



**Cordina, Renzo and Gannon, Martin Joseph and Croall, Ross (2017) Over and over : consumer engagement and turning sports tourists into fans. In: Academy of Marketing: Tourism Marketing Special Interest Group (SIG), 2017-12-01 - 2017-12-01, Heriot-Watt University. (Unpublished) ,**

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# OVER AND OVER: CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT AND TURNING SPORTS TOURISTS INTO FANS

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## INTRODUCTION

Travel to consume sport is an increasingly popular and prevalent leisure pursuit (Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011; Fredline, 2005). From those who follow Formula 1 across the globe (Henderson et al., 2010), to Tennis' most ardent fans (Fredline, 2005), consumers probe further afield in order to satisfy their desires for memorable and gratifying travel couched within the domain of their favourite sporting activities. Football consumption, although traditionally aligned along geographical or demographic boundaries (Jones, 2000; Porat, 2010, Conner, 2014), is no different with 800,000 overseas tourists travelling to the UK to experience matches every year (Magowan, 2015).

The extent of this travel provides opportunities tangentially for service providers geographically proximate to major finals and international tournament destinations (Daniels, 2005; Prayag et al., 2013), but also at a granular level for football clubs who seek to attract, engage, and maintain access to this lucrative market of affluent consumers who spend over £680m annually (Magowan, 2015). Extant research is focused on the impact of this economic influx (Daniels, 2007; Smith, 2005, Allan et al., 2007), with little consideration given to the tourists themselves, nor the potential to engage with these one-off visitors in order to transform them into more regular sources of income.

Therefore, engagement is crucial and, from an operational perspective, the football 'industry' has recognised this. The increasing prevalence of social media transfer announcements (Lang, 2017), innovations such as Manchester City's newly developed glass-tunnel (Hyde 2017), and 'city-takeover' events aimed at bridging the gap between player-and-fan, demonstrate how

football clubs are adopting unusual strategies in order to encourage consumers to believe that they have ‘behind-the-scenes’ access to the machinations of the clubs that they love. However, these attempts typically focus on local fans, neglecting those who travel to consumer sport on a regular basis. As such, the question remains, how can football clubs engage these tourists and encourage them to become ‘fans’ (through repeat visits and recommendations to friends) and thus benefit financially from their considerable spending power?

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

### **Engagement, Interaction, and Sports Tourism**

The concept of engagement is established across the gamut of business and management research, where it is concerned with how organisations encourage customers to interact with their business and/or brand in a committed, shared, interactive, and social manner (Pansari & Kumar, 2017; Taheri et al., 2014). Within tourism literature, high levels of engagement can improve tourists’ overall perception of a destination or experience, influence them to spend more time at a destination, increase their in-situ spending, and increase their propensity to recommend a destination to others (Falk & Storksdieck, 2005; Wang, 2006; Gannon et al., 2017).

Taheri et al. (2014) contend that traditional measures of engagement (e.g., time spent at attractions), do not necessarily stimulate substantive levels of involvement or engagement. Instead, there are three important characteristics necessary for consumer engagement to take place: attractors, sustainers, and relators. ‘Attractors’ are attributes that drive visitors to engage with sites, destinations, or experiences. ‘Sustainers’ help to maintain engagement throughout tourists’ visits, and ‘relators’ encourage tourists to foster a sense relationship with the experience, which can stimulate repeat visits. The greater the number of engagement opportunities (e.g., guided tours and interactive elements), the more memorable the tourists’ experience (Willson & MacIntosh, 2008) and, the more engaged tourists are, the greater the likelihood that they will return in future (Bryce et al. 2015, Willson & Macintosh 2008).

Sports tourists prescribe greater meaning to their travel, with the match-day given near-mystical status to the extent that it is considered a symbolic ‘pilgrimage’ (Gibson et al., 2003). Nonetheless, engagement is stimulated, accelerated, and maintained in a number of ways (Taheri et al., 2014), and the highly visual, interactive, and experiential nature of sporting events embodies many of the characteristics required to stimulate engaging and meaningful tourism (Edmond, 2006). The social aspects of sports tourism and consumption are important

in fostering commitment (and ultimately engagement) and the football match-day experience may serve as a particularly robust example of this (Conner, 2014). The opportunity for social interaction can motivate travel (Chang, 2006), but can also encourage tourists to revisit a destination, or stimulate positive recommendations (Gannon et al., 2017). Interactions with locals provide tourists with reliable and candid insights into the reality of a destination or experience (Zhou et al., 2015), and those seeking social interaction when travelling do so in the hope that it will make their experience more memorable (Kim, 2010).

Further, sports tourists are likely to return if their interactions with locals are friendly, welcoming, and they do not feel like ‘outsiders’ (Chen & Funk, 2010). However, football is highly partisan and tribal (Conner, 2014; Hewer et al., 2015), which leads to questions surrounding how best to engage tourists while exposing them to the more open and welcoming aspects of football fandom. As such, consumer engagement strategies may play a key role in moulding tourists into more regular sources of income, or even ‘fans’, by stimulating a desire to revisit in future or to act as advocates by recommending the experience to others (Gannon et al., 2017).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The focus of this study is Celtic FC, a football club based in Glasgow, UK. Recent estimations suggest that the club has a fan base exceeding nine million and the club regularly features as one of the largest brands in world football (Brand Finance, 2012). However, while Celtic FC has achieved a degree of international success in the past, it is not currently an elite-level club and, European competition notwithstanding, does not play in an elite league.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 sports tourists. While their nationality varied, the majority (82.8%) were from elsewhere in Europe, outside of the United Kingdom. All, however, had one thing in common – they travelled from their native country to attend a Celtic FC match in the period since August 2015. Given the international nature of the sample, interviews were conducted both in-person and via VOIP services, and recorded and subsequently transcribed. On average, interviews spanned 50-minutes. Thematic analysis was employed to explore responses from international tourists and themes highlighted throughout extant literature (Kakoudakis, McCabe, & Story, 2017). Participants were instructed to provide detailed, robust responses in order to clarify their opinions. This was a fluid, exploratory process, with codes revised as ideas developed, and findings were shared between the authors, increasing the validity of our analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest that the current engagement tactics employed by football clubs serve as appropriate ‘attractors’ (Taheri et al., 2014) and succeed in encouraging sports tourists to attend a match. The majority of participants were influenced to attend a Celtic FC match to some degree by the active and creative promotion tactics employed by the organisation. However, it may be difficult to sustain this initial engagement due to the inherent, non-local nature of sports tourists. Basic information is required in order to extend the match-day experience and further engage sports tourists:

“I hadn’t realised that the stadium was in walking distance to my hotel in the city centre – the website doesn’t say that - I got a cab after the match, and was stuck in traffic for over 30 minutes, and feel ripped off – it made it a very more expensive day out” (Jim, Canada)

This is exacerbated by their conflicting desire to feel like part of the crowd, which is simultaneously contradicted by a wish to be recognised as having taken the time and effort to attend a sporting event while travelling. This is most apparent during the match-day experience, and stems from issues surrounding the implied or inherent knowledge of where to go, or simply what to do, when at the stadium.

“I bought my ticket at the kiosk then I felt a bit like, you have my money, I’m on my own now – I will go enjoy the match then return to my hotel room afterwards...it wasn’t really an *experience* as such – just a match” (Jordan, Australia)

This need for an *experience* is not uncommon, despite the notion that live football consumption is an experience in-and-of itself. In some instances, our findings suggest that the club has recognised this: “We went to the match on the Saturday – it was great – and we wanted to get to know the club better – we were able to book onto a tour a bit more about the history of the club and we got to see the facilities in more detail” (Nicola, Italy). While prior knowledge can facilitate travel in the sports tourism context, basic characteristics such as the sight of the stadium, and even ‘the smell of the grass’ (Conner, 2014, p.532) can leave an impact on the sports tourists and may help to sustain interest and encourage them to explore tangential opportunities, which can further build relationships between service provider and tourist (Taheri et al., 2014)

Further, socialisation through exposure to local fans can strengthen engagement by providing a more authentic experience to sports tourists. Indeed, the inherently social and collective

nature of live football consumption goes some way to negating engagement oversights, and can encourage tourists to feel welcome and less isolated when consuming live sport:

“It was a lot of fun. At first I didn’t know what I was doing...you know...just lots of noise. But the guy next sitting next to me taught me the words to some of the songs and then I was singing along too” (Tomáš, Czechia)

Given this, there is room for interactions between local and tourist to be curated in order to increase the likelihood of tourists having a positive experience when socialising with local fans. If positive, this socialisation may encourage them more to return as burgeoning fans themselves, or to serve as advocates by recommending the club, the match-day experience, and the associated tangential aspects of sports tourism to others.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Outside of elite events, competitions, and teams (Henderson et al., 2010; Prayag et al., 2013), our understanding of those who travel to consume sport is limited. Football clubs have a difficult balance to strike between treating those tourists who attend matches as regular fans, while acknowledging their non-local nature and unfamiliarity with match-day customs. Achieving this balance is vital in order to sustain engagement (Taheri et al., 2014), in order to stimulate an experience that may result in repeat visits or recommendations to fellow tourists. More generally, current engagement tactics are successful in attracting tourists, who are attracted by this pre-travel interaction (Taheri et al., 2014). However, this does not stimulate revisits or subsequent recommendations as our findings suggest that these are contingent on how engaging and social the experience itself is. Nonetheless, as service providers, football clubs hold a natural advantage: (1) those attending matches are typically inclined towards the product on offer – the football, and (2) they may already have knowledge of the team they are travelling to watch.

As such, football clubs must make concessions if they aim to sustain engagement by providing a welcoming, social atmosphere for tourists. They should provide a greater degree of easily accessible information to tourists, both regarding the match-day experience, but also with regards to tangential information related to stadium tours, merchandise outlets, and hospitality offerings in order to encourage tourists to perceive the match-day as more than simply the match itself; a prolonged travel experience to engage with. Managers should train a cohort of staff dedicated to aid and assist tourists while at the stadium, and ensure that signage and

directions are clear to those unaccustomed to the match-day experience. Additionally, a dedicated multi-language mobile phone application could be introduced in order to provide tourists with the relevant information they need with regards to in-situ directions and expectations in an easily accessible context a multitude of languages.

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