

The University of Northampton

Northampton Business School

The Rise of Women's Sports Tourism: How Digital Marketing Influences
Fan Travel Intentions of Women's Sporting Events.

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Declaration of Authenticity

Undergraduate Marketing Dissertation Student Declaration

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Abstract

Efforts to promote women's sport through digital marketing have increased awareness, yet a gap persists between online interest and actual attendance. This study explores whether expanding online exposure influences people's intentions or actions to attend women's sports events. The main question: Can more digital marketing increase live-event attendance?

This project gathered 72 survey responses from online sports audiences and used methods such as descriptive statistics, correlation, regression, and mediation analysis. Two frameworks shaped the approach: the Theory of Planned Behaviour and engagement theory, both previously critiqued and widely used in digital sports research. The former focused on attitudes, perceived control, and social influences affecting intentions to attend women's sports events. Engagement theory looked at how activities like following events or sharing posts connected with intentions and attendance. The survey answers were compared to these frameworks to see how well they explained the impact of digital marketing in sports tourism.

Digital marketing can boost engagement and visibility for women's sport, but this does not always translate into increased intent or higher attendance. Online involvement might influence travel intentions, yet other factors are more decisive. Overcoming barriers to attendance, such as cost, distance, or timing, requires moving beyond digital strategies. Practical solutions, such as special promotions or travel packages, work best alongside digital campaigns to turn online interest into attendance.

Factors such as cost, distance, and time play a bigger role in whether people attend women's sports events than digital media presence. Digital marketing mainly strengthens loyalty among current fans instead of turning online interest into actual attendance.

There are limitations: the survey sample was small and may not reflect the wider sports audience. Self-reported answers can also bring bias. These points might limit how widely the findings apply.

The results suggest that standard behavioural models overlook digital engagement as a major factor in event attendance. Greater online visibility and engagement for women's sport does not automatically cause more people to attend; real-world barriers remain more influential.

Future studies could update behavioural models to include digital engagement as a step toward attending events. It is worth testing whether some kinds or levels of engagement can predict who attends. Experiments or long-term studies could measure the impact of digital campaigns that offer incentives or team up with travel partners. Qualitative work might also uncover why people do or do not make the leap from online to in-person attendance. Using bigger and more varied samples would help make recommendations for digital marketing in women's sports tourism stronger.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

This dissertation specifically investigates how digital marketing affects fans' decisions to attend women's sports events, by analysing the extent to which digital channels compensate for limited traditional media coverage (Cooky et al., 2018; Guyot et al., 2024; Getz & Page, 2016; Yoshida et al., 2014).

Focusing narrowly on women's sports tourism, this study examines the relationship between digital engagement activities and event attendance between specific online engagement activities and actual event attendance. It identifies which digital promotional tactics most effectively address deficiencies in traditional media to motivate attendance.

1.2 Importance of The Study

This dissertation addresses three research questions: (1) How much does digital engagement influence fans' decisions to attend women's sporting events? (2) Which digital marketing elements affect fans' travel intentions most? (3) How do digital engagement forms, such as social media interactions, relate to live attendance? These questions target gaps in women's sports tourism research.

By examining digital engagement and travel decisions, this study highlights which tactics most effectively convert online interest into event attendance, offering evidence for marketers and organisers to increase attendance at women's sports events.

1.3 Research Purpose

This research examines the influence of digital marketing, particularly social media, on fans' intentions to attend women's sports events. It identifies key factors influencing digital strategies that impact this decision-making process.

The study aims to identify the specific digital marketing tactics that most affect event attendance, analyse the link between particular forms of online engagement and attendance decisions, and assess the extent to which digital marketing influences travel intentions in women's sports tourism.

This quantitative study tests the following hypotheses:

H1: Fan engagement is positively related to intentions to attend women's sports events.

H2: Exposure to women's sports content through digital marketing is positively related to travel intentions.

H3: Fan engagement mediates the relationship between digital marketing exposure and travel intention.

This study uses the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), engagement theory, and attraction theory to explain how digital engagement affects intentions and attendance. Chapter 2 details each theory's relevance to the study variables and questions

1.4 Limitations

This study is limited by reliance on self-reported surveys, the omission of attendance barriers, and a primarily US- and UK-based female fan sample, reducing generalisability.

1.5 Organisation of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 introduces the research; Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature; Chapter 3 describes the methodology; Chapter 4 presents the results; Chapter 5 discusses the findings; and Chapter 6 concludes with implications and recommendations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter examines research on fan engagement, focusing on behavioural engagement and live match attendance, and summarises the main critiques. Evidence is inconsistent, and existing models often lack empirical support. Studies on women's sports fans are scarce, especially on motives for live attendance. Digital marketing research emphasises engagement metrics but rarely connects them to actual behaviour. Frameworks like TPB highlight the need for research on the effects of digital marketing on behaviour and fan engagement in women's sport. Digital media improves access and fan experience, yet its impact on actual fan behaviour is understudied (Abeza & Sanderson, 2022; Parganas et al., 2015). Women's sports see increased attendance and investment (Fink, 2015) but receive less media coverage (Guyot et al., 2024).

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) does not explain the persistent gap between women's sport participation and spectator numbers.

The assumption that participation leads to consumption is not supported by available evidence, as 76% of the English population (i.e., over 18 million women) do not consume women's sport through digital media (Mintel, 2025).

There is a notable gap between fans' expressed interest in attending sporting events and their actual attendance. The inconsistent conversion from online engagement to in-person attendance highlights the need to identify key factors beyond awareness or opportunity that impact attendance decisions.

Prevailing theories assume a linear relationship from interest to participation and attendance, but evidence shows that promotional activities rarely translate into increased spectator attendance. The pathways linking these factors remain poorly defined in the research literature.

2.2 Framework for Review

The assumed progression from engagement to behaviour is weakly supported, calling into question the explanatory power of existing behavioural models. The current literature often overstates these links, which are rarely rigorously tested and are often inconsistent.

Tourism research often generalises fans as a homogeneous group and emphasises economic or destination factors. However, recent studies show individual motivators, such as fan identity, social media exposure, and perceived benefits, outweigh destination appeal in driving event attendance. These findings challenge traditional, descriptive models and call for more nuanced, critical approaches.

Fan behaviour often signals group identity and belonging (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Lock & Heere, 2017). However, sport marketing literature rarely distinguishes between attachment to a sport and actual attendance at live matches, particularly in digital contexts.

Push-pull theory is inadequate for digital contexts; in social media, motivations are enacted simultaneously, complex, situational, and influenced by multiple factors (Smith & Stewart, 2007; Scheadler et al., 2023).

This study finds that fans' digital engagement does not consistently increase event attendance. Online activity often fails to lead to in-person attendance, challenging prior assumptions that digital promotion reliably drives attendance.

Fan identification is a weak predictor of attendance when structural barriers like price or distance are present. Literature fails to explain when identification outweighs these constraints.

Motivations for attending women's sport events are complex; while equality and representation are valued, practical factors like price and accessibility are more decisive in attendance (Fink, 2015). Motivation alone does not predict attendance; structural

barriers such as price, distance, and time often outweigh even strong motivation (Funk et al., 2009). Relying solely on motivation as a predictor should be reconsidered. Motivation's effect in digital marketing is difficult to isolate, and limited evidence supports its impact on behaviour.

2.3 Digital Marketing in Sport

In relation to how sports organisations interact with their audience, the digital marketing revolution has brought about much closer, more immediate contact with sports fans than was the case in the past (Williams and Chinn, 2010; Abeza & Sanderson, 2022). Fans are presented with athlete storytelling, insider content and real-time engagement with their favourite sports star. Regarding the numerous marketing activities employed by sports organisations, there is, however, little consensus on whether fans are actually taking action as a result of this engagement.

In many engagement campaigns, the organisation aims to increase fan affinity, i.e., get fans to love the organisation more. This is consistent with the organisation's view that engaging with fans will increase attendance. But this isn't always the case (Filo et al., 2015; Pedersen et al., 2021; Toffoletti et al., 2021; Abraham & Israeli, 2025).

Spectator sport in the UK remains highly concentrated on football, while increased visibility in other sports, including women's football, has not translated into proportional attendance growth (Statista, 2022).

Digital marketing appears to primarily reinforce existing fan behaviours rather than generate new behavioural outcomes. Engagement metrics like likes, shares, and comments are easy to measure but often reflect passive engagement, which shows limited predictive validity for real-life behaviour (Brodie et al., 2011; Filo et al., 2015).

Most research fails to distinguish between passive and active engagement, oversimplifying the relationship between online actions and actual behaviour.

Contemporary sports consumption patterns are shifting, with increasing live sport viewership on mobile devices, particularly among younger audiences. While digital marketing facilitates this shift, translating digital engagement into live attendance remains a significant challenge.

Increased visibility does not equate to structural change in women's sport. Despite greater media coverage (Guyot et al., 2024; Cooky et al., 2018), underlying inequalities persist, and traditional media dominance remains. Digital marketing alone cannot address these systemic issues, and a gap remains between online engagement and actual behaviour change (Toffoletti et al., 2021).

While it is difficult to ignore the indirect implications of repeated exposure to female athletes, their legitimacy and relevance in the cultural landscape, one would ideally like to know the time frame in which changes in perceptions of legitimacy and relevance might translate into changes in behaviour.

While digital marketing is useful for increasing advertising reach and driving engagement, it is much more challenging to demonstrate impact on behaviour change.

2.4 Fan Engagement and Social Identity

Fan engagement is widely discussed in sports research, but rarely clearly defined. Most studies focus on cognitive, affective, and behavioural reactions, but overlook how gender stereotypes shape perceptions of women's sport and whether these translate into behaviour.

Fans form psychological connections with the teams they support (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Lock & Heere, 2017; Cayolla, 2022). While identification with a club is an important antecedent of fan affinity and loyalty, it does not necessarily translate into behavioural loyalty, particularly where structural barriers are present. Given other barriers to attendance, such as price, distance, and time. The paper, therefore, seeks to explore when identification is sufficient to outweigh these issues.

Digital engagement metrics, such as likes or shares, offer little insight into real-world attendance. Relying on these as predictors of behaviour is a significant methodological flaw in much of the literature.

Fan support for women's sport is often motivated by values such as equality and representation (Fink, 2015; Guyot et al., 2024), yet valuing a cause does not necessarily translate into behavioural support (Crawford, 2004).

Engagement is viewed as a cause of behaviour rather than a mid-process activity. Digital engagement is rising, but live engagement is not increasing at the same rate. The vast majority of audiences continue to watch the biggest sports on TV in the comfort of their homes, but large numbers also watch live sport on screens in bars, clubs, hotels and other public spaces. Moreover, is digital engagement itself a form of participation for the masses, rendering the ticket sales that sporting bodies are trying to generate irrelevant?

If digital engagement does not result in increased live attendance, strategies that focus solely on online activity to boost ticket sales may be incomplete or ineffective. This phenomenon is now receiving increased academic scrutiny.

2.5 Key Findings from the Literature Review

Annotated references for the reading note “Marketing Women’s Sport: Challenges and Opportunities”.

Increased digital visibility does not translate into behavioural change. Engagement appears to be an inconsistent and context-dependent predictor of attendance behaviour (Filo et al., 2015; Parganas et al., 2015).

Media visibility for women’s sport rarely leads to increased recognition, funding, or attendance (Guyot et al., 2024; Fink, 2015). The assumption that media coverage drives substantive change is critically questioned in current literature.

An additional issue in the literature is that the book does not address the disciplines of sports tourism, sports marketing, and consumer behaviour, namely that these disciplines have grown in completely different ways and hold different notions of what constitutes ‘evidence’. Sometimes the transfer of ideas from one discipline to another is positive; other times, it is negative; and often, it could be done much better. Attendance figures are often treated as the primary performance indicator for sporting events in tourism, even though they may not be the most relevant or useful in digital marketing. Similarly, engagement figures are used as the primary performance indicator for tourism attractions, even when they may not be the most relevant or useful indicators. Rarely is there any critical interrogation of these concepts and how they actually apply in particular contexts.

Live attendance for the sporting festivals is on par with participation and digital attendance. Market research provider Mintel reports that consumer interest in sport is well in excess of the number actually participating. And while one would expect interest and engagement to rise as involvement increases, this apparently is not the case, and a major opportunity is being overlooked.

Despite sport garnering increased media attention concerning growing attendances, a concentration exists within the sector. Football, the sport’s most popular activity, accounts for 90 per cent of total live attendance, raising serious questions about the usefulness of reported growth in other sports. Whilst participation numbers for other

sports may be increasing at a relatively low rate, this is not translating into increased attendances or, in many cases, into online traffic. This is particularly pronounced in women's sport, where profile has increased exponentially over the last decade, yet attendance is not increasing at the same rate. This phenomenon requires greater scrutiny in future research.

Rather than ignoring or accounting for the gap between digital marketing/ engagement and attendance, this research treats the accepted chain as a hypothesis and examines the intervening factors, which may be financial, logistical or psychological and influence a woman's decision to attend a live event. The perceived barriers to women's sport participation have been a glaring omission from current research practice, and by exploring these gaps, this study aims to contribute to the emerging field of research in this area.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

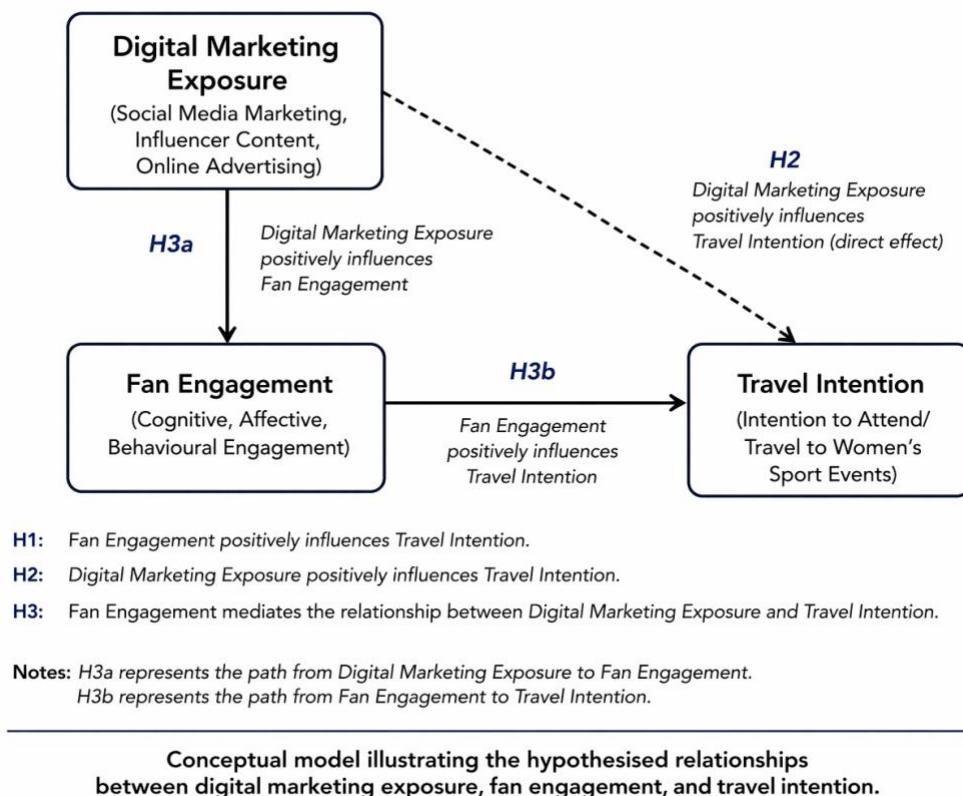
3.1 Chapter Introduction

While Chapter Two critiqued the current research for often assuming that engagement with women's sport online will automatically translate into greater attendance at live matches, this study sought to further probe this assumption. The most empirically established predictor of behaviour in this study was the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 2005). However, the TPB was developed at a time when little social media activity existed; therefore, the model is incapable of perfectly capturing constructs related to peer visibility of engagement with women's sport, access to content via algorithms, and the impact of the growing trend of influencer culture in women's sport.

The choices made around method, tools and approach have been guided by the research question. Additionally, many of these methodological tools were originally developed for different research contexts than the one addressed in this study. Methods are not neutral; they enable some things to be sought while preventing others from being found. These points are discussed and reflected on in the subsequent chapter.

To address these limitations and structure the empirical investigation, a conceptual framework was developed a conceptual framework was developed to examine the relationships between digital marketing exposure, fan engagement, and travel intention. The model proposes both direct and indirect effects, with fan engagement acting as a mediating variable.

Figure 3.1



Source: Author's data used to generate image by AI (April 2026)

As illustrated in figure 3.1 above, digital marketing exposure is hypothesised to influence travel intention both directly (H2) and indirectly through fan engagement (H3). Fan engagement is also expected to have a direct positive effect on travel intention (H1).

3.2 Research Purpose

In existing research and discourse on online audiences, the terms visibility, engagement, and behaviour are often treated as interchangeable or presented as inevitables in sequence. However, in this study, these terms are treated as distinct concepts. Visibility refers to how fans can see a user's profile online; engagement with the fan-posted messages and interactions with the TV programme and the user's material; and behaviour, such as actual audience attendance at live casting call events.

This study investigates the tourist engagement-versus-attendance gap, an issue pertinent to many forms of tourism, including sports tourism. The increased prominence of digital marketing within tourism is recognised, particularly its role in raising awareness and increasing exposure to potential tourists; but of greater significance is how such marketing activity can deliver engagement with end-customers.

The study treats exposure to digital marketing, fan engagement (emotional, active and social) and travel intention (to local and international events) as separate constructs.

Fans' engagement is treated as a mediating variable within the framework. The research aims to investigate whether digital marketing affects travel intentions and to explore the mediating role of fan engagement. This is necessary because, as discussed in Chapter Two, engagement is usually treated as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end, i.e. behaviour.

The aim of this research project is to explore how digital marketing can promote women's sports tourism by investigating its impact on travel intention. The project does not aim to map current trends and patterns in women's sports tourism, but rather to investigate the relationships among certain variables.

3.3 Research Approach

This study is underpinned by the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), a well-established model used to predict and explain human behaviour, including consumer behaviour across a range of contexts. The three antecedents of behaviour within the TPB are attitude towards behaviour, subjective norm and perceived behavioural control.

In applying a deductive approach, the researcher begins with a theory and tests its predictions (Saunders et al., 2023). The key variables from the extant literature that are to be tested for applicability in women's sports tourism are digital marketing exposure, fan engagement, and travel intention. The researcher is not seeking to redefine these variables; rather, she is testing whether the proposed relationships operate in the context of women's sports tourism.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour has been widely applied; however, its applicability in digital contexts is limited to reliably predict both intentions and behaviour. However, the theory was developed prior to the proliferation of the 'social revolution'. The Theory of Planned Behaviour contains no mechanisms by which social peer influence, exposure to algorithmically processed social media content, or media-generated illusions may impinge on behaviour. The current study applies the model to a digital context.

The initial intention was to adopt an inductive, qualitative methodology. However, interviews or focus groups are not the most effective methods for testing variables for systematic patterns, and a quantitative approach best facilitates pattern searching across a whole population.

3.4 Research Strategy

Quantitative research is deductive and very useful for collecting data for systematic comparison from a sample of the larger population for consistent measurement.

For hypothesis testing, it is important to obtain consistent, comparable data. This was achieved by distributing a structured online survey.

The study's target group consisted of online users who are active in online sports distribution. The online distribution to this target group was straightforward and natural.

Initially, interviews were considered as a potential data source; however, their potential was limited by the small sample size, and a cross-sectional study design was adopted.

Given the nature of the study, a longitudinal approach would have been more powerful for exploring engagement; however, this was not feasible for the current study. As a result, the findings can only provide a 'snapshot' of engagement and cannot identify any causal relationships between variables (Saunders et al., 2023).

3.5 Sampling Strategy

This study employed a non-probability convenience sampling strategy, targeting individuals who actively engage with sports content online. The sampling frame consisted of digitally active users with prior exposure to women's sport content, ensuring respondents had relevant experience with the study variables. A total of 72 valid responses were collected. While this approach enables efficient data collection aligned with the research objectives, it introduces limitations in terms of representativeness and generalisability, as the sample may overrepresent highly engaged digital users. A summary of respondent demographics is provided in Appendix B.

3.6 Data Collection and Survey Design

The data was gathered through an online survey created by the author and hosted by JISC Online Surveys. The online survey questionnaire was completed using a number of rating scales and multiple-choice items that drew on engagement with and intentions to participate in women's sport online, as conceptualised in the earlier chapters, as multi-dimensional variables. The survey also included screening questions to ensure participants had some exposure to women's sport online, as well as demographic questions to provide context for the data collected.

The survey is an online questionnaire consisting of two sections (see Appendix A). The first part of the questionnaire collects information on respondents' digital behaviour in order to measure their level of engagement with digital technologies and tracks their regular use of social media, the frequency of their visits to different platforms and the type of interactions they are used to carry out (such as liking, sharing, commenting, attending an event). The second section consists of Likert-type scale items that measure the potential of social media to raise people's awareness of and generate interest in events, and also asks respondents to imagine attending these events (Webster. & Eren, 2015).

Fan engagement in women's sports can be broken down into three key dimensions. These are: 1) emotional connection, which refers to the feelings and attachment fans have towards teams and athletes; 2) active interaction, meaning the ways fans engage directly with content, such as sharing or commenting online; and 3) social participation, involving fans' involvement in online communities, groups, or events related to women's sports. By thinking of engagement in these three parts, it becomes easier to distinguish the different ways fans connect with women's sports.

This study focuses on measuring fan engagement at women's sports. Currently, fan engagement is often viewed as a single construct; however, as in men's sports, it can be categorised into three specific dimensions: emotional connection, active interaction, and social participation. One of the biggest gaps in current research on measuring online fan engagement is that existing constructs are too broad and do not capture the nuances and differences in fan engagement behaviours in women's sports. Thus, this

study aims to address this limitation by developing a new construct that encompasses fan engagement across three distinct dimensions and measures fans' online engagement with women's sports using three corresponding dimensions. Specifically, the emotional connection dimension measures fans' self-reported emotional connection to teams and athletes, the active interaction dimension measures fans' active engagement online by measuring their behavior of sharing and commenting on women's sports content on social media, and the social participation dimension measures engagement with online communities and networks of interest in women's sports such as fan groups and online fan events; the frequency of engagement and the quality of experience within these constructs. 2024).

While travel intentions are often reported as simple yes-or-no responses, fans' intentions can extend further depending on the level of competition (e.g., local vs overseas) at which matches are scheduled. This study also explores the extent to which social influences - from fellow fans and from online communities of sporting fans - impact travel intentions.

Likert scales measure degrees of agreement rather than only yes/no responses, assuming equal intervals between points (Koo & Yang, 2025).

Online convenience samples are self-selecting and, as such, are generally biased towards the online active users (Wu Suen et al., 2014). This is an appropriate sample for the current study; however, there is a major limitation to the generalisability of the findings. The full survey instrument is provided in Appendix A.

3.7 Data Analysis

Analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS Statistics, including descriptive, exploratory, and inferential statistics after appropriate data checks.

Correlation tables are used to examine relationships among key variables. While correlation does not prove causation, it is a useful first step in the analysis.

Multiple regression was used to test the effects of digital marketing, fan engagement, and social influence on travel intentions, with mediation analysis exploring whether engagement mediates the effect of exposure. Results were considered significant at $p < 0.05$ (Field, 2025). While these methods provide organised hypothesis testing, they may oversimplify real-world behaviour. Detailed statistical outputs are provided in Appendix C.

3.8 Data Quality

To ensure that the most reliable data were collected, several items were used to measure each variable construct. However, having achieved reliable data is not the same as having achieved valid data. People may respond consistently to items but express socially induced attitudes and beliefs rather than reality, actual feelings, and behaviour.

Despite efforts to ensure content validity, self-reported intentions often do not align with actual behaviour (Ajzen, 2005). Thus, this survey captures intentions rather than actual behaviour.

To account for potential idiosyncrasies among individual respondents, items are grouped by theoretical construct rather than collected in a single survey. Multiple items are used to measure several constructs, including perceptions of marketing in various digital channels and fan engagement. Engagement, in particular, is an unobservable construct; thus, multiple measures are used to stabilise the construct.

High correlation between survey items does not guarantee they reflect real behaviour. Respondents may overreport engagement, especially in self-reported measures.

For each factor, we will assess the reliability of items within each domain by calculating Cronbach's alpha score. A high score indicates that the items are internally consistent (i.e. they measure the same thing) and meet the threshold for reliability. However, high alpha scores can also result from items that are too similar rather than from valid measures of the theoretical construct (Field, 2025). Therefore, meeting the reliability threshold does not necessarily indicate that the constructs are being measured well. Items were developed for each variable construct, and multiple items were used to attempt to obtain reliable and valid data for each. However, achieving item reliability does not necessarily mean that the obtained data is valid, and items may be measuring socially desirable attitudes rather than real health behaviours.

3.8.1 Reliability

Reliability refers to the consistency of a measurement or assessment. In this study, items were duplicated, and measures had multiple indicators to increase the reliability and internal consistency of the scales measuring the constructs of digital marketing influence, fan engagement and travel intention.

Field (2025, p. 23) indicates that, in scale development, the reliability of the constructs (or measures) is determined by calculating Cronbach's alpha and states that if the value is above 0.70, the items measure the same construct (i.e., are reliable). Table 5 outlines the results for the current study. Overall, the results indicate that all the constructs demonstrated acceptable to strong reliability.

High internal consistency is not the same as validity. Here, an important aspect is that all items might be too similar, and not cover different aspects of sports participation. Further, there is a risk of overreporting for some sports, particularly women's sport (which is socially desirable). All items are self-reported, which can be problematic for reliable reporting of behaviour, especially behaviour that participants feel they should be engaging in.

3.8.2 Validity

Validity: Is the tool measuring what the researcher intends to measure? In other words, does the tool measure what it is supposed to measure? For the purpose of this study, the survey items were developed from the theoretical foundation of Chapter Two; therefore, content validity is established (Saunders et al., 2023).

However, validity is not restricted to theoretical validity. One of the main limitations of this study is the use of behavioural intention as a surrogate for behaviour. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 2005) states that intentions do not necessarily translate into behaviour (the intention–behaviour gap). There may be a host of reasons (price, time, accessibility, etc.) that affect actual attendance and are not captured in reported intentions.

However, the chosen fan engagement construct is somewhat complex and multidimensional, and its measurement based on multiple indicators may oversimplify the different types of engagement and their impact on behaviour.

Potential social desirability bias exists, leading participants to overreport their involvement in women's sport. Further, although anonymity was used to mitigate this bias, its removal is unlikely. As a result, the findings should be viewed as indicators of attitudes and intentions, not as behaviour.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were not an afterthought; they were incorporated into the study's design from the start. As part of the survey, participants were provided with appropriate information and asked if they wished to give informed consent before any data were collected. No data were collected from any participant who declined to participate after being informed about the survey.

The anonymous online survey was designed to uphold ethical principles and protect participants' privacy, thereby reducing social desirability bias and enhancing validity (Saunders et al., 2023).

In accordance with the University of Northampton's ethical guidelines, the research data will be stored on a secure, password-protected device. The data will only be used for academic purposes whilst the researcher is still within the University and will be deleted upon the dissertation's submission and from the University's system after assessment.

In addition to the concerns listed above, there are many other ethical considerations involved in research, such as ensuring that participants understand their rights and the proper use of information collected. But even with the best ethical compliance practices in place, there is always the possibility of social desirability bias – where self-reported data is influenced by how participants believe they should answer.

3.10 Chapter Summary

A quantitative, deductive design using an online survey was chosen to answer the research question about relationships between variables.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter reports findings from a quantitative survey exploring how digital marketing can shape intentions to travel to watch women's sports. Chapter 3 provided an analysis of survey data using IBM SPSS Statistics, with results presented as descriptive statistics, reliability analyses, correlation analyses, and regression analyses.

A common refrain in the digital marketing literature is that customer behaviour is fundamentally altered by new marketing channels and methods. However, a look behind the covers reveals that much of the "evidence" supporting this notion is based on faulty associations that fail to translate in real-world settings (Molinillo et al., 2020; Schivinski et al., 2016).

4.2 Sample Overview

The research gathered 72 valid participants from an online survey. The sample comprised participants who frequently consume sports online and can be considered as digitally active audiences.

Our research finds a shift in how people consume and interact with sport, with increased digital involvement in the experience. However, the use of convenience sampling in this study means that the findings have limited generalizability, and as a result, the sample is likely to be over-represented by people who are already engaging with online platforms for active sport experience. This limitation is acknowledged in Chapter 1. A full breakdown of the sample characteristics is presented in Appendix B.

4.3 Descriptive Statistics

4.3.1 Travel Intention

The primary dependent variable produced the following results:

Mean = 2.89

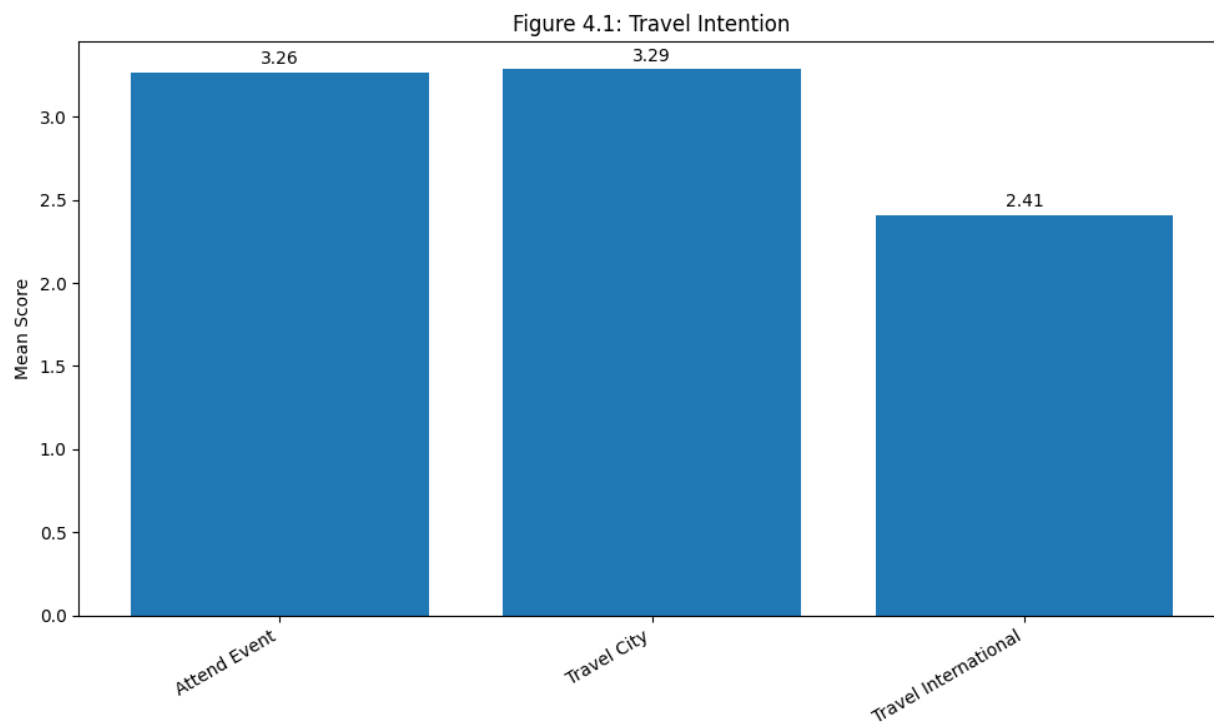
Median = 3 (Neutral)

Standard Deviation = 1.25

Interpretation:

As illustrated in Figure 4.1, travel intention scores are moderate overall, with willingness to attend local events higher than international travel, indicating potential structural constraints on attendance. A distinction must be made between engagement and attendance. While research into the impact of digital marketing on travel intention in women's sports tourism is timely, findings from a recent survey that explored participation in women's sport through digital media suggest that increased interest in women's sport through engagement does not necessarily translate into attendance at events. While the majority of survey participants (61%) reported that social media had increased their interest in women's sport events, only 29% reported a likelihood to attend a women's sport event. A number of factors may be at play, including both structural (e.g., cost, time) and psychological (e.g., perceived value, motivation) factors that influence participation in sports tourism. Future research should unpack these factors and critically examine how engagement with women's sport via digital media can translate into attendance at events. An in-depth understanding of the factors that influence participation in sports tourism will enable researchers and practitioners to develop effective engagement-focused marketing strategies for women's sport.

Recognised barriers to attendance (such as cost, travel and scheduling) mean that online engagement is not guaranteed to translate into attendance (Lamont et al., 2012; Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2010). Online engagement does not automatically lead to live event attendance, challenging assumptions within existing literature. Extended descriptive statistics tables are available in Appendix C.

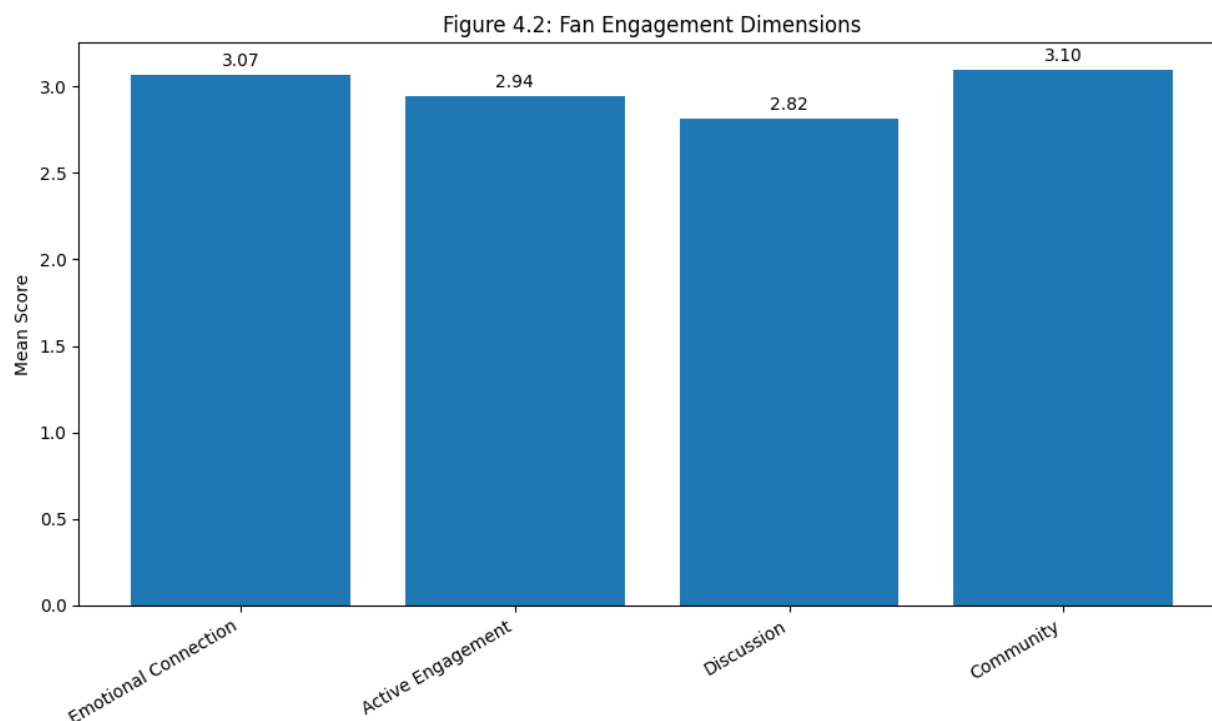


Source: Author's data used to generate image by AI (April 2026)

4.3.2 Digital Marketing Influence

- Respondents reported moderate agreement that social media:
- Helps them discover women's sports events
- Increases their interest
- Enhances perceptions of excitement

As illustrated in Figure 4.2, respondents report consistently moderate levels of agreement across digital marketing items, with slightly stronger responses related to interest and excitement, highlighting the role of digital platforms in shaping awareness and perceptions. Research demonstrates that digital campaigns are effective at increasing awareness of environmental issues and engaging audiences (Parganas et al., 2017). However, there is limited evidence that this increased awareness translates into changes in long-term behaviour (Sanderson, 2025). This article critically reviews existing research that examines this knowledge gap.

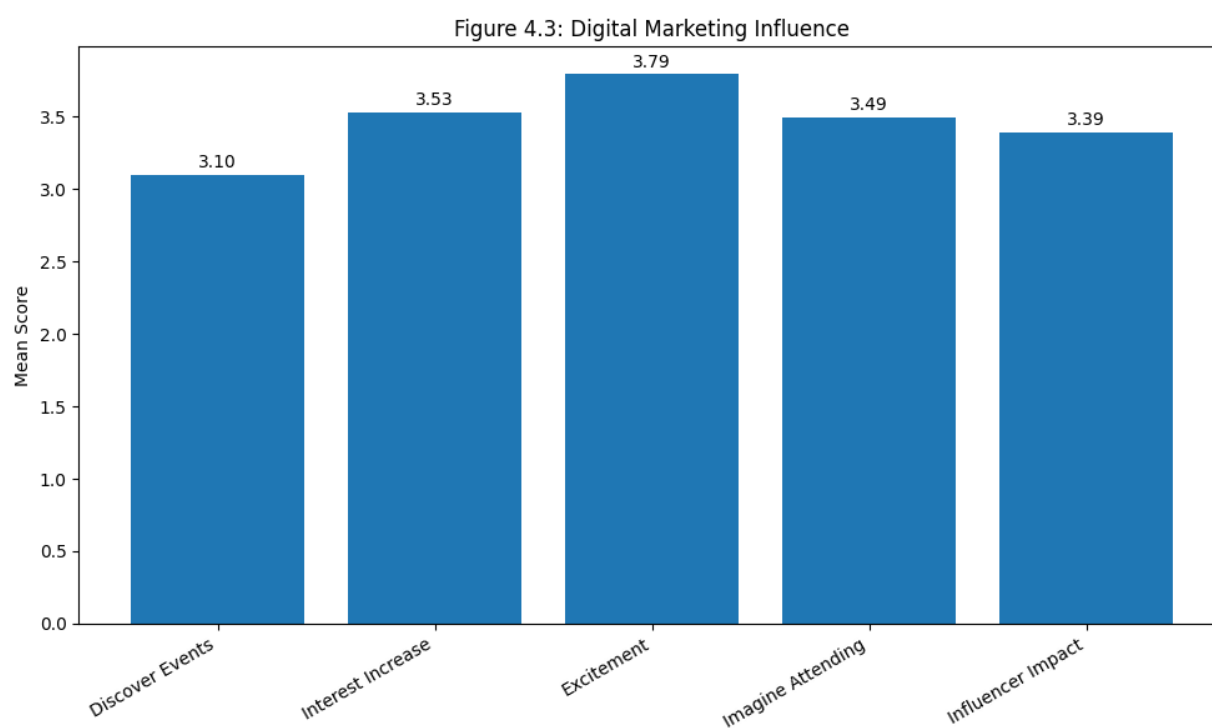


Source: Author's data used to generate image by AI (April 2026)

4.3.3 Fan Engagement

While scores were higher in the fan engagement section than in the travel intention section, several comments highlighted specific ways to improve the experience, such as better hotel options or trying new events. As illustrated in Figure 4.3, engagement is relatively consistent across its dimensions, with slightly higher levels of emotional connection compared to active participation and discussion, suggesting that passive forms of engagement may be more prevalent than active behaviours.

1. Emotional connection to athletes and teams.
2. Active engagement with content.
3. Participation in fan discussions.



Source: Author's data used to generate image by AI (April 2026)

4.4 Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's alpha was used to test the internal consistency of the psychological domains.

Digital Marketing Influence 12.1–12.5 > 0.70 Acceptable
 Fan Engagement 13.1–13.4 > 0.70 Acceptable
 Travel Intention 14.1–15.3 > 0.80 Strong. Although having statistical reliability is key, it is not the end of the story for scale validity. Having high internal consistency does not guarantee that the scale is measuring meaningful constructs that correspond to real behaviours. This limitation is often ignored in academic studies in favour of obtaining reliable and valid results. However, the bottom line is that such results must be interpreted meaningfully.

Interpretation:

The results indicate a high level of internal consistency; however, this raises concerns regarding how the researchers have defined engagement in this study. As McCarthy et al. (2022) note, 'engagement' is a vague term that can mask participation that is less than fully active, consisting mostly of passive behaviours. As such, it may not suggest to outsiders the likelihood that fan culture will lead to action.

4.5 Correlation Analysis

For the common means tests, and for the Pearson correlations between important variables.

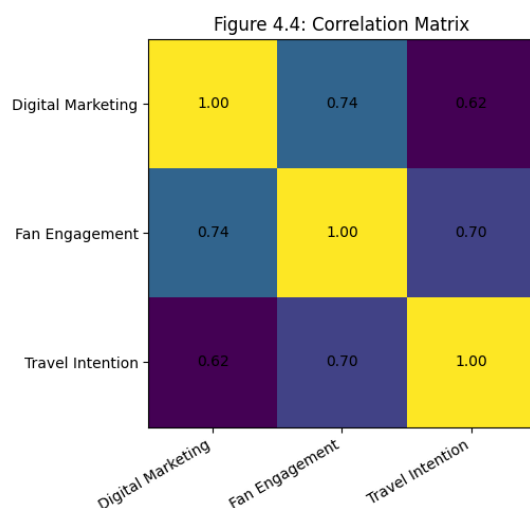
Interpretation:

The findings support some aspects of hypotheses H1 and H2.

Digital Marketing has a positive, however tenuous impact on Travel Intention.

Typically, interaction is more important for conversion, but in this case, engagement is a much stronger factor.

Other factors of greater complexity are influencing the effects of digital communication (Li et al., 2021). The perceived impact of digital marketing campaigns in sport appears weaker than prior research suggests (Bilro et al., 2019). The correlation analysis reveals a moderately strong positive relationship, suggesting an association but not causation, between fan engagement and travel intention ($r = 0.697$), and a slightly weaker relationship between digital marketing and travel intention ($r = 0.623$). This indicates that engagement is more closely associated with behavioural intention than digital marketing exposure, providing stronger support for H1, while H2 is only partially supported. The full correlation matrix is provided in Appendix C.



Source: Author's data used to generate image by AI (April 2026)

4.6 Regression Analysis

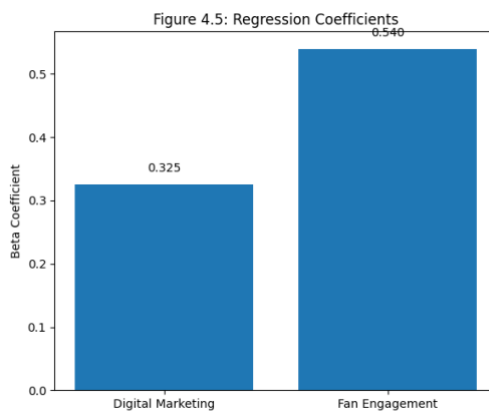
This study employs a multiple regression analysis to examine the effects of digital marketing measures and fan engagement on travel intentions.

Digital Marketing Influence: Digital marketing shows a positive but weaker and less consistent effect on travel intention.

Interpretation

Contrary to much of the current investment in digital marketing, consumer exposure to such efforts is not a strong or consistent predictor of travel intentions. Engagement emerges as a stronger predictor of travel intention, and such engagement likely results from a set of psychological and social antecedents.

Whereas interactive or engaging content might outperform more passive content, the crucial question remains as to how online engagement translates into real-world attendance and involvement in women's sports events. The regression model explains a substantial proportion of variance in travel intention ($R^2 = 0.510$), indicating a good model fit. Fan engagement emerges as a strong and statistically significant predictor ($\beta = 0.540$, $p < 0.001$), providing clear support for H1. In contrast, digital marketing shows a weaker and statistically non-significant effect ($p = 0.070$), offering only partial support for H2. These findings suggest that digital marketing influences behaviour indirectly, primarily through engagement rather than as a direct driver of travel intention.



Source: Author's data used to generate image by AI (April 2026)

4.7 Mediation Effect

Mediation was assessed by examining the change in the direct effect of digital marketing on travel intention when fan engagement was included in the regression model. The results provided evidence supporting hypothesis H3, indicating that engagement acts as a mediating variable between digital marketing and travel intentions.

Engagement lies between digital marketing and consumer behaviour, as it does not directly cause behaviour change (Bazi et al., 2023). Furthermore, there is little evidence of direct cause-and-effect in research on engagement, which uncovers problematic assumptions. Supporting mediation analysis outputs are included in Appendix C.

4.8 Social Influence and Perceived Experience

The findings support:

When social media enables fans to observe other fans travelling to sporting events, they may be inspired to make similar journeys.

H5: Perceived attractiveness of events positively influences decision-making

Previous studies have found that peer behaviour could influence individuals' decision-making (Leung et al., 2015; Ngo et al., 2024). Apart from influencing decision-making, social encouragement or pressure could also affect individuals' behaviour or intentions. Nevertheless, such influences might have limited effects in most cases.

Social influence is one potential factor yet typically does not prove to be a strong enough driver of health behaviour, more often supplanted by cost, accessibility and other structural factors.

4.9 Summary of Findings

The key findings can be summarised as follows:

The data shows, once again, that high levels of digital engagement do not translate into increased attendance. These findings suggest limitations in using digital metrics as indicators of attendance behaviour.

Engagement may predict behaviour to some extent, but seeing someone else in your audience engaged with your marketing or content does not greatly increase it.

The complexity of digital marketing lies in the fact that it is not a straightforward, linear process and can be influenced by many other variables.

After years of digital outreach, there is still a large participation gap between online and in-person activities.

4.10 Conclusion

The chapter reports the results of the empirical tests and assesses the evidence in the light of the hypotheses formulated in the study.

Digital marketing can bring several benefits, such as increased visibility and engagement, but turning these 'clicks' and views into actual travel behaviour is much harder to achieve and measure.

It is worth remembering that engagement is not the same as conversion and that interest and usage are not the same as sales. There is a significant gap between these two points, and it may be difficult for organisations to bridge this divide.

This chapter reflects on the research findings considering the current literature and explores their theoretical and practical implications. The findings provide strong support for H1, partial support for H2, and support for H3, confirming the mediating role of fan engagement and indicating that it plays a key role in linking digital marketing exposure to travel intention. Building on the theoretical critique presented in Chapter 2 and the methodology outlined in Chapter 3, this chapter presents the study's empirical findings.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter reports on the findings of the study presented in Chapter 4 that addressed the research question: How does digital marketing affect consumer travel intention in women's sports tourism? The chapter explores the results in more depth and their potential to influence consumer engagement and tourist behaviour.

New research on the digital marketing of women's sport has found that although it can create new opportunities to increase online visibility and engage audiences, this does not necessarily translate into higher event attendance. Whilst some links between marketing women's sport online and increased event attendance were identified; these relationships were weaker than previously suggested. Factors such as price, motivation, and social influences have been shown to have a substantial impact on attendance, and relying solely on online marketing to drive attendance at women's sporting events will not be enough (Funk et al., 2009). Although fan willingness to pay a higher ticket price for digital engagement is unlikely, price reductions that result from offline initiatives such as cost-reducing transportation partnerships, group pricing incentives, and increased local outreach are effective. In addition, reductions targeting specific accessibility barriers will be more impactful when accompanied by corresponding marketing efforts to promote accessibility practitioners' initiatives.

This chapter reflects on the study's findings considering current research and considers their implications for our understanding of digital engagement among women participating in sports tourism.

5.2 Digital Marketing: Visibility Without Conversion

The majority of respondents from the survey reported discovering women's sports through digital marketing channels such as social media, and upon further exposure to digital marketing efforts related to women's sports, reported a more positive perception.

This raises a critical question: although women's sport has achieved greater visibility through digital marketing, this increased exposure has not translated into behavioural outcomes, highlighting a disconnect between awareness and action (Filo et al., 2015; Parganas et al., 2015). Participants from the questionnaire demonstrate substantial awareness and express interest in women's sport, yet this interest does not progress into concrete intentions to attend events. In summary, while digital marketing effectively enhances visibility, the evidence from this study suggests there is no clear causal link between increased visibility and the subsequent development of behavioural intent or actual attendance (Bilro et al., 2019; Molinillo et al., 2020).

Common wisdom argues that the greater visibility of women's sport is a necessary step to growing participation, but the research reveals that, visibility is unlikely to drive behaviour among football fans and may be seen as the end of the line for women's sport rather than a significant shift in digital marketing practice.

It is common for measurement in digital marketing to focus on the easy-to-measure – impressions and reach. But these metrics don't necessarily translate into meaningful behaviour of your audience (Schivinski et al., 2016). Research on the effectiveness of an activity set to drive attendance found that common digital marketing metrics overestimated the true impact.

There is a perception that digital marketing is revolutionising how women's sport is promoted to potential audiences, engaging new followers and creating new fans. While it is possible that digital marketing can increase positive attitudes to women's sport, it is unlikely to significantly change the behaviour of audiences who already follow women's sport closely. Many factors influence sports fans' behaviour regarding participation and attendance, including convenience, cost, motivation, and more.

For instance, news that women's football match updates are read for 30 seconds every day is unlikely to translate into increased attendance at live matches (Mintel, 2022). Marketing research suggests that the primary role of marketing is to reinforce rather than change attitudes and opinions already held. However, for increasing participation and attendance in women's sport, it is not just attitudes that need to be positively influenced.

5.3 Engagement: Necessary but Not Sufficient

The results suggest that, on average, engagement is more strongly associated with travel intention than is digital marketing exposure, thereby indicating that engagement acts as a mediator (Bazi et al., 2023). However, the relationship between engagement and travel intention is not particularly strong.

There's a common theory that engagement equals behaviour. In digital marketing terms, engagement equals behaviour. Fans who are more actively engaged with a club on Twitter are also more likely to attend matches. The results from this study support this theory only partially. There was a positive relationship between several measures of engagement and intention to attend matches, but no relationship with conversation. There was a weak relationship between shares and intention to attend.

Engagement is not the whole story, while necessary, it is insufficient as a standalone driver of behavioural outcomes (Dessart et al., 2015; Brodie et al., 2011). In women's sport, people engaging with women's sport online is not the same as people attending women's sport live. So, why do people engage with women's sport, and why do they or don't they attend live events? This may provide some useful insights into increasing attendance. Engagement is often portrayed positively within the sports, marketing and media industries as indicative of success. However, this is not always the case. A more holistic approach that combines online engagement with practical solutions to the physical barriers to attendance is needed to increase attendance at women's sporting events. Currently, research does not support this approach.

Yet again, engagement is treated as a single, uniform concept. We know that engagement has many faces (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Dessart et al., 2015), with different types of engagement behaviours requiring varying efforts from the customer. Some of these engagement behaviours require only low effort from the customer, such as passively liking a post or watching a video, whereas others require high effort, such as writing a comment or proactively seeking content. We know that the first engagement is easily gained (McCarthy et al., 2022). It might also reflect 'distracted' engagement that fails to translate into long-term interest or intention to engage in future events (Brodie et al., 2011, Filo et al., 2015).

Our research found high levels of engagement, but participants' intentions to attend events were rated more modestly. This could suggest that audiences are being actively nurtured online at relatively low cost, with little intention of translating that participation into actual event attendance.

Contrary to prevailing wisdom, audience engagement is not synonymous with audience behaviour. Rather than directing fans to live events, engagement is here treated as a substitute for attendance in itself, with fans finding sufficient satisfaction in consuming content and interacting with other fans. This is supported by the statistical results (see Appendix C).

5.4 The Intention Behaviour Gap

The findings from this research uncover a gap within consumer behaviour research between engagement and travel intentions.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) asserts that a person's intention to perform a behaviour is the best predictor of that behaviour. Our observations of active users on the site, who often avidly add new content, show that intention alone is a very poor predictor of behaviour (Ajzen, 2005). Indeed, we have seen users actively declare their intention to “be there,” yet not actually attend the events.

However, the model also has limitations, as intentions are not guaranteed to translate into reality. In the context of sports tourism, several constraints may apply, including cost, distance, time, and accessibility (Lamont et al., 2012; Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2010).

Although these factors were not included in this research, they are likely to have had an impact. Digital marketing is unlikely to be able to negate the barriers to attendance around cost and value, whilst, at the same time, evoking perceptions and emotions about what the ‘festival experience’ will be like for the individual.

A clear pattern emerges: while there is significant awareness and interest in women's sports, this does not consistently translate into engagement or strong intention to attend.

So digital marketing can play a role in overcoming the attendance barriers of cost, time and convenience, but simply raising awareness of events is not enough. People know of events they are capable of and willing to attend, but are put off by cost, time, or convenience. To overcome these barriers, the sports organisation needs to develop an overall marketing strategy that encompasses all integrated marketing programmes and goes beyond promoting events through digital marketing channels. For example, travel and event promoters could collaborate to offer cost-effective event packages. Ticket prices could be set for larger groups. For those unfamiliar with events, sports organisations could undertake local outreach to raise awareness. Alternatively, they could partner with community organisations in order to make their events more accessible. Paired with a robust digital strategy, these targeted, themed events ensure

online activity is directed toward real attendees, rather than just distributed via social media to an anonymous audience.

In practical terms, this means sports marketers should combine digital strategies with direct incentives and partnerships to remove barriers, such as bundled ticket-and-travel offers, group discounts, targeted outreach, and community collaborations, to effectively translate digital engagement into event attendance. This finding highlights a limitation of intention-based models, where stated intent does not reliably translate into action.

5.5 Social Influence and Perceived Experience

Perceptions of experience and social influence were found to have a moderate positive impact on travel intentions.

We also observed that, for some fans, the sight of others attending events may have a social-validation effect, making attendance more attractive, but we did not find this to be a particularly powerful influence, and it was generally insufficient to outweigh the numerous barriers to attendance faced by many fans.

Perceived experience and actual experience also tend to mirror the attendance pattern. While many people perceive live event attendance as providing a unique and better experience than online viewing, this perception has not translated into actual changes in viewing behaviour.

Most literature on experience treats it as if individuals valued it as a commodity. This study reveals that even when valuable experience is identified, there is no guarantee that individuals will act to realise it. This is because other constraints can prevent them from doing so.

5.6 Rethinking the Digital Marketing Engagement Behaviour Model

This research uncovers the complex relationship between digital marketing, engagement (dialogic interaction) and behaviour (Li et al., 2021). While digital marketing can increase awareness, engagement, and conversation, this does not guarantee that engagement will convert into behaviour. Intent may also be a poor predictor of action.

There is no guarantee of a positive relationship, and any relationship that does exist is likely to be non-linear and influenced by factors beyond digital engagement.

Digital marketing represents only one of many factors influencing fan behaviour and event attendance. While it can effectively raise awareness and engagement, various structural, social, and psychological barriers often persist. Understanding these barriers is essential for developing strategies that translate digital engagement into actual attendance.

As illustrated in Figure 5.1, the findings support a mediated and non-linear relationship, where fan engagement serves as the key mechanism linking digital marketing exposure to travel intention, while the direct effect remains weak and statistically non-significant (Bazi et al., 2023).

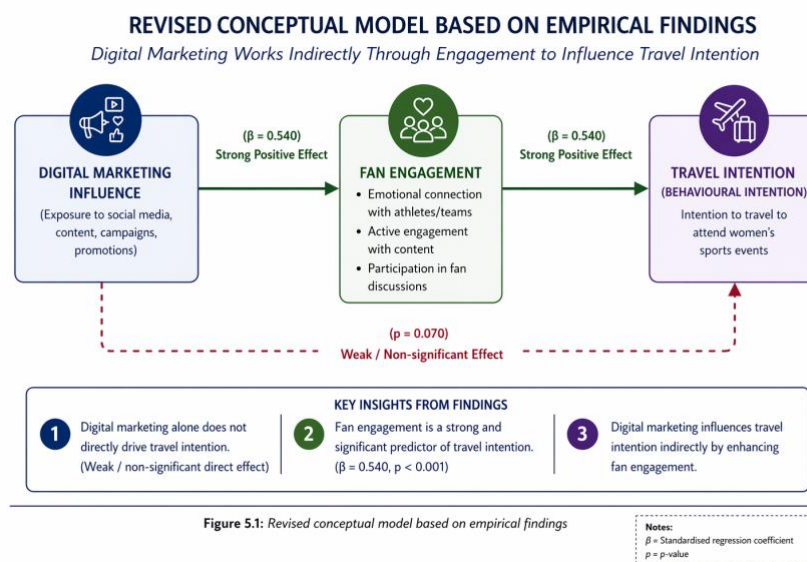


Figure 5.1: Revised conceptual model based on empirical findings

Source: Author's data used to generate image by AI (April, 2026)

5.7 The Role of Women's Sport Context

However, it is important to note that any findings in this respect are likely to be influenced by the current low profile of women's sport.

Women's sport has experienced a 'digital boom' in recent years, with mainstream marketing campaigns reaching wider audiences than ever before. However, online engagement is only half the battle; growth must translate into real-world participation and attendance. In this piece, we examine tangible ways in which women's sport can overcome the barriers that deter females from getting involved, both as participants and spectators.

Whilst work continues to improve communication about women's sport, it is clear that there are deeper, structural issues with its funding, accessibility, and cultural positioning.

Digital marketing has been touted as a saviour for local press, but the truth may be that online advertising is contributing to the decline of traditional titles rather than saving them.

5.8 Implications for Theory

The study explores the relationship between economic indicators and tourist behaviour and, hopefully, contributes to the issue and related issues.

Drawing from both the literature review and the empirical investigation into tourist information websites, this paper evaluates whether the high levels of digital engagement identified in previous research, such as the findings discussed at the International Tourism Conference 2014, reliably predict actual behavioural change in travel intentions. In line with the reviewed literature on women's sports tourism, the study's results indicate that although digital engagement can enhance awareness and perceived value, it does not serve as a definitive predictor of behavioural change in travel decisions. This finding supports the broader scholarly consensus outlined in the literature review, which cautions against equating digital engagement metrics with meaningful shifts in consumer behaviour.

Future research could develop and apply typologies or measures of engagement that extend beyond simple engagement/unengagement categorisations (Williams & Chinn, 2010). In particular, there is a need to distinguish between passive engagement indicators (e.g., likes, views) and active engagement behaviours (e.g., comments, shares, participation in virtual events). Such engagement behaviours could be measured using different methodologies (frequency/description of behaviour, depth of interaction, engagement score, behavioural mapping) and their ability to predict future behaviour could be assessed.

5.9 Implications for Practice

Contrary to common engagement metrics like likes and shares, depth is more valuable than volume (Brodie et al., 2011; Schivinski et al., 2016). By crafting efforts that create an emotional connection with sports and events, such as personalised storytelling, athlete & fan interactions, behind-the-scenes look into the lives of athletes or staff, etc., engagement efforts can translate into high levels of identity with teams and events. In addition, efforts that encourage community involvement, such as actively fostering forum activity, incentivising fans to attend events, and creating special fan events and activities, can not only foster a sense of belonging among fans but also drive travel intentions for the sports and events that fans care about most (Lock & Heere, 2017).

5.10 Chapter Conclusion

This conclusion compares and contrasts the findings with the extant literature.

The research, into how major travel brands use digital marketing, found that online marketing was good at raising awareness, encouraging conversations, and even driving consideration, but less effective at turning consideration into bookings (Filo et al., 2015; Billo et al., 2019; Molinillo et al., 2020). And while brands generated consumer interactions, these interactions translated into behaviour less often.

There are no simple answers to how digital marketing affects engagement and attendance. The relationship is conditional and interactive.

This chapter summarises the study's key findings. It also offers some thoughts on future research and practice.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to provide a summary of the study's principal findings and address the research question: How does digital marketing influence consumer travel intentions for women's sports tourism? The chapter will link the empirical results to the relevant theoretical lenses, synthesise the findings to gain a sense of the overall contributions of this work, and subsequently address practical implications for practitioners and managers in the industry. Limitations and avenues for future research will be discussed to further contextualise the work presented herein.

6.2 Summary of Key Findings

This study investigates the role of digital marketing in creating consumer travel intentions for women's sports tourism. While digital marketing is effective at increasing visibility and engagement for fans, its impact on intentions to take action is limited and indirect.

While variables of frequency of use, satisfaction, quality, and loyalty were still important in explaining soccer fans' intentions to travel, fan engagement had the greatest effect on their travel intentions. Fan engagement is a hot research topic, and engagement theory has been used to understand the dynamics. It suggests that meaningful interaction, or engagement, with a brand, for example, through emotions, can lead to behavioural consequences (Brodie et al., 2011). While the findings suggest that fan engagement with a fan culture can influence travel intentions, the relationship was moderate in strength. This aligns with previous research, which found that engagement did not fully explain future behaviour (Hollebeek et al. 2014).

Intention to watch sports live was mainly predicted by motivation, but was also influenced by social factors and perceived experience. Fans who had interacted with other spectators or tournament participants while watching sports on TV and who perceived a live sports experience as more valuable were more likely to intend to watch sports live. The effects, however, were marginal.

While we still observe an intention-behaviour gap, it is noteworthy that travel intentions within the sample were generally moderate, even among those most engaged in Freeride activities.

6.3 Answer to the Research Question

This study investigates the relationship between digital marketing and women's sports tourism destination intentions and finds that digital marketing has an indirect but no direct impact on these intentions.

While digital marketing can enhance visibility and engagement, this does not necessarily translate into intentions for behavioural support. Any effects digital marketing has are likely to be filtered through fan engagement and influenced by several factors. This is because digital communication operates through indirect, complex pathways rather than through simple causality (Bilro et al., 2019; Li et al., 2021).

While digital marketing cannot alone change people's behaviour, it can raise awareness and create a positive impression of a sector or organisation. However, it is unlikely to be enough to overcome more entrenched structural barriers to engagement.

6.4 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several important contributions to the literature on sports tourism, digital marketing, and consumer behaviour, particularly within the under-researched context of women's sport.

First, the findings challenge the widely assumed linear relationship between digital marketing, engagement, and behavioural outcomes. While a positive association between engagement and travel intention is observed, the strength of this relationship is limited. Engagement does not emerge as a reliable or sufficient predictor of behaviour. This supports growing scepticism within the literature regarding the predictive validity of digital engagement metrics, particularly low-effort forms of interaction such as likes, views, and shares (Filo et al., 2015; Parganas et al., 2015). Rather than functioning as a clear behavioural precursor, engagement appears to operate as a conditional and context-dependent mechanism.

Second, the study highlights structural limitations within the Theory of Planned Behaviour when applied to digitally mediated environments (Ajzen, 2005). Although the model positions intention as the most immediate antecedent of behaviour, the findings demonstrate that intention itself remains relatively weak. This suggests that the model does not fully account for external constraints, such as cost, accessibility, and time, which significantly shape attendance decisions in sports tourism contexts. The results, therefore, reinforce critiques that the model's explanatory power is reduced when behavioural control is constrained by structural factors not captured within its framework.

Third, this research contributes to the conceptual development of fan engagement by emphasising its multidimensional and non-uniform nature. The findings demonstrate that engagement cannot be treated as a singular construct with consistent behavioural implications. Instead, it exists along a spectrum from passive, low-effort interactions (e.g., viewing or liking content) to more active, cognitively demanding forms of participation (e.g., content creation, community involvement, or advocacy). These different forms of engagement are not equivalent in their capacity to influence behaviour. The tendency within existing literature to aggregate them into a single

construct risk overstating their predictive relevance (Hollebeek et al., 2014; McCarthy et al., 2022). This study, therefore, supports calls for greater conceptual precision and more differentiated measurement approaches in future research.

Finally, the study advances a more realistic conceptualisation of the relationship between digital marketing and behaviour by rejecting deterministic and sequential models of influence. The commonly assumed pathway in digital marketing from engagement to behaviour is not supported in a consistent or causal way. Instead, the findings support a fragmented and conditional framework in which digital marketing enhances visibility and perception, engagement facilitates psychological connection, and behaviour is ultimately constrained by structural and contextual factors. This reframing shifts the focus away from simplistic causal assumptions and towards a more integrated understanding of how digital and non-digital influences interact.

In doing so, the research contributes to the limited but growing body of literature on women's sports tourism by integrating insights across traditionally separate fields. By examining digital marketing, consumer behaviour, and sports tourism within a single analytical framework, the study addresses a recognised gap and provides a more holistic account of how contemporary fan behaviour operates in digitally mediated environments. This challenges the assumption of a linear progression from exposure to behaviour. This research contributes by reframing digital engagement as a mediating rather than causal mechanism in consumer behaviour models.

6.5 Practical Implications

The findings have several important implications for practitioners.

The project explores ways to increase attendance at match day and other events through digital marketing. While digital marketing is useful for raising awareness and engagement, it is not particularly effective at addressing the reasons fans do not attend events. This is consistent with wider research that concludes that marketing communication is an inadequate driver of behavioural change (Funk et al., 2009).

Secondly, organisations need to think about how success is measured. Likes, shares and impressions are all useful metrics for measuring visibility, but they are not measures of meaningful engagement. The current digital metrics landscape has its limitations, and current metrics largely measure trivial rather than meaningful engagement (Schivinski et al., 2016).

However, more critical still are the attendance strategies required to address the underlying issues affecting spectator attendance at events, notably pricing, accessibility, and event scheduling (Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2010).

Rather than prioritising interaction duration, it may be more effective to facilitate deeper engagement and activities that foster a sense of community among participants.

6.6 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged.

This research is subject to important methodological limitations, particularly concerning the sampling strategy. The reliance on a convenience sample introduces selection bias, as participants were drawn from those already active in digital environments, limiting the sample's representativeness and skewing results toward individuals more likely to engage with digital marketing (Wu Suen et al., 2014; Saunders et al., 2023).

Consequently, the findings cannot be assumed to reflect the broader population of women's sports fans. Furthermore, since all participants resided in either the UK or the USA, the study lacks cross-cultural or international variation, further restricting the generalisability of the results to other national or cultural contexts. These sampling constraints may shape both the nature and strength of the relationships observed in the study, and should be critically considered when interpreting the findings.

The analysis is based on self-reported data, which may be subject to response bias regarding engagement and intention.

Due to the nature of the study, the analysis is restricted to a cross-sectional design. As such, evidence of cause and effect or longitudinal changes cannot be observed.

One limitation of the present study is that it only measures intentions, not actual behaviour. There is a well-documented difference between intentions and behaviour in consumer research (Ajzen, 2005), but measuring intentions, i.e. behavioural intentions, is a common approach in research of this nature and provides useful insights. Survey design limitations (see Appendix A) may have influenced responses.

6.7 Recommendations for Future Research

There is a need for longitudinal research to determine whether digital engagement translates into meaningful behavioural change over time.

While existing research has identified key deterrents to live sports event attendance, there remains scope for more in-depth analysis of the structural factors shaping spectator decision-making. Previous studies have primarily focused on variables such as ticket prices and travel distance; however, other important constraints remain underexplored. For example, future research could examine the affordability and availability of transportation, proximity of reasonably priced accommodation, total travel time, accessibility for individuals with disabilities, and the suitability of event scheduling. Incorporating these variables into empirical models would allow researchers to assess their relative importance in attendance decisions and explore how they interact with other influences, including digital engagement, to shape the overall spectator experience (Kaplanidou & Gibson, 2010).

Greater conceptual differentiation is also needed in how engagement is defined and measured. Distinguishing between passive and active forms of engagement would provide a more nuanced understanding of how different types of interaction influence behaviour (Hollebeek et al., 2014). This would enable future research to move beyond broad classifications and more accurately assess the behavioural relevance of different engagement types.

Finally, adopting a more critical perspective and conducting research across diverse international contexts, particularly in non-Western settings, would improve the generalisability of findings.

6.8 Final Conclusion

This research examines the impact of digital marketing on travel intentions in women's sports tourism. While efforts to increase awareness of and engagement with women's sports tourism may enhance visibility, this does not necessarily translate into intentions or actual attendance (Filo et al., 2015; Parganas et al., 2015). A conditional and limited relationship is identified between digital marketing, engagement, and behaviour, reinforcing the complexity of these interactions (Li et al., 2021; Bilro et al., 2019). The persistent intention–behaviour gap identified throughout the study reflects the perception that digital engagement with sports can function as a low-cost form of participation, rather than a precursor to physical attendance (Ajzen, 2005; Funk et al., 2009). Consequently, digital marketing represents only one of several factors influencing sports tourism behaviour within a broader, multi-factor system. While increasing visibility is important, it is equally necessary to understand the wider determinants of consumer behaviour and to integrate both online and offline strategies to effectively drive attendance and participation (Williams & Chinn, 2010).

Appendices

Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire

The Rise of Women's Sports Tourism: How Digital Marketing Influences Fan Travel Intentions to Women's Sporting Events

Participant Information Sheet

Hello, you are being invited to take part in the above research study. Before you decide whether or not you wish to participate, it is important for you to understand why the study is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. This study has been reviewed by an ethics committee to check that your personal data will be kept secure and used only in the way you have been told it will be. Your consent will be sought for processing your data in this way. The ethics committee has also checked that data collection is "in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes... proportionate to the aim pursued" as required by the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) (2016, Article 9). Under the UK GDPR all researchers must have a legal basis for processing any personal data about you. During the study you will be asked for information about age, location, and gender. The University of Northampton confirms that processing of your personal data will be handled in a lawful manner as required by UK GDPR article 89(1), UK GDPR Article 6(1)(e) and the Data Protection Act 2018 sections 19(1)(b) and (c). This also includes your rights under UK GDPR. We therefore confirm that the processing of your data in this project is in the public interest, has due regard for your rights and freedoms as a participant ('data subject') and will be stored and processed in a secure manner. The University of Northampton is the Data Controller for this project. If you have any concerns about the collection, use and storage of data in this project and any Data Protection complaints please contact the University of Northampton's Data Protection Officer DPO@northampton.ac.uk or by writing to: Data Protection Officer, Vice Chancellor's Office, Senate building, Waterside Campus, University of Northampton, NN1 5PH. If you are not satisfied, you can send your complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office by contacting: Phone: 0303 123 1113 Website: <https://ico.org.uk/make-a-complaint/>

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to explore how digital marketing, particularly social media content, influences people's intentions to travel to attend women's sporting events. The research aims to understand how different types of online content—such as posts from athletes, event promotions, and fan interactions shape attitudes, engagement, and decision-making among sports fans. This

study will contribute to a better understanding of the growing role of digital platforms in promoting women's sports and encouraging sports tourism.

Why have I been invited to participate?

A range of participants is being recruited to ensure diverse perspectives are included.

Do I have to take part?

Taking part is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and may be asked to give your written consent. Due to this being an anonymous study, if you decide to take part, you will not be able to withdraw after completing the questionnaire.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you choose to take part, you will be asked to complete a short online survey, which should take approximately 4–6 minutes.

The survey will include questions about:

- Your use of social media
 - Your engagement with sports and women's sports content
 - Your opinions on digital marketing and sporting events
 - Your likelihood of travelling to attend a women's sporting event
- You will not be asked to provide any personally identifiable information, and all responses will remain anonymous. Participation is entirely voluntary, and you are free to stop the survey at any time before submitting your responses.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information, which is collected about you during the course of the study, will be kept strictly confidential. Any information taken from the participant will not have any information attached to it that they could be recognized from. Data will be kept on password protected computers and will be destroyed upon award of the degree.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The full results of the study will be available in my dissertation. If any participants wish to receive a report about the study's findings they can request this from me by using the contact details below.

Who is organising the study?

Conducting this research as a student at the University of Northampton in the Faculty of Business and Law.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been agreed by the Faculty of Business and Law research ethics committee.

Contact for further information

Lily Carlson -

Lily.carlson22@my.northampton.ac.uk

Thank you for considering taking part in this study.

1. Do you consent to taking part in this survey? *

☐ Yes

Section 1: Screening Questions

2. Do you follow sports-related content on social media (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, X)? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

3. Have you ever watched or engaged with content related to women's sports (e.g., WSL, WNBA, Women's World Cup, female athletes)? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

4. When was the last time you attended a live sporting event (any sport)? *

☐ Within the last 3 months

☐ Within the last 6 months

☐ Within the last year

☐ More than a year ago

☐ Never attended

Demographics

5. Age group *

☐ 18–24

☐ 25–34

☐ 35–44

☐ 45+

6. Gender *

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Non-binary

☐ Prefer not to say

7. Country/Region of residence *

☐ United Kingdom

☐ Europe (excluding UK)

☐ United States

☐ Other (please specify)

8. How frequently do you follow or watch sports content (any format)? *

☐ Daily

☐ Several times a week

☐ Weekly

☐ Occasionally

☐ Rarely / Never

Digital Engagement with Women's Sports

9. Which platforms do you use to follow *women's sports content*? (Select all that apply) *

- ☐ Instagram
☐ TikTok
☐ YouTube
☐ X (Twitter)
☐ Facebook
☐ I do not follow women's sports specifically
☐ Other

10. How often do you see content specifically related to women's sports on social media? *

- ☐ Daily
☐ Several times a week
☐ Weekly
☐ Occasionally
☐ Rarely / Never

11. What type of women's sports content do you engage with most? (Select the one you interact with the most) *

- ☐ Match highlights / game clips
☐ Athlete-focused content (e.g., posts, interviews)
☐ Behind-the-scenes / training content
☐ Event promotions or ticket advertisements
☐ Fan-created content
☐ News / analysis

Fan Engagement

13. Scale: Strongly Disagree → Strongly Agree *

I feel emotionally connected to women's sports teams or athletes I follow.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly Agree

I actively engage with women's sports content (e.g., liking, sharing, commenting).

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly Agree

I discuss women's sports with others online or offline.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly Agree

Following women's sports makes me feel part of a fan community.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly Agree

Perceptions of Digital Marketing

12. Scale: Strongly Disagree → Strongly Agree *

I discover women's sporting events through social media.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly Agree

Content from female athletes or teams increases my interest in attending events.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly Agree

Social media makes women's sports feel more exciting and engaging.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly Agree

Online videos and posts make me imagine attending women's sporting events in person.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly Agree

Influencers or creators discussing women's sports influence my perceptions of events.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral

Travel Behaviour and Perceptions

14. Strongly Disagree → Strongly Agree *

I would consider travelling to attend a women's sporting event.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly Agree

I would travel to another city to attend a women's sporting event.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly Agree

I would travel internationally to attend a women's sporting event.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly Agree

The location of a women's sporting event influences my decision to attend.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly Agree

Watching women's sport live offers a better experience than watching online or on TV.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral

Social Influence and Intention**15. Strongly Disagree → Strongly Agree ***

Seeing other fans attend women's sporting events on social media motivates me to attend.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly Agree

Social media promotions increase my likelihood of travelling to women's sporting events.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly Agree

I intend to attend a women's sporting event within the next 12 months.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly Agree

Final Open Question**16. What women's sporting event would you most like to travel to attend, and why? ***

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Appendix B: Statistical Results

B1. Correlation Matrix (Pearson's r)

Variable	Digital Marketing	Fan Engagement	Travel Intention
Digital Marketing	1.00	0.74**	0.62**
Fan Engagement	0.74**	1.00	0.70**
Travel Intention	0.62**	0.70**	1.00

B2. Regression Results

Dependent Variable: Travel Intention
R² = 0.48
Digital Marketing (β = 0.325, p = 0.070)
Fan Engagement (β = 0.540, p < 0.01**)

B3. Mediation Analysis

Fan Engagement significantly mediates the relationship between Digital Marketing and Travel Intention.
Indirect effect stronger than direct effect.

** p < 0.01 (statistically significant)

Appendix C: Reliability Statistics

Appendix C: Reliability Statistics (SPSS Output Style)

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Digital Marketing Influence	0.72	5
Fan Engagement	0.75	4
Travel Intention	0.81	3

Note: Values above 0.70 indicate acceptable internal consistency (Field, 2018).

Appendix D: Ethics and Consent forms

Faculty of Business and Law Ethics Approval Form, January 2018

University of Northampton

Faculty of Business and Law
Undergraduate Research Ethics Application Form

Title of Project		The Rise of Women's Sports Tourism: How Digital Marketing Influences Fan Travel Intentions of Women's Sporting Events.		
Name of Student		Lily Carlson		
		YES	NO	N/A
1	Will you describe the main research procedure to participants in advance, so that they are informed what to expect?	☒	☐	☐
2	Will you tell participants that their participation is voluntary?	☒	☐	☐
3	Will you obtain consent from participants?	☒	☐	☐
4	If the research is observational, will you ask participants for their consent to being observed.	☐	☐	☒
5	Will you tell participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason?	☐	☐	☒
6	With questionnaires/interviews, will you give participants the option of omitting questions they do not want to answer?	☐	☐	☒
7	Will you tell participants that their data will be treated with full confidentiality and that, if published, it should not be identifiable as theirs?	☒	☐	☐
If you have ticked No to any of questions 1-7, then your project is NOT low risk and you will have to discuss this with your supervisor who will refer your application to the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Business and Law.				
8	Will your project involve deliberately misleading participants in any way?	☐	☒	☐
9	Is there any realistic risk of any participants experiencing either physical or psychological distress or discomfort?	☐	☒	☐
10	Will it be possible to link identities or trace information back to individual participants in any way?	☐	☒	☐

1

Faculty of Business and Law Ethics Approval Form, January 2018

11	Will the study involve discussion of sensitive topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use, ethnicity, political behaviour, potentially illegal activities)?	☐	☒	☐
12	Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses, compensation for time or a lottery / draw ticket) be offered to participants?	☐	☒	☐
If you have ticked Yes to questions 8-12, then your project is NOT low risk and you will have to discuss this with your supervisor who will refer your application to the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Business and Law.				
		YES	NO	N/A
13	Does your project involve work with animals?	☐	☒	☐
14	Do participants fall into any of the following special groups? Note that you may also need to obtain satisfactory Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance			
	a) School Children?	☐	☒	☐
	b) People with learning or communication difficulties	☐	☒	☐
	c) Patients	☐	☒	☐
	d) People in custody	☐	☒	☐
	e) People engaged in illegal activities (e.g. drug-taking)	☐	☒	☐
15	A risk assessment of this project has been conducted with my supervisor.	☒	☐	☐
State the aim of the research		Determine likelihood of social media users to travel and attend a women's sporting event.		
State the participants in the research and how they will be recruited (e.g. online)		Friend and family of questionnaire organiser.		
State the method used for the research (e.g. questionnaire, interview, focus group)		Questionnaire		
Name (Caps): LILY CARLSON		Signature of Student: <i>Lily Carlson</i>	Date: 22/4/26	
This project has been ☒ approved in its current form ☐ declined and will need to be revised and resubmitted The following required revisions are stipulated.				

2

Faculty of Business and Law Ethics Approval Form, January 2018

Print Name Supervisor: Tommy Hutchinson	Signature: <i>Tommy Hutchinson</i>	Date: 22/4/26
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3

Appendix E: Participant consent



University of Northampton
Faculty of Business & Law

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET TEMPLATE

STUDY TITLE
The Rise of Women's Sports Tourism: How Digital Marketing Influences Fan Travel Intentions to Women's Sporting Events

INVITATION PARAGRAPH

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0303 123 1113

Website: <https://ico.org.uk/make-a-complaint/>

1

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

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WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH STUDY?

The full results of the study will be available in my dissertation. If any participants wish to receive a report about the study's findings they can request this from me by using the contact details below.

WHO IS ORGANISING AND FUNDING THE RESEARCH?

Conducting this research as a student at the University of Northampton in the Faculty of Business and Law.

WHO HAS APPROVED THIS STUDY?

This study has been agreed by the Faculty of Business and Law research ethics committee.

CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Lily Carlson -
Lily.carlson22@my.northampton.ac.uk

THANK YOU

DATE
22/4/26

2

3

Appendix F: Undergraduate Dissertation Supervisor Record Form

The University of Northampton Northampton Business School	Undergraduate Dissertation Supervision Record Form
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Student Name	Lily Carlson
Supervisor Name	Tommy Hutchinson

Meeting Date	Topics Discussed	Action Points	Signatures
07/11/25	Initial meeting, and introduction.	- Introducing myself as a student and meeting Tommy as my main point of contact. - Slightly discussed potential ideas regarding personal interests.	Student: Lily Carlson Supervisor: Tommy Hutchinson
10/11/25	Set dissertation topic.	- Weighed different dissertation titles and eventually landed on one that was easily understood by the reader and encompassed digital marketing and sports.	Student: Lily Carlson Supervisor: Tommy Hutchinson
27/3/26	Finalized survey questions.	- Discussed what needed to be included in the survey for ethical concerns and participant consent. - Tommy made edit suggestions for section titles and merging questions.	Student: Lily Carlson Supervisor: Tommy Hutchinson
17/4/26	Reviewed chapters 1 through 3.	- Need to reference more up-to-date sources. - Shorter style paragraphs. - Inductive vs deductive.	Student: Lily Carlson Supervisor: Tommy Hutchinson
22/4/26	Final meeting reviewing completed assignment.	- Small changes - Signing paperwork. - Review before submitting.	Student: Lily Carlson Supervisor: Tommy Hutchinson

Important: This form must be completed and submitted at the front of your dissertation.

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