Maintaining Fan Loyalty: An Examination of the Marketing Strategies Employed by League of Ireland Clubs

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Abstract

Many believe that player performances and financial profits are the foundations of a successful sporting institution, yet the history of the League of Ireland proves that the unwavering support of fans is the true pillar that protects this beloved domestic league. Although it is widely accepted that fans play a major role in the survival of the league, there is little research into fan loyalty in the context of the League of Ireland. While fan loyalty has been thoroughly covered in academia, it has focused on the more popular leagues across Europe, and fails to account for the unique structure and administration of the Irish league.

A review of literature was conducted into the areas of loyalty, sports marketing and the SSE Airtricity League (The League of Ireland). The literature revealed that building and maintaining a loyal fanbase is essential for sports organisations' growth; sports marketing has been recognised as a crucial component in achieving this relationship between the club and the fan. Therefore, this research aims to identify which distinct marketing strategies are used by clubs in the Irish football league to create and maintain fan loyalty.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with marketing officers across a variety of League of Ireland clubs. This was undertaken in order to identify which marketing strategies each club uses, allowing the researcher to compare these findings to those of the literature. The results outlined the most common marketing strategies that League of Ireland clubs are using to build and sustain fan loyalty, which revolve around using social media channels, securing sponsorships and working within the local community.

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1. Introduction

Loyal fans are key to sports clubs' success. Sports represent a unique context for loyalty, as it has been found that sports fans are unlikely to change their allegiance to a team. This makes it undeniably important to attract potential supporters and maintain their loyalty. When loyal, fans provide organisations with a competitive advantage by attending matches, buying merchandise and promoting the club. Despite these factors, research into the significance of fan loyalty for Irish clubs lags behind, leaving the individual organisations at a disadvantage when preparing marketing strategies to compete with their rivals.

The SSE Airtricity League (more commonly known as the League of Ireland) is the domestic football league in Ireland. This historic league has united communities and fans alike for generations and continues to play a vital role in the Irish sports industry in the modern era. While the commercialisation and popularity of the English Premier League has grown exponentially in recent years, the League of Ireland offers the Irish public a more accessible and relatable way to enjoy football within their local community. However, it is among the lowest ranked leagues in Europe due to being severely underdeveloped and underfunded. This has led to the majority of clubs within the League of Ireland having little or no budget. Therefore, these clubs rely even more on their supporters, in turn, creating special conditions for building fan loyalty. This raises the important question of how League of Ireland clubs are ensuring fan loyalty.

Marketing has been identified as a key element in creating and sustaining fan loyalty for sports organisations (Dias & Monteiro, 2020). Therefore, the aim of this dissertation is to identify which marketing strategies League of Ireland clubs use to create and maintain the loyalty of their fans. Investigating this topic will provide sports clubs with information on which marketing strategies are used by a wide variety of Irish football clubs.

This study is introduced by reviewing the existing literature related to the research question, which includes loyalty, fan loyalty, sports marketing and the League of Ireland. Whilst there is a vast amount of literature available on fan loyalty and sports marketing, there is an evident scarcity of such research within the context of the Irish football league.

The literature review is directly followed by the methodology; this section outlines the research design chosen as well as the rationale behind it. In addition, the methodology reviews the limitations of the research. The next section discusses the findings of the qualitative research undertaken. Lastly, the conclusion summarises the main findings of the research and alludes to the future research that may be needed in this area.

2. Literature Review

This chapter will provide a thorough examination of the literature surrounding the key topics within this dissertation, including loyalty, sports marketing and the SSE Airtricity League (The domestic Irish Football League). The literature review will open by defining *loyalty,* by reviewing loyalty research, inclusive of sports fan loyalty. It examines the research on sports marketing, looking at relationships, different communication channels, the importance of understanding the target audience, engagement and interaction, sponsorships, brand equity and identification. Finally, it will provide an overview of the SSE Airtricity League and its current reputation, which may affect how fans view these clubs and, in turn, the loyalty of fans.

2.1 Loyalty

Loyalty has been a key focus for many academicians for many decades and has many different definitions. In addition, consumer loyalty has been a worthwhile consideration of marketing strategies, with a focus on customer retention (Bee and Havitz, 2010). It is generally accepted that increasing and maintaining the number of loyal customers is crucial for long-term success (TaghiPourian and Bakhsh, 2015).

A popular definition of loyalty was proposed by Jacoby and Kyner (1973, as cited in TaghiPourian and Bakhsh, 2015, p.48); loyalty is "a biased behavioural response expressed over time by a decision-making unit with respect to one or more alternative brands out of a set of brands and being a function of psychological processes".

One of the most important figures in loyalty research is Richard Oliver. According to Oliver (1999, p.34), "generally, loyalty has been and continues to be defined in some circles as repeat purchasing frequency or relative volume of same-brand purchasing". He earlier defined loyalty as:

> "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronise a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour" (Oliver 1997, as cited in Oliver 1999, p.34).

Therefore, Oliver believes that loyalty comprises both attitudinal and behavioural dimensions. Similarly, Dick and Basu (1994, p.99) defined customer loyalty as "the strength of the relationship between an individual's relative attitude and repeat patronage". Stevens and Rosenberger (2012, p.7) defined attitudinal loyalty as a "favourable attitude that reflects a preference or commitment over time to repurchase the brand"; this captures the inner attachment of consumers/fans. In contrast, behavioural loyalty "reflects repeat patronage over time", and only reflects a consumer's purchase behaviour. As a result, it is essential to understand both attitudinal and behavioural elements when looking at loyalty. According to Oliver (1999), there are two attitudinal dimensions: *cognitive loyalty* and *affective loyalty*, in addition to two behavioural dimensions: *conative loyalty* and *action loyalty.*

Cognitive Loyalty

Cognitive loyalty is defined as the first loyalty phase in Oliver's framework. According to TaghiPourian and Bakhsh (2015, p.50), it is at this stage that "perceivable qualities and features of a certain brand indicate that it is more advantageous and desirable than other alternatives". This loyalty can be based on information of and experiences with the brand (Oliver, 1999).

Affective Loyalty

Known as the second phase, affective loyalty involves the development of a liking towards the brand due to a pleasure fulfilment (Oliver, 1999). The consumer has an emotional loyalty and commitment to the brand, which is "impressed as a form of cognition and affection on consumers' mind" (TaghiPourian and Bakhsh, 2015, p.50). Oliver (1999) identified similarities between cognitive loyalty and affective loyalty. He believes that at this stage, consumers are still subject to switching brands due to dissatisfaction and gaining new information.

Conative Loyalty

The next part of Oliver's framework consists of behavioural intentions which indicate a "brand-specific commitment to repurchase" (Oliver, 1999, p.35). According to TaghiPourian and Bakhsh (2015, p.50), "this stage is achieved after repeated formation of positive feelings toward a brand".

Action Loyalty

The final phase, where consumers' intentions become their actions, is known as 'action control' (Oliver, 1999). Oliver (1999) stated that consumers will be so motivated to make the purchase that they will overcome any obstacles that appear. When this action is repeated, it facilitates a potentially consistent level of repurchasing.

McMullan and Gilmore's (2008) research looked at the factors that sustain and develop customer loyalty. They claimed that "as markets become more competitive, many companies recognise the importance of retaining current customers and some have initiated a variety of activities to improve customer loyalty" (p.1084). They discovered huge benefits from a business perspective of customer loyalty, especially the retention of existing consumers. With saturated and competitive markets, it is essential to keep existing customers rather than having to go out and find new ones. Another benefit that their research found is that loyal customers act as information channels; in this way, they spread information and link networks of friends, relatives and other potential customers to the organisation (McMullan & Gilmore, 2008). Hill and Green (2000, p.147) agree, stating that "a loyal customer base is highly sought after, as loyal customers are more likely to use services again, and are more resistant to switching behaviour than less loyal customers". Both TaghiPourian and Bakhsh (2015) and Bee and Havitz (2010) discussed that a loyal relationship between an organisation and a customer positively impacts profitability. "Studies have demonstrated that small increases in consumer retention lead to exponentially greater profit and that the costs of customer retention are substantially less than the costs of new customer acquisition" (Bee and Havitz, 2010, p.37).

Stevens and Rosenberger (2012, p.8) compiled the benefits of customer loyalty:
- Reduced marketing costs
- Favourable word-of-mouth
- Greater resistance to competitor overtures
- Repeat purchasing
- Greater market share
- A higher relative price

Therefore, it is without a doubt that having loyal customers is critical for gaining a competitive advantage and for an organisation's overall success. As a result, loyalty is now considered a key aspect of marketing teams' goals. TaghiPourian and Bakhsh (2015, p.48) believe that initial loyalty creation does not suffice and "marketers should constantly work in protecting it". However, as shown by Bee and Havitz (2010), loyalty in the context of sports consumption may be different from loyalty towards a brand.

2.1.1 Sports Fan Loyalty

Sports represent a unique context for loyalty. Bee and Havitz (2010, p.38) explained that this is due to "the sundry of attributes and benefits associated with sport, and the consumer's involvement and identification with sport". However, likewise to brands, loyal 'consumers' or 'spectators' are critical to their success.

Hunt et al. (1999, as cited in Decrop and Derbaix 2010 p.588) defined a sports fan as "an enthusiastic devotee of some particular sports consumptive object". Sports fans often possess high levels of involvement along with a strong emotional attachment (Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012). According to Stevens and Rosenberger (2012), "involvement is the extent to which the consumer views the object or activity as a central part of their life, and sees the object or activity as meaningful, engaging and important to them" (p.11). Therefore, involvement is the level of interest that the fan ascribes to sports. Highly involved fans are likely to be active in attending matches, seeking information and staying informed about the team that they support, in addition to spreading word-of-mouth information (Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012).

Stevens and Rosenberger (2012) also found that "high-involvement consumers are more likely to form more strongly held or committed attitudes toward a particular product or brand, and are more resistant to persuasion or changes, i.e. they are likely to remain brand loyal" (p.12). When loyal, fans provide organisations with a competitive advantage, as they exhibit behaviours, such as repeat purchasing of tickets and continual attendance (Bee and Havitz, 2010). Tapp (2004) believes that every football supporter is "unstintingly loyal to their adopted team" (p.203). In this way, fans are unlikely to change their allegiance and consequently, they have an exclusive loyalty to their team. This differs greatly from customer loyalty.

Fouvy et al. (2011) also examined fan loyalty. They stated that being a loyal fan is "part of the sporting landscape, although not all sports consumers fit this description and cannot really be categorised as fans" (p.2). They found that being loyal involves more than just repeat attendance and buying merchandise; it involves resisting the temptation to switch to a more successful team during a poor season. They also compared sports fan loyalty to consumer loyalty. Key differences include that in consumer loyalty, "the customer needs to remain satisfied in order to continue the relationship", whereas in sports loyalty, disappointment and dissatisfaction are part of the pleasure in the experience (p.3). Therefore, football clubs can be considered different from brands as the 'product' is inconsistent and unpredictable (Tapp, 2004).

Sports fan loyalty can be looked at in terms of Oliver's (1999) loyalty framework. Behavioural loyalty, in terms of sports fan loyalty, can include consistency, repeat purchasing and repetitive behaviours, such as attending games and purchasing team merchandise (Bee and Havitz, 2010; Yun et al., 2021). Conversely, attitudinal loyalty refers to the inner relatedness of fans to their team, such as positive attitudes towards their team (Yun et al., 2021; Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012).

Loyalty for sports teams is crucial for various reasons. Gladden and Funk (2001) identified that it ensures a stable income even when the "core product's performance falters" (p.55). It also creates opportunities for product extensions, such as merchandise. Clowes and Tapp (1998) agree and additionally found that acquiring a new fan costs more than maintaining current fans. They discovered that a very loyal supporter "will always be willing to pay more to see their adored team" (p.20). Lastly, they described that loyal fans are likely to provide free word-of-mouth recommendations (WOM). Word-of-mouth recommendations are defined as "all informal communication between a consumer and others concerning evaluations of goods or services" (Bauer et al., 2008, p.208). Positive WOM is considered very effective in building trust and confidence, impacting consumers' attitudes, and reducing risk and uncertainty (Kursan et al., 2020).

While organisations are increasingly recognising that loyalty from consumers is a desirable outcome, it is noted that it is difficult to achieve (Tapp, 2004). According to Bee and Havitz (2010), customer loyalty "has long been recognised as a key consideration of marketing

strategies focused on customer retention" (p.39). This raises the question: which marketing strategies are sports organisations using to create and maintain fan loyalty?

2.2 Sports Marketing

Sports marketing is the marketing of brands in sports (Dias & Monteiro, 2020). Dias and Monteiro (2020) claimed that sports organisations use marketing in order to "identify, propose and communicate value proposals that satisfy the diverse stakeholders of the sports environment, such as supporters, sponsors and team managers" (p.255). As explained, sports marketing differs from brand marketing as the marketer has little or no control over the core product. For example, "a match between two teams today may produce a completely different result a week later, even though it involves the same players, officials and facilities" (Charumbira, 2014, p.68).

Within the broad concept of marketing, sports marketing is a recent addition (Charumbira, 2014). Charumbira (2014) reviewed sports marketing literature and discovered that there are two thrusts of sports marketing: *marketing of sports* and *marketing through sports*. The marketing of sports surrounds the marketing of sports goods and services, such as advertising teams and events directly to consumers. Alternatively, marketing through sports involves using sports to market other consumer goods and services. This research focuses on the former.

Sports marketing, or the marketing of sports, can therefore be defined as "the application of all marketing related activities, structures and thoughts to the phenomenon of sports" (Chadwick et al., 2017, p.18). This includes all communication towards stakeholders, relationship management, reputation management, selecting merchandise products and managing sponsorships (Chadwick et al., 2017). Fullerton and Merz (2008) identified four domains of sports marketing: *theme-based strategies, product-based strategies, alignment-based strategies,* and *sports-based strategies.*

Theme-Based Strategies
Themed-based strategies are defined as the "use of traditional marketing strategies that incorporate a sports theme into the marketing program for non-sports products" (Fullerton

and Merz, 2008, p.96). This domain has the lowest level of integration of sports, and advertisements may not necessarily have a sports theme; instead, it may be used solely to target sports-orientated markets. For example, "the use of a sports-related platform to advertise non-sports products" (Charumbira, 2014, p.66).

Product-Based Strategies

In this domain, strategies may not involve a sports theme; however, the product being offered is sports related, e.g. football equipment. Fullerton and Merz (2008) explained that the marketer has no official relationship with the sports entity being used.

Alignment-Based Strategies

This includes traditional sponsorships, endorsements, venue naming rights and licensing agreements (Fullerton and Merz, 2008). Here, non-sports products are aligned with sports properties (Charumbira, 2014).

Sports-Based Strategies

Lastly, sports-based strategies involve "official sponsors of a sports property who are selling other sports products" (Fullerton and Merz, 2008, p.105). They believe that this domain is the least common type of strategy used by sports marketers today.

As mentioned, sports provide a unique context for loyalty. According to Parker and Stuart (1997), "football has been likened by many to a religion: once indoctrination has occurred, changing to another club is extremely difficult to contemplate" (p.1). In contrast to brands, football clubs are subject to full public scrutiny at least weekly during football seasons and results are heavily documented in the media. Boyle and Magnusson (2007) discovered that winning breeds more loyal fans. This raises the question of how football clubs, which aren't performing well, are maintaining fan loyalty. They argue that this finding increases the importance of brand equity, group experiences, history, the venue, rituals and supporters' identification with the team (Boyle and Magnusson, 2007). Other studies have also identified relationship marketing, understanding the audience and engagement as pivotal strategies for fan loyalty.

2.2.1 Relationship Marketing

Building and maintaining relationships with stakeholders is a key aspect of any organisation's marketing strategy. According to Gray and Wert-Gray (2012), "relationship marketing efforts have assumed a prominent role in sports organisation marketing" (p.275). If successfully implemented, relationship marketing activities help to develop long-term relationships with fans and, in turn, increase the likelihood of retaining the loyalty of supporters (Gray and Wert-Gray, 2012).

In their research, Bee and Kahle (2006) described relationship marketing as "an ongoing cooperative behaviour between the marketer and the consumer" (p.103). Marketers must ensure that they thoroughly understand consumers' or fans' wants, desires and values (Bee and Kahle, 2006). They identified various strategies used to strengthen relationships within the sports context: sports talk, hospitality and gift giving (Bee and Kahle, 2006):

- Sports talk involves "the mere act of interaction over the topic of sports".
- Hospitality at sports events creates opportunities for social interaction and sports talk.
- Gift giving, of sports-related items, rewards fans and helps establish an identity for fans.

Similarly, Buhler and Nufer (2010) recognised the importance of relationship building for sports organisations: "Fans need their clubs as an integral part of their lives and sports entities need their fans in order to survive – both in financial terms and as organisations" (p.69). Relationship building is identified as a difficult task and requires a lot of work and investment (Buhler and Nufer, 2010). This is even more difficult for sports organisations with few resources.

Recognising that their aim is to satisfy the needs of customers, their research found that it is essential for club marketers to "know who their customers are, where they can find them and how they can address them" (p.70). They outlined various strategies to build relationships, that will offer the opportunity for fans to involve themselves and become part of the club:

- Designing interactive features – for example, providing consumers with the opportunity to play games on their websites or participate in competitions.
- Creating member clubs – aimed at both adult fans and younger fans, to ensure that they build relationships with fans of all ages.

- Establishing fan loyalty programmes – this rewards and encourages loyal buying behaviour.
- Setting up systems to manage complaints – complaints can supply important information, which clubs can use to improve their products and services in order to satisfy consumers.

2.2.2 Understanding The Target Audience

While being an element of relationship marketing, 'understanding the audience' is also an important aspect of sports marketing. As the overall aim of sports marketing is to attract and satisfy fans, Sukhdial et al. (2002) stated that "sports marketers must gain a more clear understanding of fan motivations, emotions and attitudes" (p.25).

Similarly, Da Silva and Las Casas (2017) highlighted 'understanding fans' as the first challenge in sports marketing. Target audiences must firstly be identified, and then marketers need to try to understand them. According to Da Silva and Las Casas (2017), these targeted fans or audiences can be considered in five groups based on geography, demography, psychographics, benefits and behaviours. Sports marketers can subsequently develop fan focused strategies for events, matches and activities (Da Silva and Las Casas, 2017).

Baena (2014) agrees with Da Silva and Las Casas (2017) on the importance of understanding fans in order to keep them happy, as these are the people who dedicate their time, money and effort to support their favourite team. These supporters relate to their club on a high level and want it to embody their values and morals (Baena, 2014). Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that football clubs' marketing teams identify these key stakeholders and understand their needs and wants. According to Baena (2014), this is essential in successfully engaging supporters and keeping them loyal. For example, clubs need to be aware that football fans can be very sensitive, and if a club becomes overly commercial, supporters can react negatively due to the unique emotional bond that they feel like they have (Baena, 2014).

With various attitudes, wants and needs, League of Ireland (LOI) football clubs need to be creative and use different marketing strategies to target the unique groups of supporters that they may have within their fanbase. An example of this is the various age demographics expecting different levels of engagement and different types of content. This raises the

question: do League of Ireland clubs have different strategies in place for different segments of fans to increase their loyalty?

2.2.3 Communication Channels

Traditional and new digital communication channels are employed by marketers to deliver messages and reach stakeholders. Channels should be chosen based on who the marketer is trying to reach and the type of content.

Traditional Media

Traditional media includes TV, radio, direct mail and newspapers. Baena (2014) claimed that sports are still a huge feature within traditional mass media. While still popular for distributing sports messaging, these channels only allow for one-way communication and therefore prevent the opportunity for engagement with fans. Ogidi and Utulu (2016) agree with Baena that traditional mass media is a one-way stream of communication and interaction with people is limited as a result. They also added that traditional media can limit reachability as some readers lack access to this information, whereas new types of media are easily accessible anytime, anywhere (Ogidi and Utulu, 2016).

Social Media

As arguably the most popular form of digital media, social media platforms allow organisations to transcend geographical constraints and interact with stakeholders. Baena (2017) believes that it facilitates two-way communication and therefore has the benefit of increasing fans' connection with the team. Popular social media platforms include Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and TikTok, each of which can be used for different functions depending on the content and overall goal. Social media also allows fans to share their experiences, engage with other fans and create communities. Sashi (2012) stated that "using social media, organisations can forge relationships with existing as well as new customers and form communities that interactively collaborate to identify and understand problems and develop solutions for them" (p.255). However, with an increase in social media usage, it can be difficult for marketers to break through the noise and they must also be careful of issues, such as 'fake news' and 'cancel culture'.

Owned Media

Organisations' owned channels, such as websites and blogs, are crucial for providing accurate information and content. Kitchin (2006) identified team news, results, fixtures/match information and merchandise as important features for sports websites. According to Baena (2014, p.205), "the clubs' sites become a meeting point where members develop their relationships inside an environment where the brand is always present". However, like traditional media, as a one-way source of communication, it can inhibit interaction and engagement.

It is important for marketers to be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of different channels and to choose which to use when creating strategies to build and maintain fan loyalty. Despite its importance, there is no research that has looked at the communication channels that League of Ireland clubs are using to create and maintain fan loyalty. This begs the question: which channels are LOI clubs using to communicate with and engage fans, and, in turn, increase fan loyalty?

2.2.4 Engagement and Interaction

High engagement and interaction with stakeholders can help build trust, relationships and loyalty. Within academia, interest in customer engagement and interaction has grown since the evolution of the internet and social media (Sashi, 2012). According to Sashi (2012):

> "the interactive nature of social media, with its ability to establish conversations among individuals and firms in communities of sellers and customers and involve customers in content generation and value creation, has excited practitioners with its potential to better serve customers and satisfy their needs" (p.254).

The benefits of having an engaged customer or fan include that they are likely to recommend the club to others, create and provide user-generated content and become loyal to the organisation. Sashi (2012) believes that "user-generated content can greatly enhance customer satisfaction, loyalty, and/or delight" (p.268). When fans provide feedback and share their opinions, marketers should listen and act on that information to ensure that they are satisfying them and building loyalty. These activities are facilitated by being active on social media. However, it is not enough to simply push information out on these platforms; instead, it is essential that marketers encourage these activities by providing engaging content and also interacting with comments and feedback.

Content marketing is a contemporary component of marketing which has many long-term benefits for organisations, including customer loyalty (Du Plessis, 2017). It is achieved by engaging with the target audience through valuable content (Du Plessis, 2017). Du Plessis (2017) argues that there is a huge contrast between content marketing and more traditional marketing, as content marketing is used to connect and build relationships with target audiences instead of solely informing them about new products and promotions. This form of marketing is particularly popular on social media, where organisations have the opportunity to engage directly with communities (Du Plessis, 2017). According to Du Plessis (2017, p.3), "research indicates that users engage most with brand posts that are consistent, interactive and vivid". Examples of engaging content include competitions, user-generated content, quizzes and exciting opportunities, e.g. the chance to design a jersey.

Jaakonmaki et al. (2017) agree with Du Plessis' (2017) research. They stated:
> "a message that includes persuasive content (e.g. emotional and philanthropic) increases engagement, while informative content (e.g., product, prices, availability, or features) reduces engagement when used separately, but increases engagement when combined with some persuasive content" (p.3).

Therefore, football club marketers must not only promote general information, merchandise and services. They must create content to engage and interact with their supporters. This raises the important question: which type of content is League of Ireland clubs distributing to increase engagement and interaction, and ultimately, loyalty?

2.2.5 Sponsorships

"Sponsorship is the most important source of income for most professional sports clubs" (Chadwick et al., 2017, p.19). Sponsorships can help increase brand recall and awareness (Pons et al., 2017). In terms of marketing, sponsorships represent a tool to manage brand image, personality and equity (Pons et al., 2017). Nuseir (2020) also examined sports sponsorships. He found that sponsorships play a crucial role in promotion and finance, and when successful, contribute "to brand quality and brand loyalty" (p.192).

Although not a new phenomenon, sponsorship in sports has increased steadily in recent years. For clubs, the benefits are providing financial assistance and increasing brand awareness. Another reason that they identified for using sponsorships is fulfilling the organisation's social responsibility. This enables them to be part of the community and the public; "sponsorship has the potential to develop effective relationships with the local community and the public" (Nuseir, 2020, p.195). Sports clubs can often be of central importance in Irish communities, yet this begs the question: are LOI clubs using sponsorships to build fan loyalty and integrate themselves into their local communities?

2.2.6 Brand Equity and Image

Today, professional sports organisations and clubs increasingly operate as brands to be managed (Ross, 2006). This increases the importance of building a strong brand image and distinctive brand equity. Pons et al. (2017) defined a brand as "a name, a word, a sign, a symbol, an image, or a combination of these elements, intended to identify the products and services of a company and thereby distinguish them from those of its competitors" (p.44). They argue that brand image and equity is even more crucial in the context of sports due to increased competition.

Ross (2006) identified brand equity as key for brand loyalty. Additionally, it increases "the probability of brand choice, customer (and retailer) retention, profit margins, willingness to pay premium prices, consumer search, marketing communication effectiveness, positive word-of-mouth, brand licensing opportunities, and brand extensions" (p.23). A strong brand equity also helps to create a 'brand community' among admirers of a brand (Pons et al., 2017). In addition to creating brand loyalty, having a strong brand equity helps to "generate broader media coverage, lucrative merchandising activity, higher ticket sales with more season passes, and a more upbeat atmosphere during sporting events, making it easier to find sponsors" (Guenzi and Ricca, 2017, p.56).

In the same vein, Baeur et al. (2008) looked at brand image. They stated that "one promising strategy for sport marketers to drive sport consumers' preferences and loyalty is to build strong, positive and unique consumer beliefs about the club" (p.206). They defined brand image as brand associations in the consumer's mind. Likewise, Yun et al. (2021) defined team brand image as brand associations, and stated that it is a "necessary component to be

competitive to drive stronger brand loyalty" (p.6). Marketing strategies should therefore focus on creating and reinforcing positive brand associations (Gladden and Funk, 2001).

2.2.7 Identification

Consumers are drawn to teams that have a strong similarity to them, and often express themselves through association with them (Carlson et al., 2009). Stevens and Rosenberger (2012) believe that the primary goal of sports marketing should be to create fan identification with the team. They described fan identification as "the personal commitment, perceived connectedness and emotional involvement a spectator has with a team, where the team's failings and achievements are experienced as one's own" (p.9). Loyal fans will go to great lengths to accommodate devotion to their team, and often believe that being a fan is an important part of who they are (Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012).

This provides an opportunity for sports marketers, as Chadwick et al. (2017) outlined that "if the marketer is able to strengthen the identification of the fans (consumers) with 'their' team, the revenues resulting from sale of tickets, merchandising, etc., are more and more independent from the current performance of the team" (p.24). Having increased exposure to information about their team and contact with the team will increase identification and loyalty. Therefore, it is important to expose fans to information and also interact with them in order to increase loyalty. Chadwick et al. (2017) described that this content shared with fans should include highlighting the team's success in the past, the performance of individual athletes, shared values or a common understanding as an underdog, instead of focusing on current success or failings. Boyle and Magnusson (2007) agreed, and also highlighted the significance of the club's history, venue and rituals.

2.3 SSE Airtricity League – League of Ireland

The *SSE Airtricity League*, more commonly known as the *League of Ireland*, is the national football league within the Republic of Ireland. It consists of two leagues: the Premier Division and the First Division, with each division consisting of ten teams (Tobin, 2017). The administration of the league is controlled by the Football Association of Ireland (FAI). Participating clubs must maintain certain standards to ensure that they can obtain a license to compete (Tobin, 2017). According to Tobin (2017, p.770), the league can be categorised as a

"European domestic football league that is very much free from the constraints of globalisation and its characteristics".

The clubs that play within the League of Ireland are based across the whole country, with every province in Ireland being represented. Within Northern Ireland, Derry City are the only club that play in the Premier Division. The East side of the country is where the vast majority of clubs lie, with the Premier and First Division heavily represented. Bohemians and Shamrock Rovers are two of the largest clubs in the country and occupy the North and South of Dublin respectively. Both clubs compete in the Premier Division and a huge rivalry exists between them. These games are known as the 'Dublin Derbies' and usually offer "a vibrant, exciting spectacle" (Redmond, 2016). Down the South of the country, Cork City are considered to be the largest club in the area, despite currently playing in the First Division. The West of Ireland is home to Sligo Rovers, who play in the Premier Division, and Galway United, who compete in the First Division. Finally, in the midlands, Longford Town would be regarded as the biggest club. Despite being a small club in comparison to a lot of clubs around the country, they currently compete in the Premier Division of the League of Ireland (SSE Airtricity League, 2021).

2.3.1 League of Ireland History

Since 1883, football has been played regularly by clubs in Dublin (Curran, 2021). However, Ireland's first professional clubs were based in Belfast, and under the control of the Irish Football Association (IFA). Following the Irish War of Independence in 1921, the League of Ireland was founded in Dublin (Cullen, 2017).

Initially, the Dublin clubs were the dominant forces within the league until clubs such as Dundalk, Cork City and Sligo Rovers started to become contenders in the 1930s and 1940s (Cullen, 2017). According to Redmond (2016), the 1950s were referred to as the 'Golden Era' of the League of Ireland. He believes that this was a fairly bleak decade and football offered "refuge from the drudgery" (Redmond, 2016). Despite this, Irish fans had their heads turned towards clubs like Manchester United and Celtic in the 1960s due to their success in European competitions (Redmond, 2016). The success of these clubs in Europe was compared to the League of Ireland, where teams struggled to make it past the first round.

It was not until the mid-1980s that the League of Ireland became as we know it today, with the creation of two divisions the Premier and First Division (Cullen, 2017). In 2003, Summer Soccer was introduced in an attempt to attract more eyes to the league due to the better weather conditions, and lack of English Premier League distraction. According to Cullen (2017), it was also believed that it would give Irish clubs a competitive advantage in European competitions (Cullen, 2017). Despite this initiative, Cullen (2017) ultimately concluded that it was a failure as "crowds did not turn up at League of Ireland matches in the numbers that had been hoped for when Summer Soccer was introduced".

Over the past two decades, a number of League of Ireland clubs have become extinct due to mismanagement of finances (Cullen, 2017). Cullen (2017) found that this led to the FAI introducing "a more rigorous licensing regime" in 2008. This regime involved wage controls that were brought in to "regulate a club's spending on players' wages and costs to a maximum of 65% of relevant income" (Cullen, 2017). These issues may be affecting the League and participating clubs' reputations and marketing budgets and fan loyalty.

Sports organisations that lack resources and operate on a minimum budget, such as a number of League of Ireland clubs, often "designate sports marketing responsibility to an employee who has no experience" (Dias & Monterio, 2020). According to Dias and Monteiro (2020), this can have a negative impact on marketing objectives and goals and can stifle the development and implementation of marketing plans. Dias and Monteiro's research identified cost-efficient marketing strategies that have a positive impact, such as "displaying photos of fans on the club's website, or offering free tickets for bringing friends to games". These types of strategies result in a positive impact on the relationships between the club and its supporters. This raises the question: which marketing strategies are Irish clubs that have minimum resources using?

2.3.2 League of Ireland Reputation

The League of Ireland is considered one of the weakest leagues in Europe, recently ranking 40th out of the 54 leagues that make up the UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) (Reilly, 2015). There is huge support for the Irish Men's National Team, which suggests that the popularity of the sport is not the reason that the domestic league lacks appeal. According to Reilly (2015), a massive contributor to this issue is "the availability of a

higher quality product in the neighbouring Premiership Leagues of England and Scotland".
Another important factor to consider, that Reilly (2015, p.486) highlighted, is the
"competition for spectators provided domestically by other popular team sports". For
example, there are national sports unique to Ireland, such as Gaelic Football and Hurling,
which are massively popular.

The average attendance at a League of Ireland game is roughly 1,750 people (Bachan and
Reilly, 2016). This pales in comparison to the All-Ireland series in GAA, which are reported
to have an average attendance of 19,106 (RTE, 2019). According to Bachan and Reilly
(2016), advocates for the League of Ireland are extremely frustrated at the lack of support for
domestic clubs from Irish soccer fans. The arguments made by such advocates claim that the
league underperforms regarding attendance figures due to the quality of football that is on
display (Bachan and Reilly, 2016). Alternatively, Redmond (2016) believes that the clubs
aren't attracting big crowds due to competition for fan loyalty from English and Scottish
clubs and the population shift towards suburbs in Dublin. His research also shows that the
problems in the league such as structure, administration and poor facilities play a huge role.

A survey conducted by 'VisitBritain' in 2011 showed that "out of 767,000 tourist trips to
Britain that included attending a football match, the largest single group, comprising about
one-fifth of the total, was from Ireland" (Bachan and Reilly, 2016, p.265). Along with the
huge popularity of the English and Scottish football clubs from Irish fans, the League of
Ireland faces competition from other team sports in the country such as GAA, which maintain
huge fan loyalty. This raises the question: how can LOI clubs create and maintain fan loyalty
when it can be argued that the league has an overall negative reputation, and in addition,
other sporting leagues are gaining mass audiences?

2.3.3 Fan Loyalty in The LOI

Despite the perception amongst the Irish public that the League of Ireland is of low quality
and therefore lacks appeal, LOI clubs do maintain 'die-hard fans'. However, there is a
significant lack of academic research in regard to fan loyalty in the League of Ireland.

Fans are a key aspect of any football club's support and can be considered even more so in
the context of the League of Ireland. Revenue is limited for these clubs due to increased

affiliation fees, reduced prize money and a lack of income from television revenue. This means that these clubs are "somewhat reliant on supporters as a means of fundraising" (Tobin, 2017, p.771). This creates special conditions for creating and maintaining fan loyalty in the Irish League, yet this area has not yet been researched. This research will therefore attempt to uncover more about fan loyalty in the League of Ireland and identify the strategies that the clubs are using to create and maintain fan loyalty.

2.4 Summary

Building and maintaining a loyal fan base is vital for football clubs to ensure that they have repeat purchasing of tickets and continual attendance. Sports marketing has been identified as playing an important role in achieving fan loyalty, and the commonly used strategies have been outlined. Lastly, the literature review provided readers with an insight into the League of Ireland and its reputation, which may affect the loyalty of fans.

The main themes derived from the literature review will guide the interview questions and discussion with marketing professionals from clubs within the LOI. The themes that emerged are as follows:

- Relationships
- Communication channels
- Understanding the target audience
- Engagement and interactions
- Sponsorships
- Brand equity and image
- Identification

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This section of the dissertation describes the methods used in helping to answer the research question: *Which marketing strategies are League of Ireland clubs utilising to maintain fan loyalty?* A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study. Semi-structured interviews with marketing practitioners from a variety of clubs in the Premier and First Division of the League of Ireland were designed to obtain the necessary primary data. The collection of relevant secondary data assisted in the findings, discussions and overall conclusion. All of the data gathered was instrumental in gaining insights into how football clubs in the League of Ireland use marketing strategies to maintain the loyalty of their supporters.

3.2 Objectives & Purpose of Research

This research study aims to identify the marketing strategies that League of Ireland clubs are using to create and maintain the loyalty of their supporters. The six clubs were selected in order to provide the widest range of results from the whole country rather than a specific area where the majority of clubs would be based, for example, Dublin. The topic for this dissertation was chosen due to the researcher's personal interest in the League of Ireland and the marketing strategies that these football clubs use. The topic of fan loyalty and how it can be maintained in the League of Ireland is relevant due to the perceived reputation that the league has amongst the public. While there is no shortage of previous research on loyalty and sports marketing, it has not yet been looked at in the context of the Irish football league – The SSE Airtricity League.

3.3 Research Design

Research designs can be of quantitative or qualitative nature; however, this research will take the form of qualitative. Qualitative research "is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2014, p.4). According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research consists of emerging questions and procedures with primary data typically collected from within the participant's natural setting.

While analysing the data collected, the researcher can notice similarities turning into general themes and can begin interpreting the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2014). A qualitative research design approach allows the report to have a flexible structure (Creswell, 2014). There are various methods that a researcher can use to collect qualitative data, including observations, textual or visual analysis, interviews and focus groups (Gill et al., 2008).

3.4 Interviews

Interviews, as a form of qualitative data collection, consist of the researcher asking questions and the participant of the study answering these questions (Kabir, 2016). Interviews can take a variety of different forms, such as "individual, face-to-face interviews and face-to-face group interviewing" (Kabir, 2016, p.211). The asking and answering of questions can also take place via telephone or other electronic devices, such as a computer (Kabir, 2016). The purpose of conducting interviews in a research study is to "explore the views, experiences, beliefs and/or motivations of individuals on specific matters" (Gill et al., 2008, p.292). According to Gill et al. (2008, p.292), interviews tend to provide the researcher with a "deeper understanding of social phenomena" than what could be obtained from other methods of qualitative data collection, such as questionnaires. When there is minimal research or literature available on a specific topic, interviews are the most appropriate method to use in order to gain detailed insights from participants of the study (Gill et al., 2008). Interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured (Kabir, 2016).

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most suitable type of interview approach in order to improve the researcher's understanding of the marketing strategies of League of Ireland clubs. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer and the interviewee to engage in a formal way, and while the interviewer has a guide to adhere to, they can follow "topical trajectories in the conversation that may stray from the guide" when appropriate (Kabir, 2016, p.212). This approach consists of a number of defined questions that assist in defining the area that the study seeks to explore (Gill et al., 2008). A considerable benefit of semi-structured interviews is their flexibility (Gill et al., 2008). This allows for the "discovery or elaboration of information that is important to participants", which is beneficial as it may have been previously overlooked by the researcher (Gill et al., 2008, p.291).

3.5 Marketing Practitioner Interviewees

This study aims to identify the marketing strategies which League of Ireland clubs use in creating and maintaining the loyalty of their fans. It was vital to conduct semi-structured interviews with marketing practitioners who work for clubs within the league. This was undertaken in order to gain valuable knowledge and insights into their strategies to answer the research question.

There are only twenty clubs within the League of Ireland, ten of which are in the Premier Division (top tier), and the other ten are in the First Division (second tier). Therefore, the population is limited. With assistance from the researcher's supervisor, the interview sample was carefully selected to include a cross-section of regions. This ensured that the sample included Premier and First Division clubs, full-time and part-time clubs, successful and unsuccessful clubs in terms of silverware, and finally a cross section of the bigger and smaller clubs, based on general club size and fanbase. Therefore, the sample was chosen in order to obtain a wide range of responses and to gain an understanding of the most commonly used strategies in the league.

Six participants were contacted via email and Twitter to conduct one-on-one semi-structured interviews. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, none of the interviews were able to be conducted in person (face-to-face). Hence, the interviews were completed via Zoom and phone call. Each interviewee was asked roughly ten questions and each interview lasted approximately 35 minutes. The audio from each of the six interviews was recorded and transcribed.

Prior to the interview, each participant received a detailed research statement and consent form to acknowledge before taking part in the study. This allowed them to better understand the purpose of the research, informed them that their participation was voluntary, and assured them that they had the right to remove themselves from the process at any time.

The participants in this research are as follows:

Premier Division		
Mark Lynch	Marketing Officer	Shamrock Rovers FC
James Donnelly	Marketing Manager	Longford Town FC
Shane Crossan	Marketing Officer	Sligo Rovers FC
Lawrence Moore	Public Relations Officer	Derry City FC
Lewis Shaw	Social Media Officer	Drogheda United
First Division		
Aaron Howey	Media & Marketing	Cork City FC

3.6 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis will be used to examine the data collected. This consists of "identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes" that the researcher has come across within the data collected (Nowell et al., 2017, p.2). According to Nowell et al. (2017), thematic analysis produces a rich and detailed account of data due to it being highly flexible. They also described it as a "useful method for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences" (Nowell et al, 2017, p.2). This was important as the researcher was able to compare the interviewees' responses and identify the marketing strategies that are utilised by different clubs. Secondary research was also undertaken to help analyse the interview data. This involved browsing websites, articles, media coverage and social media content.

3.7 Limitations

The first limitation of the study was due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It restricted how the interviews could be conducted. They had to take place via Zoom or phone call instead of face-to-face. Despite being more flexible and less time-consuming, it limited the researcher's ability to understand the interviewee's body language and facial expressions clearly.

Due to time restrictions, only a sample of the League of Ireland clubs participated, which limited the amount of data available. The remaining fourteen clubs that were not involved in the research may have different marketing strategies to the six clubs which were selected. Therefore, these insights could have had an impact on the findings and discussion.

4. Findings and Discussion

This chapter will examine the findings of the semi-structured interviews conducted with marketing officers from a variety of League of Ireland clubs. Assisted by the literature review, a number of themes have arisen from the interview data that will be discussed. These themes will provide crucial insights into which marketing strategies League of Ireland clubs are using to build and maintain fan loyalty. The first section looks at how these clubs view fans and how important they consider fan loyalty to their success. Following this, in order to answer the research question, the marketing strategies of League of Ireland clubs are outlined.

4.1 Fan Loyalty

The first question asked by the researcher was: 'how important are loyal fans to your club's success?' This question was posed in order to gain insight into how these League of Ireland clubs view fan loyalty and to understand the level of importance that they place on it.

Unsurprisingly, all interviewees identified fan loyalty as a crucial component in being a successful club. The data showed that loyal fans are known as the backbone of the League of Ireland and are therefore a key consideration for every club's overall marketing strategy.

Aaron Howey, Cork City's media and marketing assistant, explained how important loyal fans are, not only for their marketing strategies but also for the running of their club:

> "Loyal fans, especially in League of Ireland terms, are what keeps the club running. The majority of what we do is geared towards loyal fans. We see them as the lifeblood of the club, even when it comes to decision-making within the club".

Lawrence Moore identified Derry City's season ticket holders and members as their core group of loyal fans:

> "Season ticket holders and members are massive in terms of the survival of the club. To us they are absolute lifeblood".

Shamrock Rovers is 50% owned by fans. According to Mark Lynch, their marketing officer:

"Football without fans is nothing. I know that's a cliché phrase, but it's been shown to be true. Loyalty isn't even a word that's used when it comes to them; it's family".

He also acknowledged the significance of maintaining fan loyalty in terms of running the club, as it is a key income source, revealing that "the lion's share is from the fans".

"That's everything from their attendance, gate receipts, purchase of merchandise, and anything during match night itself, buying a tea, coffee or burger. It's all generating revenue. So at every level fans are crucial" (Lynch - Shamrock Rovers).

Similarly, Shane Crossan (2021) highlighted that fan loyalty is particularly important for LOI clubs due to lack of budget. Therefore, it is crucial for Sligo Rovers to keep their fans loyal. The marketing officer simply stated:

"Without fans, there's no Sligo Rovers".

Longford Town consider the loyalty of their supporters as irreplicable in regard to achieving their club's goals: sustainability and longevity. James Donnelly, Longford's marketing manager, explained:

"We have a core base of loyal fans that have been with us through thick and thin the last 15/20 years. The most important aspect of our club is our loyal fans; they are paramount to the club's success overall".

Lastly, Lewis Shaw, Drogheda United's social media officer, believes that loyalty is key in terms of purchasing goods. He outlined:

"Loyalty is really important, because once you have loyal fans, whatever you sell, they'll buy it".

However, Shaw also recognised that loyalty is affected by how well the team is doing and stated that "it really depends on if the team is winning". Therefore, League of Ireland fans will generally show more loyalty when their club is performing well. This finding was reflected in both the literature and interview data.

As shown, fan loyalty is crucial for the survival of League of Ireland clubs and consequently, they place great emphasis on it. This raises the question of how these clubs are building and maintaining fan loyalty even when they are not performing well or earning favourable results.

4.2 Fan Segmentation

4.2.1 Young Fans

It is important for League of Ireland clubs to try to embed fan loyalty into people from an early age. This was highlighted in the literature by Tapp (2004) who believes that once fans have a team they support, they are highly unlikely to change and will be exclusively loyal to this football club. Therefore, targeting the younger generation, or kids, is a worthwhile strategy. This was reflected within the interview data, as LOI clubs place great importance on targeting the younger generation with their marketing strategies.

For example Shamrock Rovers launched a 'kids go free' initiative in 2018. Their marketing officer, Mark Lynch (2021), described the initiative as a "loss leader" pricing strategy and a "strategic investment in the future":

> "The kids came and they got a taste for it. They want to come back and they tell their parents that they want to go back. Then, after that first free season, the following year it became €20, in effect a euro a game for that kid's season ticket. Hopefully then that's your fan for the next 10 years and hopefully for life".

Another strategy that Shamrock Rovers have adopted revolves around getting their young fans (known as Junior Hoops) involved as much as possible across the season to keep them engaged:

> "The Junior Hoops are very involved on a matchday. These kids can wave the players on with the guard of honour, they can meet other kids. There are also lots of activities made available for them across the season, such as training with the players" (Lynch - Shamrock Rovers).

Similarly to Shamrock Rovers, Sligo Rovers are attempting to grow their young fanbase as they recognise that "the kids are the future of the club" (Crossan, 2021). Shane Crossan is heavily involved in their work with the kids, including the club's own independent football

summer camp. He explained that any child that participates in the summer camp receives a free ticket to a home game, which will help to introduce that child to their club from a young age. The club also hosts children's birthday parties:

> "We introduced that any kid who attended a party with us got a free pass to the next home game. Then when they come, they might be tempted to buy a gift in the merchandise shop, like a jersey or a scarf" (Crossan - Sligo Rovers).

Providing and promoting this deal of a free ticket not only helps to make children loyal to the club, but it also benefits the clubs themselves by encouraging more adults to come to the club:

> "If the child has a free ticket for the Saturday and the dad comes with the child, you're getting another 15 euro for his match ticket. Then, they might buy a match programme or a scarf; it's the little things like that which can add up" (Crossan - Sligo Rovers).

Cork City have also adopted this strategy:

> "We give tickets to the kids. It's almost a trick - you give the tickets to the kids, and then the parents have to come along, so they have to buy the ticket. But that gets people in the gate" (Howey - Cork City).

In contrast, Longford Town do not have many specific marketing strategies in place for appealing to children.

4.2.2 Older Fans

The older generation of loyal League of Ireland fans was identified as crucial, as they make up the season ticket holders and, in some cases, are members of the club. Two clubs, Longford Town and Derry City, even identified older fans as being the majority within their fanbase. The importance of these fans was highlighted by all of the interviewees, yet despite this, interviewees placed less of an emphasis on marketing strategies targeting the older generation to keep them loyal.

> "To be honest, we don't really have strategies in place for the older generation, which is something that we should. For example, especially with COVID, match tickets and everything else is all online. It's not really accessible for the much older generation" (Howey - Cork City).

Unsurprisingly, however, it emerged in the interviews that these clubs are using traditional media as the main way to ensure that these fans are kept informed and engaged.

> "A good size of our support would be considered in the older generation. As a result, you use the traditional methods of marketing, you're talking about not cold calling but letters and approaching people on the street" (Donnelly - Longford Town).

> "We do understand that all of the supporters aren't online, and they're quite fearful of being online; they just don't trust it and they don't want to be on it. We have to accept that. So for our older supporters, we use print media and the radio station" (Crossan - Sligo Rovers).

In addition to using these forms of communication, Sligo Rovers have introduced ways to guarantee that older supporters can obtain tickets. Crossan (2021) explained:

> "At the moment, the season ticket holders have to log in online and select their seat on a seating plan and pay for their ticket online. However, about 25% of those wouldn't actually have access online or wouldn't even know how to go online to buy their tickets. So we actually do it for them and print out their tickets. We buy and print the ticket ourselves and contact them to say your ticket is here, do you want to come in and collect it? That's one thing that we're happy to do because the fan appreciates it".

4.3 Communication Channels

The literature found that although sports clubs are still using traditional means of communication, they may begin moving away from it, toward digital platforms. This is due to it mainly supporting one-way communication, leading to a lack of interaction (Ogidi and Utulu, 2016). In contrast, the interview data showed that while League of Ireland clubs are utilising social and digital communication, they are all still using traditional means to communicate with fans and build fan loyalty.

As mentioned previously, within the League of Ireland, these channels are primarily used to target the older generation of supporters. Interviewees revealed that the traditional channels utilised mainly include newspapers and radio programmes. These media sources are often locally-based outlets.

Revealed through the interviews, developing links with the local press within their area is a common strategy used by League of Ireland clubs. It helps them to reach target audiences with news and updates in a cost-effective manner. For example, Derry City's strategy for effective traditional media communication involves having a close relationship with their local media sources. Their public relations officer, Lawrence Moore, described how he creates these relationships through ensuring that these outlets receive the club's news and information first before it is made public:

> "The Derry journal and Radio Foyle are inexplicably linked with Derry City, they demand all of our news. It's a two-way relationship - we give them the content, they give us the coverage. I've an arrangement with the Derry Journal, they publish on a Tuesday and Friday, if we've a story breaking on the Monday, I'll hold the story and break the story after to benefit them" (Moore - Derry City).

In a similar vein, Cork City have partnerships with Red FM and the Evening Echo, while Drogheda United have developed a link with the Drogheda Independent.

> "If we're doing any announcements we let Drogheda Independent know first" (Shaw - Drogheda United).

In addition, the interview data showed that all of the clubs involved use a multi-channel approach to communication across traditional and digital media. In particular, most of the interviewees highlighted that social media is becoming the prominent channel for their club's marketing.

The literature identified that social media allows for two-way communication, aiding interaction and engagement between parties. This finding was reflected in the interviews, as interviewees believe that it helps loyalty by making fans feel more connected to their football club. The main sites identified included Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube. LOI clubs' marketers also rely on their own digital websites for sharing club updates, player news and match information with fans. These platforms can be used for different purposes; for example, Cork City's website offers different sections for fans to browse, including news, men's teams, women's teams, shop, history, match reports and player profiles.

However, an over-reliance on these channels to communicate with loyal fans can limit access for the older generation of supporters. This was recognised by Drogheda's Lewis Shaw:

"Everything that we do is communicated through social media and this can lead to a lot of confusion with the older generation...There probably should be more done for the older generations that are not on social media".

Crossan (2021) from Sligo Rovers also commented on this issue:

"By and large, it's all on social media. But we do have to remember that we have a lot of older supporters. We can't forget about them. So that's why we would always use the local radio and print media as well, just to make sure that they are kept in the loop".

However, these low-cost online channels are crucial for clubs with small budgets, which characterises most League of Ireland clubs. This was demonstrated in the interview data as financial reasons have played a huge factor in Shamrock Rovers relying more on these channels:

"Our main channel is social these days. 98FM has been our radio partner, so we'd have some radio advertising. Apart from that, there aren't budget pots in LOI clubs to go and start buying TV, digital player, posters or cinema advertisements. So traditional media is very much a minor part of the media plan; instead, it would be heavily driven by organic use of social platforms" (Lynch - Shamrock Rovers).

4.4 Content

Across these traditional and digital channels, League of Ireland clubs are creating and providing different types of content to satisfy their supporters and keep them loyal. The interview data showed that the most common content used are as follows:

4.4.1 Match Day Content

Three interviewees highlighted the salience of sharing regular content on match days. This includes posts before, during and after the match, in an attempt to raise awareness, create excitement and provide information to fans. This is particularly important for supporters who are unable to attend the match, helping to keep them involved, engaged and informed.

Howey (2021) from Cork City described their marketing activity on match day:

"What's working well for us is normal matchday content. For example, stories of the team getting off the bus or arriving at the stadium, your team sheets, warm up videos. That's what goes down the best at the moment".

Cork City have also created online quizzes, giveaways, competitions and Twitter takeovers i.e. a player hosting a Q&A on the club's profile. Similarly, Shamrock Rovers host a quiz online, provide team sheets, a manager's interview before the match, and additionally provide videos and content of previous games played against the two teams involved that day. Crossan also stated that Sligo Rovers post highlights of the previous match and interviews with the team manager or club captain as a way of keeping fans satisfied and engaged.

All League of Ireland clubs revealed that they regularly post pictures and graphics of score lines at the end of their games. However, synonymous with the literature, the interview data revealed that the match result has an impact on the level of engagement and interaction that content receives from fans.

"When we win and we put up a full-time post, that's probably when the most people engage with our content. The amount of comments saying 'well done, let's go next week' and the amount of likes is absolutely fantastic" (Shaw - Drogheda United).

4.4.2 Video Content

As mentioned, video content, such as pre-match and post-match interviews with managers and players, are key aspects of LOI clubs' marketing strategies. When these League of Ireland clubs deliver this content on a regular basis, it contributes to maintaining the loyalty of fans.

"100% video content. We've found that visual is definitely better for us" (Moore - Derry City).

"The day of or the morning after a positive performance, you're able to put up interviews with the first team manager or the club captain, and that has proven to be very popular" (Crossan - Sligo Rovers).

"You're talking about big graphics, not too much text, a lot more imagery than text, videos, highlights. Before or after every game, you have the media interviews with the players or management to get reactions. We have a mini 20 minute pregame show, where the lads are interviewing players on the pitch or they're talking about the teams before they come out" (Donnelly - Longford Town).

4.4.3 Fan and Community Content

The interview data showed that League of Ireland content that is based around the supporters or the local community is very popular. This type of content is important as fans can relate to it and it helps to create a bond between the club and supporter. The literature found that this will increase their identification with the club and, in turn, enhance their loyalty (Chadwick, 2017).

Buhler and Nufer (2010) believe that the building of relationships between sports organisations and fans is imperative. They added that it is difficult to create and sustain these relationships as it requires a lot of work and investment. A cost-effective way of developing these relationships is engaging and interacting with your current or prospective supporters. Most League of Ireland clubs have very few resources to be able to put towards this, emphasising the need for engaging content and interacting with fans effectively.

Donnelly recognised the importance of engaging and interacting with fans of Longford Town as it plays a huge part in their attendance figures:

> "You need to make the fans feel that they are a part of the club, which they already are. A few years ago, the club itself didn't do much in terms of online engagement. There was more just popping out post after post about results and things like that. Nowadays, it's all about engaging the fan, you need people engaging with your content, because if they're not engaging, they're not interested and if they're not interested, they're not going to turn up on matchday".

Shaw agrees with Donnelly's assessment and explained how they engage with Drogheda United's fans, helping to create a positive relationship between fan and club.

> "When the fans tag you when they're in the stadium on Instagram, we would share that onto our Instagram story. I think a lot of people get great satisfaction from that. One person did it and then as soon as we shared it onto our story, everyone else that was in the ground saw it and started doing it as well".

In their strategy, Derry City have created an emphasis on interacting with their supporters and using these exchanges to produce relatable or heart-warming content. For example, Moore from Derry City explained:

"I posted a photograph of a young lad, who just had a brain surgery, attending a game in the Brandywell along with a profile of his story. The players all signed his shirt and I put that up on social media and it took off. Being a community based club, people talking to the supporters or the supporters themselves being at the focal point is huge".

In addition, Sligo Rovers' Crossan stated:

"Any community work we do always goes down very well. For example, last week, we put up a post showing that we did a litter pick with a nursing home in Sligo. The local media and the SSE Airtricity social media page picked up on the story as well so that went down very well".

4.5 Attracting Fans

The importance of attracting fans to your football club was highlighted in the literature review as it is a key element of growing a loyal fanbase. Despite this, the data showed that half of the League of Ireland clubs interviewed do not have strategies in place to attract new supporters, with the exception of the initiatives in place for children.

This was with the exception of Drogheda United and Cork City. Both interviewees recognised the impact that the introduction of the 'streaming service' had on their club. By providing and promoting this service, it has allowed fans from various locations, who otherwise wouldn't be able to tune into League of Ireland games - in particular people living abroad, the chance to watch matches and stay involved with the club.

Howey (2021), from Cork City, described this service as a 'godsend' and explained how they attempted to embrace these new viewers:

"We put up a world map - it has the kick off times for the match around the world. We then ask on our socials 'where are you watching from? And we get a lot of people interacting with that. We've had people email into the club the last couple of weeks from Brazil for example, and they bought a lot of merchandise and they're like, 'we started watching you on LOI TV this year. Is there any chance we could get our jerseys signed?' So streaming this year has been the main thing for attracting new supporters".

Keeping in line with their aims of longevity and sustainability, Longford Town have also created a strategy to attract fans. They focus on treating everyone equally. Their marketing manager, Donnelly, explained:

> "We have this attitude that we treat everybody the exact same, whether they are here supporting the club for 20 years or they're here supporting the club for two hours. The feedback we get is that people feel very welcome. That's kind of how we attract more people in. We treat them with respect and politeness, and we make sure they have everything they want, and they're comfortable and they enjoy the match".

4.6 Sponsorships and Partnerships

Synonymous with the literature, all interviewees identified the importance of sponsorships and partnerships for sports clubs. For these League of Ireland clubs, it is accepted that sponsorships and partnerships are essential and provide many benefits, particularly in terms of finance. As mentioned, many LOI clubs are often on low budgets, making income from external resources crucial. Many of these affiliations are with local businesses.

> "For a small club like ours, sponsors are massive. Without our major sponsors, the club wouldn't be where it is" (Donnelly - Longford Town).

> "We rely on our sponsors for financial support" (Moore - Derry City).

> "For LOI clubs, sponsorships and partnerships are what keep clubs running" (Howey, - Cork City).

> "Sponsorships are massive and very important to us, even in terms of revenue, building a trusting relationship with local businesses and national businesses as well" (Crossan - Sligo Rovers).

In addition to financial support, it was outlined that being partnered and associated with local businesses in the area reflects well on the club's image and can contribute towards fan loyalty.

> "If you have more local partners, it does look good on the club and it's definitely beneficial for both parties because they're getting advertised on our profile as well" (Shaw - Drogheda United).

Lynch (2021) noted that these sponsorships can be promoted on jerseys, signs on the club grounds and brand logos on tickets. Moreover, he explained more recently that sponsors want to be part of Shamrock Rovers' social media activity to help drive awareness of the brand and traffic to their pages and sites. For Longford Town, their sponsors are displayed on pitch side advertisements and on the players' shorts. Allied Recycling has also provided them with free bins for the next 3 years. This creates a mutually beneficial relationship, as these businesses will also promote the club on posters and online.

In addition to their match sponsors, Sligo Rovers have partnerships with Clayton Hotels and IT Sligo. According to Crossan (2021):

> "The partnership with IT Sligo, which is probably one of the biggest and most important partnerships we have at the moment, is a scholarship programme - so members of our first team are able to be in full-time education along with training with us as well.

Crossan believes that this partnership enhances both parties' brands, as Sligo Rovers can offer players free education, making them an attractive proposition, and IT Sligo is seen to support "the biggest football club in the Northwest".

Cork City's aim is to work with local businesses:

> "When we partner with a business that has a big presence in Cork, a big community presence, it engages our fans. It will also engage other Cork businesses that may look to get involved the next season" (Howey – Cork City).

Alongside helping to promote the club, providing a source of income, helping the club's image, and engaging fans, these affiliations are also what allows the club to provide rewards and benefits to their loyal fans.

4.7 Rewards and Member Benefits

As referred to within the literature review, rewards can play a role in maintaining the loyalty of football fans. While not many clubs have rewards in place for attracting fans, a number of these League of Ireland clubs have developed membership schemes or supporter clubs that their loyal fans can become a part of, which, in turn, offers them benefits.

Shamrock Rovers reward their members by granting them access to meetings throughout the year, where the future plans for the club are discussed. This allows fans to engage with the club and voice their opinions.

> "The fans get to hear information first, that otherwise you'd expect to read in the paper or hear on the news. So it's very much a case of letting them know exactly what's going on at the club" (Lynch – Shamrock Rovers).

Alternatively, Longford Town offer different types of rewards to their loyal fans. They have a supporters club where membership costs €10; this membership card can be presented in local retailers for discounts. Season ticket holders also benefit from priority entry into matches, a reserved seat and a free match programme.

Similarly, Drogheda United offer their loyal supporters discounts in selected shops in Drogheda when they become members. They also receive discounts from their partner, the Maldron Hotel.

Tied in with their sponsorships, season ticket holders of Cork City are provided with discounts and rewards. For example, when fans go to Soho Bar and Restaurant and show their season card, they will get 10% off. To ensure that fans will be satisfied and remain loyal, Cork City consider these benefits when discussing potential sponsorships.

In contrast to other League of Ireland clubs, Sligo Rovers do not provide their loyal fans with any specific rewards or benefits.

4.8 Brand Image

The literature found that football clubs are behaving increasingly similar to consumer brands, which has resulted in a focus on creating a positive brand image (Ross, 2006). By creating a positive brand image, it will help to increase loyalty and allow fans to identify with the club. The importance of creating a favourable brand image for building fan loyalty was reflected in the interview data.

A number of interviewees believe that their brand image is formed around the work that their club does in the community. For example, according to Howey (2021), Cork City have worked to create the reputation of being a big community club that gives back to the local area. This results in locals wanting to be a part of the club and to be associated with the community ethos of the club.

> "We have done weekly school, charity and hospitality visits. The tagline is more than just football, it is all about community involvement".

Sligo Rovers focus on creating a perception of their club that is inclusive and focused on the wider community, where anyone is welcome regardless of race, colour, national origin, religion, sex or sexuality. Crossan (2021) explained:

> "We're working now with Sligo Pride. We've represented Sligo Pride at our last home game and the pride flag was placed in the Showgrounds and it will be there for the pride festival" (Crossan – Sligo Rovers).

For Shamrock Rovers, their brand image is created on the pitch:

> "At your core, your product is what you deliver on the pitch. Liverpool wouldn't be Liverpool if they didn't win all those leagues and European Cups in the 80s. They'd be another team from Liverpool. However, there's a lot that you can do to shape that through communications and marketing" (Lynch – Shamrock Rovers).

Shamrock Rovers have worked tirelessly to incorporate their iconic green and white colours into the overall image of the club; consequently, these brand colours remind the fans and the public immediately of the team's success and prestige. Shamrock Rovers pride themselves on the fact that the club strives for excellence, right from the first team all the way down into the academy setup. Lynch (2021) believes that their image of excellence is complemented by being the club who have supplied "more internationals to the Irish senior team over the years than any other club in the world". Shamrock Rovers' supporters identify with this image of their club. Based on the literature, this means that these fans will devote themselves to every aspect of the club as it is an important part of who they are (Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012).

4.9 Merchandise

A new finding that emerged from the interview data was that of the significance of merchandise for fan loyalty. While the literature found that loyal fans will buy club merchandise, the focus on merchandise for creating and maintaining fan loyalty became apparent through the interviews. Therefore, this makes it a key consideration for all League of Ireland clubs when it comes to satisfying fans and ensuring their loyalty.

Donnelly (2021) discussed the importance of Longford Town's merchandise:

> "It is probably up there as one of the most important things in terms of satisfying fans because they're supporting the club. They want to wear the colours and you need to supply the colours for them" (Donnelly – Longford Town).

Lynch (2021) claimed that merchandise is not only key for maintaining fan loyalty and a fan culture but it is also crucial for their business model. In the past, to create revenue, Shamrock Rovers have released imaginative and commemorative jerseys. This allows fans to wear the club's colours and "badge" themselves, simultaneously showing that it is their team.

For Cork City, merchandise also plays a huge role in generating much needed revenue:

> "Most of 2020, the merch was the main factor of the club as it was our only source of income" (Howey – Cork City).

Derry City believe that by providing stylish merchandise, it will create a brand image that their fans want to be associated with. Moore (2021) stated:

> "Our brand kit at the minute is Adidas. I think most fans would buy Derry City gear but they'll buy it quicker because it's Adidas. Our merchandise team focuses on market trends when working out who to tie in with" (Moore – Derry City).

Interviewees from Drogheda United and Cork City both commented on merchandise being a marketing vehicle. Shaw (2021) explained that after Drogheda advertised their new merchandise, people were sharing their opinions online: "people were replying back with gifs saying 'shut up and take my money'". This not only generates interest around the product, but also helps to spread positive word of mouth about the club online.

Similarly, Howey (2021) described that by providing a large range of merchandise, fans are promoting the club to others.

> "When fans wear their City merch, they're showing off their club. People wear it around the city, around the country. People see that as well, and that helps grow the club, just as it would for any club".

5. Conclusion

This research study set out to identify the marketing strategies that League of Ireland clubs use to create and maintain the loyalty of fans. Interviews were conducted with members of marketing teams across a variety of football clubs. This process helped to discover the following:

Firstly, it was found that all of the interviewees agreed on the importance of fan loyalty for not only the success of their clubs, but the survival of them. As a result, loyal fans are the key consideration when the club is designing its marketing strategy. However, it was discovered that fan loyalty is often affected by how well the team is doing. This challenge means that LOI clubs must implement various marketing strategies to ensure fan loyalty even when the club isn't performing well.

Synonymous with the literature, many League of Ireland clubs have recognised the importance of targeting young kids in order to gain their support from a young age. Attempting to turn these children into loyal, committed fans, a number of the clubs have marketing strategies in place for this age demographic. This includes providing free tickets for kids, giving them the opportunity to train with players, hosting summer camps and organising birthday parties. This was with the exception of one club who doesn't have any specific marketing strategies focused on children.

Older generation fans were recognised as crucial to these clubs' success, as they make up the season ticket holders and members of the club. Despite their importance, these clubs had less strategies in place to keep these fans satisfied and to maintain their loyalty. However, many of the clubs identified that they use traditional media to reach this fan base.

In contrast to the literature review, which suggested that football clubs are moving solely towards digital platforms, it was determined that League of Ireland clubs adopt a multi-channel approach to communication. Therefore, they are using social, digital and traditional means of communication. Traditional media is used less frequently due to the high costs of advertisements. However, all clubs confirmed that they rely on local newspapers and radio programmes, and consequently work to create mutually beneficial relationships with them. The interview data showed that social media sites and digital websites are essential for all

League of Ireland clubs' communication. These low-cost platforms allow clubs to reach wider audiences with news, information, ticket sales and other content to increase fan engagement and interaction.

There were three types of content specially mentioned by the interviewees that they felt were the most relevant in ensuring fan commitment. Regular match day content was deemed vital in engaging loyal fans and building momentum in the lead-up to the game. This includes player Q&As on the club's profile, online quizzes, competitions and highlights of previous matches. In addition, all clubs identified that they regularly post pictures and graphics of score lines at the end of matches. A second theme that emerged was that video content, whether it be an interview with a player or the manager or behind-the-scenes footage, is the most popular form of content amongst fans. Finally, content based around the fans or the local community is extremely popular. This content is relatable and therefore helps fans to identify with the club.

Although the importance of having strategies in place to attract fans to your football club was highlighted in the literature review, the interview data showed that half of the League of Ireland clubs do not have strategies to attract new adult supporters. However, two clubs believe that the introduction and promotion of the LOI streaming service has increased their fan base from other locations.

All interviewees discussed the significance of sponsorships and partnerships, particularly in terms of providing another source of income. These sponsorships are mainly promoted through signs on the club ground, merchandise, tickets, and are more recently becoming part of the club's social media activity. Most of these affiliations are with local businesses, which also helps to strengthen the club's image and, in turn, increase fan loyalty.

Furthermore, these partnerships allow clubs to provide rewards and benefits to their loyal fans. These benefits are mainly offered to fans that are already members of the club or have a season ticket, and take the form of discounts in local retailers, priority entry into matches, reserved seats and free match programmes.

The interview data supported previous studies, as League of Ireland clubs are behaving increasingly similar to consumer brands, and therefore are focusing on creating a positive

brand image. Most of the interviewees believe that promoting the work that their club does in the local community and for social campaigns, e.g. Sligo Pride, is what has helped to form a favourable view of the club in the public eye.

Merchandise as a mechanism for increasing fan loyalty is a new finding that emerged from the interview data. Interviewees are increasingly aware that providing branded merchandise is essential for satisfying fans. It is also a form of marketing, as when fans display the gear or wear it out in public, they are promoting the club. In addition to this, fans often comment and share posts online after the club releases new products, which creates interest and drives awareness of the merchandise and club - which may even help to attract new fans.

5.1 Future Research

This research adds to work on fan loyalty, whilst directly looking at the marketing strategies used in the Irish football league. This study identified which marketing strategies League of Ireland clubs use in order to create and maintain the loyalty of their fans; however, it did not attempt to analyse which strategies are the most and least effective. Future research could examine the aforementioned marketing strategies and determine which are the most effective. This would provide League of Ireland clubs with a best practice guide on how to ensure fan loyalty.

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7. Appendix

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APPENDIX A: CLUB PROFILES

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Shamrock Rovers

- **Success:** Shamrock Rovers are the most successful club in the entire League of Ireland, having won the domestic league 18 times, the FAI Cup 25 times and the Irish League Cup twice (Transfermarkt, 2021).
- **Stadium Capacity:** They play their home games in the Tallaght Stadium. It has a capacity of 8,000 with the potential of it reaching 10,000 following the development of a new stand (Transfermarkt, 2021).
- **Marketing Budget:** Shamrock Rovers' marketing budget is more or less non-existent, for the most part being a voluntary effort.
- **Distinctive Issue:** A distinctive issue that the club faces is that they are originally from Milltown, Dublin. In 2009, they moved to a new base in Tallaght. This is a new community that they have had to try and immerse themselves into, which is a challenge.

Sligo Rovers

- **Success:** Sligo Rovers are an established club in the top flight (Premier Division) of the League of Ireland. Despite this, in the club's history, they have accumulated limited silverware in comparison to the likes of Shamrock Rovers. They have won the domestic league 3 times, the FAI Cup 5 times and the Irish League Cup twice (Transfermarkt, 2021). A lot of this success has been in the last few decades, indicating the growth of the club.
- **Stadium Capacity:** They play their home games in the Showgrounds, which has a capacity of 5,500 (Transfermarkt, 2021).
- **Marketing Budget:** Sligo Rovers have a limited marketing budget.
- **Distinctive Issue:** An issue that Sligo Rovers face is that they are a town in the North West of Ireland, which can have its difficulties in attracting players/ supporters. It is a town with strong traditions, including having roots to the GAA.

Derry City

- **Success:** Derry City are another established club in the Premier Division of the League of Ireland. They have won the domestic league twice, the FAI Cup 5 times,

and the Irish League Cup 11 times. They haven't won the domestic league since 1997 (Transfermarkt, 2021).

- **Stadium Capacity:** They play their home games at the Ryan McBride Brandywell Stadium. It has a capacity of 7,700 (Transfermarkt, 2021).
- **Marketing Budget:** Derry City's chairman supplies a small budget in the marketing department of the club.
- **Distinctive Issue:** An issue that Derry City face is that they are the only club in the League of Ireland that are from Northern Ireland.

Longford Town

- **Success:** Longford Town currently compete in the Premier Division but have a lot of recent experience in the First Division. They would be considered one of the smallest clubs in terms of success and fanbase with the Premier Division. They have won the FAI Cup twice and the Irish League Cup once in their history. All three trophies were won in the early 2000s (Transfermarkt, 2021).
- **Stadium Capacity:** They play their home games at Bishopsgate, which has a capacity of 4,960 people (Transfermarkt, 2021).
- **Marketing Budget:** Longford Town's marketing budget is small. It allows them to employ a marketing manager full-time, but outside of that, the budget would be more or less non-existent.
- **Distinctive Issue:** An issue that Longford Town face is that they are a midlands club, based in a provincial town. Soccer is not the most popular sport in the town with many of the young athletes pursuing GAA careers.

Drogheda United:

- **Success:** Drogheda United play within the Premier Division but have a lot of first Division experience in their recent history. They have won the domestic league once, the FAI Cup once and the Irish League Cup once (Transfermarkt, 2021).
- **Stadium Capacity:** They play their home games at the stadium formerly known as United Park but was recently renamed Head in the Game Park. This was done to raise awareness for mental health in football (Transfermarkt, 2021).
- **Marketing Budget:** Drogheda United do not have a marketing budget available. Their marketing officers are all volunteers.

- **Distinctive Issue:** An issue that Drogheda face is that they are located in County Louth where they have had to operate near their local, traditional rivals Dundalk who have dominated the league for almost the past decade.

Cork City:

- **Success:** Cork City play in the second tier (First Division) of the League of Ireland. Their success has come in recent years winning the FAI Cup in 2016 and the domestic league and FAI Cup double in 2017. Off the field issues since in the years following led to a disappointing relegation in 2020 (Transfermarkt, 2021).
- **Stadium Capacity:** They play their home games at Turners Cross, which has a capacity of 7,845 (Transfermarkt, 2021).
- **Marketing Budget:** They do not have a marketing budget available.
- **Distinctive Issue:** An issue that the club faces is that the city has extremely strong GAA roots, being a top county in Gaelic football and hurling.