population.” (Dwivedi, & Ismagilova, & et al,2020) Web based media plays a huge part in everyday live for the majority of the population. Whether it is to see the most up to date news, communicate with friends or family or for general information.

Web based platforms are used by millions and millions of people around the world in which they can exchange ideas, perspectives and knowledge by creating interactive networks and connections. In the football world, the growth in the use of social media platforms hasn't gone undetected.

Football teams all over the world are finding that using digital platforms such as social media is improving and extending their brand, either for advertising reasons or to personally communicate to their supporters. Since most supports are unable to attend matches in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic, web based media has become far more relevant. People can build or post material on sites and apps as well as engage on social media. "The sports marketing literature suggests that consumers of sports have unique relationships with their favourite teams." (Abosag, & Roper & Hind,2012) The method of football fans interacting among football clubs, players and various fans has evolved due to the surge by social networking sites. "Due to the popularity of social media, sport clubs increasingly invest significant time and resources to drive online engagement, leveraging the highly involved nature of their fans." (Vale, & Fernandes ,2018). "A sport brand is no longer just a name or a symbol, colour, but a product of communication between the producer and the consumer, in the images, values and other characteristics that the audience of the stakeholders sees behind the brand." (Obradovic,& Alcakovic, & et al,2019)

On a whole a football club as a business must engage with its supporters to ensure that current and potential consumers are aware of their brand, squad or athletes while hoping to communicate information towards the fan. "One of the best ways for the companies or sport organizations to meet their relationship marketing goals is using the benefits of the social media." (Obradovic, & Alcakovic & et al,2019) It enables customers to communicate on a variety of ways. It enables fan to consumer or consumer to football club engagement. Consumers can interact with social media during multiple stages of the consumption process including information search, decision-making, word of mouth, and the acquisition, use, and disposal of products and services. Social media use is an increasingly popular activity for Internet users. Football fans who interact on web based media platforms often find themselves as part of the fan community. A fan community is made up of admirers who have a shared passion through connection , love and togetherness for the same team or club.

Football teams such as Liverpool and Manchester United are supported by a large majority of Irish citizens. “Almost half of Irish adults say they “support” a football club with close to two-thirds of those listing Manchester United or Liverpool as the team they take an interest in, according to a survey conducted for An Atlas of Irish Sport.” (Malone,2020)

In a recent study completed in Ireland, it's Liverpool (25.67%) who come out on top ahead of Manchester United (23.20%), with Arsenal a fair bit behind in third (11.86%)”. (Heneghan,2015) “Audience figures for last season’s Airtricity League coverage by RTE show that the number tuning in remain relatively static in almost a decade.” (Malone,2018) This indicates that the Irish football scene has stagnated over the years. An Independent journalist wrote “Who cares what happens to the 2020 League of Ireland campaign? Not that many people, I'm afraid.” (Sweeney,2020) The highest attendance pre COVID of the 2019 season was 7021 at Tallaght stadium in the Dublin Derby between Shamrock Rovers and Bohemian Fc, yet however still fell below the “ 8,061 which attended a scarcely mouth-watering Connacht football quarter-final between Roscommon and Leitrim in Carrick-on-Shannon.” (Sweeney,2020) A more recent statistic is of RTE have not broadcasted any League of Ireland game since May 7th 2021 which is disappointing for the passionate fans.

1.2 League Of Ireland(LOI)/ FAI

The Football Association of Ireland (FAI) is the governing body of all soccer in the Republic of Ireland, encompassing both professional and amateur teams (FAI,2020) The main objectives for the FAI are to “enable every Irish person to participate in our game, to allow all involved in the game to reach their full potential, whatever level that might be, and to inspire the nation through international success at the highest level.” (FAI,2016) FAI is affiliated to both FIFA and UEFA and must follow the rules and regulations set by both organisations. FIFA is the highest governing body of football all over the world. It’s motto is ‘for the game for the world’. FIFA stands for International Federation of Association Football.

UEFA stands for the “Union of European Football Associations and is the governing body of European football and the umbrella organisation for 55 national associations.” (UEFA,2019)

Thanks to the demographic gap and the greater global popularity of the Barclays Premier League overseas in the United Kingdom Irish Football clubs maintain an even smaller social media base. “Since 1985 the League of Ireland has comprised a Premier Division and a First Division with relegation from the latter and promotion to the former.” (Reilly,2015)

The League of Ireland (LOI) is also recognised or nicknamed as ‘the greatest league in the world’ by its avid supporters across Ireland. There are ten clubs in the premier division. Bohemian Fc, Derry City, Drogheda United Fc, Dundalk Fc, Finn Harps Fc, Longford Town Fc, Shamrock Rovers, Sligo Rovers Fc , St Patricks Athletic Fc, and Finally Waterford Fc are among the contenders for the 2021 season. Every club is run independently, much like any other corporation. The “SSE Airtricity League is the pinnacle of the game in Ireland and is the most competitive League in Europe with eight different clubs winning the Championship between 2004 and 2014.” (FAI,2016). There are five divisions of Irish senior football with one women’s league. The LOI season usually starts mid-February running until the end of October playing prominently through the warmer weather in summer in hope of attracting more fans.

1.3 LOI TV / WatchLOI

Watch LOI was formed at a period when the beginning of the 2020 campaign was unknown, with the goal of providing top flight coverage of the LOI to fans in the country and throughout the globe. However as the 2021 competition approached the mid-season break, The FAI stated that this streaming platform would come to an end and rebranded to LOI TV. LOI TV would live stream the final one hundred and ten matches in the season for a fee of seventy nine euro. Furthermore, Members and supporters who took up this offer would be entitled to free access to the Women’s National League which would also be broadcast.

1.3.1 Women’s National League (WNL)

The Women’s National League (WNL) is a quality level competition of women’s football on the island of the Republic Of Ireland. Compared to the SSE Airtricity first division it only has nine teams. The WNL is organised by The FAI also. Along with the help of UEFA, the division known as WNL was created in 2011. It was formerly known as the Ladies. In 2021, the WNL commemorated its 10th anniversary with a sponsorship deal with the SSE Airtricity. This was a huge deal as it was the first ever time both leagues of men and women have the same sponsorship. It was previously branded the Irish ladies LOI or the women’s LOI from 1973 up to 2011.

Airtricity	Premier Division	2021
<i>Teams</i>	<i>Founded</i>	<i>Location</i>
Bohemian FC	1890	Dublin
Derry City FC	1928	Derry
Drogheda United FC	1919	Louth
Dundalk FC	1903	Louth
Finn Harps FC	1954	Donegal
Longford Town FC	1924	Longford
Shamrock Rovers Fc	1899	Dublin
Sligo Rovers FC	1928	Sligo
St, Patricks Athletic FC	1929	Dublin
Waterford FC	1930	Waterford

Table 1: SSE LOI Airtricity League premier division teams 2020/21

Teams	Web based media platforms used
Bohemian FC	Facebook, Instagram, LOI TV, Tiktok, Twitter, Youtube
Derry City FC	Facebook, Instagram, LOI TV, Tiktok, Twitter, Youtube
Drogheda United FC	Facebook, Instagram, LOI TV, Tiktok, Twitter, Youtube
Dundalk FC	Facebook, Instagram, LOI TV, Twitter, Youtube
Finn Harps FC	Facebook, Instagram, LOI TV, Tiktok, Twitter, Youtube
Longford Town FC	Facebook, Instagram, LOI TV, Tiktok, Twitter, Youtube
Shamrock Rovers Fc	Facebook, Instagram, LOI TV, Tiktok, Twitter, Youtube
Sligo Rovers FC	Facebook, Instagram, LOI TV, Tiktok, Twitter, Youtube
St, Patricks Athletic FC	Facebook, Instagram, LOI TV, Tiktok, Twitter, Youtube
Waterford FC	Facebook, Instagram, LOI TV, Twitter, Youtube

Table 2: LOI Premier Division teams are on which Web based Platforms

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to Literature

The literature review will initially discuss the strong partnership between both football itself and followers of online media and media engagement. Subsequently, available literature on the League of Ireland and their use of web-based media will be reviewed. Relevant research on the use of web-based media in larger leagues will be reviewed and the rationale for the current research will be explained.

Concluding this chapter it will look in depth at fan engagement, loyalty and also fan experience/fan community. Overall, the literature review aims to explain the importance of digital web-based media for broader engagement with the sport and for financial profits for clubs themselves.

The use of web-based media from a business perspective is crucial for leagues/clubs to gain exposure to brand deals, sponsorships, and profit from engagement with games and game attendance. Much of the previous research on the topic of online

football engagement has been investigated through the lens of social media alone, but it is necessary to expand this scope as literature on online platforms and its importance in sports marketing and connectivity broadens year upon year.

“Social media is the term often used to refer to new forms of media that involve interactive participation.”(Manning,2014) whereas web based platforms are known as multimedia elements of communication that run off the world wide web for example social networking sites, mobile applications, streaming services and emails.

Modern football clubs’ engagement and development with web-based platforms has grown, due to digital networks becoming a constant in today’s world through the usage of daily internet. That said, some of the larger football clubs can be sometimes criticised for focusing too much on profit and losing contact with their supporters; this can happen when there is a steady increase in overall profits and revenue, despite fan engagement. An example of this was the recent scandal around the Super League. “The pandemic has shown that a strategic vision and a sustainable commercial approach are required to enhance value and support for the benefit of the entire European football pyramid.”(Independent, 2021). The above statement was the explanation of the requirement for the new super league. However the new Super league collapsed essentially due to the backlash of the fans. This shows the importance and the power in which the fans hold throughout various aspects of the game. “fan power having been credited with turning plans for the breakaway league to rubble.” (Payne,2021)

This demonstrated the importance of leagues/clubs staying engaged with supporters, and understanding what fans want from the sport. Fans may communicate or interact in multiple ways with the development of a diverse web-based media.

The impact of an online digital presence in the business sector has grown rapidly over the past number of years. “There is literally no major brand or company that does not play the social media game, whose main goal can be summarised in just two words: engage customers.” (Aichner, 2019) “Football fan culture has evolved immensely from sitting passively in front of a television screen, to live tweeting, live videos and an active involvement with the football team, players and management.”

(Menon & Philip, 2018). The above highlights the rise of connectivity through the usage of digital platforms amongst football supporters and their favourite teams.

Relevant to the above, it is of interest to understand how users of web-based media rate different apps usability in term of driving engagement, its importance, and how it is effective for advertising. Research undertaken by Voorveld & van Noort et al. (2018) analysed how well the involvement of media platform users contributed to the commitment and appraisal of publicity integration on various channels. In this research Voorveld focused on eight media platforms from most users and their popularity. “By evaluating these characteristics of commitment Voorveld observed obvious disparities across the major social media sites” (Voorveld et al,2018). The levels of brand communication and actuality were substantial on Facebook.

Facebook also did well in the form of entertainment aspect. As per a questionnaire, active users used it to fill gaps within their day. “Twitter performed badly in all other aspects than topicality, including negative emotions related to content.” (Voorveld et al., 2018) This was considered weak because it was able to keep viewers notified and updated about recent events worldwide. However, interpersonal communication was highly marked. In the form of entertainment aspect, Youtube came in first place whilst Facebook scored a lot less. “People used Youtube to be up to date and to fill an empty moment, according to a survey.” (Voorveld, & van Noort & et al, 2018) The people stated that they were calm and satisfied while using this online medium. Instagram was chosen by recipients as being a highly regarded online media platform. The aspects of leisure and newsworthiness, communications and engagement were particularly greater than the alternative platforms. Although this research is relatively recent (2018) new internet based technologies are continuously adapting and improving in which this research may be outdated as for example more social media networking sites like Tiktok have gained increasing popularity in recent times. Business organisations like football clubs use web-based media for a variety of purposes, and so research needs to be constantly adapted and updated to reflect the ever-changing online landscape. The proposed investigation of this study should build on Voorveld’s research and distil the consumer engagement within one specific niche. (League of Ireland)

The 2018 research study from Vale and Fernandes “argues that consumer’s motivations are associated with a range of Facebook functionalities (e.g. posts, comments, shares) which can lead to a more complete perception on social media.” (Vale, & Fernandes ,2018) “The sports marketing literature suggests that consumers of sports have unique relationships with their favourite teams.” (Vale, & Fernandes,2018) “In the sport marketing literature, the word "engage" has been used to describe these elevated levels of allegiance, squad loyalty, and emotional commitment to sports clubs.” (Vale & Fernandes,2018). One of their findings was that “integration and social interaction” .” (Vale, & Fernandes,2018) was a key motivating factor between sports fans and Facebook. The Vale & Fernandes study is relevant as this proposed study is centred around Irish football but expands to include all web based media platforms and the fan engagement there on.

“Media is one of the largest sources of revenue for team organizations, soccer especially. According to Harris, broadcasting, distribution, publication, and licensing rights sell for a pretty penny all over the world. An example is NBC Universal’s new 3-year \$250 million TV rights deal with the Barclay’s Premier League.” (Kuzma, & Bell & Logue,2014). The reviewed literature by Kuzma and Bell demonstrates that five clubs within the top division in the United Kingdom have bigger fanbases beyond their own cities. For many, this finding is quite startling. This shows the higher interest in the English league yet the power social media has among any sports. Another finding of Kuzma and Bell is that the authors themselves were surprised by the average amount of posts. “Seria A the Italian league showed the most total posts with the Premier League following in second place.” (Kuzma & Bell & Logue,2014). The reviewed methodology in place was in order to leverage the social media platforms, “each football team in the league was analysed for their use of social media communication.” (Kuzma & Bell & Logue,2014) a deeper insight into this literature suggests the limitations and deficiencies on the four chosen leagues. While it is quite an old paper published in 2014 and football/social media trends change in short periods, the report is relevant because it addresses how social media has enabled football clubs to have a two-way relationship with its fans. “Peate states Facebook and Twitter give fans a direct link to the club in between match days.” (Kuzma & Bell & Logue,2014). The proposed research question further investigates on Kuzma (2014) both in terms of clubs and digital media engagement.

A more recent paper on football clubs social media usage and user interaction is that of Aichner in 2019. In depth research of the four most popular European football leagues was undergone. Aichner used three different sections for finding his results. It was divided into sections. Firstly, the extent to which European football clubs use digital platforms, that of fan involvement with multimedia published by European football clubs and brand advertising through user engagement. The findings state that while the majority of European football clubs operate all of the digital platforms evaluated, Aichner demonstrated that the level of social media utilisation differed significantly. His findings included a correlation between fan engagement and the level & quality of social media postings. “This calls for attention by marketing managers in order to analyse weaknesses and opportunities of SM marketing.” (Aichner,2019) While Aichner’s paper focuses on brand advertising through social media it provides a foundation for the analysis of fan engagement through social media.

Web based media offers football clubs a channel for supports to increase their dedication and devotion through innovative and engaging interactions. However according to O’Sullivan, the Irish game doesn’t get sufficient national attention let alone engagement by the media. “Of course, journalists and editors have no such responsibility, that responsibility falls on clubs and the FAI. Nevertheless, the vast majority of people I know covering the league across various media platforms actually have a genuine interest in, even love for, the league.”(O’Sullivan,2015)

Research has been conducted to assess the usefulness of social media in multiple fields, while the utilization of social media grows in popularity. There have been plenty of research reviews on the usage of social networking sites in the sport so far. In result, such research adds to the body of knowledge for respectively the media platforms and football industries. There is little previous research done on association football on the island of Ireland.

Trev Keane in 2018 looked into “the trends on social media across all the Irish sporting bodies.” (Keane,2018) and found some interesting results. His most important takeaway was the amount of interaction powered by social media and that of Instagram especially. “The Facebook owned channel delivered 63% of all online

engagement in 2018 despite accounting for just 8% of all social content.” (Keane,2018) He went onto state “with the exception of Irish Rugby (2.3M views) and FAI (218k), YouTube is not generating views and engagement for Irish sporting bodies.” (Keane,2018) This could be a huge opportunity missed by Irish sports especially football given the surge in Youtube views. It is “ a social media platform with billions of daily views, YouTube has tremendous potential to share information. (Li & Biley & Huynh & Chan, 2020) This paper by Keane is relevant because it researched Irish sporting bodies which included the FAI and the proposed study of this dissertation follows the development of fan engagement with newer social media platforms.

2.2 League of Ireland Research

The second section of this chapter focuses on the current available literature available on League of Ireland and similar papers that will be of help in this study. To date, there has been no research carried out on the effects of web based media platforms and how they can be of benefit for League of Ireland (LOI) football clubs. There are quite a few academic studies surrounding the League of Ireland together with a substantial amount of newspaper articles on the topic of Irish Football.

A very recent study is on “the playing and working conditions of League of Ireland players” (Curran, 2021) yet there are none to date on the use of web based media on the League of Ireland. Curran’s research proves how semi-professional athletes have high expectations thus combining their playing career with alternative prominent occupations. When researching the lifestyles of footballers in the league of Ireland through interviews with a variety of players in the League of Ireland, the results demonstrated that “some footballers prefer to play at this level instead of Britain’s lower professional leagues.” (Curran, 2021)

An older academic paper in 2015 by Barry Reilly investigates the demand for the League of Ireland overall. Reilly used statistics over 570 “fixtures played through the premier division over the 2012,2013, and 2014 seasons.”(Reilly,2015) These reports enabled Barry to do an independent review into the impact of a range of club

related indicators such as match quality, game result uncertainties, temporary unpredictability and also the expense of opportunities. The findings suggest that aspects of developing the fixture for spectators but also show that the competitiveness of the home league is brief. The results also indicate that moderate improvements can be accomplished through improvement and reduction of match congestion.

It is believed from a recent study that “football has the highest sports participation (10.6%) in Ireland ahead of its Gaelic counterpart (3.9%)” (Fitzharris & Jones & et al,2017) As a result of a shortage of experience and funding, Irish sporting associations really aren’t successfully using web-based platforms to raise visibility and encourage new supporters, according to an article by Shauna Carroll.

2.3 The Use of Social Media in Larger Football Leagues

The middle section of the literature review examines the papers that focus on the media-usage of larger leagues that tend to have higher engagement than the LOI, such as the premier league. Online web based platforms are already a vital virtual hub for acquaintances and relatives which has risen dramatically in current history. Scholars like McCarthy et al (2014) previously stated that football teams weren’t properly controlling their digital presence through online media platforms because they failed to convert their fan following into interaction/engagement. Due to this statement a recent graduate of Cardiff decided to explore this through a mixed methodology approach such as questionnaires and semi structured interviews. Chung found that in 2016 94% of his respondents use social media for content on their team in the premier league with 67% of the respondents using streaming services other than tv broadcasted games to watch their team play. It is possible to think that this can only be of higher percentage now due to the increased technology in today’s day and age.

A 2019 paper on the use of social media in communication strategies looked at the top five clubs in the premier league that of Manchester United, Chelsea, Arsenal,

Liverpool, and Manchester City due to having the highest number of fans/following. The investigation and their findings have been split into three main groupings such as material type, content structure and social media post regularity. (Obradovic & Alcakovic & et al,2019). This method is similar to what Aichner did but narrowed it just to the English Premier League. Following their study and interpretation of the data they came to a view that a well-developed plan for contact between zealous football fans and social media platforms is highly significant. Another finding of their investigation was that Manchester United page on Facebook was “the most popular social network” (Obradovic & Alcakovic & et al,2019). They also found out that it is essential to interact everyday not just on matchdays. As new technologies such as Tiktok had not blown up yet this study may need to be adapted or repeated to reflect modern society.

2.4 Rationale for the Current Research

In order to improve fan interaction between the club and supporter itself, numerous touchpoints for web based media platforms are constantly evolving. Consequently, “making the processes more streamlined and without friction for the user. It also introduces more scalable technologies and platforms to add to new revenue sources.”(Previati,2020)

The introduction of streaming service of live Irish football matches on watch LOI or LOI Tv is an opportunity to advertise and grow the Irish game on web based media platforms and through new technologies. “Social media has revolutionized the sports industry by changing the way athletes, coaches, clubs, federations, sport companies and other industry actors interact.” (Carril & Fajardo & et al,2020).

News emerged in summer 2021 that “the biggest and richest clubs in the world were planning on breaking away and forming a Super League, with no relegation or promotion for the founding clubs” (Kinsella,2021). So it is probably time for us to quit being so devoted to them and “start satisfying our football cravings elsewhere - the League of Ireland”. (Kinsella,2021) This provides an opportunity for the LOI

clubs to review their web based media platform output in order to maximise their fan following, reach and income streams.

It is believed that without paying for advertising, organisations will only reach 6% of their followers according to Neil Patel. Although paid advertising is recommended, social media can still be very effective organically once planning and consideration go into its use. Organisations must also be aware of the time and labour costs associated with the use of social media.” (Carroll,2019)

For the 2020 LOI premier division season some live matches could be viewed on Eir Sport, and other matches were available on WatchLOI. However there is now a new streaming service which will stream all league games. This is a new web based media platform being operated by the FAI. This new platform provides an opportunity for investigation in terms of fan engagement.

There are always new and innovative ways to engage football fans. The English FA operate an internet based game known as Fantasy Football. This game format is currently not formatted for the FAI/ LOI premier division. Whether or not there is a market for an equivalent internet based game remains to be seen.

Football fans are highly studied in literature, through engagement, loyalty and satisfaction. “Among the different aspects embedded in sports organizations’ management, fan experience” has become one of the most relevant and innovative concepts developed.” Fan experience is done through the use of fan engagement, fan loyalty, fan communities, however research on fan channels and their surge in not just promoting engagement and loyalty but also the league overall is quite restricted. Some researchers have “noted that there are great benefits in the use social networking sites and suggested that sport teams should implement online marketing activities to enhance the relationships between teams and fans, and foster relational exchanges.” (Pronschinske et al,2012)

2.5 Fan Engagement

In the current day fan engagement is an aspect that football clubs cannot overlook. Football arguably is the most popular game around the globe is confronted by a rising demand for recreational moments for fans especially since COVID-19. Fan participation in football is a unique type of engagement. “In marketing, researchers define customer engagement as a consumer’s spontaneous, interactive, and co-creative behaviours primarily in non-transactional consumer-company exchanges to achieve his or her individual and social purposes.” (Yoshida et al,2014)

Football club attendances are unquestionably “impacted by marketing success in fan engagement, firstly through transactional exchanges, such as ticket sales, and secondly via promotion of fan extra-role behaviours in non-transactional exchanges” (Keogh & Rosenberger III, Philip & Pandit, & Holzmüller,2019). which can be done through web based platforms for example such as social media. “Highly engaged fans are arguably the most important group of all the soccer fan stakeholders.” (McDonald, Karg & Vocino, 2013).

Football teams, brands and businesses haven’t felt more vulnerable than they do now. “They’re exposed through social media, so everything they do is visible publicly and globally. The players are now the most visible assets of those clubs, and they’re pretty unfiltered at times.” (Carruthers,2019)

Top football teams whose allegiance goes well outside its own locality and which reach billions of supporters around the world presents a vital market potential. Fans participation and connection will never be more crucial. It is an important opportunity to engage on a wide scale yet being able to engage individually with the passionate football fan “and it’s something that clubs can’t afford to ignore in the digital age, when both organisations and players are so exposed through social media.” (Warc,2020)

Fan engagement is of such importance in today’s world. Supporters now “have opinions – and that’s dangerous when you’ve got global platforms like Twitter and Instagram, whereby people can put out a point of view, be it right or wrong, cultivate

an audience around that point of view, and elevate an argument that can be detrimental to the club.” (Carruthers,2019)

According to Field, two characteristics guide the function of supporter engagement. “The first one is, how do we grow the brand and the club globally in international markets, and then how do we serve those fans as a club.” (Carruthers,2019)

Fan Engagement as a whole is a well-studied research topic globally which mostly concentrates on the English Premier League and limited study on other global leagues with no present study on the Irish footballing scene and can be seen. The importance of web based media platforms for supporter engagement, loyalty, discovering how to be an avid supporter and what that implies has been highlighted in an ethnographic research of Liverpool supporters conducted both online and offline in 2017. (Petersen-Wagner,2017). Fan engagement is therefore considered the foundation for building fan loyalty.

2.6 Fan Loyalty

Football viewers are people who watch a football game in person or perhaps from any kind of internet based media. They are not necessarily supporters of any specific club. On the other hand, football fans are extremely devoted , enthusiastic and love the club of their choice. “A deeply committed fan usually experiences intense emotional events during his/her “life” as a fan besides single game wins and losses.” (Koenigstorfer & Gröppel-Klein,2010)“Being a fan of a sport club is something that can give meaning to a fan’s life” (Tapp, 2004). Their first team remains their love for life. There is no research on how fan loyalty is established in childhood (Parental persuasion / friends choices / successful teams at that time of choice). While a team can be chosen in childhood web based media platforms have a role to play in enhancing team loyalty through fan engagement. According to Wakefield & Sloan (1995)Team loyalty is defined as “an allegiance or devotion to a particular team that is based on the spectator’s interest in the team that has developed over time.” (Koenigstorfer & Gröppel-Klein,2010) There is plenty of new web based media games such as Fantasy football, with the most commonly used the Barclays English Premier League platform. Fantasy football is a trendy yet distinct online pastime that

blends conventional football loyalty with digital elements to improve a supporter's ultimate recreational experience.

The fantasy football market has grown to be a multibillion dollar enterprise that has become a significant part of the overall football sector worldwide. (Flanigan,2014) However there is little to no academic research done on the effects it has on fan loyalty, fan engagement and fan community in football (soccer) compared to that of the American football (NFL).

Fantasy football operates on the concept that individuals or players can serve as managers of their favourite players. In a league style system, players often engage weekly versus other virtual players or members. The game is primarily an online service that is completely customizable, interactive, and involves nearly every major professional sport. (Dwyer,2011) Dwyer's findings point to a positive link between participation and behavioural loyalty as well as an out of the box correlation between a highly active fantasy football user's views and actions, particularly in terms of team loyalty. (Dwyer,2011)

Research by Everton Fc an English team in the Premier League states that allegiance and loyalty to football fans is extremely essential. According to this research, "Supporters need to feel like they belong to Everton Fc and not just be seen as consumers."(Pena-Taylor,2019) However research in the Irish leagues and of loyalty is yet to be investigated. The key takeaway from Pena-Taylor is that fans must believe that they are appreciated in order to interact.

A previous study has demonstrated that both viewers and supporters devotion to a particular team influences "the emotional, intellectual ,attitudinal yet behavioural components of passionate loyal supporters." (Koenigstorfer & Gröppel-Klein,2010) However none has been completed on the Irish leagues, showing there is a gap for research.

2.7 Fan Experience & Fan Community

Fan experience begins when you choose a team to follow. Fan experience is a journey and sometimes a rollercoaster of emotions depending on how successful your chosen team is. However it is much more than just that. “In the absence of a championship, the fan experience is the ultimate measure of success against which a sports organization is held.” (Turnali,2013) This article identifies some elements of fan experience when going to a match from ticket purchase to parking to use of social media on the day.

Historically fan clubs were operated on an offline basis with newsletters and meetings and excursions to matches, representing the basic fan experience. By their nature there was often a time lag between the event and the analysis of the match which diluted the fan experience. New web based media platforms such as Youtube and fan channels provide immediate content to fans and allows for improved interaction.

“In addition to the feeling of acceptance from fellow community members, sport fans receive further affective benefits by having a direct relationship with the organization through their membership in the fan community.” (Mastromartino & Zhang,2020). While supporter groups usually are independent and function by itself, a connection between the club may provide a validity for a “ fan community and make members feel as if they are a part of the team” (Mastromartino & Zhang,2020).

2.7.1 Fan Channels

Fan experience and fan communities can be further enhanced through a new phenomenon known as fan channels. Fan media platforms such as fan channels provide the supporters with fresh, unfiltered and authentic material. Fan channels utilise podcasts, streaming through Youtube and video content on web based platforms. The flow of match analysis has altered and the everyday supporter is more empowered often being interviewed outside the venue which captures the true emotions of the natural fan which can be relatable. The rise of the ‘Fan TV’ culture

must be seen in relation to the 'fandom-technology' duology, as fans are now free to broadcast fan channels and provide real-time match day services to fellow fans.

Due to such progress in web based media platforms "Today, an armchair fan's voice can be heard by millions around the world. Platforms like Instagram and YouTube have made it easier than ever for fans to interact with their favourite clubs and least favourite players". (Sesay,2020) Fan channels "gives the content an authentic feel, allowing viewers to relate to what they're watching." (Sesay,2020). The most famous and known fan channel is that of AFTV from the United Kingdom following Arsenal Fc and their fans thoughts opinions and views. AFTV has been influential all over the world. Football supporter channels especially in the Barclays Premier League has gather a lot of attention in a short time and may be viewed as important actors in building their individual clubs community and experience. A 2019 study investigated "football fandom and banter in the new media area". (Rivers & et al,2019) The method used to analyse was to take the highest viewed match reaction for every fixture throughout the season with a further deeper dive into the comments section for looking at the engagement under the headings of : "personal banter, legacy banter, impersonal banter and banter violation" (Rivers & et al,2019) in which some help to build a fan community.

A similar format has been used in Ireland for the creation of fan channels such as LOI Fan Tv and Irish Football Fan Tv which help to promote the game on the island to new and current fans. The appeal of this modern generation of football medium has been used by fan channels to voice their opinions on their beloved teams. Fan channels are only getting bigger and bigger year upon year. As supporters are now able to stream live reactions, pre-game and post-match it gives a true game day experience or service to other fans, so the emergence of fan tv must be considered to the fan community literature.

2.8 Conclusion

In summary while there are substantial academic papers on social media and sport in general there are no scholarly studies on the effects of web-based media platforms

and how they can be of benefit for League of Ireland (LOI) football clubs in increasing fan loyalty/ engagement and fan community, as of yet.. As a result there is a research gap for this.

2.9 Research Question

The aim of this research is to investigate the effects of web-based media platforms and how they can be of benefit for League of Ireland (LOI) football clubs in increasing fan loyalty/ engagement and fan community.

The main objectives of the research are: to examine how effectively web based media is being used to strengthen interest in the League of Ireland; To gather information about the research subject by use of an online questionnaire; To query how social media and the use of the internet can create a football community; To provide suggestions on future changes for either the League of Ireland and/or the FAI.

The key research questions are:

1. Do consumers/sports fans believe that web-based media is being used effectively to promote football in Ireland? (descriptives)
2. What types of initiatives might improve overall fan experience and/or engagement with LOI/FAI? (descriptives)
3. To what extent does the use of social media platforms for engaging with football news/content (IV) improve fan experience (DV)?
4. To what extent does the use of social media platforms for engaging with football news/content (IV) create the sense of belonging to a football community (DV)?

Chapter 3: Methodology

The author's goal in this chapter is to clarify the logic for the selected study approach. This chapter is broken into separate sections under the following headings; Research design, participants, consent/ethics, and procedure.

3.1 Research Design

The current study implemented a quantitative approach through the use of a non-standardised questionnaire with a correlation design. The dependent variables were fan community, and fan experience. The independent variables were that of football news and content.

The primary goal of quantitative research of this study was to quantify the evidence. It allowed for the findings to be generalised through evaluating the opinions and answers of the respondents.

3.2 Participants

The sample was achieved through convenience and snowball sampling. The population was dedicated League of Ireland fans. The sample was acquired between the 7th of July 2021 until the 21th of July 2021. 157 participants/volunteers enrolled in participation to complete this online survey via web based media platforms through three social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. The sample comprised of existing LOI football fans. Names were not used throughout data collection but gender and age were collected. All analysed participants were over 18. Minimum, maximum, mean age and standard deviation for age are presented in Table 3 below. Volunteers remained anonymous and were free to withdraw at any point of involvement without reason. A total of 40 participants were excluded from analysis due to errors such as :

- 1) 8 participants were under the age of 18.
- 2) 1 participant did not give an age.
- 3) 31 participants misread the county question and specified countries rather than counties.
- 4) 40 in total were excluded from analysis and findings.
- 5) Total for analysis and interpretation = 117 (n=117)

One participant input their age as 99 this was deemed to be probably incorrect and the age data for this participant was emended by imputing a mean score.

Participants were also advised on how their results would be assessed and who the final recipients of the final study would be. Ultimately, participants were thanked for their involvement.

Age	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
Participants	18	77	43.414966	45	22	17.3792603

Table 3: Excluding 99 year old

3.3 Consent/Ethics

Volunteers/participants were addressed in a respectful manner throughout.

Participants were given the opportunity to withdraw their participation at any time during the questionnaire. The National college of Ireland Business Ethics committee approved this research topic and the researcher followed GDPR guidelines at all times. In the first section volunteers were advised to read the terms and conditions of the survey and by accepting to participate and answer agreed to the terms. If there were any queries, feedback or issues the researchers email and social media was provided as a point of contact. Participants were not forced into answering questions they felt uncomfortable to do so for example gender.

3.4 Procedure

Data collection was executed using Google Forms. This survey was organised online in order to capitalise on maximum reach and to simplify anonymity while adhering to HSE COVID-19 instructions. As several scholars have pointed out, the web is particularly useful for testing and information gathering for research, particularly while studying important subjects or if the community is difficult to access. The online questionnaire participants answers become digitally registered, so summarised information is automatically ready for analysis from the investigator. The information obtained was also exported in a number of ways through different

software's for interpretation, for example a google spreadsheet which was quickly translated to SPSS.

The purpose of our research is to identify the effectiveness of fan engagement, fan loyalty and fan communities among Irish league of Ireland football clubs via web based media platforms. A pilot study was firstly used as it is a concept to construct the survey questions.. The pilot study helped to make sure the questions were understandable, clear and to the point. "Quantitative data comes from close ended data sources like tests, questionnaires or psychological instruments." (Hafsa,2019)

All participants acquired essential information in regards to the aim and the method of the study. Participants who agreed to the terms and conditions were directed to section two whereby they filled out twenty-one questions. After the closing date of the questionnaire the data was coded through SPSS in order to further analyse through graphs and diagrams to get the most out of the findings.

A five-point Likert scale was used to evaluate views, emotions and competences. A Likert scale was of benefit as it indicates a respondent "degree of agreement and disagreement with a variety of statements about some attitude, object, person or event." (Taherdoost,2019). A Likert scale was easy to build and gave a very accurate measurement through Google Forms.

Google Forms was used to create a potential survey in which could obtain answers to the research questions. A google survey was of benefit to create as it wouldn't be time consuming but yet it could get straight to the point of analysing the questions. Another benefit is that web questionnaires can enable investigators to retain time. "online surveys allow a researcher to reach thousands of people with common characteristics in a short amount of time, despite possibly being separated by great geographic distances." (Wright,2005) "With any online survey, it is important to have an inductor page that describes the study, explains what participation will consist of, and outlines the risks and benefits of participating." (Alessi & Martin,2010)

Throughout the online survey there were several questions that were close ended. Close ended questions in the questionnaire is whereby "respondents' answers are

limited to a fixed set of responses.” (Roopa & Rani,2012). In this piece it will include yes and no simple answers and multiple-choice questions and finally scaled questions of ranking something 1-5. (For example 1 Strongly Disagree 5 Strongly Agree).

Several closed ended questions allowed the participants to select between numerous answers by way of multiple choice. “A key advantage of online qualitative surveys is openness and flexibility to address a wide range of research questions of interest to social researchers, as the method allows access to data that range in focus from peoples' views, experiences, or material practices.” (Braun, & Clarke & Boulton & Davey & McEvoy,2020)

3.5 Materials

Materials applied included an online information piece that included the title and the intention of the study and also finally exactly what cooperation was required. An online consent form was created in the first section of the google form, which allowed the participant to express their consent to inclusion in the research study.

The online survey included basic demographic questions about gender, age and county of residence.

The online survey (see Appendix 6.1) was brought to a conclusion with a simple thank you for participation and further contact details of the research for queries or issues.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Findings

The outcomes from the main study conducted are the subject of this chapter. In total, one online survey was conducted in order to analysis the results. A total of twenty-one questions were used in view of answering the projected research questions. To analyse the data collected, the researcher also has primary data from the online

survey shown in the form of diagrams (Figures). SPSS was utilised to analyse the findings and correlate coefficients where appropriate. (see Appendix 6.2)

4.1.Descriptive Statistics

4.1.1 Demographics

Out of the 117 participants 87.2% (n= 102) were male with the remaining 12.8% (n= 15) were female. Age ranged from 18 to 77 with a mean age of 43.16 years (SD= 17.37n). Out of the 117 respondents, 82.1% of participants come from an urban area in the Republic of Ireland the remaining 17.9% of volunteers are from rural areas. Urban areas are defined as villages, towns, cities and districts. Rural regions are the polar contrast of cities and are sometimes referred to as the countryside. In relation to specific counties, 45.3% were from Dublin, the second highest respondent level was 25.6% were from Sligo, 6.8% were from Louth, 3.4% were from Meath and Limerick, 2.6% were from Derry and Donegal, 1.7% were from Cork and Leitrim. The remaining participants (0.9%) came from Carlow, Down, Galway, Longford, Mayo, Tipperary, Waterford and Wicklow.

The percentage of respondents from Dublin 45.3% is broadly in line with the general population. The Economic profile of Dublin states that 40% of the population of the state live in the greater Dublin area. (Dublin Chamber,2021). County Sligo represents the 2nd highest respondent county with 25.6% of respondents. This is not in line with the general population where Sligo has a population of 19,199 per CSO Census 2016. (see Table 4) This anomaly could be explained by the level of fan engagement for Sligo Rovers Fc.

Town	County	Population 2011	Population 2016	Population change 2011-2016
Sligo	Sligo	19,452	19,199	-13

Table 4: Per CSO Census 2016, Most populated Settlements

4.1.2 Frequency of Using Web Based Platforms

The majority of respondents (42.7%) spend between 2-4 hours on web based platforms daily, 33.3% spend 0-2 hours per day, 17.1% are on web based platforms for 4-6 hours with 6.8% spending 6 plus hours on such online platforms.

In relation to percentage of use for specific content (e.g. how often fans use social media to engage with football content), 45.3% of the respondents indicated that they use social media platforms for engaging with Irish football news and content daily. 27.4% of participants often use social networking sites for engaging with Irish football news and content. 15.4% only use it occasionally with only 2.6% never using it. (see Figure 1)

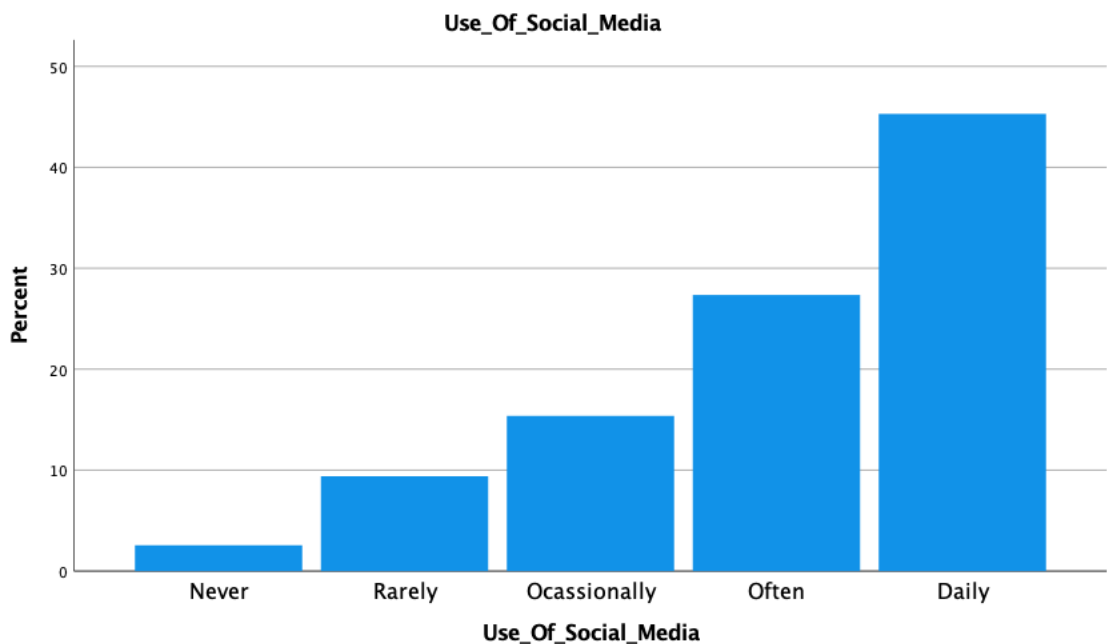


Figure 1: How often do you use social media platforms for engaging with Irish football news and content

Over 68% (n=100) of the respondents use web based platforms before, during and after matches so they do not miss anything. Due to some participants(17) choosing multiple options they are not included in this question findings.

This shows their love and loyalty for their beloved Irish club. 14.9% engage with web based media platforms after matches. 12.9% of supporters utilise these sort of platforms before the match kicks off with 4% of fans use it during the live match. This suggests that web based platforms are used throughout the process of a football match not just for one purpose. They can be used at all stages between the build-up to the post-match analysis and even days later.

Overall fans are highly engaged with their clubs through web based platforms. When asked which web based platforms are used 53 respondents (n=117) only picked one with Facebook being the most popular and accounting for 22 (18.8%). Where multiple platforms are used the most common is LOI TV + Twitter + Facebook at 12 (10.3%) and LOI TV + Facebook at 9 (7.7%). In total 50 (42.7%) use LOI TV plus at least one other platform. On the other hand, nobody uses Tiktok on a standalone basis, with only 1 person (0.9%) viewing Tiktok with another platform. (see Appendix 6.3)

4.1.3 Other Relevant Data on Using Web-Based Platforms

Overall fan experience is positive per the survey in (Figure 2.) (“Fan Experience”). This was assessed on a Likert scale ranging from Very Negative to Very Positive. It is noted that nobody assessed their fan experience as extremely negative with only 3.4% deeming their experience somewhat negative. 38.5% and 36.8% considered their fan experience to be either positive or very positive.

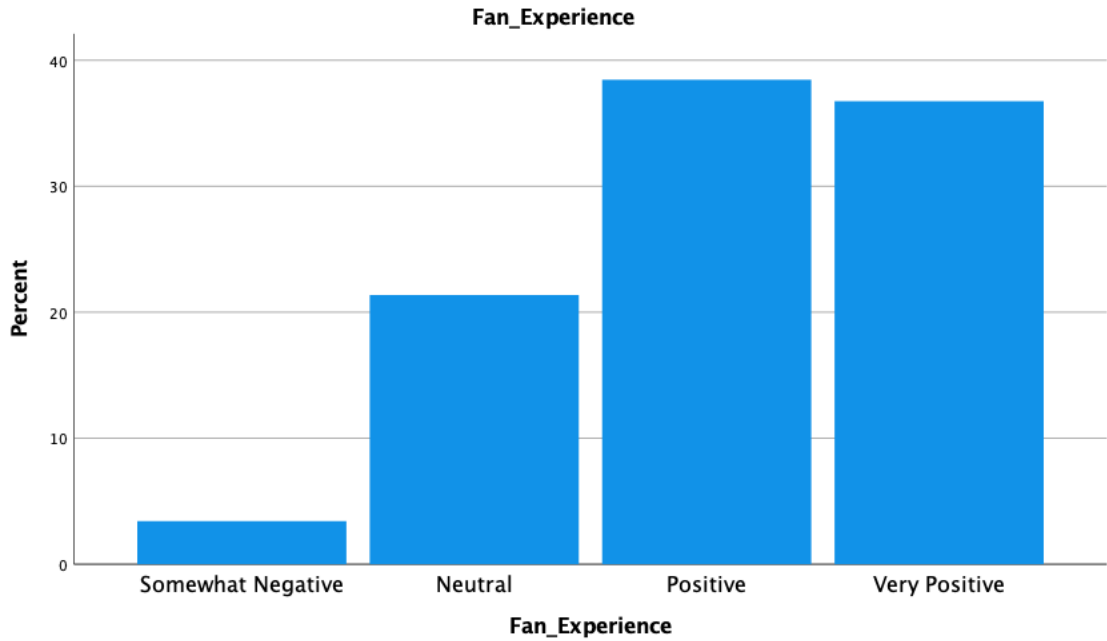


Figure 2: How positive do you feel your fan experience is overall

Relatedly, respondents were asked is there a stronger emotional bond between the Irish clubs and its supporters as a result of the rise of web-based media? The results suggested that there is a stronger emotional bond between the Irish clubs and its supporters as a result of the rise of web-based media platforms. The cumulative percent agree/strongly agree is 63.2% which is a positive finding for the League of Ireland as a whole. However 31.6% of respondents have a neutral opinion. While this question verified the results that there is stronger emotional bond between the Irish clubs and their supporters as a result of web based media platforms there is further potential for further improvement given level of neutral findings. This can also be of benefit for Irish clubs in encouraging fan loyalty and vice versa for the fans showing their love for their club on web based media platforms.

A further question on the level of “Belonging” to a football community showed 41% believe that they “fully belong” to the Irish football community. 32.5% believe they “belong” within the Irish football community. 16.2% feel they “moderately belong” belong in the community. 6.8% feel they “belong a small amount” to the community and then 3.4% feel no attachment whatsoever to the Irish football community. Therefore c.10% of respondents who are avid fans of their own specific feel little or no connection to the greater Irish football fan community.

4.1.4 Interest in Gaming

37.6% of the 117 participants would be very interested if there was an internet game (For example Premier league fantasy football) on the League of Ireland. 27.4% are very uninterested and don't see a need for it in the market of LOI football. With 10.3% neutral to the idea of the game and also 10.3% interested in the possibility of a fantasy platform for passionate Irish fans. This shows that there is by all means a want by ardent League of Ireland fans to engage and participate more with the league through an internet based interactive game. (See Figure 3)

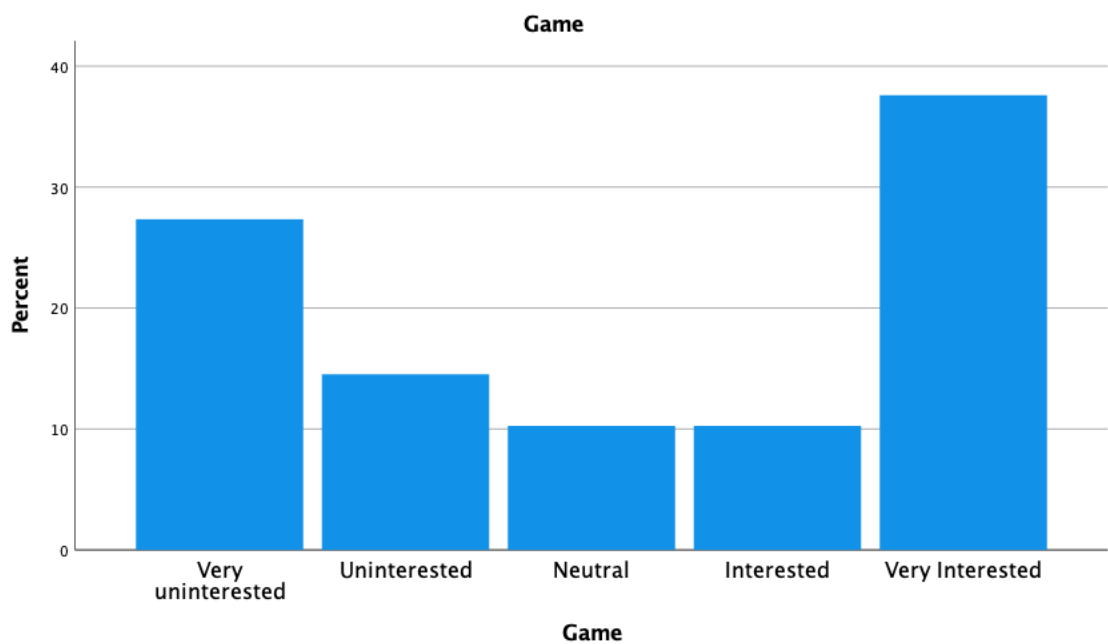


Figure 3: If there was an internet game on LOI would you be interested

As the graph above shows there are high percentages at opposite ends of the scale. Accordingly a Spearman Rho correlation was calculated between "Age" and "Game". This shows significant negative correlation (-.545**) which indicates that younger respondents are more interested in a new web based game.

4.1.5 LOI Clubs

Out of 117 participants, 33.3% of participants follow Sligo Rovers Fc. While this might seem skewed it broadly reflects the fact that 25.6% of respondents live in Co, Sligo. 21.4% follow Bohemian Fc with a further 13.7% following Shamrock Rovers and 9.4% following St Patricks Athletic Fc. Again this reflects the fact that 45.3% of respondents stated they live in Co, Dublin. Fans of Dundalk Fc come to 8.5%. Finn Harps Fc fans and Derry City Fc fans account for 5.1% each of respondents. Waterford Fc fans total 1.7% of survey ,with newly promoted Drogheda United Fc and Longford Town Fc accounting for 0.9% each.

All League of Ireland teams are represented in the below pie chart. See Figure 4.

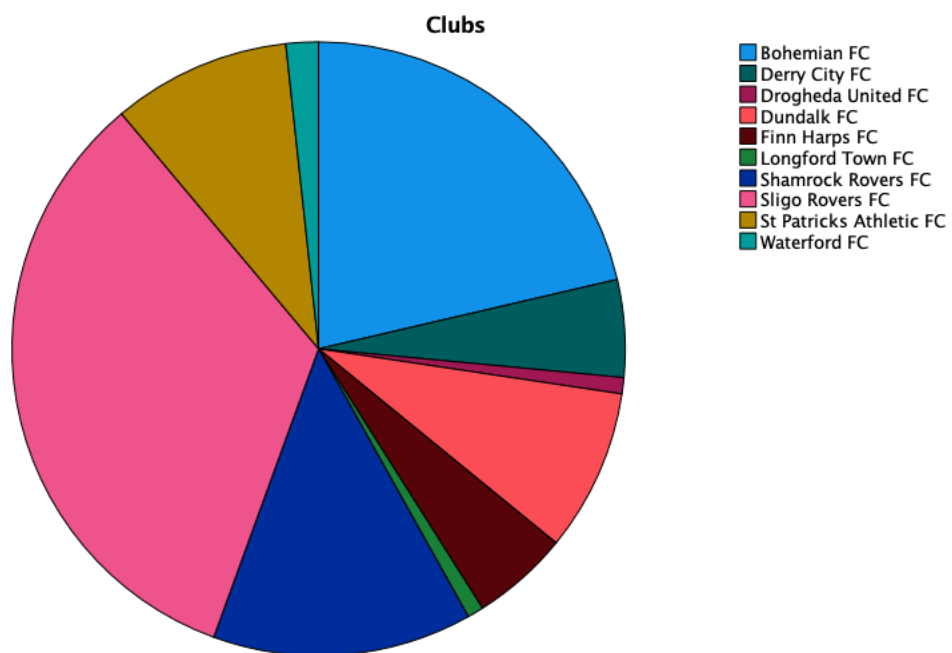


Figure 4: What Irish football club out of the premier division do the participants follow

4.1.6 Research Question 1

Descriptive statistics were consulted to address the first research question “Do consumers/sports fans believe that web-based media is being used effectively to promote football in Ireland?” 35% are neutral as to whether they believe web-based

media is being used effectively to promote football in Ireland. 23.1% feel web based media platforms are being used beneficially to further the league however 22.2% think that web-based media is not being used effectively to promote football. 12.% strongly agree that web-based media is being used effectively to promote football in Ireland. 7.7% strongly disagree that there are not being used to their full potential. (See Figure 5.)

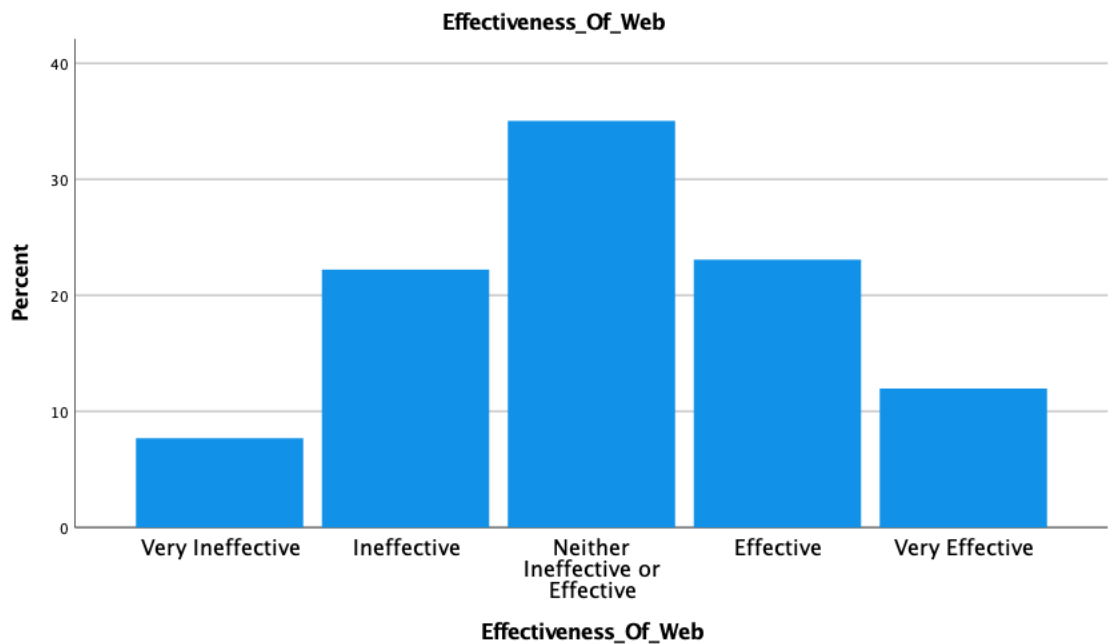


Figure 5: Do consumers/sports fans believe that web-based media is being used effectively to promote football in Ireland

Relatedly, respondents were asked out of five social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok and Snapchat is more effective or powerful for interacting/engaging with Irish football supporters?

The survey responses show that participants view Facebook as the most effective and powerful platform for interacting/engaging with Irish football supporters at this moment in time at 46.2%. 36.8% view Twitter as the most effective networking site for Irish fans. 12.8% portray Instagram as the most effective social media platform. 4.3% regard Tiktok as the most effective media medium. No participants consider Snapchat as an effective web based media platform. This could be due to the limitations of the platform which only allows short stories and maximum two viewings of an article.

4.1.7 Research Question 2

Descriptive statistics were also consulted to address the second research question “What types of initiatives might improve overall fan experience and/or engagement with LOI/FAI?” From the below pie chart, the 53.8% of respondents believe a weekly highlights show would improve fan experience. 23.1% believe a behind the scenes series could potentially improve fan experience. 13.7% think an LOI mobile application could be of benefit while 9.4% believe a LOI fantasy football could enhance overall fan experience. (See Figure 6).

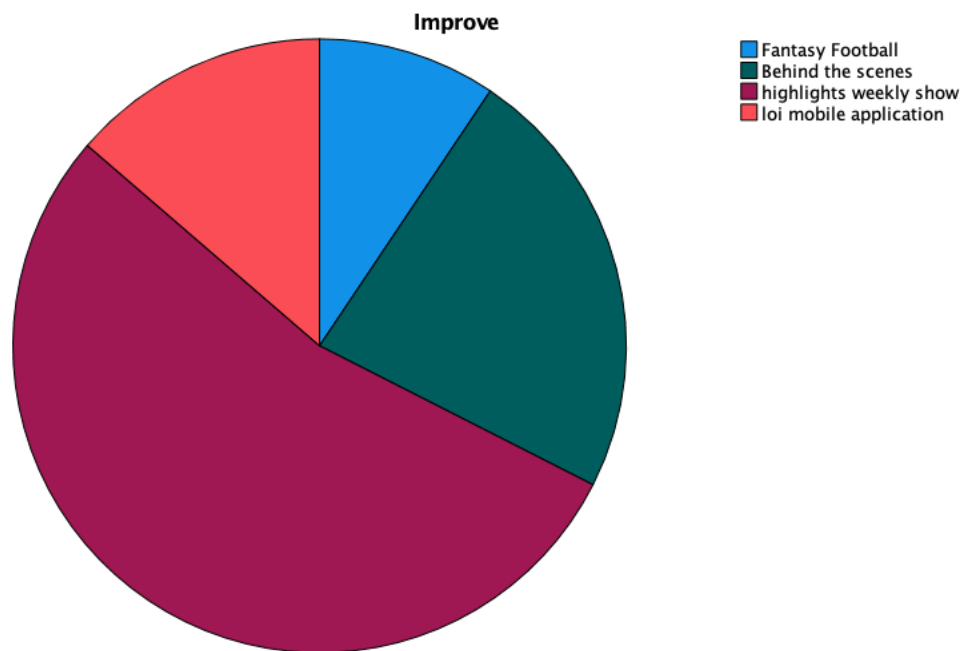


Figure 6: Which could improve Irish football fan experience of football engagement

Inferential Statistics

4.2.1 Tests for Normality

Tests for normality were conducted for the following continuous IVs and DVs: “use of social media platforms” (IV) “fan experience” (DV) and “belonging to the football community”. (DV) The Shapiro-Wilk statistic was examined along with

visual inspection of normality plots. The results demonstrated that none of the three variables were normally distributed (all p 's < 0.05), therefore the non-parametric Spearman's correlational analysis was undertaken.

4.2.2 Research Question 3

To address the research question "To what extent does the use of social media platforms for engaging with football news/content improve fan experience?" a correlational analysis was undertaken with the following variables: Variable 1 is Fan Experience (How positive do you feel your fan experience is overall). Variable 2 is Use of Social Media (How often do you use social media platforms for engaging with Irish Football news and content?) and Variable 3 is Rise of Social Media (on a scale 1-5, how much would you agree with the following statement; the rise of social media has had a positive effect on a team's contact with its fans?) Rise of social media was included as it is conceptualised as an indicator of fan experience.

Variables	1	2	3	4
Fan Experience		1		
Use of Social Media			1	
Rise of Social Media				1
Feeling of Belonging				
	.402**	.408**	.224**	.236**
	.628**	.536**		
				1
N=117; Statistical Significance: *p<.01				

Table 5: Spearman's Rho Correlation Coefficient

Preliminary analysis indicated that the assumption of normality was violated for each variable, so a Spearman's Rho was conducted to determine the relationship between the *Use of Social* (Predictor Variable, PV), *Fan Experience* (Criterion

Variable, CV) and *Rise of Social Media* (CV) . There was significant positive correlation between Use of Social Media and Fan Experience ($n=117, r=.402, p <.001$) and a significant positive correlation between Use of Social Media and Rise of Social Media ($n=117, r=.224, p <.001$). This result means the more participants use social media to engage with LOI content, the more positive they rated their fan experience overall (See Table 5)

4.2.3 Research Question 4

To address the research question “To what extent does the use of social media platforms for engaging with football news/content create the sense of belonging to a football community?” a Spearman’s correlation coefficient was undertaken with *Use of Social Media* as the PV and *Feeling of Belonging* (“how much do you feel you belong to the Irish football community”) as the CV. Results showed a significant positive correlation between these two variables ($n=117, r=.536, p <.001$). This result shows that the more a person uses social media to engage with LOI football content, the more they feel they belong to a football community. (See Table 5)

Overall, this suggests that the FAI / LOI should consider an increased focus on their web based platforms, as not all clubs are active on all available social media platforms.

4.2.4 Results Summary

Overall, the findings support the hypothesis set in the research questions. It is clear that the fans are engaging with content and news through web based media platforms but FAI & the LOI can still do more to maximise fan engagement, fan loyalty and fan community.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Detailed Summary

The aim of this dissertation was to investigate the effects of web-based media platforms and how they can be of benefit for League of Ireland (LOI) football clubs in increasing fan loyalty/ engagement and fan community. The researcher was able to answer all research questions set out by a mixture of independent study results and available literature. Web based technology has evolved substantially since the original introduction of Facebook.

All of the premier division clubs use Facebook, Instagram, LOI TV, Twitter and Youtube, with only two clubs not utilising Tiktok as a form of communication with its fans base.

The purpose of this section is to go further into the results in light of the current research and theoretical assumptions discussed in Chapter 2. The objective of this section is to explore the findings in a larger perspective with a particular focus on :

1. Web-based media effectiveness
2. Fan Engagement / Fan Loyalty in LOI
3. Fan Experience / Fan Community

5.1.1 Web based media Effectiveness

The primary research indicate that the participants view Facebook as the most effective platform used for interacting/engaging with Irish football supporters at this moment in time. Twitter followed in second. It is unclear as to whether this reflects the output of these platforms Vs Tiktok, Snapchat and Instagram or whether fans are more comfortable using the more established platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. This could also potentially suggest that younger people are more experimental or adventurous with the newer platforms compared to that of the older generation. The two web based platforms Facebook and Twitter are constantly

trying to keep up to date with the new modern platforms. (Instagram ,Snapchat, Tiktok) by replicating their platforms to a degree in some shape. For example stories have been added to Facebook as of 2017 & Twitter in 2020 as a story variation known as fleets.

This investigation was somewhat similar to that undertaken by Vale & Fernandes (2018). Vale & Fernandes looked particularly at Facebook and which team had the most effect on Facebook whereas LOI fans were asked which out of the top five social media platform are more effective/powerful for interacting/engaging with Irish football supporters. While the premise of the Vale & Fernandes report differ slightly they both support the theory that Facebook remains the strongest communication tool.

There is a direct correlation between the age of respondents and their use of social media. Spearman Rho calculation indicates a correlation coefficient of $-.287^{**}$ which shows that younger people use social media to a higher degree than the older respondents.

As seen in Figure 5 the fact that 35% are unsure on whether web based media platforms are being used effectively represents an opportunity for the clubs to promote football in Ireland. In addition to this cohort, the research indicates 22.2% believe that web based media is ineffective while a further 7.7% believe web based media is very ineffective in promoting football. This segment shows a clear opportunity for Irish football to influence its fan base positively through web based media platforms. The additional 35% neutral participants provides a further segment that could be swayed positively by use of digital media platforms. A population therefore of 64.9% is potentially available to Irish football to add to its fanbase in a popular manner. The perception of web effectiveness in the promotion of football in Ireland is considered only one factor in overall fan experience. The online survey indicates a high level of fan experience within the respondents and therefore any perceived improvement in the effectiveness of web based media platforms would further enhance fan experience.

5.1.2 Fan Engagement / Fan Loyalty in LOI

Dedicated LOI fans in this study believe that Facebook followed by Twitter are the main two web-based media platforms in which they engage with Irish football on a whole. The researchers findings differ to that of Keane in 2018. His research indicated that Instagram was the most popular platform for fan engagement at 63% followed by Facebook at 21%. His hypothesis was that there was room to develop Youtube, which only achieved an engagement rate of 0.3%.

While this researchers study shows the continuing strength of Facebook which is comparable with Keane's research it also shows the evolution of new web based media platforms and their engagement with fans.

Keane believed that there was an opportunity for Irish sporting bodies to utilise Youtube as an effective means of engagement. The current study indicates that this hypothesis has not been fulfilled, as there is little fan engagement with Youtube.

One of the questions asked in the online survey was:

“Which of the following do you think could improve Irish football fan experience or football engagement?” Respondents show a preference for a highlights show. RTE used to have a highlights show but it was cancelled. RTE have claimed that a highlight show such as BBC Match of the Day or the GAA Sunday game “is not viable” (Fitzmaurice, 2021). This survey concludes that there is a demand for such a show, which could be adapted to streaming services such as Youtube. This could be deemed an opportunity for the FAI and also LOI to potentially expand the fanbase and improve overall engagement.

Fantasy Football has recently become an important way to engage with football especially in the English Premier League. While only 9.4% of respondents believe that this could help improve the Irish football fan experience or football engagement, this represents a potential opportunity for FAI / LOI. When specifically asked *“If there was an internet game (For example Premier league fantasy football) on LOI would they interested?”* 47.9% of respondents (Figure 3) stated they would either be interested or very interested in an LOI version of the game. There is a significant

negative correlation between age of respondent and their interest in an LOI Game. (Spearman's Rho shows a correlation coefficient of $-.545^{**}$)

This hypothesis is further strengthened by an announcement on the 13th of August 2021, of a new web based game for the Northern Irish (NIFL) top flight league. This will be a Fantasy football for the 12 teams in the NIFL. Fans can battle out against other players from all clubs but also mini-leagues can be created for groups and there is also a leader board for fans of each specific club. (NIFL,2021)

It is quite difficult to compare these findings with Dwyer (2011) who researched the influence the NFL fantasy has on fan loyalty. This is due to the sheer population of American football fans compared with that of fans of League Of Ireland. Dwyer's study found a "positive link between the interaction of the game and team loyalty" (Dwyer,2011) in American football (NFL). Furthermore it established that a fantasy football product could assist the clubs to expand the geographical fan base. Given our finding that most people follow their local club a fantasy football game could broaden the fanbase to beyond county boundaries and even worldwide. As a fantasy football game is largely dependent on the use of the web, which is continuously developing, it is difficult to determine the potential reach of the fantasy football enterprise.

5.1.3 Fan Experience & Fan Community

The concept of fan experience emerged as a fascinating discussion during the investigation. Fan experience can come through multiple means either through in person experiences or web based media platforms. "The reasons individuals consume sport vary from person to person, but according to Wann (1995), and group affiliation is one of the most common motivations." (Mastromartino, & Zhang,2020). "Social media provide a platform for sport managers to enhance the commitment and engagement of fans by creating new and interactive experiences." (Meng & Westburg , 2015) Although Meng (2015) paper is a study of the National Basketball Association (NBA) the findings of this current research support both of the above hypothesis.

The survey indicates that the rise of social media has had a positive effect on a team's contact with its fans, with 90.6% either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.

Fan community is derived from a positive fan experience. Respondents were asked to both categorise their current feeling of belonging to a football community and their view on the potential of improving fan community through the introduction of fan channels. There is a strong sense of belonging among the respondents with 73.5% considering they belong or fully belong to the Irish football community. Nevertheless 79.8% agree or strongly agree that the introduction of a fan channel would significantly enhance fan community.

The emergence of fan channels posted on Youtube, football supporter engagement in the Barclays Premier League (EPL) has expanded. As outlined in the literature review it has seen fan channels in Ireland being created. The findings from the online survey contradict Rivers (2019) which suggested that the likes of Arsenal Fan TV (AFTV) may not make fans feel a part of the community. AFTV was originally founded with a right wing purpose and goal to offer average supporters a forum to speak their minds, “ the channels unprecedented success in the genre means that it now appears to be more aligned with the corporate side of things” (Rivers & et al,2019) On the other hand the Irish league is seen to be quite niche and LOI Fan TV clearly help fans feel closer to their teams and more a part of the community.

5.2 Suggestions for future studies

While this study shows definite, positive correlation between the use of web based media and the fan experience further studies could be undertaken for academic purposes or to assist in the FAI / LOI achieving maximum potential within the fan community, both in Ireland and worldwide. Potential future studies include;

- 1) Given the results on effectiveness of web based media platforms, a comparative study could be undertaken to analyse web based media versus that of print and television. This could assist the FAI / LOI in distilling their

communication channels to the most beneficial for fan experience / fan engagement based on age or other demographic details.

- 2) A potential future study could be conducted on the cost / efficacy of a weekly highlights show and its potential impact on improving the LOI fan loyalty and fan experience.
- 3) The current study was user / fan based. Further study could be conducted on an output basis (hours / type) for individual clubs in the LOI. This could establish which platforms could be the most effective in increasing fan experience, particularly in relation to emerging or minimally used platforms. (Tiktok)
- 4) While this study indicated that the use of social media facilitates a sense of belonging to Irish fan communities this could be further explored. There was a low level of survey participation from Waterford, Longford and Drogheda fans and therefore a potential study of social media and fan community could be undertaken on an individual club basis.
- 5) There are strongly supported findings of Teneo Sports and Sponsorship index 2018 which found that “Over half of those surveyed (58 per cent) believe that women’s sport does not receive sufficient media coverage.” (O’Keefe,2018) As only 12.8% of respondents were female, an alternative future study could be that of investigating the effects of web based media platforms in the women’s game in terms of Women’s National League (WNL).

5.3 Limitations of Research & Future Directions

One of the main limitations with this study is that there is no evidence of any previous study on this topic within the Irish league of Ireland and therefore there is little academic literature to complete comparative analysis.

A second limitation of this research is that the investigation was restricted to LOI Premier Division clubs and fans. The findings do not reflect fan engagement with local community football clubs and lower division of FAI. A future study could analyse the level of fan engagement between community football clubs and premier division teams.

A further limitation would be that only 12.8% of respondents were female. Additional research would be required to establish whether this statistic is a real reflection of female interest in LOI Irish premier division.

Additionally, there is an age bias in the results with the mode age being twenty two and also with the fan base for responses being limited to the island of Ireland. Potentially younger people have a higher usage rate of web based media platforms which could have potentially skewed the results and findings. A more targeted survey on a demographic basis for both age and fan location could provide additional knowledge for the LOI.

Finally, this online survey was limited to the views from existing fans of LOI football. Further research would be required if FAI / LOI wished to establish how web based media platforms could be used to generate new fans for clubs.

5.4 Implications

The broader implications identified from the results are;

1. The advancements of web based media platforms play a pivotal role on a sports teams contact with its fans.
2. League of Ireland could use their web based media platforms more effectively to attract more fans and increase fan engagement & fan loyalty.
3. The fans are seeking improved engagement with the FAI / LOI and it is likely they will continue to do so particularly as web based media platforms continue to evolve.

5.5 Conclusions

The goal of this study was to explore the effects of web-based media platforms and how they can be of benefit for League of Ireland (LOI) football clubs in increasing fan loyalty/ engagement and fan community. By undertaking this investigation, The author sought to quantify the relationship between the use of social media and overall fan engagement. Both primary and secondary data was collected and interpreted.

While fan experience is considered good and fans are emotionally attached to their clubs it is clear that further action can be taken by the FAI / LOI to effectively use web based media platforms to promote Irish football. The fans questioned have given a clear indication on how this can be achieved.

6 Appendices

6.1 Google Forms Survey Questions

Q1) What gender are you?

- Male
- Female
- prefer not to say

Q2) How old are you?

- Text entry in number

Q3) What is your current status?

- Employed
- Unemployed
- Student,
- Other please specify

Q4) What county do you live in?

- Text Entry

Q5) Where are you currently living?

- Rural area
- Urban area

Q6) On a typical day, how long do you spend on social media? (in hours)

- 0-2 hours
- 2-4 hours
- 4-6 hours
- 6 plus

Q7) What Irish football club out of the premier division do you follow most in Ireland?

- Bohemian Fc
- Derry City Fc
- Drogheda United Fc
- Dundalk Fc
- Finn Harps Fc
- Longford Town Fc
- Shamrock Rovers Fc
- Sligo Rovers Fc

- St Patricks Athletic Fc
- Waterford Fc

Q8) Out of the list below of web-based media platforms, which would you use most to engage with Irish football on a whole?

- Streaming Services
- LOI TV
- Twitter
- Instagram
- Tiktok
- Facebook
- Youtube

Q9) Which of these social media platforms below do you believe is more effective/powerful for interacting/engaging with Irish football supporters?

- Twitter
- Facebook
- Instagram
- Tiktok
- Snapchat

Q10) On a scale 1-5 how much would you agree with the following statement; the rise of social media has had a positive effect on a team's contact with its fans?

- (Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree) Likert Scale

Q11) Do you feel fan channels (LOI Fan tv) allow football fans to feel closer to their teams and more a part of the community?

- (Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree) Likert Scale

Q12) Is there a stronger emotional bond between the Irish clubs and its supporters as a result of the rise of web-based media?

- (Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree) Likert Scale

Q13) If there was an internet game (For example Premier league fantasy football) on LOI would you be interested?

- (Low Interest – High Interest) Likert Scale

Q14) Do you believe web-based media is being used effectively to promote football in Ireland?

- (Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree) Likert Scale

Q15) Which of the following do you think could improve Irish football fan experience or football engagement?

- Fantasy Football for LOI
- Behind the scenes coverage of LOI clubs
- Highlights weekly show,
- LOI mobile application

Q16) How often do you use social media platforms for engaging with Irish Football news and content?

- (Never – Daily) Likert Scale

Q17) How much do you feel you belong to the Irish football community?

- (None – Fully Belong) Likert Scale

Q18) What is your primary purpose for using web-based platforms to interact with Irish football?

- To watch games,
- For news or information,
- To share experiences or views among other fans
- To increase knowledge
- All of the above

Q19) How positive do you feel your fan experience is overall?

- (Very negative – Very positive) Likert Scale

Q20) When would you use web-based platforms the most?

- Before matches,
- During matches,
- After matches,
- All of the above

Q21) Do you as a consumer / sports fan believe that web-based media is being used effectively to promote football in Ireland?

- (Ineffective – effective) Likert Scale

6.2 Screenshot of SPSS Data

Thesis DATA.sav [DataSet] - IBM SPSS Statistics Data Editor

Visible: 22 of 22 Variables

	Gender	Age	Status	County	Area	Hours	Clubs	Engage	powerful	Rise_Of_Social_Media	LOL_Fan_TV	Emotiona_I	Game	Effectivaly	Improve	Use_Of_Social_Media	Feeling_Of_Belon_ging	Purj
1	1.00	23.00	1.00	6.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	3.00	4.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	3.00	4.00	4.00
2	1.00	22.00	1.00	6.00	2.00	3.00	1.00	3.00, 6.00	3.00	4.00	5.00	3.00	4.00	1.00	2.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
3	1.00	22.00	1.00	6.00	2.00	2.00	6.00	2.00	3.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	3.00	2.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
4	1.00	24.00	1.00	6.00	2.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	4.00	5.00	4.00	5.00	4.00	1.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
5	1.00	22.00	1.00	6.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	2.00	3.00	5.00	5.00	4.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
6	1.00	23.00	1.00	6.00	2.00	4.00	6.00	3.00	2.00	5.00	5.00	3.00	2.00	5.00	3.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
7	1.00	22.00	1.00	6.00	2.00	2.00	7.00	2.00, 3.00, ...	3.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	5.00	3.00	1.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
8	1.00	23.00	1.00	6.00	2.00	3.00	6.00	3.00	4.00	4.00	5.00	4.00	5.00	4.00	3.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
9	1.00	23.00	3.00	6.00	2.00	1.00	7.00	5.00	2.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	5.00	2.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
10	1.00	23.00	3.00	6.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	6.00	1.00	4.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	2.00	3.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
11	1.00	22.00	1.00	6.00	2.00	2.00	1.00	1.00, 2.00, ...	1.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	3.00	3.00	5.00	4.00	4.00
12	1.00	22.00	1.00	6.00	2.00	3.00	1.00	2.00, 3.00, ...	1.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	4.00	2.00	3.00	3.00	3.00
13	1.00	22.00	3.00	6.00	2.00	1.00	8.00	1.00, 3.00, ...	3.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	5.00	3.00	2.00	2.00	1.00	1.00
14	1.00	19.00	3.00	6.00	2.00	2.00	9.00	2.00	1.00	3.00	5.00	3.00	5.00	3.00	3.00	5.00	4.00	4.00
15	1.00	39.00	1.00	10.00	2.00	2.00	4.00	1.00, 2.00, ...	1.00	4.00	4.00	3.00	5.00	5.00	1.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
16	1.00	19.00	1.00	9.00	2.00	3.00	1.00	1.00, 2.00, ...	1.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	5.00	3.00	1.00	4.00	4.00	3.00
17	1.00	28.00	2.00	9.00	1.00	1.00	4.00	1.00, 2.00	1.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	1.00	2.00	4.00	4.00	5.00	5.00
18	1.00	42.00	1.00	1.00	2.00	2.00	1.00	2.00, 6.00	1.00	3.00	4.00	3.00	2.00	3.00	3.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
19	1.00	38.00	1.00	6.00	2.00	2.00	6.00	2.00	1.00	5.00	3.00	4.00	5.00	2.00	3.00	3.00	5.00	5.00
20	1.00	22.00	3.00	6.00	2.00	3.00	1.00	1.00, 3.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
21	1.00	19.00	1.00	13.00	2.00	3.00	7.00	1.00, 3.00, ...	2.00	4.00	4.00	3.00	5.00	3.00	1.00	4.00	5.00	5.00
22	1.00	22.00	3.00	6.00	2.00	1.00	6.00	2.00	3.00	3.00	5.00	4.00	2.00	2.00	3.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
23	1.00	62.00	1.00	15.00	2.00	1.00	10.00	2.00	1.00	4.00	4.00	2.00	5.00	1.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00
24	1.00	21.00	3.00	14.00	1.00	4.00	6.00	2.00	4.00	5.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
25	1.00	29.00	1.00	6.00	2.00	2.00	8.00	1.00, 2.00	1.00	4.00	2.00	3.00	1.00	2.00	3.00	2.00	3.00	3.00
26	1.00	48.00	1.00	6.00	2.00	2.00	1.00	1.00, 3.00, ...	3.00	4.00	4.00	3.00	4.00	2.00	2.00	4.00	4.00	5.00

Data View Variable View

6.3 Web-based media platforms which do participants use most to engage with Irish football on a whole

		Engage			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Streaming services (LOI TV)	10	8.5	8.5	8.5
	Twitter	15	12.8	12.8	21.4
	Instagram	4	3.4	3.4	24.8
	Facebook	22	18.8	18.8	43.6
	Youtube	2	1.7	1.7	45.3
	Instagram + Youtube	1	.9	.9	46.2
	Instagram + Twitter + Youtube	3	2.6	2.6	48.7
	LOI TV + Twitter + Instagram + Youtube	2	1.7	1.7	50.4
	LOI TV + Instagram + Youtube	2	1.7	1.7	52.1
	LOI TV + Twitter + Instagram + Facebook + Youtube	1	.9	.9	53.0
	LOI TV + Twitter + Facebook	12	10.3	10.3	63.2
	LOI TV + Twitter	5	4.3	4.3	67.5
	Twitter + Youtube	1	.9	.9	68.4
	LOI TV + Instagram	1	.9	.9	69.2
	LOI TV + Instagram + Facebook + Youtube	1	.9	.9	70.1
	Twitter + Instagram + Tiktok + Youtube	1	.9	.9	70.9
	LOI TV + Twitter + Instagram + Facebook	4	3.4	3.4	74.4
	Instagram + Youtube	1	.9	.9	75.2
	LOI TV + Facebook	9	7.7	7.7	82.9
	LOI TV + Twitter + Facebook + Youtube	3	2.6	2.6	85.5
	LOI TV + Facebook + Youtube	5	4.3	4.3	89.7
	LOI TV + Twitter + Youtube	2	1.7	1.7	91.5
	Twitter + Facebook	2	1.7	1.7	93.2
	Instagram + Facebook	1	.9	.9	94.0
	Twitter + Instagram + Facebook	2	1.7	1.7	95.7
	LOI TV + Instagram + Facebook	3	2.6	2.6	98.3
	Facebook + Youtube	1	.9	.9	99.1
	Twitter + Instagram + Facebook + Youtube	1	.9	.9	100.0
	Total	117	100.0	100.0	

References

1. Abosag, I & Roper, S & Hind, D (2012) "Examining the relationship between brand emotion and brand extension among supporters of professional football clubs", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 46 No. 9, p 1233-1251. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03090561211247810>.
2. Aichner, T. (2019), "Football clubs' social media use and user engagement", *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, Vol. 37 No. 3, p242-257. <https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-05-2018-0155>.
3. Alessi, E & Martin, J. (2010). Conducting an Internet-based Survey: Benefits, Pitfalls, and Lessons Learned. *Social Work Research* . 34 (1), p122-128
4. Braun, V & Clarke, V & Boulton, E & Davey, L & McEvoy, C (2020) The online survey as a *qualitative* research tool, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, Doi : 10.1080/13645579.2020.1805550.
5. Bundesliga. (2021). *All you need to know about soccer*. Available: <https://www.bundesliga.com/en/faq/all-you-need-to-know-about-soccer>. Last accessed 16th May 2021.
6. Carril, S & Fajardo ,P & et al. (2020). The Rise of Social Media in Sport: A Bibliometric Analysis. *Social media in sports management*. 17 (06), p1-24.
7. Carroll, S. (2019). *The Use of Social Media in Sporting Organisations in Ireland: An Examination of Practice and Challenges in Accomplishing Organisational Objectives..* Available: [https://repository.wit.ie/3367/1/Sheena%20Carroll%20-%20Masters%20by%20Research%20\(MA\)%202019.pdf](https://repository.wit.ie/3367/1/Sheena%20Carroll%20-%20Masters%20by%20Research%20(MA)%202019.pdf). Last accessed 16th May 2021.

8. Carruthers, B. (2019). *Why Chelsea FC thinks about football outside the world of football*. Available: <https://www.warc.com/content/article/event-reports/why-chelsea-fc-thinks-about-football-outside-the-world-of-football/130755>. Last accessed 13th Jul 2021.
9. Curran, C (2021) The playing and working conditions of League of Ireland footballers in a part-time-professional football Euro 2021 host nation: the Republic of Ireland's League of Ireland, Soccer & Society Doi: 10.1080/14660970.2021.1906535
10. Dwivedi, Y & Ismagilova ,E & et al. (2020). Setting the future of digital and social media marketing research: Perspectives and research propositions. *International Journal of Information Management* . 1 (1), p1-37.
11. Dublin Chamber. (2021). *Economic Profile of Dublin*. Available: <https://www.dublinchamber.ie/business-agenda/economic-profile-of-dublin>. Last accessed 12th Aug 2021.
12. FAI. (2020). <https://www.fai.ie/sites/default/files/atoms/files/Section%201%20-%20Introduction.pdf>. Available: <https://www.fai.ie/sites/default/files/atoms/files/Section%201%20-%20Introduction.pdf>. Last accessed 19th Jan 2021.
13. FAI. (2016). *Strategic plan 2016-2020*. Available: <https://www.fai.ie/sites/default/files/atoms/files/FAI%20Strategic%20Plan%202016-2020.pdf>. Last accessed 21st Jan 2021.
14. Flanigan, M. (2014). *How Fantasy Sport Participation Affects Fan Loyalty*. Available: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=sport_undegrad. Last accessed 14th Aug 2021.

15. Fitzharris, N & Jones, G & Jones, A & et al (2017) The first prospective injury audit of League of Ireland footballers *BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine* 2017 (3)1 p1-7 Doi: 10.1136/bmjsem-2017-000220.
16. Fitzmaurice, A. (2021). *RTÉ head of sport confirms League of Ireland highlights package 'not feasible'*. Available: <https://www.independent.ie/sport/soccer/league-of-ireland/rte-head-of-sport-confirms-league-of-ireland-highlights-package-not-feasible-40141114.html>. Last accessed 18th Aug 2021.
17. Hafsa, N. (2019). Mixed Methods Research: An Overview for Beginner Researchers. *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics*. 58 (1), p45-48.
18. Heneghan, C. (2015). *twitter reveals the most supported premier league team in Ireland*. Available: <https://www.joe.ie/sport/twitter-reveals-the-most-supported-premier-league-team-in-ireland-493045>. Last accessed 16th May 2021.
19. Independent. (2021). *Confirmed: Six Premier League clubs announce intent to join European Super League*. Available: <https://www.independent.ie/sport/soccer/confirmed-six-premier-league-clubs-announce-intent-to-join-european-super-league-40327943.html>. Last accessed 17 June 2021.
20. Keane, T. (2018). *Irish Sports social review: 63% of all engagement on social comes from 8% of content*. Available: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/irish-sports-social-review-63-all-engagement-comes-from-trev-keane/>. Last accessed 17th May 2021.
21. Keogh, Clare & Rosenberger III, Philip & Pandit, Ameet & Holzmüller, Hartmut. (2019). Exploring Football Fan Engagement: A Case Study in Customer Experience Innovation.

22. Kinsella, R. (2021). *Now more than ever, the League of Ireland deserves your support*. Available: <https://www.irishpost.com/sport/now-more-than-ever-the-league-of-ireland-deserves-your-support-209963>. Last accessed 19th Apr 2021.
23. Koenigstorfer & Gröppel-Klein. (2010). “You’ll Never Walk Alone”—How Loyal Are Soccer Fans to Their Clubs When They Are Struggling against Relegation?. *Journal of Sport Management*. 24 (6), 649-675.
24. Kuzma, J & Bell, V & Logue ,C. (2014). A Study of the Use of Social Media Marketing in the Football Industry. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Computing and Information Sciences*. 5 (10), p728-738.
25. Li,H & Bailey,A & Huynh,D & Chan ,J. (2020). YouTube as a source of information on COVID-19: a pandemic of misinformation?. *BMJ Global Health*. 1 (1), p1-6.
26. Malone, E. (2020). *Football fan survey: Man United still top league among Irish fans*. Available: <https://www.irishtimes.com/sport/soccer/english-soccer/football-fan-survey-man-united-still-top-league-among-irish-fans-1.4185728>. Last accessed 15th May 2021.
27. Malone ,E. (2018). *Revenue from League of Ireland broadcast rights is hopeful thinking*. Available: <https://www.irishtimes.com/sport/soccer/revenue-from-league-of-ireland-broadcast-rights-is-hopeful-thinking-1.3391902>. Last accessed 16th May 2021.
28. Manning, J. (2014.) Social media, definition and classes of. In K. Harvey (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia of social media and politics* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. (p. 1158-1162).
29. Mastromartino, B & Zhang, J (2020). Affective Outcomes of Membership in a Sport Fan Community. *Frontiers in psychology*, 11, 881. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00881>.

30. Meng, M & Stavros, C & Westberg, K (2015), "Engaging fans through social media: implications for team identification", *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*, 5(3) p199 – 217.
31. Menon, S & Philip, L. (2018). A study on the effect of social media on increasing interactivity between football fans and clubs.. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*. 6 (1), p1053-1057.
32. Mishra, P, Pandey, C. M., Singh, U., Gupta, A., Sahu, C., & Keshri, A. (2019). Descriptive statistics and normality tests for statistical data. *Annals of cardiac anaesthesia*, 22(1), p67–72. https://doi.org/10.4103/aca.ACA_157_18
33. NIFL (2021). New NIFL Fantasy Football Game Launched. Available <https://www.nifootballleague.com/news/2021/august/new-nifl-fantasy-football-game-launched/>. Last accessed 13th Aug 2021
34. Rivers, D. J., & Ross, A. S. (2019). "This channel has more subs from rival fans than Arsenal fans": Arsenal Fan TV, football fandom and banter in the new media era. *Sport in Society*, p1–20. doi:10.1080/17430437.2019.17064
35. Roopa S, Rani MS.(2012) Questionnaire Designing for a Survey. *J Ind Orthod Soc* 46(4), p273-277.
36. Obradovic, M & Alcakovic, S & et al. (2019). Use of Social Media in Communication Strategies of Premier League Football Clubs. *International Scientific Conference On Information Technology And Data Related Research*. 1 (1), p244-249.
37. O'Keefe. (2018). *Ireland needs to show serious support for women's sport*. Available: <https://www.irishtimes.com/sport/ireland-needs-to-show-serious-support-for-women-s-sport-1.3737314>. Last accessed 5th Aug 2021.

38. O'Sullivan, J. (2015). *The League of Ireland punches well above its weight in terms of media coverage*. Available: <https://www.the42.ie/league-of-ireland-media-coverage-2040249-Apr2015/>. Last accessed 16th May 2021
39. Payne, J (2021). *The demise of the detested European Super League has shown that fan power can bring about change in our game*. Available: <https://metro.co.uk/2021/04/30/european-super-league-deminse-shows-fan-power-can-bring-about-change-14497090/>. Last accessed 12th Aug 2021.
40. Pena-Taylor, S (2019). *How Everton understands football fan archetypes*. Available: <https://www.warc.com/content/article/event-reports/how-everton-understands-football-fan-archetypes/en-gb/130767>. Last accessed 11th Aug 2021.
41. Petersen-Wagner, R. (2017). *The Football Supporter in a Cosmopolitan Epoch*. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 41(2), p133–150
doi:10.1177/0193723517696967
42. Previati, A. (2020). *The Importance of Fan Engagement and Fan Management in Sports*. Available: https://scholar.stjohns.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1122&context=theses_dissertations. Last accessed 20th Jul 2021.
43. Reilly, B. (2015). *The Demand for League of Ireland Football*. *The Economic and Social Review*. 46 (4), p485-509.
44. Sesay, H (2020). *Are fan channels like AFTV good for the game?*. Available: <https://penalty.online/are-fan-channels-like-aftv-good-for-the-game/>. Last accessed 14th Jul 2021.

45. Taherdoost ,H (2019). What Is the Best Response Scale for Survey and Questionnaire Design; Review of Different Lengths of Rating Scale / Attitude Scale / Likert Scale. *International Journal of Academic Research in Management (IJARM)*, 8. hal-02557308
46. Tapp, A. (2004). The loyalty of football fans – we’ll support you ever more? *The Journal of Database Marketing & Customer Strategy Management*, 11, p203–215.
47. Turnali, K. (2013). *Sports And Analytics: Fan Experience Matters*. Available: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sap/2013/04/10/sports-and-analytics-fan-experience-matters/>. Last accessed 12th Aug 2021
48. UEFA. (2019). *What UEFA does*. Available: <https://www.uefa.com/insideuefa/about-uefa/what-uefa-does/>. Last accessed 21st Jan 2021.
49. Vale, L & Fernandes ,T(2018) Social media and sports: driving fan engagement with football clubs on Facebook, *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 26:1, p37-55
50. Voorveld ,H & van Noort, G & et al (2018) Engagement with Social Media and Social Media Advertising: The Differentiating Role of Platform Type, *Journal of Advertising*, 47(1), p38-54, doi: 10.1080/00913367.2017.1405754
51. Warc (2020). <https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/why-football-clubs-are-spending-more-time-on-fan-engagement/43124>. Available: <https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/why-football-clubs-are-spending-more-time-on-fan-engagement/43124>. Last accessed 13th Jul 2021.
52. Wright, KB. (2005) Researching Internet-Based Populations: Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Survey Research, Online Questionnaire Authoring Software Packages, and Web Survey Services, *Journal of Computer-Mediated*

Communication, Volume 10, Issue 3, 1

JCMC1034, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2005.tb00259.x>

53. Yoshida, M et al. (2014). Conceptualization and Measurement of Fan Engagement: Empirical Evidence From a Professional Sport Context. *Journal Of Sports Management*. 28 (4), p399-417.

