Building a Sustainable Future: How Can Digital Marketing Grow the League of Ireland?

A dissertation submitted by

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I hereby certify that the information contained in this (my submission) is information pertaining to research I conducted for this project. All information other than my own contribution will be fully referenced and listed in the relevant reference and acknowledgement section at the rear of the project.

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This section is a supplement to the main assignment, to be used if AI was used in any capacity in the creation of your assignment; if you have queries about how to do this, please contact your lecturer. For an example of how to fill these sections out, please click here.

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This section acknowledges the AI tools that were utilized in the process of completing this assignment.

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Additional Evidence:

[Place evidence here]

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Introduction

In the field of sports promotion in the League of Ireland, Digital Marketing techniques have been hindered. The full potential of Digital Marketing tactics has not yet been realized. Primarily the roots stem from insufficient investment in digital marketing, poor use of social media and inadequate knowledge of digital marketing. This dissertation aims to examine how digital marketing techniques can aid the League of Ireland to gain popularity and strengthen its relationship with its core audience.

A thorough examination of League of Ireland attendances following the first quarter of the 21/22 season. It revealed a 25% increase from the previous comparative period, a 40% increase from 2018, and a 56% increase from 2017 & top-tier turnout was 2,878, up from 2,082 in the previous year. Even while this sounds great, we are still trailing England's National League, whose total attendance for the 21/22 season is 3,018. It stands at 4,924 in League Two. The number in League One is 10,034. Huge differences are evident (O'Riordan, 2022).

The general situation continues to remain the same as before, The League of Ireland is struggling to expand beneath the covers of an enormously powerful industry. It emphasizes the necessity for Irish clubs to provide players with something unique in the event that they are unable to rival one another on the basis of assets, facilities, and, often, support. Therefore, this research question asks How can Digital Marketing grow the League of Ireland Premier Division?

In other sports leagues, (Premier League, League Two, League One) Digital Marketing techniques have become indispensable instruments, providing exceptional chances to raise awareness, interact with supporters, and draw prospective audiences. The league of Ireland Premier Division can grow its existing base of supporters and engage a local and an international audience by utilizing social networking sites, digital channels, and data-driven strategies.

Evaluating Digital Marketings significance in promoting involvement revenue, and overall achievement in the modern sports world necessitates an exploration of the subtle ways through which it can be adapted to the peculiar requirements and difficulties facing the League of Ireland Premier Division.

The goal of this study is to determine the marketing tactics that League of Ireland clubs can employ in order to expand the league. Sports clubs can learn which marketing techniques are employed by a range of Irish football clubs by looking at this topic.

Literature Review

Introduction to Literature

The initial examination of the literature review will explore the intersection of football, digital marketing, and the League of Ireland, examining the current research on the use of digital marketing in the league. This will involve identifying trends, patterns, and best practices in digital marketing strategies employed by League of Ireland clubs, as well as comparing them to other leagues, countries, and sports. Additionally, the study will seek to identify areas where research is lacking and provide evidence-based insights to guide future research and the development of effective digital marketing strategies in the League of Ireland.

The entire literature review seeks to clarify the significance of digital marketing in football & how digital marketing can grow the League of Ireland. "With new marketing strategies, investment pouring into some clubs and groin crowds, the League of Ireland is making all the right moves" (Hartnett, 2023).

It will help to outline the issues with fan growth and financial stability of football teams in the League of Ireland. From a business standpoint, leagues in football & football teams must utilize digital marketing as a tool. It is empirical in order to gain exposure and to get recognition by organizations to secure sponsorship deals. This will also aid in generating revenue through increased fan participation and game attendance.

Under the direction of Louise Cassidy, the FAI's newly appointed marketing director, the League of Ireland underwent a rebranding during the winter season (Hartnett, 2023). Dermot Usher generated millions as he sold his family business in 2021. Being a supporter of the League of Ireland, he believed that Cork City was the greatest place for his money to have an impact. Enhancing the restrooms at Cork City's stadium is among Usher's top priorities. In regard to the fan experience, the League of Ireland still has some work to do in this area. In terms of generating revenue through increased fan participation and game attendance, in summer, Tallaght Stadium, which is the home grounds of Shamrock Rovers will finish building an additional stand, increasing seating to 10,000 and elevating the stadium to the pinnacle of UEFA classification level. The methods that will be used in this research are interviews.

Digital Marketing in Sports

" An ongoing process through which contests with an uncertain outcome are staged creating opportunities for the simultaneous fulfillment of direct and indirect objectives amongst sport customers, sport businesses and other related individuals and organizations" (Chadwick, 2007). A study conducted by Marina Bartoletti on The Importance of Social Media in Their Contribution to The Marketing of Sport Events, will aid to answer the research question "How Can Digital Marketing Grow the League of Ireland Premier Division." Aspects of this study will be applicable to the League of Ireland as a sports event. Football leagues and teams are successful due to a variety of criteria, including recognition, rivalry, value, achievements, revenue, and numerous other significant variables (Maivizhi, 2023).

This article centers on the significance and impact of emerging media, specifically examining the role of social media and mobile Internet in sports event promotion. Bartoletti examines whether or not customer needs and actions around sporting activities are significantly influenced by the consumption of fresh media. The author employed many methodologies for qualitative investigation. The outcomes of the renography and content analysis were evaluated. It was discovered that Fan pages demonstrated the capacity to accomplish various objectives via the posted content. fan pages seemed to be online venues where advertisers could solicit fan ideas about the events and raise awareness of associated sporting events.

Impressions of the organization have a strong impact on the customers' perception of a product or service (Pickton & Broderick, 2005). In relation to the League of Ireland, this statement has a strong connection. Tale states How a monetary crisis ended up being the best thing that ever happened to Bohs (Tale, 2023). Tale explains how Bohs who are a team in the League of Ireland nearly went under because of a debt of €6.7m. However, they were able to turn their downfall into their pinnacle. The club understood the perception it had of its fans and made various changes. They began to develop a relationship with the community, showing then that the club is not just about money. They club started working with St. Vincent de Paul, the Special Olympics organizations, elderly individuals, kids in school, seniors with modest mental health concerns, people with autism and Mountjoy convicts. The club incorporated various digital

marketing techniques to stay floating (Tale, 2020). This is truly relevant & relates to my work. The use of digital marketing tactics (participation on social media, content production, and targeted advertising) by Bohemians Football Club is a great illustration of how League of Ireland Premier Division teams may use digital marketing to increase their influence, reach, improve brand perception & give their supporters a feeling of community. Other League of Ireland Premier Division teams can use this strategy as an example of how digital marketing can grow the league.

This is a clear example of how marketing has changed the global aspect of football overall. It is not just about playing the sport or simply winning competitions. Football now has a deeper meaning for fans of clubs. Digital marketing can help to steer football away from the commercial aspects by ways of community focused campaigns, creating interactive content & creating virtual fan communities.

Digital marketing not only gives sports leagues the ability to interact directly with fans worldwide and tell stories, but it also allows individual players to become micro-brands, for example how Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi have become their own micro-brands & amassed millions of followers on social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.

In 2022, arguably the two best footballing stars of all time, Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo collaborated on the "Victory is a State of Mind" Louis Vuitton campaign, precisely on schedule to align with Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. This proved significant considering both of these men have a long-standing subliminal rivalry (Li, 2022). On their individual Instagram profiles, Messi, and Ronaldo both posted the recognizable picture of them playing chess on a Louis Vuitton briefcase.

Figure 1: Messi & Ronaldo

Li (2022)

Cristiano Ronaldo's post received almost 35 million engagements in a single day, demonstrating the enormous reach of this small gesture. It created a stir on social media & became a global trend. The ad deftly timed its introduction to coincide with the 2022 FIFA World Cup, leveraging the increased enthusiasm and interest in football. Sports fans everywhere expressed their amazement because it marked the advertising debut of a never-before-seen reunion of two of sports' biggest, but most respected enemies (Li, 2022).

Athletes can effectively expand the League of Irelands story by using their social media presence and unique journeys to reach new audiences and strengthen fan relationships. Athletes and clubs gain from this mutually beneficial partnership, which helps the league gain more visibility and participation while helping athletes develop their own brands and draw in possible sponsors.

Recent Literature by Elliot Hogg (2021) on "Football as a Growing Business, an In-depth Investigation into Sponsorship and Marketing" revealed how the Premier League is expanding annually, with regular matches being televised to nations across the globe. Currently, League of Ireland football games are broadcast on

Eir Sport & RTE Sport during the season. Although we know that the League of Ireland and the Premier League of on different sides on the scale, it should be looking to televise matches globally.

The Premier League has started selling worldwide TV rights and has positioned itself as the best league in the world. It has earned £106 million a year from the agreement with NBC to broadcast matches in the United States for six years, and this contract has also raised the league's profile (Hogg, 2021). Irish fans' attention has been drawn by British broadcasters, like as Sky Sports and BT, for years, drawing them in from the LOI to the premier league (Hogg, 2021).

Conclusions drawn from Hoggs interviews depicted the marketing manager acknowledged that the FAI could do more for the league & feels that in order to draw supporters despite the allure of the Premier League, it needs to be better marketed (Hogg, 2021).

In Hoggs literature a statement is made, "The premier league is agreeing deals with global broadcasters to show weekly games whereas the LOI is rarely broadcasted on Irelands national channel" (Hogg, 2021). The literature seeks for the League of Ireland to replicate what the Premier League is doing regarding broadcasting football games directly. While the Premier League's expansion has certainly been aided by its widespread exposure on networks like NBC and BT Sport, the League of Ireland may not want to adopt exactly the same tactic. There are many obstacles that the league of Ireland faces such as financial restrictions, time constraints & having a much smaller fan base than the Premier League. Alternative strategies in my opinion must be adopted such as leveraging streaming platforms that can connect fans globally, creating a strong social media presence by ways of uploading "Kick off times." Arsenal, who are in the Premier league, have adopted this strategy well. It constitutes of an Instagram post that lets fans know what times the Arsenal game will be at in different time zones. Also, the Arsenal social media team do an excellent job with interactive captions such as "Tell us where you're watching from in the comments," this undoubtedly increases engagement as fans feel recognized.

Figure 2: Arsenal Kick-Off Times

Arsenal (2023)

Strategy like this can be adopted and tailored to the League of Ireland. It can improve planning by allowing fans worldwide to set reminders and be aware of precise kick off times in their local time zones. Another key factor is it enables content creation, time zone differences can be used to produce interesting content that draws in new viewers and sparks interest in addition to eye-catching images and details regarding teams, players, and plots. Fan engagement can encourage a feeling of connection and community even for fans who live far away. Ultimately, the result may draw in more sponsors and create more excitement.

Global broadcasting is just one piece of the puzzle and definitely a great direction to head, but for the League of Ireland, current stage of development, it may be more productive to concentrate on sustainable growth tactics, use alternative platforms, and emphasize its distinct identity. Remember, a long history, substantial financial support, and a well-established global fan base all contribute to the Premier League's

success. By utilizing its advantages and gradually expanding its reach to a broader global audience, the League of Ireland must discover its own route to growth.

Athletes Leverage Marketing

A brand in sports is defined as "a name, design, symbol, or any combination that a sports organization uses to help differentiate its product from the competition" (Shank, 1999, p. 239).

"The league and team represent master brands into which an athlete brand is integrated" (Doyle et al, 2020). Recent findings from a study conducted by Yiran Su, Bradley J. Baker, Jason P. Doyle, and Thilo Kunkel on "The Rise of an Athlete Brand: Factors Influencing the Social Media Following of Athletes" relate to the current question in this research.

Despite having a lengthy and prestigious history, the League of Ireland has had difficulty drawing in prominent players with a high profile. In football, fans are intrigued to see huge football stars like Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo, who have a huge social media following. Although in the League of Ireland, realistically it is not at that financial point yet or it may seem unattractive to some players.

The study reveals that algorithms employed by social media platforms ensure that athletes with a higher number of followers receive greater exposure (Constine, 2018; Cappelletti & Sastry, 2012). In context to the league of Ireland, players with a high social media profile can help to leverage exposure for their club. Doyle reviewed Athletes Branding on social media and what impact this has. The literature revealed limitations on the joint influence of team and leagues on athlete's brand. The aim of the research is to provide answers to this.

Doyle also reviewed other aspects such as team related influence. According to social identity theory, those who identify as team supporters will grow to like athletes who join their team (c.f., Tajfel & Turner, 1979). If teams in the League of Ireland can attract fresh players, it can encore favorable behavioral and mental reactions from the fan base while also closing the psychological gap between the athlete and the fan. It represents a benefit to the athlete's brand from the team in terms of social media followers. Findings from this study show how athlete brands function as sub-brands inside brand architectural systems and how the master brands they are affiliated with affect how much the athlete brand can gain from adjustments to their

brand portfolio. In order for the league of Ireland to grow, the potential impact from athletes is huge. Especially from athletes that know how to leverage their social media.

Athletes leveraging digital marketing to build their micro-brands, their star power does not shine alone. Sponsors view these athletes as brand ambassadors with devoted fan bases and shared values, as they strive to establish genuine connections with their target consumers. Lewis Hamilton's sponsorship deal with Mercedes Benz that pays him an incredible $57M per year, highlighting the large revenue that brands are willing to pay athletes (Deb, 2023). In context to the league of Ireland, sponsorships become equipment deals and social media campaigns which in turn is a win for both athletes and clubs.

In a 2021 article by Padraig Conlon, he expresses how Irish Olympic gold medalist Kellie Harrington has impacted amateur women's boxing. After winning the gold medal in Tokyo, Kellie and SPAR agreed to a three-year collaboration that will see SPAR assist her all the way to the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris. Also, ten community-based coaches will be recognized and rewarded by SPAR through this new project, with a chance to win €1,000 each for their club or community association (Conlon, 2021).

Figure 3: Kellie Harrington

Conlon (2021)

Kellie Harrington has been able to leverage marketing to further support the sport of women's amateur boxing. In Ireland, Harrington's performance has been specifically linked to a considerable increase in female boxers joining clubs and training programs. This has expanded the number of talent and made future national teams potentially stronger. This raised the awareness of amateur women's boxing and attracted possible financiers and sponsors, which may provide educational initiatives, gear, and contests.

Overall, League of Ireland athletes can be inspired by Kellie Harringtons success and potentially grow the LOI, but the question is how? This research question seeks to answer the questions posed. Big star athletes like Jack Byrne can share their journeys & support local initiatives. Recently, Irish star Jack Byrne can be seen leveraging marketing with a recent purchase of a new car, pictured wearing his Shamrock Rovers attire. This simple tactic sparks exposure for Shamrock Rovers and the League of Ireland by the auto dealer posting the picture online, car enthusiasts worldwide who potentially be future fans of the League of Ireland. The further expansion of the League of Ireland Premier Division can be fueled by increased sponsorship engagement and athlete value, which draw in further funding and collaborations.

Figure 4: Auto Class

Autoclass (2024)

Sports Sponsorship

"Sponsorship is the most important source of income for most professional sports clubs" (Chadwick et al., 2017, p.19). Since many League of Ireland clubs have limited funding, revenue from outside sources is essential. Numerous of these connections are with nearby companies in the community. In terms of marketing, sponsorships represent a tool to manage brand image, personality, and equity (Pons et al., 2017). The league of Ireland compared to other European Leagues, such as, Premier League, Bundesliga & La Liga operates on very narrow margins.

Recent findings conducted by Ross Maguire on "Maintaining Fan Loyalty: An Examination of the Marketing Strategies Employed by League of Ireland Club," also relate to the current question in this research. He found that "Sports clubs can often be of central importance in Irish communities & that sponsorships play a crucial role in promotion and finance, and when successful, contribute to brand quality and brand loyalty" (Maguire, 2021). Clubs in the League of Ireland rely heavily on sponsorship infusions to fund operations, player salaries, infrastructure improvements, and community outreach programs. Without these sponsorships, it would be difficult for many clubs to thrive, which may put the league's continued existence in jeopardy.

Playing in the Leinster Senior League, I have witnessed first-hand the importance of sports sponsorship. In Ireland, grassroots football is an essential component of the game to develop young athletes. Facilities fees are among the resources that grassroots clubs frequently lack and seek sponsorship from local businesses and often the league. Currently, the football team the researcher plays for "Jobstown Celtic" is in dire need of a state-of-the-art football field. The grounds have been laid for years and need transformation. The cost of the refurbishment is a whopping €250,000, which the club cannot afford & is seeking funding from sponsors. Brand sponsorship can have a significant impact on facility development, retention of talent, operational support and bran visibility (good will). This depicts the clear emphasis of sports sponsorship in the league of Ireland and how it can aid to grow the league of Ireland by retaining but also attracting new members.

Athletes have a significant impact on sports sponsorship., both Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo made unexpected moves in 2023. Ronaldo transferred to Al-Nassr in the Saudi Pro League from Manchester United, bringing considerable focus on the Saudi Arabian league. On the other hand, Messi signed for David Beckhams Inter Miami side, also having a considerable impact on American soccer. Adidas has been named as Al-Nassr's new kit provider. Given that the company already makes the Inter Miami outfit, this means that starting in the upcoming season, both Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo will be sporting the German manufacturer's emblem (O'Donnell, 2023).

Fan loyalty and sports sponsorship are closely related, with sponsors greatly contributing to fans' increased bond with their preferred clubs and players. Previous literature conducted found that for a variety of reasons, sports teams require fan loyalty (Maguire, 2021). Behavioral loyalty, in terms of sports fan loyalty, can include consistency, repeat purchasing, and repetitive behavior is, such as attending games and purchasing team merchandise (Bee and Havitz, 2010; Yun et al., 2021).

Figure 5: Premier League Logo

Premier League (2024)

In general, the English Premier League has a larger and more engaged fan following than the League of Ireland. This is probably because of a number of variables, including financial resources, worldwide reach, and historical legacies. The Premier League has been effective in building fan devotion through the use of fantasy football. In the game FPL, you take on the role of a Premier League player's fantasy manager, choose a team of fifteen players who will score points for your side dependent on how well they perform

for their clubs in Premier League games and Players' prices are determined by how many FPL points they are expected to score, and your 15-man roster can only contain a maximum of £100.0 million (Premier League, 2023).

Football fans have a keen sense of loyalty, are passionate about their team, and adore it. According to Berkshire Encyclopedia of World Sport, Fan loyalty is "a form of sports spectatorship characterized by a powerful sense of attachment to and affiliation with a particular sport or team. Fan loyalty is now viewed by sports management as an important variable that can be manipulated to increase revenue as well as build and maintain a brand" (Berkshire Publishing Group, 2013). This research investigates how well certain tactics used by the Premier League fantasy platform can be replicated in the League of Ireland, with the goal of determining how these methods might support greater fan loyalty and league expansion.

Recent studies by Liam Feeney on "the effects of web-based media platforms and how they can be of benefit for League of Ireland (LOI) football clubs in increasing fan loyalty/ engagement and fan community" revealed that there is a potential for research to be conducted on the Irish Leagues as it has not been done before. The fantasy football market has grown to be a multibillion-dollar enterprise that has become a significant part of the overall football sector worldwide (Feeney, 2021).

Based on findings from Aaron Smith (Director of Sport Management at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia's School of Sport, Tourism, and Hospitality Management) & Bob Stewart (Chair of Victoria University's Sport Management and Policy Group in Melbourne, Australia, a major factor in why sports fans and consumers choose to participate in sporting events and travel great distances to do so is the bond they have with sports teams and leagues. It is not uncommon to see Irish supporters fly to England to watch their preferred Premier League team. A VisitBritain report from 2021 states, with 175,000 football visitors, the Irish Republic leads the way among inbound markets, followed by Germany and the USA. Additionally, these markets are one of the main markets for all foreign travel to the UK (United Kingdom) (VisitBritain, 2021). Fans significant value to the UK economy is demonstrated by the £1.4 billion they spent in the

country in 2019 and the £909 they spent each visit, which was 31% more than the average (VisitBritain, 2021).

Figure 6: Foreign Travel

Rank (by visits including live football)	UK rank*	Market	Visits including live football	% of visits from market including live football
1	4	Irish Republic	175,000	6%
2	3	Germany	126,000	4%
3	1	USA	113,000	3%
4	2	France	93,000	3%
5	18	Norway	78,000	12%
6	7	Netherlands	77,000	4%
7	10	Australia	63,000	6%

VisitBritain (2021, pg. 14)

Irish supporters of the Premier League have several reasons to be so passionate. The Premier League is regarded as the most competitive and thrilling league in the world, highlighting some of the best players in the world, and fans can regularly see their favorite clubs play thanks to the league's widespread broadcast in Ireland. I would argue that fans going to witness their preferred Premier League side in England is a pilgrimage for many Irish supporters. I remember flying to London to watch my first Arsenal football game live at the Emirates against our biggest rivals Tottenham Hotspurs, it was amazing. Being a part of it was wonderful, the mood was electric. It was incredible to witness the players in person, they exceeded my expectations. It was so loud, the chants of "Come on you Gunners!" gave me chills.

Feeney (2021) research findings uncovered some fascinating and unexpected results that challenged my previous thoughts, requiring me to rethink my stance. He used quantitative methods to collect data by way of Google forms (survey). In response to a specific question "What types of initiatives might improve overall fan experience and/or engagement with LOI/FAI?" Only 9.4% think the whole spectator experience

may be improved with a LOI fantasy football. Current fantasy football players know how engaging the platform is & how it connects fans from all around the globe. Although the percentage is low, there is still an opportunity for the League of Ireland to attempt Fantasy football. As Feeney's findings are 3+ years old, have opinions changed? Is there a sudden urge now? This is what my research seeks to uncover.

To strengthen my case the impact that Fantasy football can have on the League of Ireland, I reviewed a 2019 NFL article by Bret McCormick on "Rise of fantasy football played big part in leagues growth". In a statement by the president of Fantasy sports & gaming association, Paul Charchian said "I challenge anybody to come up with a single element in the history of football that has changed and progressed the game more than fantasy football has."

It was revealed that around 60 million individuals (about twice the population of Texas) participate in fantasy sports, with 80% of them playing fantasy football.

Figure 7: Rise of Fantasy Football
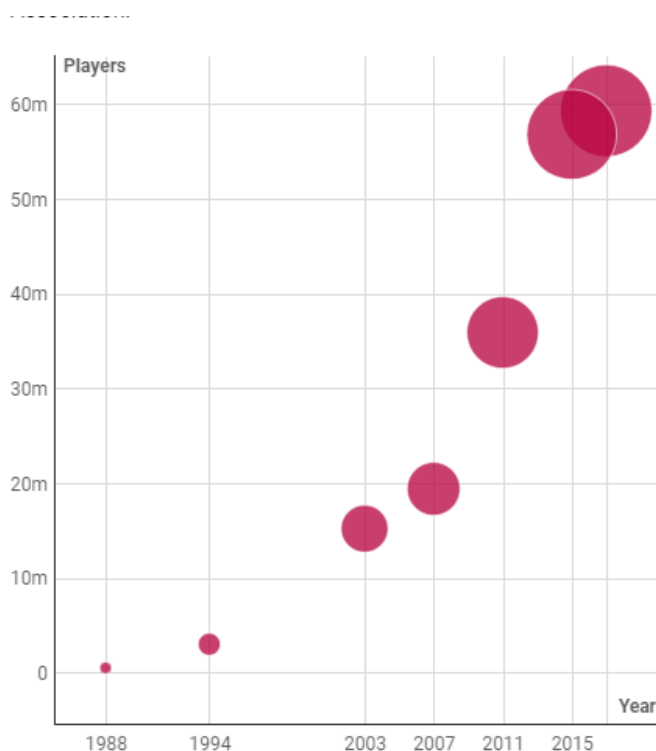
McCormick (2019)

Previous FSGA literature revealed 64% because they play fantasy sports, more live games are being watched by fans of those sports. Furthermore, such interaction exposes a considerably basic truth about sports enthusiasts in general.

This proves the immediate effect that an online web-based platform can have on the expansion of the League of Ireland. There is potential to do something that has never been done before in the league & furthermore improve all aspects of Irish football.

Research Question

Question & Objectives

The central inquiry that the research will address is How Digital Marketing Can Grow the League of Ireland. This research question is specifically designed to discuss the important points of how digital marketing can assist to the general expansion of the League of Ireland. Key areas of the research will be digital marketing in sports, athletes leveraging marketing & sports sponsorship.

The primary goals of this investigation are: To inquire can digital marketing be the League of Irelands secret weapon; To compile data regarding the topic of study (How Can Digital Marketing Grow the League of Ireland) via the use of interviews; To offer recommendations regarding fan interaction, recognition of the brand, and growth motivated by data via social media, mobile applications, and video content.

The principal inquiries for research are:

1. What are the biggest challenges to growing the League of Ireland fanbase through digital marketing?
2. How can the FAI develop a sustained digital marketing strategy that leverages social media, athlete involvement, and content creation to continuously attract new audiences and retain existing fans?
3. What specific resources or investments would be needed to effectively grow the League of Ireland?

The proposal's theoretical framework, which highlights the function of digital marketing in creating brand identity, raising customer engagement, and propelling growth for the league, is in line with the investigation in question. It offers a solid basis for understanding the research results and formulating useful suggestions for the League of Ireland. Considering being a competitive player in Ireland, I find particular resonance with this research topic about (How Can Digital Marketing Grow the League of Ireland).

Through an examination of the particular challenges and possibilities identified by the League of Ireland, this study can contribute to the creation of successful digital marketing plans for other league teams. These results will offer hard proof of how digital marketing can aid in the expansion of the League of Ireland.

Methodology

This particular section of this research will address the research methodologies employed. These research techniques will be used in order to evaluate the value and efficacy of the inquiry for research: How Can Digital Marketing Grow the League of Ireland. Under this current topic, the following section is divided into distinct sections: Philosophical assumptions, research design, interview schedule, sampling, pilot study, analysis, ethics & limitations.

Every transcription undergoes a standardized coding procedure that includes 3 essential components.

1. The order of interview.
2. The participant's gender.
3. The initials of the participant's occupation.

As an illustration the code (1-M-SMM) would be an example of the standardized coding process containing the 3 essential components.

Research Philosophy & Philosophical Assumptions

Ontologically, this study aligns with an interpretivist perspective. Mcleod (2024) describes interpretivist perspective as "an approach to social science that asserts that understanding the beliefs, motivations, and reasoning of individuals in a social situation". Digital marketing has become a standard practice for marketers, and its effectiveness depends on how various stakeholders within the League of Ireland Premier Division (LOI) construct and interpret its role in fan engagement and league growth.

This research is predicated on the assumption that digital marketing can have a tangible effect on the growth of the League of Ireland. Possible outcomes could involve heightened fan involvement, enhanced brand recognition, or the acquisition of new sponsorships. This study looks at how LOI clubs use digital marketing techniques to pinpoint and examine these observable impacts.

It will make it possible to investigate thoroughly how stakeholders see the league's digital marketing initiatives. Semi-structured interviews can offer insightful information about how the League of Ireland's brand is seen as well as the general effect that digital marketing has had on the league's expansion. This research design leverages semi-structured interviews to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of stakeholder perceptions regarding the League of Ireland's digital marketing campaigns. The in-depth nature of interviews allows for probing beyond surface-level responses, potentially yielding nuanced insights that surveys or focus groups might not capture.

In conclusion, the purpose of this research is to investigate how well digital marketing techniques can engage supporters and improve the League of Ireland's brand perception. Through the use of qualitative research techniques, the study will offer insightful information about the individualized experiences and viewpoints among stakeholders and supporters. The results will benefit the fields of sports and digital marketing by helping to shape the creation of successful digital marketing plans for sports leagues. The research has the potential to significantly improve the League of Ireland and establish a standard for other sports leagues.

Research Design

For this study, a qualitative research methodology will be used. Definitions of qualitative research include research that involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data (e.g., text, video, or audio) to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. It can be used to gather in-depth insights into a problem or generate innovative ideas for research (Bhandari, 2023). Semi-structured interviews shall serve as the primary instrument that I will utilize to do qualitative research for my subject area. Semi-structured interviews consist of several key questions that help to define the areas to be explored, but also allow the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail (Gill et al, 2008).

I chose this method because from previous readings of other academic sources, there are limitations with quantitative research. Previous research conducted by (Feeney, 2021) on "the effects of web-based media platforms and how they can be of benefit for League of Ireland (LOI) football clubs in increasing fan loyalty/ engagement and fan community" revealed limitations of online surveys. Limitations were that there were age biases as younger people have a higher usage rate of web-based media platforms which could have potentially skewed the results and findings (Feeney, 2021) regarding their experiences and ignoring methods for interacting with older fans.

In addition, social desirability bias can cause respondents to select responses that they believe to be more favorable, exaggerating reported levels of engagement or overrepresenting fans who are not engaged in any way. This can happen with online surveys as well, which often provides inadequate space for in-depth answers, making it difficult to adequately express the depth and complexity of experiences and tactics connected to digital marketing and fan interaction.

For this study, interviews have a number of benefits over online surveys. The collection of more detailed data is facilitated by semi - interviews. Participant responses to open-ended questions provide them the opportunity to go into further detail about their tactics, experiences, and problems that could uncover undiscovered details that could be beneficial when examining the various themes that were taken from the discussions in the end (Kakilla, 2021). This thorough investigation yields a more thorough comprehension

of how LOI clubs use digital marketing and how successful it is at attracting and retaining fans. Additionally, it can help me to learn about nuances and the reasoning behind marketing decisions through interviews. In order to get a more comprehensive picture, it allows me to delve deeper into particularly intriguing points or clarify unclear responses.

The goal of this study is to determine the marketing tactics that League of Ireland clubs can employ to grow the league. To ensure a thorough grasp, it would be advantageous to arrange semi structured interviews with people who possess knowledge of League of Ireland operations and digital marketing tactics, such as League of Ireland officials, club representatives & sponsors. This is my sample. These people reflect a range of viewpoints within the League of Ireland and the field of digital marketing. Understanding how to use digital tactics for growth will be largely dependent on the interviews conducted, which emphasizes the interpretive paradigm of this research.

Sampling

This section details the process of selecting participants for the semi-structured interviews exploring digital marketing practices within League of Ireland clubs. The research targeted stakeholders within League of Ireland clubs who are directly involved in developing and implementing digital marketing strategies aimed at fan engagement. These stakeholders include individuals working in roles such as digital marketing manager, social media manager, fan engagement officer, or communications manager.

The study used a multifaceted method to find possible participants. Initially, direct email communication was established with each League of Ireland club's marketing department. Second, people with relevant job titles were found by searching web directories that list club workers.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants from the identified sampling frame. Purposive sampling, sometimes referred to as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, depends on the researcher's judgment in choosing the units (individuals, cases/organizations, events, or data points) that will be examined. Purposive sampling, sometimes referred to as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, depends on the researcher's judgment in choosing the units (individuals, cases/organizations, events, or data points) that will be examined (Rai, 2015). In relation to this study this technique allowed the research to target individuals with specific experiences and knowledge relevant to the research questions. Selection criteria included:

- Current employment within a League of Ireland club
- Direct involvement in digital marketing and/or fan engagement strategies
- Representation of clubs from across the League of Ireland structure (Premier Division, First Division)

A total of 4 semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders within League of Ireland clubs. This sample size allowed for a rich and nuanced understanding of the digital marketing practices and fan engagement strategies employed by these clubs.

Table 1. Interview Participants

CLUB	ROLE	CODE
DERRY CITY FC	WSM	1-M-WSM
WEXFORD	HM	2-M-HM
FINN HARPS	CM	3-M-CM
SHELBOURNE FC	HMC	4-M-HMC

Pilot Interview

The rationale behind my investigation is to determine and evaluate distinct digital marketing tactics that the League of Ireland can employ to attain expansion, while also giving insightful analysis and suggestions to guide the League of Ireland's upcoming digital marketing plan.

In order to formulate the right interview questions, a pilot interview was first conducted. "The pilot study is important for improvement of the quality and efficiency of the main study" (Anesthesiol, 2017). I employed a pilot interview methodology to investigate the field of study and modify my interview questions in light of the preliminary findings. "Pilot studies could be conducted in qualitative, quantitative, and even mixed methods research" (Roudsari, 2013). Regarding the purpose and methodology of the study, every participant supplied vital information.

A representative of Derry City FC (Head of website & media) who is in the SSE Airtricity Men's Premier Division played a significant role in the pilot interview. The rationale behind the choice was to ensure the effectiveness of the interview guide and refine research question based on previous research by Liam Feeney on "the effects of web-based media platforms and how they can be of benefit for League of Ireland (LOI) football clubs in increasing fan loyalty/ engagement and fan community" revealing that Derry City FC has a comparatively poorer track record of past accomplishments within the LOI led me to choose them.

This research design opted to forego selecting an extraordinarily successful club like Shamrock Rovers for the pilot study in order to avoid limitations associated with limited scope. Focusing solely on Shamrock Rovers could have resulted in a limited scope, potentially generating insights that are not representative of the challenges and strategies faced by other LOI clubs, particularly those with fewer resources or a different historical trajectory. Furthermore, a limited scope in the pilot study could hinder the transferability of findings. The research ultimately aims to develop insights that are applicable to a wider range of LOI clubs, not just a single successful one. If the pilot study only explored Shamrock Rovers, the research design might be overly specific to their unique circumstances, limiting its relevance to understand digital marketing

practices of other, more diverse LOI clubs. This could ultimately reduce the applicability of the final research findings to the broader LOI ecosystem.

The selection of Derry City FC was not random, but rather a strategic choice based on two key considerations. Firstly, according to Liam Feeney's (2021) research, various clubs can adopt effective digital marketing tactics, irrespective of their past achievements, by utilizing web-based media channels and encouraging fan participation. Even though they play in the top league, Derry City FC has a much poorer track record of previous successes when compared to other teams. This choice made it possible for the pilot research to get information from a team that might use digital marketing strategies different from those of other traditionally successful clubs in the league.

Secondly, by including a club with a potentially different digital marketing strategy influenced by past performance, the pilot study aimed to assess the generalizability of the interview guide and research questions across a wider range of LOI clubs. The goal was to ensure the final research design could capture diverse experiences and perspectives on digital marketing strategies within the league, not just those of the most successful clubs. This focus on generalizability strengthens the potential for the final research findings to provide valuable insights applicable to a broader spectrum of LOI clubs.

The pilot interview with the Derry City FC representative proved to be a valuable exercise. It allowed for refining the interview guide to ensure clarity of the questions and to explore specific aspects of digital marketing strategies in greater depth. One particularly significant outcome emerged from the pilot interview. The discussion with the Derry City FC representative, who filled the role of Head of Website & Media, brought to light the theme of voluntary work within League of Ireland clubs. Prior to this interview, the potential for voluntary roles within club digital marketing operations had not been a specific area of research focus.

This valuable insight gleaned from the pilot interview necessitated a revision to the interview schedule. To ensure the research captured the experiences of individuals potentially fulfilling these voluntary roles, an

additional question was added: "What are the biggest challenges you face as a volunteer media club representative?" This revision ensured the research design could capture a broader range of perspectives within LOI clubs, encompassing both paid staff and volunteers involved in digital marketing efforts.

It is important to acknowledge that the pilot study, due to its limited scope involving a single participant, may not capture the complete spectrum of experiences within LOI clubs. However, the insights gained from this initial interview proved instrumental in refining the research approach for the main study. This iterative process, involving the pilot study and subsequent revisions, strengthens the overall research design and enhances the potential for the final findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of digital marketing practices within the League of Ireland.

Data Analysis & Findings

The current section focuses on the analysis & findings from the primary investigation that was carried out using semi-structured interviews (Villegas, 2024). To examine the data gathered, a thematic analysis will be employed. "Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing qualitative data that involves reading through a set of data and looking for patterns in the meaning of the data to find themes" (Villegas, 2024). This is significant because it enables me to contrast the interviewee's answers and determine the marketing tactics used by various clubs in the League of Ireland as well as the difficulties encountered.

During the interview process, unexpected discoveries were made. Three shared challenges that were not thoroughly discussed in the literature review were recognized by all participating League of Ireland clubs, which has grown to be a major area of study interest. These challenges were: 1) The significant reliance on budget by League of Ireland football clubs, 2) The Challenge of Piracy in the League of Ireland, 3) Community Engagement. All of these themes require further investigation and are now a key focus of the research. These findings now add a new dimension to the research question of "How can digital marketing grow the league of Ireland".

Significant Reliance on Budget by League of Ireland Football Clubs

The significant reliance on budget by League of Ireland football clubs, came to the fore front of this research as a theme during the course of the research conducting semi-structured interviews. Two crucial sub-themes then emerged as fundamental to the effectiveness of the league's significant reliance on budget: voluntary work and infrastructure.

Voluntary work

The vast majority of participants viewed voluntary work as a necessity for the smooth functioning of League of Ireland clubs. 1-M-WSM confirmed this theme, highlighting how common it was amongst League of Ireland clubs.

"The fact that we are all volunteers, ideally, I should be on the training ground most days making content and putting on players and chatting to them and having more personalized content, but I would train during the day, so I'm never at it. There are limits like that, they are holding us back" (1-M-WSM).

The study recognizes the vital role that volunteer work plays in League of Ireland clubs, but it is also critical to take into account the possible effects of growing, especially in the field of digital marketing.

1-M-WSM stated "If we were far more professionalized and actually had a full-time social media person, such as a marketer, that sort of thing".

A full-time specialist with knowledge of digital marketing and social media could create and carry out a full marketing strategy that is personalized to the target demographic and particular requirements of the club.

"The biggest strategy I think for clubs is investing more in off field staff, so therefore you would have some form of marketing or social media person" (1-M-WSM)

This might lead to better brand awareness, more successful campaigns, and possibly even higher fan engagement. Consistently producing top-notch material for multiple platforms would allow committed League of Ireland members to interact with followers on a regular basis. This could involve using social media trends strategically, producing behind-the-scenes content, conducting player interviews, and showcasing highlights of matches. Arsenal football club in the English premier League execute this strategy very well. To assess the success of campaigns and make data-driven changes for ongoing enhancement and more accurate targeting of the club's online audience, social media data and website traffic could be examined.

A critical challenge facing volunteer-reliant organizations like League of Ireland clubs is volunteer burnout. This phenomenon, where volunteers gradually lose enthusiasm and motivation, can significantly impact the quality and sustainability of the league's operations. 2-M-HM, a participant in the semi – structured interviews, offered a powerful observation on this issue: "my free time and my appetite for it diminishes,

as it does for any volunteer as a specified lifespan. They die or they give up." This statement captures the essence of volunteer burnout – state of chronic stress that may lead to exhaustion, cynicism and detachment (Matthews, 2019).

While volunteer work plays a vital role in the League of Ireland, 4-M-HMC raises a critical point: "We try to find people who have the correct professional qualifications because we don't want volunteerism to equate to amateurism." This is the ongoing challenge of balancing the need for qualified personnel with the realities of a volunteer-reliant model.

By acknowledging the tension between seeking qualified volunteers and maintaining a sustainable volunteer workforce, League of Ireland clubs can develop strategies to attract and retain individuals with the necessary expertise.

Infrastructure

The research findings not only emphasize the perceived necessity of volunteer work but also highlight the critical importance of infrastructure within League of Ireland clubs. This perspective, shared by most participants, as emphasized by 1-M-WSM, aligns with the broader challenges faced by the league.

"Facilities is kind of restricting us at the moment, say everywhere had a 5,000 or 6,000, 8,000-seater stadium, and we're tall men, we'd be in a mad place, it would be great" (1-M-WSM).

3-M-HM also stated "Back then a goo attendance was 1500 to 2000. I just saw Shamrock Rovers are currently sitting on 9000 tickets sold for their match against Bohemians".

The current issues of stadium upgrades, training facilities & grassroot development are apparent issues that all clubs in the League of Ireland are facing. 1-M-WSM directly addressed the potential impact of stadium size on fan attraction, stating: "Obviously Tallaght now got the fourth stand. Yeah, it's the best stadium in the league by a mile. If everybody had something like that, I feel like the marketing lends, you have seats to sell." This quote highlights the potential for seat availability to be a driver, suggesting that a larger stadium capacity directly translates to greater revenue generation opportunities, which can be reinvested in various aspects to further improve the fan experience and attract more supporters.

2-H-HM emphasizes the potential role of large organizations with substantial financial resources, such as local authorities and universities: "it's these sorts of large organizations that, like local authorities and universities, I think that are the only way we're really going to improve our infrastructure dramatically. They're the only ones with the funding for it."

Local authorities and universities such as County Councils and university's like UCD, which has both land and facilities hold significant promise as partners for the League of Ireland. These entities often have access to substantial funding streams through government grants, local taxes, or private endowments. Partnering with them could provide much-needed financial resources for infrastructure projects. This could encompass

stadium upgrades, training ground improvements, or investments in grassroots facilities to nurture young talent.

The potential benefits extend beyond just funding. Many local authorities and universities prioritize community development. The League of Ireland, with its passionate fan base and positive social impact, can be seen as a valuable community asset. Collaboration could lead to mutually beneficial projects that improve facilities and contribute to the overall well-being of the local community. 3-M-CM mentions "I don't think they understand the benefits for the community, for people with disabilities to feel part of it, for marginal groups to feel, or minorities feel part of it. I think they underestimate what live sport can deliver".

2-H-HM further emphasizes the critical role of county councilors and TDs (members of the Irish Parliament) who are "answerable to this growing League of Ireland fan base." These elected officials can play a crucial role in advocacy and public support. They can raise awareness about the need for infrastructure development within the League of Ireland and garner public support for such initiatives. This could involve raising awareness through public campaigns or lobbying efforts.

The Challenge of Piracy in the League of Ireland

The digital age has brought both opportunities and challenges for the League of Ireland. While online platforms offer new ways to connect with fans, the issue of streaming emerged as a significant concern during the interviews. This practice, where fans access matches through unauthorized online sources, raises questions about fan access and the financial sustainability of the league. Two crucial sub-themes then emerged: illegal streaming and sponsorship effects.

Illegal Streaming & Sponsorship Effects

Another common theme highlighted by participants as a major concern for the League of Ireland is the challenge of illegal streaming. 4-M-HMC's statement, "The illegal streaming has been a blessing and a curse," captures the complex nature of illegal streaming within the League of Ireland. While it presents undeniable challenges, it also offers potential opportunities, ultimately its a double-edged sword. The prevalence of readily available devices that facilitate access to illegal streams, as mentioned by 3-M-CM, presents a significant obstacle for the League of Ireland, "it's makes it tough, dodgy boxes, that's a huge challenge, massive challenge. Illegal streaming has a detrimental impact on the League of Ireland in several ways. Broadcast rights are a vital source of income for the league and its clubs. When fans access matches illegally, the league loses out on potential revenue that could be reinvested in player development, infrastructure improvements, and other areas crucial for growth.

"We try and preach to them that the money goes to the club, goes to the league, it's our product", (3-M-CM).

Another significant challenge highlighted by participants, particularly 3-M-CM, relates to securing sponsorships for the League of Ireland. 3-M-CM pinpoints the issue of unreliable viewership figures as a major obstacle. Sponsors, especially larger agencies, base their decisions on data such as potential brand exposure and return on investment. However, the prevalence of illegal streaming through IPTV (Internet Protocol Television) makes it difficult to provide sponsors with accurate figures. Since many fans access matches through unauthorized streams, official viewing figures significantly underestimate the true reach

of the League of Ireland audience. This lack of reliable data creates a barrier, particularly when trying to attract larger sponsors who require precise information before committing to deals.

2-M-HM emphasizes the critical role of sponsorship in the League of Ireland's financial landscape: "Sponsorship is very important. It has been the most important source of funding for the league and for clubs for a long, long time, for as long as I've been involved in the League of Ireland. This is where the big, big money comes from". Sponsorship revenue acts as the engine propelling the League of Ireland's growth and development. An article highlights the critical role of sponsorships in the modern football landscape: "In today's football landscape, there's no denying that sports sponsorships have become a vital part of the club and promoter's strategy to build a brand presence through marketing tactics while leveraging each other capabilities and driving business forward" (Fonseca, 2024).

4-M-HMC raises a critical question regarding the League of Ireland's limited broadcast reach. "The English Premier League is shown on NBC in America, the Bundesliga is shown in Mexico. Why is the League of Ireland only shown in Ireland". 4-M-HMC's call for the League of Ireland to expand its broadcast reach finds support in the success story of the English Premier League. The Premier League itself acknowledges, "The strength of the Premier League's broadcast proposition is key to its global success, which is reinforced by effective engagement with fans across the world (Premier League, 2019).

Broadcasting League of Ireland matches internationally offers a multitude of advantages. Increased revenue from international broadcast deals can provide a much-needed financial boost for the league and its clubs. A wider audience exposure can attract new fans and potential investors from around the world, fostering a more global fan base. This increased visibility can also attract talented players who might not have previously considered the League of Ireland, potentially raising the overall quality of the league.

Community Engagement

Beyond the financial challenges and broadcast limitations, another crucial theme emerged from participant interviews: community engagement. Another crucial sub-theme then emerged: social outreach programme. This section will explore the significance of community engagement for the League of Ireland and potential strategies to strengthen this aspect.

Community engagement in sports is a vital aspect of harnessing potential and creating a positive ripple effect (Alkeaid, 2023). 3-M-CM highlights the importance of digital marketing within the League of Ireland's strategy, stating, "Digital marketing is a vital component as part of your marketing tools. It comes from engagement and community engagement." Effective digital marketing can be a powerful tool for building community engagement in the League of Ireland. Social media platforms like Twitter, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram provide a direct line to connect with fans, share news and updates, and create a sense of belonging. Developing engaging content like player interviews, match highlights, and behind-the-scenes glimpses can attract fans and keep them interested. However, 1-M-WSM raises a crucial challenge: limited resources. They stated, "Ideally I should be on the training ground most days making content and putting on players and chatting to them and having more personalized content, but I would train during the day, so I'm never at it. There's limits like that, they're holding us back." The potential of digital marketing is clear: a direct connection with fans fosters a sense of community, engaging content attracts and retains fans, and targeted campaigns can expand the fanbase. 2-M-HM emphasizes the increasing importance of these interconnected aspects for engaging with fans and promoting the League of Ireland, "I'm trying to balance a growing need for constant content creation and constant marketing and constant community engagement because that sphere has grown". The challenges still exist, limited staff time and resources can hinder content creation, balancing training schedules with content creation can be difficult, and maintaining a consistent flow of engaging content requires dedication. Despite the challenges, the League of Ireland can leverage digital marketing effectively. Strategic planning through content calendars and scheduling tools can ensure consistent content delivery.

Beyond digital marketing, 3-M-CM emphasizes another key aspect of community engagement: grassroots initiatives. They acknowledge the League of Ireland's growing focus on connecting with local communities through various outreach programs. Their statement, "LOI clubs have gotten much better at getting out of schools, working with local community organizations like charities, schools, clubs, junior clubs, intermediate clubs, inviting people along". These initiatives offer the League of Ireland several advantages. Engaging with schools, youth clubs, and community organizations introduces the League of Ireland to a new generation of potential fans, fostering a sense of connection from an early age. Collaborating with local charities and organizations strengthens the League of Ireland's presence within the community and demonstrates a commitment to social responsibility. By inviting people to attend matches, these outreach programs can directly translate into higher attendance figures and a more vibrant matchday atmosphere. This approach mirrors the positive example set by clubs like Bohemian FC as highlighted in their statement, "At Bohemians we have been engaged in numerous programmes and initiatives to improve our shared society for many years, locally, nationally and even internationally. We have partnered with multiple organizations such as Focus Ireland, DCU, Dublin City Council, Amnesty International and MASI (Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland)" (Bohemians, 2023). These partnerships not only strengthen the League of Ireland's presence within the community but also demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility. Additionally, outreach programs that invite people to attend matches can directly translate into higher attendance figures and a more vibrant matchday atmosphere. The League of Ireland's commitment to community outreach, exemplified by clubs like Bohemian FC, paves the way for a more sustainable future for the league. By prioritizing community connections and building strong relationships within the local area, the League of Ireland can cultivate a loyal fanbase and ensure its long-term success.

Social Outreach Programme

Interviews with key figures revealed a crucial theme: the importance of social outreach programs within the League of Ireland's community engagement strategy. This section delves deeper into this theme,

exploring the benefits and challenges of these initiatives, and highlighting potential solutions for strengthening the League of Ireland's connection with the local community.

Social outreach programs allow the League of Ireland to connect with the community beyond the pitch.

4-M-HMC highlights a vital component of the League of Ireland's outreach strategy: "We have an affiliate club network with 12 clubs which our community development office will visit." These affiliate clubs provide a crucial network for extending the League of Ireland's reach and strengthening its connection with local communities. Affiliate clubs can act as hubs for grassroots development programs, fostering young talent and introducing them to the League of Ireland pathway. They can also spearhead local outreach initiatives, tailoring programs to their specific communities and maximizing engagement. By building a strong network of affiliate clubs, the League of Ireland can expand its reach and cultivate a wider fanbase across different regions.

4-H-HMC pinpoints a key aspect of successful social outreach. "People aren't going to connect to a badge or a jersey, but if they see clubs doing good things in the community, if they see us visit their local schools, I think they'll connect with that." Social outreach programs allow the League of Ireland to connect with the community in meaningful ways. By engaging with schools, youth clubs, and local organizations, the League of Ireland fosters a sense of connection that goes beyond simply supporting a team. Partnering with charities and community organizations on outreach initiatives demonstrates the League of Ireland's commitment to social good and its positive impact on the local environment, "We also run an inclusivity team. We have a Down Syndrome Futsal team. We have a Football for All team where people with intellectual and physical disabilities can play football for fun" (4-M-HMC). Encouraging volunteers from within clubs and the fanbase can supplement staff efforts, broaden the reach of outreach programs, and strengthen the connection between the league and the community. 2-M-HM emphasizes the strategic importance of these efforts: "One of the places we've put our resources is into community links." This statement highlights the League of Ireland's recognition that strong connections within the community are crucial for its long-term success. By investing in social outreach programs, the league fosters a sense of shared identity and purpose.

Prioritizing and strengthening social outreach programs that focus on action and community engagement, the League of Ireland can build deeper connections with the local community. This can lead to a more loyal fan base, increased attendance figures, and a brighter future for the league as a whole. The League of Ireland's commitment to social outreach, as exemplified by clubs like Shelbourne FC and the network of affiliate clubs, paves the way for a more sustainable and successful future, one that is inclusive and welcoming to all.

Ethics & Consent

Throughout this research volunteers, representatives & stakeholders were treated with upmost respect. In this research, at any point of the questionnaire, participants from the interviews had the option to discontinue their participation. This research was conducted with the approval of the National College of Ireland Ethics Committee and adhered to all relevant General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines, prior to approval a detailed application form was submitted.

The application form was comprised of a detailed breakdown into various sections:

In part A of the application form, it contained information regarding the title of project & contact information. I stated in this section that my research will not be supported by any form of research funding, as it was not.

Section B of the application form outlined the research proposal. Included here were elements such, aims & objectives of the research, research design, the rational for the project, methods of data collection & the research sample along with the sample size.

A USB device with password protection was set up to securely store interviewee data. Secure data erasure techniques will be used to permanently erase the data after the required retention period has passed, and participant confidentiality will be preserved when disposing of the USB drive.

Also included in the extensive application form was the ethical risks section. The possible risks connected to the research were noted in this section, along with strategies for controlling those risks should they occur.

Before conducting the interviews, participants were sent an interview consent form via email to do semi-structured one-on-one interviews. In the initial segment, it stated what the research pertained & what it seeks to uncover. This made it possible for them to comprehend the goal of the study more clearly. Participants were required to read the interview terms and conditions before agreeing to participate and provide their answers. It was not required of participants to respond to any questions that made them uncomfortable. The interview consent form informed participants that at any time during the period of their

data being stored, under the freedom of information legislation they could request to have it. The researcher's email was included as a point of contact in case there were any questions, comments, or concerns.

Zoom, Microsoft Teams and phone calls served as tools for conducting the interviews. In order to best suit the interviewee's preferences and communication style, the interview format was carefully chosen.

Every interviewee was presented with ten questions, and the duration of each interview was roughly twenty minutes. Every interview was audio recorded, then transcriptions were made of the audio. Audio transcripts will also be kept on a password-protected USB drive for extra security.

Limitations

Understanding the limitations of any research methodology is crucial for ensuring the validity and generalizability of the findings. This section will discuss the limitations associated with using semi-structured interviews in the context of exploring League of Ireland clubs' digital marketing strategies. As noted by George (2023), semi-structured interviews present some limitations that warrant consideration. Three key limitations are important to acknowledge in this research:

1. Limited Interview Format

2. Reduced Participant Pool

3. Participant Fatigue

1. Limited Interview Format

The research design initially envisioned in-person interviews for all participants. However, unforeseen circumstances necessitated a mix of phone calls, video conference, and in-person interviews for data collection. While efforts were made to maintain a consistent interview style throughout, the use of video conferencing presented some technical challenges. These challenges included occasional connectivity issues that led to interview calls being dropped and picked back up during the conversations. This disrupted the flow of conversation and impacted the ability to maintain a train of thought & repeating information. Additionally, instances of video call freezing made it difficult to take detailed notes during the interview, affecting the comprehensiveness of the data collected.

2. Reduced Participant Pool

Despite efforts to secure interview participants, some individuals who initially agreed to participate were unable to attend their scheduled interviews due to other commitments. While attempts were made to reschedule, these cancellations resulted in a smaller pool of participants than originally planned. This limited the diversity of perspectives captured in the research. Ideally, a wider range

of experiences and viewpoints from various stakeholders within League of Ireland clubs would have been represented to create a more comprehensive understanding of digital marketing practices.

3. Participant Fatigue

All interviews were conducted after participants' full-time jobs. While the interview duration was kept manageable, the timing could have potentially impacted the quality of the data. Participants might have been fatigued after a long workday, potentially affecting their focus and willingness to fully engage with the interview questions. This could have resulted in less detailed or insightful responses.

Discussion & Conclusion

Detailed Synopsis

The aim of this dissertation was to investigate how digital marketing can grow the League of Ireland, to cultivate a more sustainable future for the Irish league. The literature review explored the established role of digital marketing in sports, highlighting how athletes leverage marketing strategies and sports sponsorship to build their brands and connect with fans. This chapter delves into the results of semi-structured interviews conducted with stakeholders within the League of Ireland clubs who are directly involved in developing and implementing digital marketing strategies from a variety of League of Ireland clubs. While the literature review provided a comprehensive framework, a unique theme emerged from the interview data that warrants further exploration. This theme: prize money, although mentioned by only one participant, holds significant potential for the League of Ireland's future success. By examining this theme alongside insights from the literature review, we will explore its potential impact and propose strategies for effective implementation.

Prize Money: Lone Voice

Despite being mentioned by only one participant, this theme warrants further exploration. As 4-M-HMC stated, "Prize money is a big issue... the team that wins the league, they get 100 grand, that's not good enough". The potential impact of increased prize money on the League of Ireland's future success cannot be ignored.

"There was a time in the league where the FAI CEO got paid more than all the clubs did in prize money, that's not good enough" (4-H-HMC).

Potential Impact of Increased Prize Money

Currently, the League of Ireland struggles to compete financially with leagues in other European countries. Limited resources often restrict clubs' ability to invest in top-tier players and development programs. However, a significant increase in prize money could change this dynamic. However, this could also exacerbate the existing financial disparity between clubs. Wealthier clubs with stronger financial backing might be better positioned to capitalize on increased prize money, further widening the gap between the top and bottom of the league. Larger prize pools would incentivize clubs to invest more strategically. The potential financial reward of winning the league or achieving a high finish could motivate clubs to:

1. Recruit Higher Caliber Players

2. Invest in Youth Development

3. Attract Talent (Domestic/International)

4. Transfer Revenue

5. Improved Performance

6. Heightened Fan Engagement

Recruit Higher Caliber Players

Increased prize money could incentivize clubs to invest in better players, but the League of Ireland still faces competition from wealthier leagues in Europe, such as the Premier League mentioned in the literature review. Attracting truly elite players might be difficult unless the prize money increase is substantial. Additionally, successful recruitment requires a strong scouting network and a professional club structure, which some League of Ireland clubs might lack.

Invest in Youth Development

While allocating some prize money to youth development is positive, relying solely on prize money increases for this purpose is risky. Investing in youth development requires a long-term commitment and a well-defined strategy. A portion of the increased prize money could be a good start, but sustainable funding for academies and coaching remains crucial.

Attract Talent (Domestic/International)

Increased prize money might entice some domestic players to stay, but other factors like playing standards, facilities, and overall professionalism also play a significant role. Unless the overall quality of the league improves mirroring Shamrock Rovers efforts alongside prize money, the impact on domestic talent retention might be limited.

The League of Ireland could become more attractive to some international players seeking a steppingstone, but the quality of the competition and potential career progression opportunities would still be major factors. Incredibly talented players might still prioritize leagues with stronger competition and better pathways to top European leagues.

Transfer Revenue

Increased transfer revenue hinges on attracting and developing players who impress enough to be scouted by bigger clubs. This relies not only on prize money but also on the overall quality of coaching, playing standards, and exposure the league receives.

Improved Performance

Increased motivation could translate to improved performance on the pitch. Players and staff might be more dedicated to training and tactics, leading to a more professional and competitive environment within clubs, other factors like coaching quality, player fitness, and overall team structure also significantly impact performance. Prize money alone might not be a guaranteed recipe for success.

Heightened Fan Engagement

More exciting, competitive matches could lead to increased fan engagement. Supporters would be more invested in their teams' success, potentially leading to higher attendance figures and a more passionate fan base, but this is not guaranteed. Fan engagement is also influenced by factors like ticket prices, stadium atmosphere, and the overall fan experience.

Path Forward

This research has delved into the potential of digital marketing to bolster the League of Ireland's profile and cultivate a sustainable future for the league. It explored the League of Ireland's existing foundation of community engagement efforts, particularly its focus on social outreach programs. By examining how digital marketing strategies can complement and amplify these efforts, this research has laid out a roadmap for creating a more engaged fanbase, increasing attendance figures, and ultimately achieving a brighter future for the League of Ireland.

However, the discussion ventured beyond the realm of digital marketing, with a particularly interesting theme emerging from the interview data: prize money. While mentioned by only one participant, the potential impact of increased prize money on the League of Ireland's future success cannot be ignored. A critical analysis revealed both potential benefits, such as enhanced competitiveness and attracting talent, and significant challenges, such as financial sustainability and ensuring a well-rounded approach to league development.

The League of Ireland, by embracing a comprehensive strategy that leverages digital marketing, fosters community engagement, invests in youth development, and explores sustainable financial solutions, can position itself for a brighter future. This research has offered a roadmap, but the journey towards a thriving League of Ireland requires the collective effort of clubs, players, fans, and stakeholders within the league. By working together and embracing innovation, the League of Ireland can not only survive but thrive in the ever-evolving landscape of professional sports.

Further Research

Further research can expand the conversation around the League of Ireland's future success. Building on this research's foundation, several exciting possibilities emerge.

We can delve into emerging digital marketing trends like influencer marketing, leveraging Artificial Intelligence for fan engagement, and optimizing campaigns through data analytics. Additionally, surveys or focus groups targeted towards League of Ireland supporters could provide a deeper understanding of fan motivations and preferences. This research would be invaluable in developing even more effective digital marketing strategies to cultivate a more passionate and engaged fanbase.

Furthermore, investigating the perspectives of players through interviews or surveys could provide valuable insights. Understanding player experiences with training facilities, coaching, and overall professionalism within the league could inform strategies for attracting and retaining talent.

Looking at the financial landscape, detailed financial modelling could assess the feasibility and long-term impact of potential prize money increases. Exploring alternative revenue generation models, such as naming rights for stadiums or partnerships with international leagues, could also be beneficial.

Beyond the League of Ireland itself, benchmarking its digital marketing strategies and financial structures against successful smaller leagues in other European countries could provide valuable insights and best practices. Finally, future research could involve implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of the proposed strategies over time. Tracking metrics like fan engagement, attendance figures, and potential revenue increases would assess the real-world impact of these solutions.

By pursuing these avenues, we can gain a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to the League of Ireland's success and develop a comprehensive strategy for ensuring its long-term sustainability and growth. The use of surveys and focus groups would be particularly valuable in gathering the opinions and perspectives of fans and players, offering crucial insights that can inform future initiatives.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Could you describe your journey and the factors that led you to pursue your career?

2. In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges to growing the League of Ireland fanbase through digital marketing?

3. In your opinion has digital marketing been effective in growing the league of Ireland in recent years?

4. What are your thoughts on the evolving landscape of digital marketing in sports, and how can the FAI adapt to stay ahead of the curve?

5. How integrated in sports sponsorship with teams in the league of Ireland?

6. To ensure long-term growth for the League of Ireland, how can the FAI develop a sustained digital marketing strategy that leverages social media, athlete involvement, and content creation to continuously attract new audiences and retain existing fans?

7. From your experience and in your opinion, do you think the LOI has leveraged live streaming or other digital broadcasting platforms to increase access to League of Ireland matches?

8. How can the FAI collaborate with other sports organizations or leagues to develop innovative digital marketing initiatives?

9. What future trends in digital marketing do you see as potential opportunities for the FAI to further grow the League of Ireland fanbase?

10. What are the biggest challenges you face as a volunteer media club representative?

Interview Sample

Researcher - In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges to growing the league of Irelands fan base through digital marketing?

1-M-WSM - There's part of the part of me, looking back too, because say, like, Facebook and all. They had stratospheric growth in the early teens and, you know, late noughties, kind of thing. And Derry wasn't making the most of their social media at that time, so it was now and then kind of coming in, in, say, 2017, 2018, and the team wasn't that great. Like, I know form and stuff helps grow social media, like, Cork's numbers were always massive because of their few successful years, kind of thing. And ours has definitely grown more in the last two years because we've been a far better team. But I feel like we must have, when everybody was liking pages and doing different things at the start of Facebook and stuff, Instagram, we've seen a bit of growth on, like, but whereas TikTok, we were intentionally an early adopter there and we've nicked nearly 100,000 followers on TikTok. I definitely don't put as much time into it as, like, Shamrock Rovers or something would. But the fact that we were early shows the growth you can get if you're on the doors early in a social media platform. So, I feel like we've missed a wee bit on Facebook and Instagram, but we're still playing catch up there with some other league of Ireland clubs. All our obstacles. There's a buzz about the league in the last few years that's definitely been a great part of it, especially since COVID,

where I think people appreciate live events and their doorstep a lot more now. And seeing all the social

media and fans. I don't think, I'm not sure if the Irish league in the north has seen the same impact, so.