"An exploratory study into supporter orientation in the League of Ireland-With specific interest in the factors of servicescape, competition / season structure and relationship marketing."

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine the factors that affect supporter orientation and the Football Association of Irelands' League of Ireland, the national senior championship of association football in the Republic in Ireland. Specifically the research paper examines servicescape, competition / season structure and relationship marketing between supporters and the League and its member clubs and how these factors impact upon supporter orientation. A literature review provides the foundation for the paper. Qualitative methodology was the approach taken to find primary information and examined three sample groups in relation to their perspective of supporter orientation and the League of Ireland. The research found that although on field activities such as quality and winning are the greatest attractions to supporters, off field factors, like servicescape, competition / season structure and relationship marketing between supporters and the League & its member clubs, do have an impact upon supporters perception of the League of Ireland. If the League of Ireland is more aware of these off field aspects, the League can become more supporter orientated and by doing so, both retain and create supporters for the League of Ireland.

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

Declaration

I hereby declare this research is entirely my own work other than that which is cited and acknowledged.

Signed:

Date:

Table of Contents

Diagrams

Appendices

List of Abbreviations

BBC= British Broadcasting Corporation

FA= Football Association

FAI= Football Association of Ireland

FC= Football Club

FIFA= International Federation of Football Associations

GAA= Gaelic Athletic Association

IFA= Irish Football Association

IRFU= Irish Rugby Football Union

LCD= Liquid Crystal Display

MLB= Major League Baseball

MNS= Monday Night Soccer

NBA= National Basketball Association

NFL= National Football League

NHL= National Hockey League

RTE= Radio Telefís Éireann

SANZAR= South Africa New Zealand Australia Rugby

TG4= Teilifís na Gaeilge a Ceathair

UEFA= Union of European Football Associations

VIP= Very Important Person

Chapter 1

Introduction

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Rationale

Association football is a team game and is also known as soccer, but most commonly and simply known as, football. Football is largely acknowledged as the most important, popular and largest game followed in the world of sports and is played in all regions of the globe. Football is truly the world game (Goldblatt, 2002). In the Republic of Ireland, the domestic football league is the League of Ireland and is administrated by the Football Association of Ireland.

In Ireland, the coming of the Celtic Tiger has seen a huge change in society. The growth and prestige of GAA sports like hurling and gaelic football, as well as rugby union, golf and horse racing has changed rapidly and attendances have grown with people keen to be associated with the sports and attendances at GAA games at club and more so county and international level (in the form of International Rules). Also at rugby union football games, match attendances, especially at provincial and international level, have swollen. However, the national association football team has arguably the greatest interest in it of all sports clubs and teams in Ireland, yet the domestic League of Ireland has struggled, with attendances nothing like GAA county teams or rugby union provincial teams. Under Jack Charlton and subsequent managers there has been a huge increase in interest and support of the Irish national football team, with games always full for international games, be they competitive or friendly. There is also massive interest in the English Premier League and Celtic of the Scottish Premier League. There are however only marginal increases in support, in terms of attendance, of the League of Ireland game. The image of the domestic game has also been tarnished, with well-documented financial woes off the pitch, damaging the perception of the League of Ireland amongst supporters.

This research is exploratory in nature, as the study is to understand customers' perceptions towards the product, in this case, supporters' perceptions of the League of Ireland (Kolb, 2008). The aim of this research is to understand what factors impact upon supporter orientation towards the League of Ireland, with primary focus upon servicescape, competition / season structure and relationship marketing.

- Servicescape: These are the facilities and amenities supporters encounter when experiencing and interacting with stadia.

- Competition and Season Structure: This is format of the League of Irelands season and tournament design.
- Relationship Marketing: This is the relationship and engagement between supporters and the League of Ireland and its member clubs.

The Author is unaware of any studies of supporters' perceptions of the League of Ireland and aware of only one academic study into the domestic game in Ireland by McGowan (2002). The research was restricted to the Border, Midlands and West Region of the Republic of Ireland.

1.2 League of Ireland

The League of Ireland, has in recent years, under went many changes. The season changed from an autumn / spring swing, which is fundamentally winter football to a spring / autumn swing, which is fundamentally summer football. The game in Ireland is in transition from been amateur and semi-professional at senior club level, to full-time professional, both on and off the field, with results in UEFA tournaments by Irish clubs gradually improving and clubs having to gain licenses to operate within the League of Ireland also. Another development by the League was the introduction of full-time Club Promotion Officers on behalf of the clubs. The role of the Club Promotions Officers is to promote and market the clubs in the wider community. One significant change in Association football in Ireland was the merger of League of Ireland to the Football Association of Ireland. The Genesis II Report (2005) changed the administrative running of the domestic game, while further strategic and structural changes to the League of Ireland are currently underway under numerous incremental changes over a period from 2007-2012 (FAI, 2005). There has also been a gradual improvement of stadia and facilities, with new stands and stadiums been built or being in the planning phases.

Media coverage of the game has also improved immensely in recent years. There are now more live games with Setanta Sports coming on air and RTE, the national broadcaster, has also increased the amounts of games it plays live.

Also for the last number of years TV3 showed a late Monday night 30 minutes highlights programme, and in 2008 RTE launched a new Monday prime time, hour long highlights programme, Monday Night Soccer. In 2005 Setanta Sports, launched a North-South cross border competition, the Setanta Sports Cup and has become a prestigious competition, while in 2007 a private consortium group Platinum One

proposed an All-Ireland League, that would comprise of the best clubs across the League of Ireland and Northern Irelands' Irish League participating (The Irish Times, 2008).

1.3 Research Question and Objectives

Question

Does servicescape, competition / season structure and relationship marketing have the potential to impact supporters' orientation towards the League of Ireland?

Objectives

- Is servicescape a factor that shapes supporter orientation?
- Can competition / season structure influence supporters orientation?
- Could relationship marketing build supporter interest?

1.4 Definition of Terms

- <u>Association football:</u> The game of association football will also be referred to as football throughout the research paper.
- <u>Competition / Season Structure:</u> A competition is a tournament where teams play each other competitively in. The season is, firstly, the time of year when a competition is played and secondly the season is, the total number of different tournaments played.
- <u>Competitive Balance:</u> Competitive balance is where uncertainty in games and in turn, uncertainty in tournaments, is maintained in order to sustain interest from supporters in sporting events (Sanderson and Siegfried, 2003).
- <u>League of Ireland:</u> Is the main competition clubs in the Republic of Ireland compete in and includes, for the purpose of this research, subsequent and related competitions, such as the FAI Cup, the League of Ireland Cup (more commonly known as the League Cup) and Setanta Sports Cup, which form part of the League of Ireland season, but not League of Ireland competition.
- <u>Relationship Marketing:</u> Is the interactive process between both the marketer and customer, with the aim of customer retention for the marketer (Sheth, 2000).
- <u>Servicescape:</u> Sevicescape is the enviroment that consumers interact with, when receiving a service or product with such as ambiance (such as

cleanines§s), phyiscal structure and design (such as furnishing) and staff (such as behaviour) (Ezeh and Harris, 2008).

- <u>Supporter:</u> Is an individual who follows a particular club / league and or sport.

1.5 Chapters Overview

- <u>Chapter 2 Literature Review:</u> This chapter examines previous research into the factors that affect supporter orientation, such as servicescape, competition / season structure and relationship marketing.

- <u>Chapter 3 Research Methodology:</u> This chapter examines the methods undertaken to achieve findings.

- <u>Chapter 4 Findings:</u> This chapter presents the findings and analyses the findings with previous research from the literature review.

- <u>Chapter 5 Conclusion:</u> This chapter presents concluding remarks, recommendations, the limitations of the research and where further research could be undertaken.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will examine literature in relation to factors that affect supporters orientation to a sport, with particular attention to servicescape, competition / season structure and relationship marketing. The literature review also gives an elementary understanding to what sports marketing and a sports supporter is, in order to give a foundation to examining the factors that affect supporter orientation.

Armstrong et al (2005) identified that a product had three levels.

- The Core Product are the core benefits for consumers.
- The Actual Product are the features, quality level, packaging, design, branding and other attributes of that combine to deliver the core benefits for users.
- The Augmented Product, are the extra benefits that support both the core product and actual product (Diagram 1).

Sullivan (2004) expands on this concept further and applied it to the marketing of sport. The core benefit of the sports basic product may be something as simple as the actual sport itself, while the real product or the product features would be stadium / facilities, competition or a teams merchandise. Combined together, both the basic product and real product make the total product. However one must be aware that basic and real products are dependent upon supporter perceptions. According to Blann (1998) a supporters' perception of a sport is both intangible and subjective. Blann added that the inconsistent and unpredictable nature of sports contribute to the supporters perception of a sport making it difficult for a sports marketer to measure and interpret supporters experience and perceptions accurately.

Diagram 1:

AUGMENTED
PRODUCT

ACTUAL PRODUCT

CORE
PRODUCT
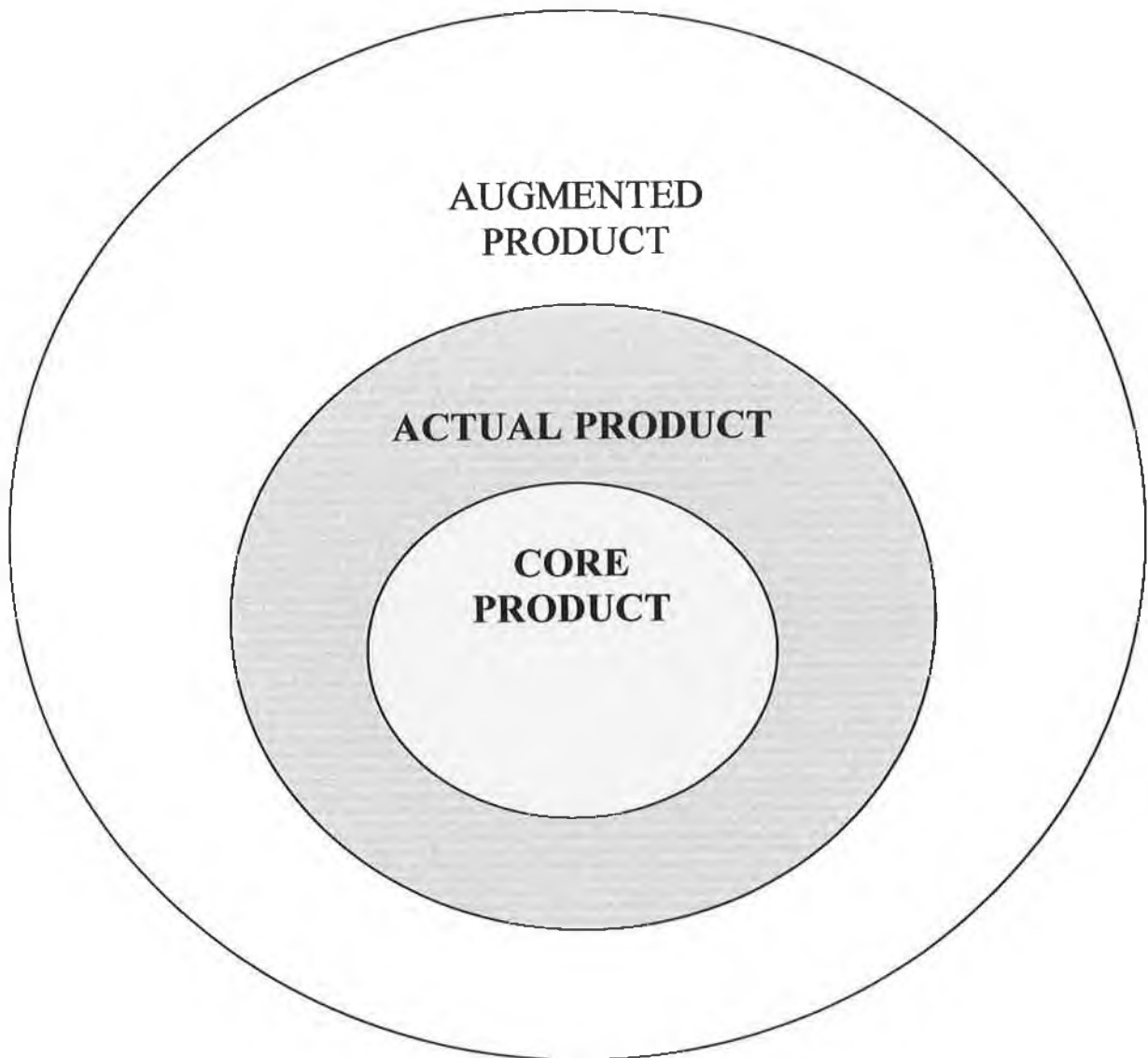
2.2 Sport Supporters and Orientation

Mason (1999) identifies that sports supporters are crucial, as they underpin the whole sports industry, including the leagues, clubs and all those associated groups with a sport. Depken (2000) supposes that supporters loyalty to a team is based upon, not alone a mixture of that of ticket prices and quality of a team, but also intangible factors as well, while Dunning and Waddington (2003) explore the idea that sport itself can be seen as 'drug' to sport supporters. Mourali, Nyeck and Pons (2006) suggest that sport holds a strong emotional attachment to sport supporters, but each individual has different motivations. Clowes and Tapp (2002) attempt to segment football supporters according to different criteria. They found through their research, that football supporters were a vast and diverse market. The reasons why people followed football ranged from a shared identification with a team, to entertainment, to following success as it gives fans a sense of intrinsic value and therefore sets football supporter segmentation different to other traditional industries, with multiple motivators for each individual supporter. In relation to this, Branscombe and Wann (1990) explore the idea that fans link their own identity with the team they follow and the teams successes and failure impact upon the supporters self esteem. Crisp et al (2007) explores this further, with the identification of the supporter with a club depends on how their team performs. Some fans who have a low identity with the team would feel sad if their team loses, whereas other fans with a higher identity would be more angry than sad if their team lost a match. Gyonghy and Krawczyk (1982) present evidence that young people in Poland and Hungary viewed sporting events as more than merely sporting events but greater cultural events and in order to attract young people to events competitions may need to be altered to entice their support. Studies have shown that how supporters identify with a sport or club is incoherent and difficult to segregate. Gouguet and Primault (2006) states that football demands vary from supporters across Europe, with fans in France having a lower demand than other supporters from other European countries indicating different wants from different fans.

Gilmore and Gilson (2007) mention that sports, such as football, has expanded beyond its traditional segment and into the wider public in England. Jewell and Molina (2005) found evidence in relation to professional association football in the United States, that more effort to be supporter oriented, should be made to target the growing segments of the population, to attract them to football.

It is imperative that sporting bodies, respond to supporters, to succeed as Surdam (2005) in his study of Minor League Baseball, found that the sport thrived despite the encroaching of Major League Baseball via medium such as television due to the sports ability to adapt and change its structure to suit supporter wants. Forster and Simmons (2006) acknowledge that association football or soccer is a world game, with many followers and sports organisations' have a role to develop the game on all fronts from competition to commercial aspects in order to attract supporters. Bashaw, Bristol and Hunt (1999) state that if a supporter follows a particular team, a knock on effect will occur in so far that the supporter will also become a follower of the league as a whole and in turn again becomes a fan of football in general too. Again, segmentation of sports fans is looked at and in order to reach out to different type of fans, different marketing strategies are needed. For example, local fans need to be reached out to by making the team part of the community, while devoted fans need constant information to be satisfied by any media for example, acknowledging the wide segmentation of sports supporters and their orientation towards sports. Depken (2001) gives evidence of this; by noting that in the NFL in American Football, there is one method teams try to re-energise supporter loyalty and widen supporter segmentation; By relocating a team to another city, it initiates interest in the NFL in that particular city.

2.3 Factors which impact upon supporters' orientation

In this section, research is presented that illustrates the factors that affect supporters' orientation towards a sport.

A number of studies found that macro environmental factors could effect supporter orientation, as Vrcan (2002) notes how supporter orientation can be changed due to the external environment. Lee (2006) identifies a number of reasons for a decline in attendance in a sport. He put forward increased competitive imbalance, economic downturn and the arrival of increased exposure of a rival sports leagues the reasons for the decrease in attendance in a sports league. Burdekin, Hossfeld and Smith (2005) suggest that even non-sporting and business activities such as race may influence supporters in attending games. Abrams (2003) in a study of baseball notes that external factors such as legal regulations can alter the publics' interest and entertainment of the game. Garcia and Rodríguez (2002) agreed that not alone is it the quality of games that attracts people to games, but variables such as cost and

economics' factors also influence people attending games. White and Wilson (1999) found in their study of Canadian sports variables, not alone economics' but even supporters education affect in dictating what sports, supporters do attend.

Hui, Pease and Zhang (1996) found that there are ultimately five variables that effect supporters' perceptions of a sports and the value it gives to the community; age and education, ethnicity, occupation and socioeconomic status.

Not alone does general macro environmental factors influence supporters' orientation, but so does other sporting factors, such as rival sports codes. Falter, Pérignon and Vercruysse (2008) found that following Frances victory in the World Cup in soccer in 1998, demand for football, in terms of club attendance went up, suggesting that macro factors beyond the control of the clubs and league can effect attendance positively or indeed negatively, while Fort and Maxcy (2001) examine rival baseball leagues and their study indicates that rival sports and leagues do take away fans from other sports and always need to be considered. An earlier study by Delgado (1997) examines the difficulties Major League Soccer has in trying to attract new football supporters, when in competition with the 'Big 4' sports of the United States such American Football, Baseball, Basketball and Ice Hockey.

Factors originating from a sports league or club also impact upon supporters' orientation. The view that on field success and quality was the greatest supporter attractor was supported by Nourayi (2006). His study found that the greatest impact on attendance is that of team performance and the more successful a team is, the more likely a clubs attendance will increase. A survey of Irish football supporters of Premiership clubs in England, by O'Dwyer and Richardson (2003) found that supporter orientation loyalty is high amongst Irish supporters (almost 70%) and that team switching is only common amongst supporters' that are under the age of 10. These loyal supporters will remain with the same team through periods of both success and failure, however, on field quality was found to be the main initial attractor for supporters, as supporters will only become supporters when the team is in a period of on field success.

In contrast, off field aspects were more pivotal to gaining loyalty from supporters, as found by Bristow and Sebastian (2001) and observe that supporter orientation is something built over time and a clubs history is crucial in creating and retaining supporter loyalty and even complete lack of success will not drive away fans. It found also that off field activities can entice potential and is especially important to engage

younger fans for long-term supporter orientation. Donihue, Findlay and Newberry (2007) indicate that many changeable factors such as ticket prices, location of the game, quality of teams on offer as well as game start times and weather factors all influence attendance at games, with an increase in ticket prices decreasing fan attendance at games. Lombardo (2008) writes that in the NBA, many factors attract people to games such as marquee trades, the improvement of traditional giants like Boston Celtics and that the increased levels of competition all help raise attendance at games. However, in comparison Coates and Harrison (2005) conclude that players' strikes and lockouts in baseball, as well as price changes to tickets, had little impact on dampening sports attendances. According to Sherry, Shilbury and Wood (2007) supporters of sport demand integrity and transparency within the sport and is very important as this can damage the image held by supporters and the general public and in the long term can damage the support they gain from the public as well as the sport itself. Lucifora and Simmons (2003) investigates the impact that soccer players who are judged to be superstars have in the Italian Series A football league in terms of attracting people to games, while Berri and Schmidt (2006, 2) examined the impact Michael Jordan had on attendances in the National Basketball Association Championship and concluded that superstar externality have an impact on enhancing attendances at games and is a major draw for supporters to matches. Brandes, Franck and Nüesch (2007) find evidence that supporters are attracted to superstar footballers by their on field performance at home and away games while those defined as local heroes attract supporters to matches by being folk heroes in the locality alone, but this only extends to attracting supporters to home games only. Ticket policy can also attract supporters, as Harris and Jenkins (2001) state that sport industry is unlike any other industry insofar as that ticket pricing are devised to attract supporters, as opposed to setting a price that is profitable. Gargalianos and Thamnopoulos (2002) examines ticketing at a large sporting event, the Olympics and finds that ticket policy can either generate a positive or negative interest from the potential supporters in the manner that it is managed.

These are some of the factors that affect supporter orientation towards a sport, sports league and sports team. The next three sections examine the impact that servicescape, competition / season structure and relationship marketing have upon supporters orientation towards a sport, sports league and sports teams.

2.4 Servicescape

Kuehn and Reimer (2005) defined servicescape as that of the physical facilities an organisation offers to its consumers and in turn impacts upon the perception that a customer receives of the quality of a service. Gronfeldt and Strother (2006) also identify the tangibles (the physical amenities design, layout and atmosphere) as also having an impact upon customers' experience of a service.

Kambitsis, Laios and Theodorakis (2001) states that sports marketers can not control the core product of football, which is the game itself, but can control extensions to the product, like servicescape aspects like quality amenities and facilities, all of which have a major influence on supporters perception of a game. Ammom (1998) states that amenities such as parking, seating, restrooms and eating facilities all contribute to a spectator's enjoyment of a sporting event. Beech and Chadwick (2004) support the view that facilities are important to today's sports consumer and the aesthetic elements of a stadium as well as the quality of facility design is all important in attracting sport consumers to use the stadium. Emery et al (2006) expands upon this, by noting that in order for sports organisations needing to create and retain customers the quality of a sports facility is vital, as this in turn will lead to greater satisfaction by sports customers and eventual retention of sports customers. Two important aspects, that constitute the visible evidence, need to be made aware of, in this regard. The first is the physical stadium itself such as seating and architectural design as well as lighting and sound systems the second is touch points such as contact people like ticket ushers and beverage staff as well as the players, as these all contribute to the service experienced by supporters. Secondly, the invisible evidence, such as a clubs marketing division needs to coordinate all these visible aspects effectively to ensure the quality of servicescape.

The expansion of servicescape is noted by Dale et al (2005) as, not alone are the facilities important in attracting people to sporting activities, but also found diverse activities such as match day entertainment, events in the club bar, before and after the game and early bird offers such as free match programme would all help entice spectators to a game. Muret (2008) views that modernisation of stadium facilities are crucial, in order to attract all types of supporters and widen the supporter base, by noting that improvement in wheelchair facilities and using LCD screens in order to assist hearing impaired fans who cannot gain service from public announcement systems. Also some new stadia facilities, are installing wireless units so that

supporters can purchase beverages on pick up, by passing the traditional queuing system.

Atmosphere was also found to be an aspect of servicescape that attracts supporters to a sport. Bauer, Sauer and Schmitt (2005) examined, from a supporter perspective, the German football league and found that football alone, was not core in increasing attendances but also non-products aspects to the football, such as the atmosphere in the stadium were all important in attracting supporters to matches.

Cooke and Paton (2005) in their examination of cricket in England and Wales, also found that methods that facilities atmosphere, are key to attracting patrons to games. Methods such as the introduction of floodlight games and moving the county team around various grounds to play matches in order to generate patron interest, as does match appearances of high profile players at county games, all enable atmosphere at stadia. Mickle (2008) supports this, by noting that attendances in the NHL in ice hockey increased and may have been offset by holding an outdoor ice hockey game, by playing the game in a different atmosphere, by a sport that has been traditionally held indoors as the average attendance at a game is 16,000 but at the outdoor game it was 71,000, Slowikowski (1993) looks at what mascots mean to a clubs fans and the identity they symbolise, and add to the atmosphere especially for younger supporters, and even though they are part of a clubs servicescape they provide a link for supporters. Mascots also play a dual role in that they represent a link between the supporters and clubs relationship.

There is strong evidence of servicescape impact upon supporters' orientation. For example, Blodgett and Wakefield (1996) views the facilities or servicescape are important on two fronts. The functional quality and the visual quality both contribute to a consumer's perception of a servicescape and this in turn, can enhance the supporters' perception of the core-sporting product as well. They empirically supported this by investigating the variation of quality in MLB stadia. Clapp and Hakes (2005) study indicates that a new stadium can increase attendance by over a third for two seasons due to the quality of the stadium alone, indicating continuous facility improvement is needed to maintain supporter satisfaction. However, Leadley and Zygmont (2005) found evidence that with the opening of new facilities, attendance at NBA games will initially increase by 15% to 20%, but this rise will fade over a number of years and clubs must be aware of this. Sayers (1991) expands this, by stating that clubs and leagues should in relation to supporters who use the sports

12

facilities, carry out regular surveys, in order to gather evidence of users perception of the facilities insofar as it can look at both the satisfactory and unsatisfactory elements of the facility, as well as giving customers a new avenue in allowing them to express what they wish to gain from the sporting facility.

The only disadvantage of upgrading servicescape was noted by Long (2005) that with consumers demanding better facilities, it is very expensive for a sport to respond to this demand, in relation to the stadia of sports.

2.5 Competitions and Season Structure

The literature found evidence that how a season is structured and how competitions are formatted does influence supporters' orientation towards a sports league and its members clubs. Mason (1999) acknowledges that the competition element in sport is important for supporters. Branscombe and Wann (1992) highlight that supporters' more readily identify with their team when winning a match and are more disillusioned with the team if they lose, with tournaments important methods of facilitating this competition. It is imperative that sports seasons and competitions are therefore structured in a format to attract supporters, with competitions formatted so that competitive, meaningful play is maintained throughout the tournament. A level of competition balance, which is that of formatting tournaments to make sure uncertainty of the sporting outcome is sustained as long as possible, is vital in attracting supporters. Sanderson and Siegfried (2003) support this by noting that many factors influence competitive balance and that competitive balance is key in maintaining supporters interest in a sport. Owen and Weatherston (2004) confirmed in their study, that competitive uncertainty is key in attracting patrons. Other competitive factors such as club rivalries, supporters' perceptions of previous games, as well as current team placing in the league are determinable factors in match attendance. Berri and Schmidt (2001) found there is a relationship between the competitive nature of a championship and the effect it has upon attendance. In contrast however, Meehan, Nelson and Richardson (2007) found that if a change in competitiveness in a sports league, will not necessarily alter the attendance at games simultaneously, indicating other factors may contribute to game attendance. Fort and Lee (2006) state that attendance at games are generally viewed as non-stationary and is therefore near impossible to predict accurately and more analysis is needed to be done in order to better predict and facilitate attendance at sport games.

Sanderson (2002) discusses that although competitive balance is the ideal in sport, it is near impossible to obtain. K Ésenne (2004) argues that, winning tournaments is the maximum objective, especially for the larger clubs. These larger clubs then will dominate the smaller clubs, and so the governing bodies will need to redress the competition balance. Kahn (2007) examines the composition of the sports leagues and finds there is an optimal size depending upon the talent in the field, and the governing bodies should make sure talent is not concentrated. One method of this is a Salary Cap suggested by Fenn, Spenner and Larsen (2006) & Easton and Rockerbie (2005,1). They state that off field activities such as salary caps can all have an impact upon the competitive nature of a sport. Berri, Brook and Schmidt (2004) suggests that competitive balance is imperative to holding fans interest in a league or sport and if this is not the case other instruments need to be brought in so that supporters are attracted to games, such as star player attraction. Fort and Maxcy (2003) note that competition is the first key factor, when accessing the success of a league from an empirical position, while Zimbalist (2003) states that this needs to be backed up by theory of competitive balance as well.

As already mentioned in the literature review, governing bodies need to implement methods to encourage competitiveness and uncertainty in sports, such as salary caps. However there are also other methods to increase this competitive balance in sports, such as how sports tournaments are structured. There are three methods of increasing competition in sport tournaments through structure. Match gameplay, which refers to altering the competitive nature of an individual match, within a tournament. Tournament modification restructuring, which refers to altering the format of a whole tournament to entice supporter interest and the final method is by creating new tournaments to sway supporters' interest. There are many contemporary examples of match gameplay, tournament restructuring and newly created tournaments, that have been developed in order to attract supporters and make sport leagues more supporter orientated. However, authors have also found that, some new tournament developments could also disenfranchise supporters as well.

2.5.1 Match Gameplay

Brocas and Carrillo (2004) examine two changes to the rules of association football, namely the introduction of three points for a win and the Golden Goal Rule, whereby a team won the game if they scored a goal in extra time. These changes were brought

into the game in the belief that they would make teams play more offensive football, but according to the research teams played more offensively under the previous two points for a win system. In contrast, Haugen (2008) also highlighted the change in football in terms of match competitiveness, with the change in the points system (From the traditional 2 points for a win, 1 point for a draw, and 0 points for a lose to increasing the points for a win to 3 points) and notes that it does change the attacking and defensive nature of the game, with the result that the points rewarded has altered the competitive balance and scope of the game. Carrillo (2007) suggests a way of making association football more attractive to watch, in relation to penalty shoot outs, by holding the penalty shoot out before extra time, therefore giving one team the initiative to win the game in extra time, as opposed to both time playing more dour football and taking their chances with the penalty kicks afterwards. Lowenthal and Shmanske (2007) examines the NHL and the change in the points reward system in order to encourage teams to change from playing conservatively in overtime to playing more aggressively, by retaining the point it gained in ordinary time, even if overtime the team loses, therefore initiating a team to play more attacking game play. Longley and Sankaran (2007) also suggest, that more gameplay strategies should be put in place that will make overtime in ice hockey more attractive and move away from the more defensive strategies played out and make more offensive styles of play an incentive and Easton and Rockerbie (2005,2) support this by recommending gameplay that do not penalise offensive play. Ackford (2000) notes that the bonus point system was introduced in the English Premiership in rugby union. The gameplay encourages offensive match tactics and rewards teams that lose games by 7 points or less and also scoring 4 tries or more. The author suggests that the gameplay will be more spectators friendly.

2.5.2 Competition Restructuring

Nourayis' (2006) study indicates that tournament format may also be a factor in attracting support to games, while Lago, Simmons and Szymanski (2006) state that it is imperative that competitions are restructured in order to sustain supporter interest. Morrow (2006) & Dejonghe and Vandeweghe (2006) indicates, in their study of Scottish and Belgium football respectively, there is a need to create a more competitive football environment and structural reform is needed at both national and trans-national level, in terms of competition and tournament structure. Horowitz

(2000) finds empirical evidence that league competitions need to be aware that fans react well to competitive matches and championships need to be structured and created to maintain supporter interest in the tournament.

Depken and Wilson (2004) examine tournament structure should be structured to reward teams that deserve it in order to maintain fairness in competitions and to attract supporter interest. Abrevaya (2004) finds evidence for this, by examining the changes that were made to the NHL play-offs made in the 1999-2000 season and found that the changes brought about the desired effect of increased excitement from the supporters during the game.

Bauer, Sauer and Schmitt (2005) state that league tournaments are vital and central to the driving football. Noll (2002) suggests that promotion and relegation in the English league system in association football has, overall, a positive effect on fan attendance as it results in more excitement and purpose in football matches, although Buraimo, Simmons and Szymanski (2006) state however, with increased competition in English football in terms of the annual seasonal promotion race and survival from relegation, non-football related pressures such as financial pressure occur simultaneously as well. Walker (1986) suggests that in British football, reorganisation of the league such as regionalisation of the lower division may boost attendances at matches, while Mason (1999) states that in football, it is also the rivalry amongst teams that fuel competitive aspect that feed supporters consumption of the game and that national championships and other tournaments should be designed to inject this. In the modern game supporters are the underlining foundation in the economics' of the games and are needed to be attracted to the game.

Crooker and Fenn (2007) examined baseballs competitive structure and found that the greater the competition balance, the greater supporter interest in the league will be generated, with Noll (2003) supporting this, by noting that MLB was to eliminate two of the weakest teams in the league in order to create a more competitive league.

Forrest and Simmons (2008) researched the schedule of games in their study of the lower divisions of the English Football League found that if unorganised, it could have a negative impact on attendance, such as playing two home games closely to one another. They also found it is best for clubs not to organise lower league games that will clash with UEFA Champions' League matches for example.

Bond (2008) reports on one development of a changed tournament format, in the Premier League in English football, is that of the proposed international round, while

Inverdale (2007) reports a similar development in the NFL with an international round also. The BBC (2008,1), Winter (2008) & The Times (2008) report that the development of international rounds in national championships will engage and be beneficial to foreign supporters of a sport, but the BBC (2008,2), Stinson (2007) and Wilson (2008) disagrees, as the development of international rounds for domestic tournaments will only alienate and disenfranchise domestic supporters, whom form a key cornerstone of national championships and make it is, what it is.

The Celtic League rugby union tournament is an example of a tournament format evolving. The BBC (2008,3) and the Irish Independent (2003) note that the championship was initially structured as a two-group tournament with three knock out rounds. It was altered however, to a more traditional home and away single league and is evolving further by introducing play-off semi-finals and final at the end of the season, in order to curtail dead rubber league games, and so making the league more competitive and attract more interest from supporters throughout the year.

In rugby league, Slater (2008) and Phillips (2003) notes small changes in tournament structure, such as the Millennium Magic Round in the European Super League and the introduction of Monday Night Football in the Australian National Football League had a positive impact upon supporter orientation.

2.5.3 Newly constructed tournaments and games

Newly created tournaments and games between teams who do not regularly play each other, shall also entice interest for supporters. McDonald and Sutton (1998) acknowledged that enough opportunities and public appetite, for competitive sports, exist to create new tournaments and events such as match doubleheaders. Butler (2002) examines the newly developed MLB inter-league series and what impact inter-league play has on attendance in baseball, in comparison to traditional intra-league play and found that the majority of fans react positively to these, with only a small number of fans who do not. The study found, these inter-league games gaining an increase of 7% to ordinary intra-league games, due to the novelty of the games, as teams do not play each other regularly. Coates and Humphreys (2002) note that post-season games are key to the competitiveness of tournaments in sports in the United States and are constructed so that teams who do not play each other in the regular season, may play each other in the post-season, making a novelty of the games. MacLeod (2007) reports that the NFL is attempting to create supporters in the

Chinese Market, with the creation of a new tournament, the pre-season Chinese Bowl and will make American football, a novelty sport in China. Baade and Matheson (2001) agreed, that novelty games, such as the All-Stars games of the baseball season, are an attraction to supporters.

Kitson (2008) and Wood (2008) agreed that in rugby union, a more global season structure is needed, with Jones (2007) reports that if a global season is formatted a new championship, the World Series of Rugby, is being proposed and would harness the boom in support and growth the game has undertaken, amongst the public. It would also give a new dimension to current tournaments like the 6 Nations Championship and Tri Nation Series as well as the Autumn International Tests, as these tournaments and games would be encompassed within the proposed championship.

In cricket, Hopwood's'(2005) study of the Twenty20 Cup in England and Gillis (2008) & Hughes (2008) examination of the Indian Premier League, found that these championships were created and designed to be supporter oriented. These tournaments also encompass the new gameplay of 20 / 20 cricket, which was also designed to be more supporter orientated as well and so two methods of competition change were implemented simultaneously, to attract supporters. Hopkins (2007) & Spander (2007) report that the creation of the Fed-Ex Cup play-offs in the PGA tour was devised to generate excitement and interest for the golfing public. Reason (2008) & Corrigan (2007) note that restructuring of the European PGA Tour with a cumulative new tournament named the 'Race to Dubai', will also increase public interest in golf, similar to the Fed-Ex Cup.

2.6 Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing and its methods are viewed as vital in attracting customers, such as supporters to a particular product. Relationship marketing is understood to be key in order for an organisation to become customer oriented, as shall be demonstrated in this section of the literature review.

Sheth (2000) understands relationship marketing, as focusing organisations towards customers' needs and wants, with the organisation engaging these customers. Donaldson and O'Toole (2007) examined the strategic growing importance of relationship marketing in a business to business context and see businesses deal, with a number of different stakeholders, some stakeholders' been once off, others on a

regular basis, but that relationships are fundamental to how any organisation operates. Philips (2006) views relationship marketing as pivotal for on organisations success. However, there are difficulties in relationship marketing, such as how the roles of the parties, involved in the relationship, are defined (Ritter, 2007 & Tynan, 1999), while Kasabov (2007) notes that relationship marketing has not been wholly understood yet. Free and Hughson (2006) examines how sport relationships are different to other areas of society, insofar as that, supporters may give financial and other material support to the sport, but this is merely a demonstration of the more emotional and genuine link they hold with the sport, as Giulianotti (2002) further explores, by segmenting football spectators into four types; supporters, followers, fans, and flâneur, with supporters on one extreme as intense localised spectators and flâneur as detached football consumers and showing that some, if not all supporters, are not merely customers of football, but are part of the football community itself.

Sports leagues and clubs have recognised the importance of relationship with supporters as Anon (2005) finds that increasing brand awareness of a club increases the number of supporters for a club and the club brand is an important symbolic aspect for fans to identify and hold a relationship with a club. Harris and Ogbonna (2008) further examine the impact a clubs relationship marketing effort has upon a supporters' attachment with the club, from an English Premier League perspective and found it to be of great importance. However, Giulianotti (2005,1) argues that it is imperative that clubs do not view supporters as mere customers of football commodities, as this will alienate these supporters and supporters needs to be viewed as part of the football community. Sports leagues and teams need to acknowledge that supporters are part of both a sports league & sport clubs and need to be engaged, through medium such as the media and loyalty programmes. The next three sections examine this.

2.6.1 Community

For relationship marketing in sport to succeed, it is necessary for a sports league or club to understand the segment or community they want to engage with. Studies have shown the importance of sports, sports leagues & teams being open to and part of a community. Kraszewski (2008) examines the idea that sports clubs are a form of community for supporters. An earlier study by Branscombe and Wann (1991) argue, that sports clubs give a sense of belonging to supporters, while Karp and Yoel (1990)

demonstrate that sport is a way for urban areas to create a sense of community identity. Giulianotti (1996) and Harris (2007) found that supporters engaged with a team because they were both part of and representatives of the community. Groothuis, Johnson and Whitehead (2001) find evidence that some teams, also brings about civic reward and enhances community morale. Giulianotti (2005,2) looks at the impact of identification and escapism offered by the 'Tartan Army' which is a loose and organic following of the Scottish national football team and how it acts as a way of escaping modern daily living for individuals, carving out an existence of its own. However, Barget and Gouguet (2007) note that while sport has an impact on wider society, such as positive ones like creating a social community, there is also negative ones like hooliganism and these will in turn impact on potential sports consumers perception of a sport.

Even though sport relationships involving teams and supporters were once simple and were of local identity and community, Berri and Schmidt (2006,1) gather evidence that suggest that supporters have moved from supporting a team out of home town loyalty, to that of following a team that is winning. The research suggests this could be due to the change in the macro environment and not alone the sport itself. Millward (2006) examines the impact UEFA club tournaments have on Liverpool FC supporters, and find that the club-supporters relationship strengthen to such macro environment events that are outside the clubs control of the relationship with supporters. Crawford (2003) also argues that team-supporter relationships are fluid and subject to change. Robertson (2004) examines how Manchester United FC go well beyond having local fans and are a global club, indicating not all clubs are indeed grass root clubs. Farred (2002) demonstrates that even distance and lack of technology do not quell the emotional ties one has to a club.

2.6.2 Media and Interactive Medium

The role of the media and interactive medium, such as the internet are an increasingly important part of the relationship between supporters and the sports league & clubs. Campbell, Finney and Rogers (2007) study suggests that media coverage generates renewed interest of a sport for supporters. A similar study by Coate, Paul and Weinbach (2007) refer to the importance of television acting as a medium for supporters' relationship with sport clubs. Ben-Porat (2000) demonstrates the important role of the media in relationships, by gathering evidence that football

supporters in Israel, more readily follow British clubs more so than local clubs, aided by access to the British leagues through television, more so than the national Israeli league. Sandvoss (2004) argues that the internet and online media elements of sports, strengthens the relationship a sport has with its supporters. Beech, Chadwick and Tapp (2000) in an earlier study of the websites of English football clubs found that they are another avenue in order to attract and retain greater supporter loyalty and increase interaction between supporters' & clubs'. It facilitates different supporters' wants, from those who wish to talk about football via chartrooms, to those who want to become more knowledgeable of the club, to those who wish to buy merchandise and tickets.

2.6.3 Supporter Engagement and Loyalty Programmes

Supporters' need to be engaged with a sports league or team, in order to develop a relationship with the sports league or team and the league or team needs to create programmes to entice supporters' to the league or club. Ferguson and Hlavinda (2007) & Stevens (2006) acknowledge that loyalty programmes are one method undertaken by organisations to strengthen relationships with customers, but are difficult to create, as loyalty models must canter for a wide segment of different customers.

Research by Matveyev, Milstein and Moltchanov (1980) suggest that the amount of an individual's engagement with sports will influence the social relationship they hold with the sport. Földesi (1996) supports this principle, in his study of Hungarian football, suggesting that fans would be more willing to engage with the game if the sport was organised differently, emphasising the importance of supporter engagement. An earlier study by Pawlak and Przybysz (1983) supports this also and found that participation and interaction with a sports association, increased supporter identification and strengthen the relationship, they hold with the sport itself. The sports club or league must devise schemes and programmes, in order to engage and strengthen relationships between supporters and the sport as, Irwin, Sutton and Zwick (1999) found that in all aspects of professional sport, being close to the customer and having a relationship with fans is paramount to success in terms of attendance and ticket sales and a club should enable schemes that will facilitate and engage supporters with the club.

Carter, Hoffman, and Kelley (1999) propose a 5-step process in order to create a supporter base;

- Create awareness
- Generate interest
- Facilitate evaluation
- Prompt trial
- Ensure adoption

The study finds it is important to engage supporters with innovative programmes that will make supporters proper members of the club and give them another social outlet and stronger identity & relationship with the club. Gwinner and Swanson (2003) agreed that supporters should become more involved with teams as it is part of the community and by utilizing simple programmes, like regular correspondence via email and by giving supporters greater accessibility to the club and its players, greater supporter affinity for a club is created. Other schemes to engage supporters were examined by Davis and Duncan (2006) whom found evidence that fantasy leagues also reinforce match spectatorship, while Bernache-Assollant, Bradock and Lacassagne (2007) study of ultra fans found the importance of programmes such as fanzine magazines in strengthening the clubs' relationship with supporters.

2.7 Literature Review Summary

The literature review finds that supporters underpin all sport industries and it is imperative that sport marketers understand what factors impact upon supporters' orientation towards a sport. According to the literature review the biggest attraction for supporters is the actual sport itself. However, sport marketers need to be aware that other factors can influence a supporters' attraction to a sport. Sport marketers need to be aware of factors such as servicescape, competition / season structure & relationship marketing and how these factors are to be constructed, so that a sport is more appealing and engaging to supporters. It is therefore vital that sports are supporter orientated.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

Chapter 3 Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

According to Moore (1987) research is carried out for the purpose of expanding knowledge, usually of a particular field. The methodology chapter will explore the research design and methodology type & process. The chapter will also describe the sampling selection of the research methodology, with the preliminary testing and questionnaire design also illustrated.

3.2 Research Design

This section describes the design of the research.

3.2.1 Literature Review Methodology

As the basis of the research design the author undertook a literature review in specific areas of sports marketing such as servicescape, the competitive / season structure and relationship marketing or related topics to these to gain some understanding of these areas. The literature review was the source for secondary information and data.

Two areas formed the basis for the secondary research. The first area was journals in sports business & sports marketing in order to give a strong theoretical foundation. Secondly all other relevant publications were examined to gain insight of contemporary issues in sports business and sports marketing today. Finally, the literature review gives a grounding in a sport being supporter orientated. The author is aware of only one area of research into the domestic game in Ireland (McGowan, 2003).

3.2.2 Primary Research

Primary research was conducted upon three sample groups by qualitative survey interviews, in order to gauge their perspective upon the three areas of servicescape, the competitive / season structure and relationship marketing. The three sample groups were domestic game officials, domestic game supporters and non-domestic game supporters.

3.3 Quantitative Research versus Qualitative Research

There is two basic different types of research; qualitative & quantitative and both are of importance in expanding and understanding knowledge, with both methods primary ways of acquiring data. Which method to use, if not both, depends however on the nature and ultimate objective and purpose of the research and the knowledge and perspective it acquires (Moore 1987).

According to Holliday (2002) quantitative research is numerical and statistical in nature, working best where large samples and a controlled environment is present and whereby a desired result is the objective. Qualitative research is more in depth and open and is a more interactive and subject to the external environment and works best in smaller samples and attempts to understand meaning and experience, with a new understanding, the ultimate objective.

The method selected was the qualitative approach. This approach was taken, as the study is exploratory. The qualitative method type gains understandings, impressions, attitudes and opinions that the stakeholders may hold in relation to their knowledge of supporter orientation in relation to the League of Ireland. This approach is undertaken to ask why they do relate or not relate to the League of Ireland and will also give depth to supporters' perceptions of the League.

The reason for selecting the qualitative approach was because the sample groups were in self-organised groups, such as domestic supporter clubs, prior to the research and therefore were easily identifiable. It was deemed better to gain qualitative data and where deeper, understanding could be acquired and improvements to the League of Irelands supporter orientation could be made.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) qualitative research has various methods that includes, interviewing, observation, focus groups and applied ethnography amongst others. The method of interviewing was selected. The reason for the use of the interview in this study was in relation to supporter orientation in the League of Ireland itself. There are a small number of interested identifiable stakeholders in the League & association football itself and the assumption that the stakeholders themselves are homogeneous & easily identifiable.

3.4 Qualitative Survey by Personnel Interviews

Keegan, Legard and Ward (2003) view interviews are one of the main methods in obtaining qualitative information. Kvale (2007) notes the interview can provide a deeper insight into a topic for the interviewer.

Keegan, Legard and Ward (2003) also state that there is certain attributes needed of the interviewer, in order to conduct a successful interview. These attributes include a curious mind, sound listening ability, a clear logical mind in order to distil information, good memory and ability to form rapport with interviewee. There are many advantages are the interview such as;

- Interviews open the opportunity to uncover information that would not have been as complete if taken for example in a postal survey.
- Another advantage is that it is taken in a setting whereby respondents are more likely to be open with their motivations and opinions.
- The interviewer can draw similar themes from the interviews conducted to draw a clearer picture.
- Researchers can get to more central, fundamental areas that lie beneath the problem.
- Control of environment, time and place.
- Structure and flexibility enable exploratory probes, which mine for avenues for further research.

However there are also disadvantages of interview such as;

- The relatively small size of the sample and therefore the higher margin of error must be considered.
- Is more expensive and time consuming to conduct.
- Subjectivity and open to interpretation upon what the interviewee stated.
- If rapport between interviewer & interviewee is not achieved and bias on behalf of the interviewer occurs, this will be detrimental to the study.
- Interviews can be intrusive due to their face-to-face nature especially in relation to sensitive issues (Keegan, Legard and Ward, 2003 & Greenfield, 1996).

3.4.1 Qualitative Survey by Telephone Interview

Telephone Interviews were held for two non-domestic game supporters, due to the nature of the interview being shorter than the interviews for the other groups, as face-

to-face survey interviews were deemed to be a considerable cost in terms of time and money.

- The advantage of telephone interviews was low cost and high speed.
- The disadvantage of telephone interviews was the limited information in comparison to the personal interview and the limited amount of non-verbal information that cannot be obtained (Greenfield, 1996).

3.5 Survey Research

The research was on three areas that have an impact upon the perception that a supporter will have of a league, other than the actual game of association football itself. These are;

- Servicescape (Stadium Ground and Physical Facilities).
- Sport Product and Innovation (Season Structure, Competition Structure, Match Structure).
- Relationship Marketing (Relationship between League / Club and Supporters).

3.5.1 Survey Design

Three groups were identified to interview. Domestic game officials (Sample 1); those who are presenting the domestic game to supporters, secondly domestic game supporters (Sample 2); those who follow the League of Ireland and non-domestic game supporters (Sample 3), who follow football, but who have an interest in the game of association football other than the League of Ireland.

There were a number of reasons for sampling three groups;

- The reasoning behind using different sample groups was to spot any gaps and variations between the groups of their perspective of supporter orientation in the League of Ireland. The purpose for survey interviews for three different groups was so to gain different perspectives from each group.
- Each of the three sample groups interviewees common themes was identified individually and then the themes of each individual sample group were cross-examined with the themes of the other groups. This highlights similarities between sample groups, but also draws attention to gaps between perceptions held between each group, and therefore mark disparities between each group and where possible improvements for been supporter orientated could be made.

26

Potential interviewees were researched through both local and national print media, websites and the phonebook. Initially 16 persons were contacted. 14 interviews were finally conducted from a possible 16. This is a response rate of 87.5%. The non-response error was 12.5%. All interviewees; domestic game officials, domestic game supporters and non-domestic supporters were aware of the study was for the League of Ireland. In respect to non-domestic game supporters, the interviewees may have had some prior knowledge of the League of Ireland, but the questions were of a more general football survey. Three questionnaire designs were drawn up. Questionnaire 1 and 2 were very similar, with only one question (13A) not been present in questionnaire 2. These questions were designed for domestic game officials and domestic game supporters with questionnaire 1 for domestic game officials and questionnaire 2 for domestic game supporters. Questionnaire 3 was designed for non-domestic game supporters and was designed to look at supporter orientation from a more general perspective. The design of the three questionnaires was divided into three elements looking at the servicescape, competition / season structure and relationship marketing, in order to explore the reasoning to find how these could impact upon supporter orientation in the League of Ireland. All interviewees were given the option of obtaining the list of questions before the interview in order to be prepared better for the interview. All but one took up the option of obtaining the list beforehand. A tape recorder was used in all interviews, for questionnaire 1 and 2, with the prior permission of the interviewees, for ethical purposes. Also all interviewees were asked whether or not they wished to remain anonymous in relation to the research itself, in the interest of confidentiality. The projected interview time estimated was between one hour and one hour & thirty minutes, for questionnaire 1 and 2. The actual time, on average was one hour and forty-four minutes. The projected interview time estimated was between ten minutes to twenty minutes, for questionnaire 3. The actual time, on average, was thirty minutes.

3.5.2 Preliminary Testing

Preliminary testing was first carried out, before been put to the sample groups. Preliminary testing of the questionnaire 1 and 2 was carried out with an individual who has played association football at youth, junior & college level and is an avid follower of both the League of Ireland and a League of Ireland club. A number of suggestions and modifications were implemented in the design of the questionnaire afterwards.

Preliminary Testing of questionnaire 3 was carried out with a known associate of a non-domestic football supporters club. In the first draft of the questionnaire, the associate thought the questionnaire was overly difficult for those with no prior knowledge of the League of Ireland and so a number of changes & suggestions were taken into account and the second draft was deemed satisfactory.

3.5.3 Sampling Groups

Since the research is exploratory in nature, non-probability sampling was selected and judgement sampling was the form of non-probability that was undertaken, as the groups selected conform to the population definition (Domegan and Fleming, 2007). Three different groups were targeted in the survey interview for different reasons. Each group had questions tailored to their perspective. All respondents were pooled together in relation to which group they would affirm to. The Pooled Respondents Groups were as follows;

- Domestic Game Officials.
- Domestic Game Supporters.
- Non-Domestic Game Supporters.

Sample 1: Domestic Game Officials

The first group targeted were the domestic game clubs, provincial association and national association officials in order to gauge their perception of supporter orientation from the official stance. The author interviewed the Club Promotions Officer of Sligo Rovers FC, who are a Premier Division club. The Club Promotion Officer, who is also the Chairperson, of Finn Harps FC from County Donegal, another Premier Division Club, was also interviewed. The Club Promotions Officer of Longford Town FC, a First Division club, was also interviewed. Also the Secretary of

the Connacht Football Association was interviewed, as was the Head Club Promotions Officer of the FAI League of Ireland.

<u>List of Sample 1 Interviewees: Domestic Club Officals</u>

1 *FAI Head Club Promtions Officer* 15-7-2008 2.30pm-3.30pm

2 *Sectretary Connacht Football Asscoiation* 9-6-2008 3.00pm-3.30pm

3 *Club Promtions Officer Sligo Rovers FC* 10-6-2008 2pm-3.30pm

4 *Club Promtions Officer & Chairman Finn Harps FC* 12-6-2008 4.30pm-7.00pm

5 *Club Promtions Officer Longford Town FC* 18-6-2008 3.10pm-5.30pm

<u>Sample 2: Domestic Game Supporter</u>

The second group targeted were the supporters club due to the knowledge they have of the game in Ireland and give their opinions on how they feel the league & clubs are supporter orientated and how they can improve. The author interviewed a member of the North Sligo Rovers Supporters Club and the Chairman of the South Sligo Rovers Supporters Club. Also interviewed was a member of The Bit O' Red Supporters Trust and also a member of the Longford Town Supporters Club.

<u>List of Sample 2 Interviewees: Domestic Club Supporters</u>

1 *Member of Noth Sligo Rovers Supporters Club* 6-6-2008 6.15pm-8.30pm

2 *Member of Bit O' Red Supporters Trust* 11-6-2008 12.15pm-3.30pm

3 *Member of Longford Town Supporters Club* 14-6-2008 2.15pm-3.30pm

4 *Member South Sligo Rovers Supporters Club* 19-7-2008 6.20pm-7.20pm

<u>Sample 3: Non-Domestic Game Supporter</u>

The third group targeted were supporter clubs' of non League of Ireland clubs and how they understand football and it workings and what they believe is important for any football league and what it needs to create and retain supporter orientation. Members of Tottenham Hotspurs Supporters Club (Sligo), Liverpool Supporters Club (Sligo) and two members of West Ham United Supporters Club (Sligo) were contacted. Also a supporter of the domestic league club Sligo Rovers, who is also a member of the Sligo Rovers Co-operative, was also contacted in order to gauge

another perspective of football in general. For the purpose of this study, the Sligo Rovers Co-operative supporter member will be classified as a non-domestic supporter.

List of Sample 3 Interviwees: Non-Domestic Supporters

1 *Member Liverpool Supporters Club (Sligo)* 9-8-2008 7.00pm-7.15pm

2 *Member Tottenham Hotspurs Supportters Club (Sligo)* 14-8-2008 6.00pm -6.45pm

3 *Member of West Ham United Supporters Club (Sligo)* 26-7-2008

4 *Member of West Ham United Supporters Club (Sligo)* 26-7-2008

5 *Member of Sligo Rovers Co-operative* 26-7-2008

3.5.4 Administration of Surveys

All surveys were conducted as personal survey interviews, with the exception of non-domestic supporters 1 and 2, whose surveys were administrated as surveys by telephone interviews.

3.5.5 Methodology Research Analysis

All survey results were collaborated, with the results presented in Chapter 4, featuring commonalties and differences within the findings. The analysis section of Chapter 4 illustrates where the findings support the work of authors (The authors are those, presented in Chapter 2: Literature Review), as well as disparities. Chapter 5 presents recommendations to the findings, where improvements could be made. Other sections of Chapter 5 include limitations and where further research could be carried out in relation to supporter orientation and the League of Ireland, as well as other related sports marketing areas.

Chapter 4

Findings

Chapter 4 Findings

4.1 Introduction

The findings of this study shows that on field football quality is key in attracting supporters to the League of Ireland, but off field activities like servicescape, competition / season structure and relationship marketing are all important supporting factors to on field activities.

4.1.1 Importance of on field and off field activities

All three groups of interviewees (Domestic game supporters, domestic game officials and non-domestic supporters) were of the opinion that the quality of football was of central importance, in attracting supporters to football. However the vast majority of interviewees acknowledged that servicescape, competition / season structure and relationship marketing as supporting activities for the quality of football, in terms of supporter orientation. A number of domestic game officials likening these supporting activities and the core element of on field football itself, as a total football package, with domestic game official 1 stating that on field has improved so much in recent years, the focus now needs to move to off field activities more so.

4.2 Servicescapce

This section examines the impact servicescape has upon supporters orientation towards the League of Ireland.

- The perception of the quality of domestic game grounds was that they are moderately adequate, with some comfortable & compact and others completely inadequate. There was however, widespread consensus amongst both domestic game officials and supporters that the quality of grounds in the League of Ireland has improved in recent times, with grounds either been redeveloped or clubs been relocated to purpose built stadiums. Seating and covered stands were the greatest indication of progress. Domestic game official 4 notes that the new FAI Licensing System, is underpinning this progress, especially in the Premier Division, but acknowledges some First Division Clubs, where the FAI Licensing System is less stringent, are through

willpower forwarding progressive stadium facilities. There was widespread agreement amongst all three groups of interviewees, that the quality of a stadium and its facilities, as well as the aesthetic and design aspects of stadia, help to attract new supporters to the League of Ireland. Some interviewees noted that the quality of stadiums is especially important in attracting families to games and the introduction of corporate boxes in stadiums need to be looked at also. The quality of stadia was seen as important as it gives a perception to supporters of the quality of the domestic game, although the majority of interviewees believed that stadia quality was more important in attracting passive and potential supporters, more so that regular supporters.

Amenities and Facilities

This section examines the amenities and facilities used by supporters, when attending games and how important these are in attracting supporters.

- There was a widespread opinion on where League of Ireland grounds could improve upon. Interviewees noted that grounds should be redeveloped and built with the purpose of enhancing the experience of the actual game of football itself, with more roofed stands, especially cantilever stands, so as not to obstruct the viewing of the game. The importance of smaller operational areas such as parking, catering, concrete walkways and giving greater comfort to fans as well as designated areas for families, hard core fans and the corporate sector, need to be scrutinized also.

- With the exception of domestic game official 2, all interviewees held the opinion of a combination of seating and terrace would be ideal. There was a view held amongst the three groups interviewed, that standing terraces, created a better atmosphere at games and some supporters prefer to stand like younger supporters, while also acknowledging that other fans such as families or the elderly preferred to sit, mostly for comfort reasons.

- There was a general consensus that food and beverages served at grounds were average. As supporters and potential supporters are becoming more sophisticated in their choice of food, beverages and food needs to reflect this.

- With the exception of domestic game supporter 1, all interviewees were of the same opinion that scoreboards add something to the game for supporters, in terms of excitement, while sound systems were varied, in terms of quality, throughout the league. However, these were of only minor importance in attracting supporters. Likewise parking was an area that needed to be improved, although new grounds had better facilities than older grounds and that provincial clubs had better parking than Dublin based clubs.

- There was a mixed response to clubs having bar facilities in their grounds. One benefit realised was the social element, which could strengthen the relationship between supporters and the clubs, but one drawback is that it could also lead to more drunkenness and anti social behaviour. The point that a club bar could not compete with a supporter's traditional local public house, was also raised. The interviewees viewed, however a club museum as a more positive step, as a way of educating supporters about the tradition and history of a club, making them feel a greater affinity for the club, although expense was seen as a negative factor in both constructing and operating both a club bar and museum.

Match day experience

This section examines the factors that impact supporters when they are interacting with the stadia and experiencing & watching the game.

- With the exception of domestic game official 2, all interviewees preferred floodlit games as opposed to daytime games. The big attraction is that it adds to the experience and atmosphere of the match and flood lightening over the pitch makes supporters concentrate solely on the match and makes the game more of an event.

- There was agreement that the League and its member clubs need to facilitate and work with supporters to create a positive atmosphere at games. All three interviewee groups, were of the opinion that drums, flags and colour bring passion and a carnival atmosphere to games and will entice supporters back especially for first time match attendees, as it should create an exciting first

impression. In relation to smoke bombs and flairs, there was a mixed response. All interviewees acknowledged that FIFA and UEFA regulations were against smoke bombs and flairs, but some interviewees thought that a specially trained designated person, to use the flairs, would be an area to explore, although other interviewees, believed it was too dangerous to use flairs and smoke bombs.

- There was wide consensus that pre, post and half time match activities are a positive asset in attracting supporters to games. Half time activities such as mini games involving local youth teams and battle of the fans penalty shootouts were seen as making the match more of an event. The mini games involving youth teams would also encourage local communities to follow the club more so. Samba bands and street entertainers such as fire-eaters and the engagement of a clubs mascot with younger supporters, before the game and at half time attract younger supporters and families to games. However, post match activities were seen as more limited to after match social meetings between supporters and the club.

- There was contrasting thoughts in relation to match day officials, such as match stewards, event controller, safety officers, and programme and ticket sellers. There was recognition that match day officials are the first point of contact and create an image of a club, and there is a need for match day officials to blend in and work with the crowd. Support for match day officials to be supporters themselves was emphasised by all interviewees. One interviewee noting the introduction of mandatory training as a positive step in the professionalism of match day stewards and how they handle situations. However some domestic supporters, were of the opinion that match day officials especially stewards are, at times, over zealous.

4.3 Season and Competition Structure

This section examines the impact that season and competition structure have in attracting supporters.

- All interviewees were of the opinion that season and competition structure were a vital aspect in attracting people to games. Interviewees noted that competitive games are key in attracting people to games, as meaningless games will not interest people. The timing of the season is also be a factor in attracting supporters to games was noted by interviewees. Areas such as kick off times need also be explored, a point brought up by domestic game supporter 2 and non-domestic supporter 1.

- The main benefits acknowledged by all interviewees of summer football was better quality pitches leading to a better standard of play, and improved results in UEFA club competitions, both of which are viewed as ways of tempting more supporters to League of Ireland games. There was widespread recognition that one of the main negatives of summer football was the clash with the GAA season, especially the local GAA and that the GAA held more appeal at this time of year. Another community alienated, because of summer football, was the rural farming sector, as this is their busiest time of year and the interviewees also acknowledged this. Some interviewees note that there is other counter attractions during the summer months such as vacations, while others noted that floodlighting is now underutilised in the League, which is in itself a major attraction to supporters. Another negative of summer football is the clash with major football championships, such as Euro 2008, which is detrimental to match attendance, although, domestic game supporters 1 and 4 believed that the domestic games should continue in tandem with the major championships and could thrive off the excitement and interest in association football generated by major championships. All domestic game and non-domestic game supporters were in favour of winter football, while domestic game officials were more open to both the benefits of summer and winter football. However, domestic game officials 1 and 4 were of the opinion that summer football needs to be re examined, to see whether the positives out weigh the negatives, in comparison to winter football.

League Structure

- Domestic game supporters 1, 2 and 3 were in favour of a single division League of Ireland, as a 10-team division brings repetition and boredom, in terms of teams played, with repetition of games, also brought up by non-domestic supporters, as a negative aspect for potential supporters, to attend games. A negative recognised by interviewees of a single division league was more meaningless games and therefore less competitive games. With the exception of domestic game official 1, whom favoured a 10 team top division, all other interviewees were in favour of a multiple division league with a minimum of 12 teams in the top division (As 10 team division would mean playing the same team fours times instead of three time in the League and this would result in more repetitive games and boring supporters). Another reason for a multiple division League is that promotion and relegation between divisions add more competition, excitement, meaning and interest for potential supporters to be attracted to the domestic game. The introduction of a promotion relegation playoff between the last placed team in the First Division and the highest placed intermediate team in the A Championship, was viewed by all interviewees as a way of adding competitive interest and excitement in the First Division, which previously had more meaningless games, although there was some reservation, due to the potential relegation of clubs who have invested much in stadia. Domestic game official 4 notes that instead of a national second tier, and proposed north and south regional divisions with promotion to the top division and relegation from the top division to the regional leagues. Promotion and relegation between division and or leagues was seen as important by all three groups, in order to make league competition more exciting and therefore more appealing to supporters.

- There were mixed reasons for holding matches simultaneously or staggered. Domestic game supporters 2, 3 and 4 as well as domestic game officials 1 and 4 emphasised the main benefit of simultaneous play is more concentration and focus upon the League, and generates more excitement for supporters, while those in favour of staggered football emphasised that each club has differing local needs, as non domestic supporter 1 acknowledged also. Domestic game official 3 notes that it would make the league more professional if

simultaneous, but a staggered programme, widens the scope for potential supporters. Some interviewees favoured Friday nights, while others favoured Saturday night, which reflects, perhaps, the need for a staggered programme.

- All interviewees responded favourably to the idea of a Derby Weekend within the league fixture programme, with local clubs playing each other, a such a concept generating excitement amongst supporters, although, domestic club supporters 2, 3 and 4, note that such a Derby programme needs promotion and media presence to fully work. A televised Super Sunday, featuring the prime fixture of the week, was favoured by a majority of interviewees. However, other interviewees note that it may clash during the summer months with GAA coverage and in the winter months with Sky Sports English Premier League coverage.

Gameplay
- A change in the points system from (3 for a win, 1 for a draw and 0 for a lost, to 4 for a win, 2 for a draw and 0 for a lose, with 1 bonus point to be awarded if a team won by 2 goals or more or lost by a single goal), was soundly rejected by all interviewees, with only a minority of interviewees seeing some novelty merit in the concept. Only domestic game official 5, noting that while it make a game more exciting, it should perhaps be used on a trial basis in the group stages of the League Cup, to see how it worked.

Cup Tournaments
- Cup competitions were viewed by all interviewees as integral to a season, as they allow clubs have more competitive, meaningful games especially for clubs who are not challenging for the League title itself and therefore increases interest for supporters.

- All interviewees were in consensus that the FAI Cup Final should be held as the last game of the season, as it is the showpiece game of the domestic season, and it adds prestige by being played as the last game of the season. The research found this prestige could be further added to by inviting the President of Ireland and senior full Irish internationals to games also. The vast

majority of interviewees also agreed that the schedule of the FAI Cup should be played on a tighter schedule, as this creates momentum and generates more interest and focus for supporters.

- Only domestic game supporter 4 and domestic game official 1, were content with the current structure of the League Cup, with the latter noting the League Cup, has been consistently re-structured and to no great avail, with some questioning the importance of the tournament. Qualification for the Setanta Sports Cup via the League Cup was a positive step for the League Cup. In contrast, the initial opening regional round and the majority of interviewees as negatives aspects of the tournament viewed two non-league clubs entered in the earlier rounds. Most interviewees believed that simple knockout was the best format for the League Cup as it generates excitement and interest for supporters. Domestic game supporters 1 and 4 were in favour of a group phase and following that a knockout phase, in the belief that it differentiates the tournament from the more prestigious FAI Cup. The majority of interviewees supported the idea of having the last game before the mid season break, with domestic game official 4 differing slightly by putting the game as the first game after the mid season break, as this may promote the tournament. Domestic game supporter 2 believed however, it would be better to play the final near the end of the season, as it would give a greater climax to the whole season. Most interviewees agreed that it would be of greater benefit to both cup competitions to have the League Cup completed, before commencing the FAI Cup, as it would allow any attention generated to fully focus on one competition and allow for lesser confusion between competitions from potential supporters. In opposition domestic game supporter 2 and 4 and Domestic game official 1 believed there would be more interest to play the tournaments in tandem.

- In relation to a Super Trophy, acting as a season opener for the League, there was a generally a positive response. Respondents noted it would be a great way of announcing a new season, especially if played at a big ground. There was some concern however, in that could it be fitted into the season structure, due to the Setanta Sports Cup starting at the same time.

International and All Ireland Tournaments

- Allowing a league, been a dual platform of been a championship in itself and as a qualifying stage for further tournaments found support, with all domestic supporters and officials in consensus that the introduction of the Setanta Sports Cup gave greater exposure to the League as well. Non-domestic supporters were of the opinion that using league competition to qualify for further competitions such as UEFA tournaments adds excitement and more meaningful games to a league.

- All interviewees responded positively to the Setanta Sports Cup, especially the novelty factor of playing new and different teams, with domestic game supporters 2 and 4 likening the competition to an Irish Champions League. Domestic game supporter 3 believed the Setanta Sports Cup could be the foundations of a potential All-Ireland League, while Domestic game supporter 2 argued that it should be open to more teams and perhaps take on a knockout format to generate more interest in the domestic game. Most interviewees thought there was no negatives with the tournament with only domestic game supporter 1 and 2 notes there is potential crowd trouble, that is not apparent within the League of Ireland, but Domestic game official 4 beliefs that " it has knocked the myth of supporter fights". All interviewees, with the exception of domestic game official 2, (whom was of the belief that 4 teams from each country makes it more "professional"), were in favour of examining the possibility of expanding the Setanta Sports Cup to 8 clubs from the North and South as not alone would it add more interest to the tournament itself but also add greater competitive intensity and supporter interest to the Premier Division of the League as well, with the top 6 attempting to qualify for the tournament.

- All interviewees were of the opinion that the positives of an All Ireland League would outweigh the negatives and would generate and invigorate much more renewed interest for domestic football supporters. It was noted, however that an All Ireland League would need to be open with promotion and relegation to and from regional feeder leagues, in order to sustain interest across the country for the domestic game, as a closed shop could drive

supporters away. Also the possibility of less UEFA tournament places for both North & South clubs and administration of the League, by two national associations were potential obstacles. The biggest negative, however, associated with an All Ireland League is potential crowd trouble, which could drive supporters away.

- There was more of a cautious approach to a Celtic Club Championship, involving teams from Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Domestic game supporters 1 and 3 thought that the Welsh League was too weak, while Domestic game supporter 2 and all Domestic game officials were responsive to the idea, especially if held as a knockout tournament, with the novelty of new teams from Wales generating new interest in the domestic game as well. Domestic game official 4 believed teams from Scottish Premier League that did not qualify for UEFA competitions, or from the Scottish Football League First Division should also be invited to participate. Domestic game supporter 4 was of the opinion that the idea had merit, but should be seen as a future project.

- A marquee game involving a League of Ireland Selection, with one player from each club, against a top European club, was proposed as a way of generating new interest in the domestic game, in which only some of the interviewees were in favour. Domestic game official 1 believed the introduction of an under-23 national team with players being selected solely from the domestic league as a positive step, but clubs would generate far more interest of supporters by competing in UEFA competitions more competitively.

4.4 Relationship Marketing

This section examines the importance of the League and its member clubs in cultivating relationships with supporters.

- The research found it was imperative that clubs recognise supporters and have procedures in place that help supporters engage and feel a belonging to a club and even the entire League.

- With the exception of domestic game official 2 (whom was unaware of any recognition of supporters clubs by the league and its member clubs), all other interviewees were aware of supporters clubs been recognised by clubs. However there is a perception gap between some domestic game supporters and domestic game officials, as the former declared that the clubs are complacent in this matter, while the latter thought it was strengthening. For example, by organising social events together and holding supporter-club-League forums. The research found, that there are many benefits to be gained by holding formal supporter recognition, as it creates greater fan identify and makes supporters feel more important & bond with the club. According to domestic game supporters 2 and 3, reassure passive and potential supporters that the supporters club has a "quality mark" of sorts and non-domestic supporter 2 noting supporters clubs act as a point of local liaison of clubs at grassroots levels. There was some awareness of Ultra fan groups, which are informal groupings of the most passionate of a club supporters and organise chanting and flag-waving in grounds and they noted they are an asset to the league, as they create a better atmosphere, bringing "colour" to the domestic game. Domestic game official 3 notes that Ultras in the League of Ireland are very different in nature to Ultras in continental European football, where there is a more of a hooligan element and is more good natured in the domestic game.

- All interviewees were of the view that it is of great importance for supporters to have access to club officials and players, is vital to strengthening clubs relationships with both supporters and the wider, local community. Domestic game supporter 1 and domestic game officials 2 & 5 recognised that it is most

important to do this with local schools. Domestic game supporter 3 and domestic game official 4 notes that it is very important to integrate the local community and supporters with the club, leading to a greater affinity of both. Also domestic game supporter 2 notes that the club may benefit also from outside ideas from supporters and other non-club bodies or persons. However, while domestic game supporter 4 and domestic game official 5 recognised the importance of supporter access to clubs, noting that there needs to be some limit of access to club officials and players and should not be expected to be on call "24 / 7". Forums were noted as a method of achieving this access for supporters.

- All interviewees were in consensus that social activities & events between the league, its member clubs and supporters only strengthen the relationship between supporters and the clubs. Events such as hotel social functions, golf classics, award ceremonies, fan forums and novelty matches such as supporter clubs versus supporters clubs, generate stronger relationships between clubs & supporters and are also places where ideas are generated that can benefit the league and / or club. All respondents were also in consensus that club merchandise strengthens identification for supporters of clubs and are a way of prompting the club in the local community. All interviewees were of the opinion that all forms of forums are a valuable method of strengthening fans relationships with their clubs, with physical forums are especially important, with web based forums supplementing this according to domestic game supporter 3 and 5.

- According to domestic game official 4 "Football is universal" and all interviewees agree that programmes need to be put in place to attract foreign nationals to domestic games and programmes such as multicultural days, allowing them into games initially for free and communicating with them in their language, were important in attracting foreign nationals, to games and engaging them with the clubs.

Media and Interactive Medium

- The media and interactive medium were found to be a vital component of the relationship and link between supporters and the league & member clubs.

- The importance of the media as a medium for strengthening the relationship between supporters and the league was viewed as the key priority, with non-domestic supporters acknowledging the importance of the media also. Domestic game official 4 described the role of the media as "paramount and vital". Some interviewees noted that local media, such as radio and newspaper were "very good", with national coverage quite weak, be it television, radio or print, with the exception of tabloid format, as all interviewees were in agreement, that the print media were a vital, but underutilized, tool in strengthening relationships between supporters and the league and its member clubs. One positive development was the new publication of *Onside* magazine, but there is a scale to promote it better and make supporters more aware of it as, it can act as a medium to educate supporters, on the domestic game. Non-domestic supporters emphasised the role of both television and print media in attracting a large Irish audience for the English game, demonstrating the importance of the media in underpinning a leagues-supporters relationship, no matter the distance.

- All domestic supporters and officials were of the opinion that Setanta Sports live coverage of football was a tool for underpinning supporters' relationship, with the league and its member clubs, with a number of interviewees, believing it a great vehicle for the League of Ireland. However, domestic game supporter 1 and 2 believe the relationship would be better served if live League of Ireland football were shown on RTE and domestic game officials 3 and 4 believing that the coverage is overly Dublin focused. One interviewee asks whether or not live football has reached saturation point and if so is there any long term benefits of strengthening the relationship between supporters and clubs, by having live football coverage?

- All domestic supporters and officials were in agreement that the introduction of Monday Night Soccer or MNS on RTE 2 at 8pm every Monday during the

2008 domestic season was a great relationship tool for the league. Domestic game supporter 4 noted that MNS is a great tool for younger supporters especially but with some scope for improvement such as more football coverage and less analysis.

- The importance of interactive medium such as the leagues website and texting service were apparent in the study as, all but domestic game supporter 1 was aware of the League of Irelands official website and text service. All three groups, believed that a website and texting service is a valuable method of strengthening relationships between the club and supporters, with domestic game official 4 acknowledges that the website was especially important for the younger generations.

- All interviewees agreed that the website needs to be up to date and contain basic information like fixtures, results match reports, upcoming events and tables. A fun / entertainment section would be an asset to the website, by having a fantasy league and competitions within that section. Some interviewees were of the opinion that a video section showing goals for example would also be a positive step. Interactive services such as forums, polls, and voting for player of the years would also be progressive steps.

Loyalty Programmes
- Loyalty programmes were found to be limited in the League, but an area that could be better exploited to strengthen relationships between supporters and the League and the member clubs.

- Most interviewees were aware of the loyalty card programme, while domestic game supporters 2, 3 and 4 felt the programme under its current system was underutilised, while domestic game official 4 and 5 believed the system was to "cumbersome" at present. All interviewees however, were in favour of a Loyalty Card Programme that gave more accessibility to Irish international matches, with the more matches attended the higher the preference the supporter would be given. Domestic game supporter 1 notes that both loyal

League of Ireland supporters be granted an option to purchase international tickets, as should those who support and organise youth and local junior football as well, but was of the opinion such a programme was unlikely to take place and the national association places more emphasis at present of selling tickets to the corporate sector. Most interviewees were of the opinion that discounts on club merchandise and discounts or vouchers for purchases of goods and services of shops located from the same area, as the club needs to be examined as a possible extension. Domestic game official 4 states that the system should be re-examined with a different implementation approach by replacing the current stamp card system with a more efficient electronic swipe card system. Domestic game official 1 believes that initiating greater awards to individual clubs whom successfully implement the loyalty card system and that in turn will lead to more supporters using the card.

4.5 Other Insights

Other observations were gathered, that impact upon supporters orientations towards the League of Ireland and football in general.

- All interviewees were of the opinion that the introduction of Club Promotion Officers was a positive step in strengthening individual clubs relationships with supporters and the wider, local community. Some interviewees noting the importance of having Club Promotion Officers that are both local and have knowledge of football, especially domestic football.

- Some domestic game supporters, notes that match ticket prices in some grounds are too expensive and this is a deterrent to potential supporters attending matches. A number of domestic game supporters and domestic game officials were of the opinion that certain schemes, such as workplace vouchers as a gift to attend games for large local companies, family tickets, and ticket deals, such as gaining free entry to a match after a certain amount of games attended, are a good method of attracting supporters to matches.

- Others note the impact of the quality of referees has on passive and potential supporters perception of the domestic game. Some domestic game supporters

view the national associations administration of the League of Ireland, also plays a role in how supporters, both current and potential, perceive the domestic game. In relation to this, domestic game supporter 2 notes that too much concentration of the national association on the international team is negative for the domestic game. In contrast non-domestic supporters view the whole professional image of the English League as why the attraction for Irish based supporters of the English domestic game. Local players and high profile friendly matches, raise awareness amongst supporters of the domestic game also, as does electronic computer games, such as FIFA Soccer and Championship Manager that feature the League of Ireland, as noted by one domestic game official.

4.6 Analysis

The purpose of this section is to find commonalties and differences between the findings of the research and the literature review.

The findings support the concept of a multi-levelled product identified by Armstrong et al (2005) and applied to sport by Malcolm (2004). One could modify these concepts and apply them to the League of Ireland. The League of Ireland been the product in this scenario, with the quality and the attraction of a winning on field, been the core product, with both the actual and augmented product, been supporting activities to the core product, such as the relationship aspect, servicescape aspect and the competition / season structure aspect (Diagram 2).

As a whole the findings support the view held by Kambitsis, Laios and Theodorakis, (2001) with peripheral areas such as servicescape, competition and season structure and relationship building between supporters and the league and its members clubs, do have an impact on the perception of supporters orientation of a league. However, the core element and benefit that is the game of football itself is the greatest influence on supporters' perception of the game.

The research also found that the League Of Ireland needs to be aware of macro environment factors and other sporting codes. Abrams (2003) Burdekin, Hossfeld and Smith (2005) Vrcan (2002) & White and Wilson (1999), that the macro environment

does affect supporter orientation, with the prime example of summer football, somewhat disenfranchising those who may be committed to farming affairs during these months. The research also supported previous studies by Delgado (1997) that other sports may take away support from one sport to another; in this regard GAA sports took prominence in Ireland during the summer months taking away from the League of Ireland.

Diagram 2:

Core Product =
(i) On field football

Supporter Product Activities =
(i) Servicescape
(ii) Competition and Season Structure
(iii) Relationship Marketing

4.6.1 On field / Off field Analysis

Success and the quality on the field was viewed by the some authors of the Literature Review as key and authors such as Nourayi (2006) was supported by a number of interviewees, while off field in attracting support by Bristow and Sebastian (2001) was viewed as important, but not essential, by other interviewees. The findings support Donihue, Findlay and Newberry (2007) and Lombardo (2008) that a sports league or club can itself attract supporters through its own policies and practice, such as competition structure. The study does not support Lucifora and Simmons (2003) insofar as that superstar players make supporters attracted to a League on a long term basis, as in the case of an annual League of Ireland Selection versus a top European club, which was deemed by interviewees that it may attract some football supporters to the annual exhibition game only and not to other League of Ireland matches. There was some initial support for Gargalianos and Thamnopoulos (2002) that ticketing policy does impact upon supporter orientation. There was also preliminary evidence that support, Sherry, Shilbury and Wood (2007) that supporters are more respectful of clubs, if there is transparency between supporters and the club or league.

4.6.2 Servicescape Analysis

Amenities and Facilities

The findings support the view held by Reimer and Kuehn (2005) servicescape does have an impact upon ones perception of a product. More specifically, the findings support Dave Arthur (2004) in that servicescape does have an impact upon supporters' perception of a sports league or club. The findings indicate that Emery et al (2006) were correct that servicescape is important in attracting and creating new supporters, as it creates the right image for potential supporters. There was also evidence that supported Emery et al (2006) in their view that invisible components, such as the creation of Club Promotions Officers, within the League of Ireland, are a vital step in making the League more supporter orientated and co-ordinate all marketing aspects, not alone servicescape, but relationship and competition structure as well. The finding support Ammom (1998) insofar that parking and eating facilities does indeed have an effect on supporters orientation to a sport, albeit a minor impact.

Match Day Experience

Bauer et al (2005), Cooke and Paton (2005) and Mickle (2008) were of the opinion that atmosphere at a ground was an element in enticing supporters to games and the findings support this view. The findings overwhelming supported the view held by Bauer et al (2005) that a combination of seating and terracing would be best, not alone to accommodate all types of supporters, but also that terracing was a method of harnessing and creating an atmosphere at grounds. The introduction of floodlighting as a method of generating match atmosphere was also found, supporting previous research by Cooke and Paton (2005) in the importance they place on floodlighting in relation to creating atmosphere, as a sense of event. There were also some qualitative evidence in support of Slowikowski (1993) that mascots do indeed play an important role in a clubs servicescape, especially as a point of contact, in the relationship between the club and younger supports and generating more excitement to the game. The findings also support Dale et al (2005), insofar as that events, such match day entertainment like mini football matches at half time between youth teams do add to the interest and enjoyment of the match day experience for supporters' at games.

4.6.3 Season and Competition Structure Analysis

The findings overall supported the literature review, that season structure and competitive balance & format is a necessity in attracting supporters to games.

The research supported the research conducted by Forrest and Simmons (2006), that the organisation of a season is vital to attracting supporters, with the findings showing the vast majority would prefer winter football, as it would not clash with other summer activities, be they other sports like the GAA or events like summer vacations or agricultural activities within the rural community. Also tournaments, such as the FAI Cup and the better scheduling of League matches, in terms of time and date, were found that in order to generate more interest, structure is vital. The research conducted by Noll (2002) in that promotion and relegation, such as the introduction of the Promotion Play off for the top intermediate team in the A Championship, does add interest to supporters was also found in this research, as it creates more meaningful matches. The findings also supported literature from the BBC (2008,3), Hopkins (2007) and Jones (2007) by making more matches meaningful in order to qualify for further play offs or tournaments is a vital tool in attracting supporters to games. This

was found that using the league as a qualifier for UEFA tournaments and the proposed expansion for the top 6 League team to qualify for the Setanta Sports Cup, adds excitement to the league itself and therefore garnered renewed interest for supporters as well. The introduction of a Derby weekend found support in the finding and gave further evidence to Mason (1999) that rivalry interests supporters. The idea of a marquee game of attracting supporters to the league did not fully support Literature Review authors, such as Baade and Matheson (2002) with only limited support found. The finding gave some support to Hopwood (2005) that different competitions, with their different formats add interest to supporters, with the different in structure between the League of Ireland and the FAI Cup, vital in gaining support from supporters, although there was mixed support for differing the League Cup, with some supporting a group phase followed by knockout phase tournament, making it different to the both the league and the FAI Cup, with others of the opinion that it should model the FAI Cup format.

Importance of Competition

The importance of competitive uncertainty as a method of attracting supporters, as raised by Owen & Weatherston (2004) and Sanderson & Siegfried (2003), was supported by the finding in this research with cup competitions and their elimination knock out aspect, with this especially true in relation to the FAI Cup, more so than the League Cup. The findings held some evidence, for possible new competitive tournaments, such as a Celtic Club Championship and a Champion Trophy, as well as the recent introduction of the Setanta Sports Cup, support McDonald and Sutton (1998) insofar as that, the creation of new tournaments, is beneficial to the renewal of supporter interest in a sport. The view held by K Ésenne (2004) that it is important that the league organises competition, so that smaller clubs can compete with bigger clubs was also supported by the findings.

Gameplay

However, the findings does not support that changing match gameplay, by authors like Haugen (2008) Sankaran & Longley (2007) and Easton & Rockerbie (2005), such as altering the points within the League structure with the awarding of a bonus point for a team that wins a game by 2 goals or more or loses a game by a goal, with the purpose of creating a more goal and attack oriented match play. However, game

51

official 5 believes that such a system may have some merit in the League Cup within a preliminary group phase, as that tournament is struggling in comparison to the other domestic tournaments.

4.6.4 Relationship Marketing Analysis

Types of supporters

The findings supported the idea that sports such as football has moved beyond its traditional segmentation by Gilmore and Gilson (2007) with the findings acknowledging that segments such as families are a growing area of support in the league. The research found that the non-native community are also being engaged by programmes, as suggested by Jewell and Molina (2005). In order for the League of Ireland clubs to expand beyond their traditional supporter base, clubs are undertaking many relationship initiatives to engage these non traditional segments, such as relationship programmes like multi-cultural days and developing family sections in stadia, in order for the league and its member clubs to demonstrate, that the relationship the League of Ireland & its member clubs extend to families is important.

Society and Community

The relationship marketing findings supported the idea, from authors such as Kraszewski (2008), Karp & Yoel (1990), Branscombe & Wann (1991) and Giulianotti (1996), that a club should not alone engage supporters but also bring a sense of community, belonging and identity for supporters, with the club being the focal point of this community. The view of Barget and Gouguet (2007) that sport, such as football, does have a hooligan element, that may weaken relationships between passive & potential supporters and a league, also found some limited support, as this was deemed to be one potential negative of both the Setanta Sports Cup and a possible All-Ireland League.

Media and Interactive Medium

The role of the media and other interactive mediums such as the internet, were seen in the literature, as vital tools in attracting supporters and the findings supported this, with the findings noting that it could be the most crucial of all methods in the relationship between supporters and the league and its member clubs. Regular communications between the league and its member clubs and supporters, as argued

by Gwinner and Swanson (2003), were supported in this study with communicative technology methods such as emails and texting, a great way of achieving this.

Research by Coate, Paul and Weinbach (2007) and Campbell Rogers and Finney (2007) placed great importance on the role of the media such as television and print media, as tools of engaging supporters and strengthening their relationships with a sport and the findings support this, with the introduction of Monday Night Soccer on RTE 2, as well as tabloid print media coverage and the important role local radio & newspapers play in strengthening this relationship seen as very important, if not the most important. The non-domestic supporters note the role the media, especially television, play in strengthening Irish peoples support for the English domestic game, especially the English Premier League and view it as one of the prime reasons why the English Premier League garners more support than the Irish domestic game, within Ireland. There was also support, within the findings, for Sandvoss (2004) and Beech, Chadwick and Tapp (2000) that the internet & a leagues official website play a huge underexploited role in strengthening relationships as well, with areas such as on line fantasy leagues a possible improvement, a point previously found by Davis and Duncan (2006). The role of fanzine magazines in strengthening the relationship, explored by Bernache-Assollant, Lacassagne and Braddock (2007), also found limited, if initially unidentified, support by the author.

Supporter Engagement and Loyalty Schemes & Programmes

The findings supported the Literature Review, authors such as Carter (1999) that Schemes by the League and its member clubs, such as a Loyalty Card Scheme, were vital tools in attracting and retaining support for the clubs and was something that was underutilised. The findings support Farred (2002) and Robertson (2004) amongst others that relationships are changing and that clubs are trying to engage more with supporters and keep in contact as much as possible and the introduction of the text service, was a sign of this, in this study. The research supported Matveyev, Milstein and Moltchanov (1980) that engagement between supporters and the league / club it of massive importance, a view that was found in the role emphasized by all interviewees in the importance of forums and club access to officials.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Chapter 5 Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

The question of becoming more supporters orientated in order to retain both existing supporters and create new supporters as well, is vital for the League of Ireland, in order to both survive and thrive.

On field / Off field Activities

A model of the League of Ireland 'product' places the quality of football as core, with servicescape, competition, season structure and relationship building been supporting activities, demonstrating that on field football activities are central in attracting supporters, with off field activities important, but not key in creating and retaining supporters.

Servicescape

Servicescape was viewed as an important supporting activity in order to create the right image for supporters and to facilitate the needs and wants of supporters.

The question of stadium design and its impact upon both comfort & atmosphere seem to be at odds. Seating seems to attract more passive supporters such as whole families whom are attracted to comfort and security, while terracing is beneficial to more hard-core supporters, whom seem to flourish in terraces as it facilitates better match atmosphere. The question is about trying to find the right balance. Can the League of Ireland cater for all? Perhaps the League of Ireland should explore the German Stadia Model of retractable seating & terrace that enables both comfortable, secure seating and atmospheric terracing as well. The question of atmosphere and summer football seems intrinsically linked. If winter football facilitates and creates an environment that enables a better match atmosphere that is allowed to flourish, through floodlights and other aspects of the spectacle such as flags and noise, it should be re-examined.

Overall however, a stadium and its facilities need to be modern, as otherwise it would not give the League of Ireland, either the right image and also in Irish society today, a comfortable place to watch events from sports events to entertainment such as the cinema or concert, is expected by people.

Competition and Season Structure

A competitive format in all tournaments is important in order to excite and interest supporters, as otherwise interest would lessen from supporters, if uncertainty of matches and tournaments, is removed. A season structure that suits all supporters is ideal, although it may prove difficult to do.

One drawback of a single division League of Ireland, comprising of some 16 to 20 teams would be the increased amount of meaningless mid-table, end of season fixtures with only the top team winning the championship and qualifying for European competition, with second and third qualifying for European competition, with the second placed team also qualifying for the Setanta Sports Cup also. A competitive league structure is important, specifically with relegation from the First Division to the newly established A Championship. The benefit of a competitive league would also entail the bottom team of the league, to be potentially relegated via a play off giving the teams near the end of the league also playing meaningful games for survival, therefore also giving excitement and interest to supporters also. It is therefore a necessary to have the League of Ireland structured in such a way that gives more meaningful competitive fixtures in order to entice fans. Only the teams at the top and the bottom, in a single division league, would be playing for something and enticing people into games, as one cannot entice supporters especially, passive supporters, into meaningless mid-table fixtures. The only benefits of a larger league would be less repetitive games; therefore the league needs more novel games.

One domestic club official notes the example of the First division whereby only one team gained promotion and the other teams in the division had nothing to play for, making the First Division, a league of meaningless games for the most part.

Also the competitive nature inherent in the 'do or die' straight knock out cup tournaments make them a big attraction to fans. The novelty element of knockout football is it playing a different team from another division, as well as the aspect that it is not the more familiar league competition, adds to its attractiveness.

The potential All-Ireland League needs to be an open shop, otherwise if closed it will hold many meaningless end of the season fixtures not alone in mid-table, but also at the lower half of the league, that won't be attractive to supporters and therefore needs a promotion / relegation element to attract the interest of supporters of clubs at the bottom of the possible All-Ireland League and also the supporters of All-Ireland feeder leagues as well.

Overall the league structure needs to be balanced and be formulated so that competitive end of season meaningful matches are commonplace, but also remove the repetition of leagues games that are present in the current league system. The season, dates and times also, need to be arranged in order to suit as many as possible.

Relationship Marketing

The importance of building & retaining relationships between supporters and the League of Ireland & its member clubs, is of high importance, since if a club in not performing on field, supporters will need to have an affinity to the club, in order to attend, so the clubs needs to mean more than just to be a winning product to be attractive. Relationships therefore need to be created & maintained and making the club part of the community, through social events & activities, bringing awareness of the League to supporters through the media and engaging supporters through online activities, are all important.

Overall, while quality on the pitch is key to attracting creating and retaining supporters, off field activities, such as servicescape, competition / season structure and relationship building can also alter the perception of the League of Ireland and make it more supporter orientated.

5.2 Recommendations

This section, suggests recommendations for the League of Ireland and its member clubs to consider, in order to become more supporter orientated.

Servicescape
- Further expansion and improvement of stadia should be kept and be the major focus of the League of Ireland. New seated stands should be built with cantilever roofs to facilitate supporter viewing of games and older stands should be redeveloped with cantilever roofing also. In order to cater for families, specially designated family areas, need to be developed. There is also a need for designated areas for hard-core supporters, as they are the source of atmosphere for grounds, according to the findings. The League of Ireland should explore the German Stadia Model, where terracing is allowing for Bundesliga matches, and generates greater atmosphere. Terracing with

retractable seating therefore should be examined. Also if all type supporters are to be cantered for, corporate boxes installed for the corporate sector should also be examined.

- Parking arrangements with local governing bodies should be expanded in order to make them more supporter friendly. Food and beverages should be improved, with increased variety. All amenities in grounds should be modernised.

- Clubhouses or social function rooms should be constructed, as it not alone provides better servicescape, but also fosters greater relationship building between the club and supporters.

- All clubs should look upon creating club mascots, as not alone does it improve the servicescape, but also provides a focal point for relationship building for younger supporters.

- Expansion of match day experience with more emphasis on stewards et al to facilitate, as opposite to control match day experience. Also components that create greater carnival atmosphere should continue to be facilitated and explored by clubs, such as cheerleaders, circus acts and supporter penalty shootouts at half time. The exploration of a designated official to allow flairs and fire works should also occur.

Season and Competition Structure
- An in-depth examination of summer season football, by researching all supporter groups and contrast the results with an examination of a return to winter season football, in order to gauge which is the more supporter orientated. The benefits of winter football seem to outweigh summer football, and do intertwine with servicescape, such as match atmosphere, as the qualitative evidence shows that matches are more passionate during winter months under floodlights.

- Currently, the League of Ireland will from next season contain a 10 team Premier Division and a 12 team First Division, with Premier Division clubs playing each other 4 times and First Division clubs playing each other 3 teams. Expand the League to 24 clubs, as the introduction of 2 new clubs seem a viable part of gradual growth for the League of Ireland, with two divisions of 12 teams, in order to play each team a maximum 3 times a season, as to play 4 times a season in League competition is too repetitive, but playing each team twice a season is not financially viable.

- The bottom 2 clubs in the Premier Division should automatically be relegated to the First Division, while the First Division Champions, should be automatically promoted to the Premier Division. Clubs placed 2nd, 3rd and 4th in the First Division should qualify for a play offs simple knockout tournament, with 2nd place holding home advantage in the final, with the semi final been with home advantage for the 3rd placed club at home against the 4th placed club. Retain the relegation play off between the First Division bottom club and highest intermediate placed A Championship Club over 2 legs.

- Explore the need to further expand a league pyramid system between all national, provincial & district leagues and sub-divisions, with promotion and relegation between them, as supporters believe having a open shop adds and maintains both excitement and interest to leagues and fairness also. The first piece of criteria for gaining promotion to a higher division or league should be sporting. However, a clubs financial ability and willingness, to play within a higher division, needs to be considered as well.

- There should be further exploration of using the Premier Division of the League of Ireland as a qualification method to an expanded Setanta Sports Cup and even a Celtic Club Championship, involving the top clubs from both sides of the Irish border and Wales. There is evidence from the research for this, that by allowing the top six in the Premier Division qualify for an expanded Setanta Sports Cup, gives both the clubs' and their supporters' something to chase and create more meaningful competition.

- A Derby weekend, involving as many local club fixtures as possible and engage the media in order to give the Derby weekend a higher profile, in order to attract potential supporters.

- Organise cup tournaments, into a more condensed time period. For example, explore the possibility of holding all the rounds of the FAI Cup in the latter half of the season and further examine the structure & format of the League of Ireland Cup, such as abandoning regional first rounds, with perhaps further exploring the idea of completing the League of Ireland Cup before the FAI Cup commences. The League Cup should have all proposed 24 League clubs only, divided into 8 open groups of 3, with a bonus point system in the group phase on a trial basis initially and subject to further examination. The top 2 in each group should qualify for the last 16 with the group winners having home advantage in the round of 16 (last 16). The tournament should be open draw from the quarter-finals onwards. Also explore the idea of a curtain raiser in the form of a Champions Trophy. Retain Setanta Sports Cup qualification for both the FAI Cup and League of Ireland Cup winners

- Only hold one replay, for each round of the FAI Cup if a match is drawn, followed by penalties and in the League Cup, if match is drawn after extra time, decide the match by penalties.

- Explore the long-term viability and possibility of an All-Ireland League, with considerable examination of an open shop in relegation and promotion, both to and from regional feeder leagues in order to maintain competitive balance.

Relationship Marketing
- Education programmes further expand the knowledge of actual, potential and passive supporters through museums, festivals, books, specialist League of Ireland football magazines, the media and interactive games such as internet fantasy leagues and strengthen ones awareness and ones relationship with both the League and its member clubs.

- The loyalty programme should be transferred to electronic swipe cards and expanded with further rewards, such as rewarding supporters with the option of purchasing international match tickets. The card should also give discounts on club merchandise and discounts for local shops.

- More openness between supporters clubs and football clubs. Making it mandatory for supporters to have a member on the board of management at both club and league level, which would assist with the process of openness. Therefore it is necessary for the League and clubs to recognise more supporter groups and to continue with other programmes such as the League of Ireland supporters' forum and engage them more so and be transparent with them.

- Look at further expansion of interactive elements, such as text service, emails, online forums and fantasy football leagues, as this makes supporters more engaged with the League of Ireland and therefore a medium of strengthening the relationship.

- Further exposure to the media, especially broadsheet papers, as this is an area that seems to be lagging. Continue the progress made on television, such as MNS and also attempt to broadcast more live games on free-to-air English speaking television, as currently more live games are on either free-to-air Irish Language TG4 and pre-paid Setanta Sports.

- Children or youth players, who play during the half-time games, must be accompanied into the ground in order to play, therefore attracting another person into the match.

5.3 Limitations of Research

- The research was limited to the Border, Midlands and West Region of the Republic of Ireland.

- There was a time limit of starting the research in early February and finishing the research by early September.

- There were Financial and resource constraints that inhibited the research of taking in a larger sample to interview.

- There were also geographical constraints imposed by virtue of both the financial and time constraints also.

- The research was limited to qualitative research and the associated problems of carrying out qualitative research.

5.4 Further Research

This section suggests further research that could be undertaken to supporter orientation and marketing towards the League of Ireland & sport in general.

Further Research into improving Supporter Orientation and the League of Ireland

- Research into the importance of the quality of referees in relation to attracting supporters to the League of Ireland and also the importance of the actual quality of the game of football itself in attracting supporters to the League of Ireland, by questioning both domestic game officials and domestic game supporters.

- A related area to explore would be the role of the perception of the administration of football in Ireland and how it impacts upon current and potential supporters attractiveness to the domestic game in Ireland, by questioning both domestic game supporters and non-domestic game supporters.

- The role of the importance of educating current, passive and potential supporters, through the media, interactive mediums such as computer games and fantasy leagues and programmes such as club museums, festivals and reading materials like books and annuals play in making supporters more aware and engaged with the domestic game.

- Further, more in depth research into the topics of servicescape, relationship marketing and the season / competition product separately & individually and more in-depth in relation to the League of Ireland.

- Research could primarily examine different areas of the role of servicescape, such as seating amenities.

- One area that could be scrutinized even further is the role of competitive balance, in terms of season & competition structure, in the League of Ireland and whether or not tournament restructuring of the League Cup and the introduction of the Celtic Club Championship would entice new support.

- Further research into the relationship marketing, especially the medium of the media in implementing and strengthening the relationship between the supporters and the League & its members clubs.

- The role played by servicescape, relationship marketing and competition & season structure in the perception of a sport could be applied to other sports within Ireland also. This could also be further expanded to look at other sports as well outside Ireland.

- The role of the quality of the actual game itself and the impact it has on supporter orientation and which laws of the game could be altered to attract more supporters.

- If possible the role played by the Premier League of England, in taking supporters away from the domestic game.

- Conduct the research by a different research methodology to gauge similarities and differences, such as questionnaires & forum methods. Other research methods undertaken, alongside the method of this research paper, should also restrain any margin of errors, into the study of supporter orientation and the League of Ireland.

<u>Type of interviewees</u>

The sample population interviewed could be expanded in order to gain more understanding of supporter orientation towards association football at club level in Ireland.

- There is scope to widen the research in interviewing more or all League of Ireland clubs nationally and also researching more or all domestic and non-domestic football supporters clubs.

- Research both clubs and supporter clubs in the Northern Ireland Irish Football Association Irish League in relation to servicescape, relationship marketing and the season / competition product and more specifically there opinions of cross border competitions, especially the impact of what an All-Ireland League would have upon supporter orientation and both the positives & negatives should a development occur.

- One could explore the difference between supporters who attend home games only and those who attend both home & away games of the League of Ireland, in order to gauge what factors affect their supporter orientation towards the League of Ireland.

- Further research could also be carried out in regions that do not have a League of Ireland club and could see whether or not such regions have potential supporters that would respond to the domestic game, if the region did have a League of Ireland club and what supporter orientation factors are important to them, to be attracted to the league of Ireland.

- Personnel of the domestic sports media in both broadcast and print could be interviewed to gauge their perception of supporter orientation in the League of Ireland.

- League of Ireland supporters' who do not belong to any official or indeed unofficial supporters groups to gauge their views on supporter orientation in the League of Ireland as well.

- Match Day officials such as referees, could also be interviewed and asked the role they play in the perception of the domestic game and how they view their role in attracting supporters to the domestic game.

- Football supporters involved in football at youth, junior and intermediate level, be they supporters, players or officials could also be interviewed and asked why they are or are not supporters of the domestic game.

- Sport supporters and officials of other sports other than association football could be interviewed and their perception gauged of the League of Ireland and how the league could be altered to attract their support.

Related types of academic marketing research into the League of Ireland and sport
- Market research into the segmentation of League of Ireland supporters could be explored. This could be further expanded to other sports within Ireland as well and a cross-examination and analysis could occur afterwards.

- Other aspects of marketing in the League of Ireland that could be researched include sponsorship and its positives & negatives. Also the importance of the branding of the League of Ireland.

- Research whether or not re-branding the League of Ireland Divisions from Premier Division to the Premier League of Ireland and the First Division to the Challenge League of Ireland, would entice greater coverage for the League of Ireland.

- Expand the research scope, from the League of Ireland and apply it to football in general and gauge what factors affect supporter orientation at all levels of football.

- Expand the research scope, from the League of Ireland and apply it to any sport in general or particular and gauge what factors affect supporter orientation in other sports.

5.5 Conclusion Chapter Summary

The League of Ireland is making improvements both on field and off field, but it is crucial that the league and its member clubs need to be supporter orientated, for the league to continue to subsist. The introduction of Club Promotion Officers is a step in the right direction. However, the League of Ireland needs to be conscious of the importance that servicescape, competition / season structure and relationship marketing perform, in attracting supporters to the domestic league and need to be continually evaluating these factors in order to become a supporter orientated league.

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Appendix 1

Questionaire 1 and 2

Question 1(Q 1) Is the quality of the football on the pitch more important in attracting people to the league, or the off the pitch activities such as servicescape, relationship and competition and season structure?

Servicescapce

Amenities and Facilities

(Q) 2 How do you find the overall quality of League of Ireland grounds?

(Q) 3 Has the quality of grounds in the League of Irelands improved in recent years and where do you think there is the greatest improvement?

(Q) 4 Do you think this quality of stadia can act as a mechanism to attract potential supporters to games?

(Q) 5 Do you think the visual quality of ground can attract supporters to games?

(Q) 6 Where do you think there can be major improvement made in the quality of stadia?

(Q) 7 Do you prefer seating or terrace or combination in stadia?

(Q) 8 How do you find the quality of food and beverages in the League of Ireland and what do you think could be improved?

(Q) 9 How do you find the quality of the Scoreboard?

(Q) 10 How do you find the quality of the Sound system?

(Q) 11 How do you find the quality of Parking?

(Q) 12 Do you think that Club bar would attract more supporters to the domestic game?

(Q) 13 (A) What is your club / association doing to enhance and improve the quality of the stadia? (Domestic game officials only).

Match day experience

(Q) 14 Do you prefer Floodlit or Daytime Games?

(Q) 15 Do you think there is more scope for pre and post match activities from the club for supporters and what do you think could be done and improved?

(Q) 16 How do you judge the quality of match stewards and match day officials at the game and how do you think they could be improved?

(Q) 17 Do you think a greater carnival atmosphere at games such as flags and noise and other activities could entice more supporters to the domestic game?

(Q) 18 If regulation was allowed, do you think smoke bombs and flairs would enhance the atmosphere of the League of Ireland?

Season and Competition Structure

(Q) 19 Are the season and the competition structure vital in attracting supporters to the domestic game?

(Q) 20 How successful do you think the introduction of summer football has in attracting supporters to the games and what are the main positives from this?

(Q) 21 Are there any negatives from the introduction of summer football and are there any groups alienated from summer football?

(Q) 22 Do you think summer season football attendance is been affected by the GAA Championships?

(Q) 23 Do Major finals distract people coming to League games? Is a mid season break best, in order not too clash league games with major football competitions such as Euro 2008.

League

(Q) 24 Are you aware of new proposals to the League? Do you think that having a 10 team top division has benefits and negatives or would you rather a two-division league of 12 teams each, or a single division League of Ireland?

(Q) 25 Do you think it is good for the bottom team in the first division to potentially get relegated via a play off of the best-placed A Championship club?

(Q) 26 Currently the points system is 3 points for a win, 1 point for a draw and 0 points for a loss. Would 4 points for a win, 2 points for a draw and a 1 point, bonus point for either a 2 goal win or 1 goal lose make games more exciting and attract more supporters to games?

(Q) 27 Do you think it is better to hold all League of Ireland games at the same date and time or do you think it should be staggered over a weekend and why?

(Q) 28 Which day / night do you think is best for football and why?

(Q) 29 Would a Derby Weekend generate new interest in the game?

(Q) 30 Is a Super Sunday, involving two prime teams, and a way of increasing interest in the league?

Cup Tournaments

(Q) 31 Would it be an attraction to supporters and potential supporters to have a champion trophy season opener between the league and cup holders as a season opener?

(Q) 32 Could the League Cup be structured bettered?

(Q) 33 Which is a more beneficial structure for the League cup to attract fans, the group and knockout version or the straight knock out version?

(Q) 34 Do you think it would be beneficial to hold the League Cup Final as the last game before a mid season break?

(Q) 35 Do you think would it be better to complete the League cup before commencing the FAI Cup?

(Q) 36 Do you think it would be beneficial to hold the FAI Cup Final as the last game of the season?

(Q) 37 Presently the first two rounds of the FAI Cup are played before the summer months and the later rounds played from September till December. Is the competition too spread out? Would there be more interest in the FAI Cup if it were played over tighter schedule? Could the FAI cup be structured better?

(Q) 38 Do you think by having the President of Ireland at the FAI Cup Final it would create greater interest and prestige in the domestic game?

International and All Ireland Tournaments

(Q) 39 What do you think of the Setanta Sports Cup and the impact it has on support for the game?

(Q) 40 Any negatives for support of the game with the Setanta Sports Cup?

(Q) 41 Do you think an expansion of the Setanta Cup to eight teams from each country would generate renewed interest in the game, with the 6 highest placed teams in the league and the 2-cup winners gaining entry?

(Q) 42 What would you think of a Celtic Club Championship, with the top teams from Ireland, Northern Ireland and Wales?

(Q) 43 In your opinion would the introduction of an All-Ireland League would attract greater support for the domestic game in Ireland?

(Q) 44 What would be the negatives of an introduction of an All-Ireland League?

Exhibition Matches

(Q) 45 Do you think that a Marquee Game, for example a game between a League of Ireland Selection XI and a top European club would generate greater interest in the League?

Relationship Marketing

(Q) 46 Are you aware of any recognition of Supporters Clubs?

(Q) 47 Do you think there are any benefits for the club and the supporters clubs by having recognition?

(Q) 48 Do you think that supporters create greater identity for supporters of football clubs?

(Q) 49 Are you aware of any ultra fan groups in clubs or the League?

(Q) 50 If so, do you think they are beneficial to the League or not and why?

(Q) 51 Do you think social activities and events by the league and the league clubs strengthen the relationship between supporters and the league / club?

(Q) 52 Does club merchandise such as jerseys for example, create greater identity for supporters and how do you think clubs and the league could enhance this?

(Q) 53 Where is the League and Clubs currently at in relation to the number of foreign nationals coming to Ireland and what could it do to attract them too come to the matches?

Interactive

(Q) 54 Are you aware of the Leagues official website?

(Q) 54 (A) If yes, have you accessed the Leagues official website?

(Q) 55 What features do you think are essential to leagues website and that are beneficial to enhancing a League / Clubs supporters relationship with the domestic game?

(Q) 56 Are you aware of the Text Service provided by the Leagues Clubs?

(Q) 57 How beneficial do you think the text service is to supporters?

(Q) 58 Do you think forums, physical or web based strengthen this relationship?

(Q) 59 How important do you think access is for supporters to club officials, coaching staff and player is, in generating a stronger relationship for fans and clubs?

Loyalty Programmes

(Q) 60 Are you aware of the Loyalty Card programme run by clubs in the League?

(Q) 61 Do you think by linking the Loyalty Card programme to international matches and prioritising League fans, will it entice people to League games? For example having people attending minimum of 15 games gaining first priority, 10 games second priority and 5 games third priority.

(Q) 62 Can you think of any other suggestions that may increase use of loyalty programmes?

Media

(Q) 63 Do you think the role of media coverage of the league is very important in attracting and strengthening supporters to the league?

(Q) 64 Do you think that increased live football coverage from Set anta sports for example reinforces supporter's relationship with the League of Ireland?

(Q) 65 Do you think the introduction of MNS on RTE will attract greater interest in the League of Ireland?

(Q) 66 Do you think League of Ireland supplements sections in newspapers strengthen the relationship between supporters and the league and clubs?

Other Insights

(Q) 67 Do you think the recent creation of the Club Promotions Officer in the League will assist in attracting more supporters to the League of Ireland?

(Q) 68 What is the importance of ticket prices and plans in attracting supporters?

(Q) 69 Any other thoughts upon supporter orientation and the League of Ireland?

Appendix 2

Questionnaire 3

Stadium facilities and atmosphere

Question 1 (Q) 1 Do you think that the quality of stadium facilities is a major factor in attracting potential new supporters to a club or league?

(Q) 2 Do you think that seating or standing or a combination is best for attracting potential new supporters to a club or league?

(Q) 3 Do you think that the atmosphere at grounds is a major factor in attracting potential new supporters to a club or league?

(Q) 4 Would you rather watch a game during the daytime or under floodlights?

Season and Competition Structure

(Q) 5 Are the season and the competition structure vital in attracting supporters to the domestic game?

(Q) 6 Would you rather watch football during the summer or during the winter?

(Q) 7 Do you think qualification for further tournaments, such as UEFA competitions for example, adds excitement to a league season?

(Q) 8 Do you think cup competitions are important to add excitement to a clubs season?

(Q) 9 Do you think it is better to play a team twice in a league per season home and away, or would you rather play a team three or four times in a league per season?

(Q) 10 Are promotion and relegation essential in adding excitement to a league?

Relationship Marketing

(Q) 11 Do you think the media is an important tool for strengthening the relationship and understanding between supporters and the club and league?

(Q) 12 Do you think Internet, emails and texting have an important role to play for clubs and leagues to communicate with supporters?

(Q) 13 Do you think it is important for clubs and league to recognise supporters?

Other Insight

(Q) 14 Is the quality of the football on the pitch more important in attracting people to the league, or the off the pitch activities such as stadium facilities, relationship and season structure?

(Q) 15 What are the main reasons for following non-domestic football and what are its main attractions, as opposed to domestic Irish football?

(Q) 16 Any other comments?