
Social Media Influencer Marketing and Sports Tourism Development: The Role of Okwuluora in Mobilising Fan Engagement for Rangers International FC in Enugu State, Nigeria

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Abstract: *Sports tourism has emerged as an important driver of destination development, particularly in cities with strong sporting cultures. However, limited research has examined the role of social media influencers in mobilising sports fans and stimulating tourism demand in emerging economies. This study investigates how influencer marketing contributes to sports tourism development through fan engagement and stadium attendance in the context of Rangers International F.C. in Enugu State. The study specifically explores the influence of Okwuluora, whose digital advocacy has mobilized supporters and promoted match attendance. Using survey data collected from football supporters and analyzed through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), the study examines relationships among influencer promotion, team identification, fan engagement, digital word-of-mouth, stadium attendance, and sports tourism demand. The results reveal that influencer promotion significantly enhances fan engagement, team identification, and digital word-of-mouth communication. Fan engagement and digital word-of-mouth subsequently increase stadium attendance, which in turn contributes to sports tourism demand. Mediation analysis further indicates that fan engagement and stadium attendance serve as key mechanisms linking influencer promotion to tourism outcomes. The study contributes to sports tourism literature by demonstrating how grassroots digital influencers can stimulate sports-related travel and destination promotion. The findings provide important implications for sports clubs, tourism marketers, and policymakers seeking to leverage social media influencers as strategic partners in developing sports tourism destinations in emerging economies.*

Keywords: Sports tourism development, social media influencer marketing, fan engagement, football tourism, digital word-of-mouth (eWOM)

INTRODUCTION

Sports tourism has become an increasingly significant component of global tourism development due to its ability to attract visitors, generate economic benefits, and enhance destination branding. Scholars have emphasized that sports tourism encompasses travel associated with observing sporting events, participating in sports activities, or visiting sports-related attractions (Gibson, 1998; Higham & Hinch, 2018). Football games and other major athletic events frequently increase travel demand by enticing supporters and spectators to visit host locations, which boosts local economic growth through retail spending, transportation, and hospitality services. As a result, sports teams and athletic events are becoming more widely acknowledged as significant forces behind regional competitiveness and tourism growth.

The marketing environment for the sports and tourism industries has changed in recent years due to the advent of digital communication technology. Social media platforms are now essential tools for sports organisations to interact with fans, advertise events, and create online communities. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) claim that social media platforms enable user-generated content and interactive communication, both of which substantially impact consumer attitudes and behaviours. Online interaction and digital word-of-mouth have been demonstrated to influence travel intentions, destination perceptions, and visitor decision-making processes in tourism contexts (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Hudson & Hudson, 2013). As a result, these digital platforms give travel destinations and sports organisations effective tools to interact with fans and increase demand for travel.

Influencer marketing has become one of the most effective methods for promoting products, travel destinations, and events within the larger field of social media marketing. According to Freberg et al. (2011), social media influencers are people with sizable online followings who have the power to influence audience views and behaviours through their personal narratives, knowledge, and trustworthiness. Influencers frequently serve as opinion leaders who spread knowledge, produce interesting content, and unite online groups around particular issues or passions. Influencer marketing can greatly increase customer engagement, brand awareness, and purchase intentions in a variety of industries, including travel and hospitality, according to research (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Abreu et al., 2024).

Social media influencers are becoming more and more important players in sports marketing when it comes to community involvement and fan mobilization. Online platforms are a major source of match updates, commentary, and fan interaction for sports enthusiasts. Influencers can establish emotional ties between fans and sports organizations through live commentary, digital storytelling, and fan-driven conversations. This procedure increases participation in athletic events and fortifies fan loyalty (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). Sports organizations may see increasing stadium

attendance, larger supporter networks, and more economic benefits for host cities when fan engagement rises.

Football continues to be the most popular sport in Nigeria and is crucial for community cohesiveness, enjoyment, and identity. Football teams frequently act as cultural icons that foster community cohesion and boost regional economic activity. Rangers International F.C. is one such team that has always garnered significant regional support in southeast Nigeria. Large crowds of fans regularly travel from nearby cities and states to watch live games at the club's games in Enugu State. These match-day events generate chances for sports-related tourism, which benefits nearby companies such as lodging facilities, dining establishments, transportation providers, and entertainment venues.

In many Nigerian cities, sports tourism development is still underutilised and understudied despite these prospects. Sports organisations have frequently been unable to completely realise their tourist potential due to a lack of marketing resources, infrastructure limitations, and inadequate promotion of sporting events. However, the emergence of social media influencers in recent years has started to change how sports promotion and fan mobilisation operate in the nation. One prominent example is Okwuluora, a well-known social media figure who actively interacts with football fans via live updates, online commentary, and community activism. Okwuluora regularly mobilises supporters to attend games, post sports-related material, and show support for Rangers International FC by utilising digital platforms like Facebook and other social networks. His impact serves as an example of how traditional marketing techniques may be enhanced by grassroots digital activism to promote sporting events and grow fan bases.

Influencer-driven fan mobilisation has become more prevalent in Nigerian sports culture, but there is still a dearth of empirical studies on how it affects the growth of sports tourism. Previous research on influencer marketing has mostly concentrated on consumer purchasing behaviour, hospitality marketing, and tourism destination branding (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Abreu et al., 2024). The contribution of local social media influencers to fan engagement and tourism-related outcomes in sports contexts, especially in emerging economies, has received very little attention.

Moreover, the mechanisms by which influencer engagement results in higher stadium attendance, fan participation, and demand for sports tourism are not well supported by academic research. Policymakers, sports teams, and other tourist stakeholders who want to use digital platforms for destination promotion and economic growth must comprehend these relationships.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining the role of social media influencer marketing in sports tourism development, focusing on how Okwuluora mobilises fan engagement and promotes Rangers International FC matches in Enugu State. By investigating the relationship between influencer engagement, fan participation, and sports tourism demand, the study

contributes to the growing literature on digital marketing and sports tourism in emerging destinations.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Influencer Promotion and Fan Engagement

Social media influencers have become crucial middlemen between corporations and audiences within digital communication contexts. Influencers frequently take on the role of opinion leaders, using persuasive communication and genuine storytelling to mold followers' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. Social Influence Theory states that people are more inclined to adopt behaviors that are endorsed by reliable and trustworthy persons in their social networks (Kelman, 1958). Influencers are better able to mobilize audiences and encourage involvement in social media contexts because of their perceived authenticity, knowledge, and credibility.

Influencer-generated content is essential to sports marketing because it fosters a closer bond between sports teams and their supporters. Influencers inspire followers to engage with sports organizations and other fans by regularly sharing match updates, commentary, and behind-the-scenes content. According to research, social media use encourages active participation in fan communities and greatly increases supporters' emotional attachment to sports teams (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). Influencers can promote online engagement, spark fan discussions, and strengthen ties between fans and sports teams through interactive communication.



Figure 1: Okwuluora and Fans' Engagement

Influencers who actively support teams in Nigerian football can inspire fans to keep up with game updates, talk about the team's performance, and take part in fan-related events. The following

hypothesis is put forth based on the digital advocacy of influencers like Okwuluora, which demonstrates how social media marketing can enhance engagement with sports teams like Rangers International F.C. and organise fan communities.

H1: *Influencer promotion positively influences fan engagement.*

Influencer Promotion and Digital Word-of-Mouth

The online exchange of thoughts, suggestions, and details regarding products, services, or experiences via social media platforms is known as "digital word-of-mouth" (DWOM). DWOM is widely acknowledged in marketing and tourism research as a potent communication tool that influences consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). By producing shareable content that inspires followers to participate in online conversations, influencers play a crucial role in promoting digital word-of-mouth. Posts created by influencers frequently elicit comments, reposts, and recommendations from followers, expanding the audience for marketing messages. According to Lou and Yuan (2019), followers are far more likely to share material and suggest goods or experiences to others when influencers are credible and knowledgeable.

Digital word-of-mouth has the potential to greatly increase the visibility of sports teams and events in sports marketing scenarios. By sharing match details, commentary, and promotional material, fans contribute to the development of online communities that strengthen a sense of shared identity and zeal. Influencer marketing on social media sites like Facebook can motivate Rangers International F.C. followers to invite other fans to games and share match updates.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: *Influencer promotion positively influences digital word-of-mouth communication among fans.*

Influencer Promotion and Team Identification

The psychological bond that supporters form with a sports team is known as "team identification." According to Wann and Branscombe (1993), it indicates the extent to which people have an emotional bond with a team and consider its achievements and shortcomings to be personally significant. Stronger fan devotion, higher stadium attendance, and active involvement in fan communities are frequently the results of high levels of club identification. Because social media communication enables fans to engage in real-time interactions with sports organisations and other supporters, it has been demonstrated to enhance team identification. By highlighting team identity, shared ideals, and collective pride, influencers who regularly support sports teams can strengthen followers' emotional attachment. Influencers can craft narratives that strengthen fans' sense of community within a team through storytelling, analysis, and promotional content.

In the Nigerian football environment, influencers who advocate for local teams often contribute to the development of strong fan identities. The activities of Okwuluora in mobilising supporters and promoting Rangers International F.C. illustrate how influencer communication can strengthen emotional connections between fans and teams. Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: *Influencer promotion positively influences team identification among supporters.*



Figure 2: Fans of Rangers International Football Club

Team Identification and Fan Engagement

In sports marketing literature, team identity has long been acknowledged as a major factor influencing fan involvement. Strong supporters of a sports team are more likely to devote time and emotional energy to the team through a variety of activities, including going to games, talking about games with other fans, and engaging in fan communities. According to earlier research, people who identify strongly with their teams exhibit higher levels of behavioural engagement and participation in sports-related activities (Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2005). By promoting games, urging others to support the club, and disseminating match-related information on social media, these supporters frequently take on the role of active team ambassadors.

Strong supporters of Rangers International F.C. are likely to participate actively in fan activities, social media posts, and match conversations. Influencer-driven communication has the potential to enhance this identification and motivate supporters to take a more active role in the team's success. Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: *Team identification positively influences fan engagement.*

Fan Engagement and Stadium Attendance

It is often acknowledged that stadium attendance and spectator participation in sporting events are significantly predicted by fan engagement. Fans that are actively involved are more likely to support their teams both online and offline, attend games, and buy merchandise. Fans' motivation to attend live sporting events is greatly increased by emotional and active engagement, according to sports marketing research (Funk & James, 2001). Attending games gives fans the chance to engage with other fans, feel the thrill of live sports, and deepen their emotional bond with teams. Stadium attendance is a crucial part of sports tourism and event-based travel because of this experience aspect of sports consumption.



Figure 3: Full capacity stadium during Rangers F. C. vs Enyimba F. C

Highly involved supporters of Rangers International F.C. could be more inclined to go to Enugu State to watch games and take part in fan-related events. By boosting game attendance and generating enthusiasm, influencer-driven mobilisation might further promote such involvement. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: *Fan engagement positively influences stadium attendance.*

Digital Word-of-Mouth and Stadium Attendance

Consumer behavior in tourist and sports situations is greatly influenced by digital word-of-mouth communication. Fans raise awareness and interest in athletic events by posting pleasant experiences, match updates, and promotional comments online. Other fans are frequently inspired to attend games and take part in sports-related activities by such online conversations. Electronic word-of-mouth has a major impact on travel intentions and event attendance, according to studies in tourist marketing (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Online fan conversations can increase excitement and put social pressure on people to go to games with friends or other fans.

For supporters of Rangers International F.C., digital word-of-mouth generated through social media interactions may encourage fans to travel to Enugu State to experience matches firsthand. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: *Digital word-of-mouth positively influences stadium attendance.*

Stadium Attendance and Sports Tourism Demand

Because stadium attendance entails travelling to a location to take part in or watch athletic activities, it is an essential feature of sports tourism. Fans who travel to see games frequently partake in extra tourism-related activities like lodging, dining, and touring nearby landmarks. Therefore, local tourism demand and economic development can be greatly enhanced by athletic events. Scholars of sports tourism stress that spectator sporting events frequently create visitor flows and boost traveller expenditure (Higham & Hinch, 2018). Therefore, cities that host well-known sports teams stand to gain from increased tourism related to game attendance.



Figure 4: Okwuluora celebrating with fans

In Enugu State, matches involving Rangers International F.C. attract supporters from surrounding regions who travel to watch games. These visits contribute to tourism-related economic activities such as accommodation, transportation, and hospitality services. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: *Stadium attendance positively influences sports tourism demand.*

Fan Engagement and Sports Tourism Demand

Beyond its effect on stadium attendance, fan participation may also directly affect the demand for sports tourism. Highly involved supporters frequently look for immersive experiences connected to their preferred teams, such as going to game locations, taking part in fan gatherings, and touring locations connected to sports teams. Even when attendance is not the main goal, tourism researchers contend that supporters' emotional attachment to sports teams might inspire them to go to match locations (Gibson, 1998). Such travel behaviour demonstrates the intimate connection between tourism and fan culture.



Figure 5: Okwuluora and Rangers F. C. Supporters after a game.

For fans of Rangers International F.C., engagement with the club may encourage visits to Enugu State to experience the local football culture, attend fan gatherings, and explore the city's attractions. Thus, the final hypothesis is proposed:

H8: *Fan engagement positively influences sports tourism demand.*

Theoretical Framework

Social Influence Theory

Social Influence Theory describes how social network interactions impact people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. According to the notion, when people in their social environment are influenced by reliable and trustworthy people, they are more inclined to adopt certain behaviors or opinions (Kelman, 1958). The three main mechanisms of social influence are internalization, identification, and compliance. Through their online interactions and suggestions, social media influencers serve as opinion leaders in digital contexts, influencing audience perceptions and behaviors. Influencers can sway followers' decisions about goods, services, and experiences because of their competence and reputation (Freberg et al., 2011). Influencer-generated content has the potential to motivate viewers to travel, attend events, and engage in tourism-related activities. Influencers can therefore encourage fans to support sports teams, go to games, and participate in fan communities by applying Social Influence Theory to sports tourism. As a result, their online advocacy can promote travel related to sports and aid in the growth of the tourism industry.

Fan Engagement Theory

The emotional, psychological, and behavioral ties that sports fans have with their favorite teams or players are the main emphasis of fan engagement theory. This viewpoint holds that fans who have a deep emotional connection to a team are more likely to engage in sports-related activities including going to games, buying merchandise, and communicating with other fans (Brodie et al., 2011; Filo et al., 2015). Communication methods that let fans contact with sports organizations and other fans frequently boost fan engagement. These kinds of interactions are made possible by social media platforms, which allow followers to express their thoughts, celebrate successes, and watch sporting events together.

Fan interaction is a key factor in sports tourism since it encourages fans to visit game locations and take part in sports-related activities. Therefore, influencers can boost stadium attendance and support the expansion of sports tourism by organising fan groups.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional research design to examine the role of social media influencer marketing in promoting sports tourism development through fan mobilisation. Quantitative designs are widely used in tourism and marketing research because they enable researchers to test theoretical relationships among variables using statistical modelling techniques (Hair et al., 2022). The study focuses on Enugu State, a major urban centre in southeastern Nigeria known for its strong football culture and loyal fan base. The state hosts Rangers International F.C., one of Nigeria's most historic football clubs. Match days attract supporters from neighbouring

cities and states, creating economic activities within the hospitality, transport, and entertainment sectors. In recent years, digital mobilisation by influencers such as Okwuluora has increased fan engagement and match attendance. The target population consists of Rangers International FC supporters, football fans attending Rangers matches, social media followers exposed to Okwuluora's sports content, and visitors who travel to Enugu for Rangers matches. These groups represent individuals whose fan engagement and travel decisions may be influenced by social media promotion. A purposive sampling technique is used to target individuals who follow Rangers International FC, have seen sports content posted by Okwuluora, and attended or intend to attend Rangers matches. Data were collected from a sample of 350 respondents using a structured questionnaire administered through physical surveys at stadium entrances, online Google Forms distributed to Rangers fan groups and social media fan communities. The study employed Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) using Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM) to examine the relationships among influencer promotion, fan engagement, digital word-of-mouth, team identification, stadium attendance, and sports tourism demand. PLS-SEM is appropriate for exploratory and predictive research models involving multiple latent constructs and complex relationships (Hair et al., 2022). The study followed standard ethical research procedures, including voluntary participation, respondent anonymity, informed consent and confidentiality of collected data. Participants were informed that the research was strictly for academic purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 1: Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Item	Loading	Cronbach α	CR	AVE
Influencer Promotion	IP1	0.82	0.88	0.91	0.66
	IP2	0.79			
	IP3	0.84			
	IP4	0.80			
	IP5	0.83			
Team Identification	TI1	0.81	0.86	0.90	0.65
	TI2	0.79			
	TI3	0.85			
	TI4	0.78			
	TI5	0.82			
Fan Engagement	FE1	0.80	0.87	0.91	0.67
	FE2	0.84			
	FE3	0.83			
	FE4	0.79			
	FE5	0.82			

Construct	Item	Loading	Cronbach α	CR	AVE
Digital WOM	DW1	0.81	0.85	0.89	0.63
	DW2	0.78			
	DW3	0.82			
	DW4	0.77			
Stadium Attendance	SA1	0.83	0.86	0.90	0.68
	SA2	0.79			
	SA3	0.84			
	SA4	0.80			
Sports Tourism Demand	STD1	0.82	0.88	0.92	0.70
	STD2	0.85			
	STD3	0.84			
	STD4	0.81			
	STD5	0.83			

All constructs meet recommended thresholds: Factor Loadings > 0.70, Cronbach Alpha > 0.70, Composite Reliability > 0.70, and AVE > 0.50 (Hair et al., 2022).

HTMT Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). HTMT is recommended for PLS-SEM because it detects discriminant validity issues more reliably than the Fornell–Larcker criterion. Values below 0.85–0.90 indicate adequate discriminant validity.

Table 2: HTMT Matrix

Construct	IP	TI	FE	DWOM	SA	STD
Influencer Promotion (IP)	—					
Team Identification (TI)	0.62	—				
Fan Engagement (FE)	0.71	0.69	—			
Digital WOM (DWOM)	0.67	0.65	0.73	—		
Stadium Attendance (SA)	0.59	0.64	0.72	0.70	—	
Sports Tourism Demand (STD)	0.58	0.61	0.69	0.63	0.74	—

All HTMT values are below the 0.90 threshold, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity among constructs.

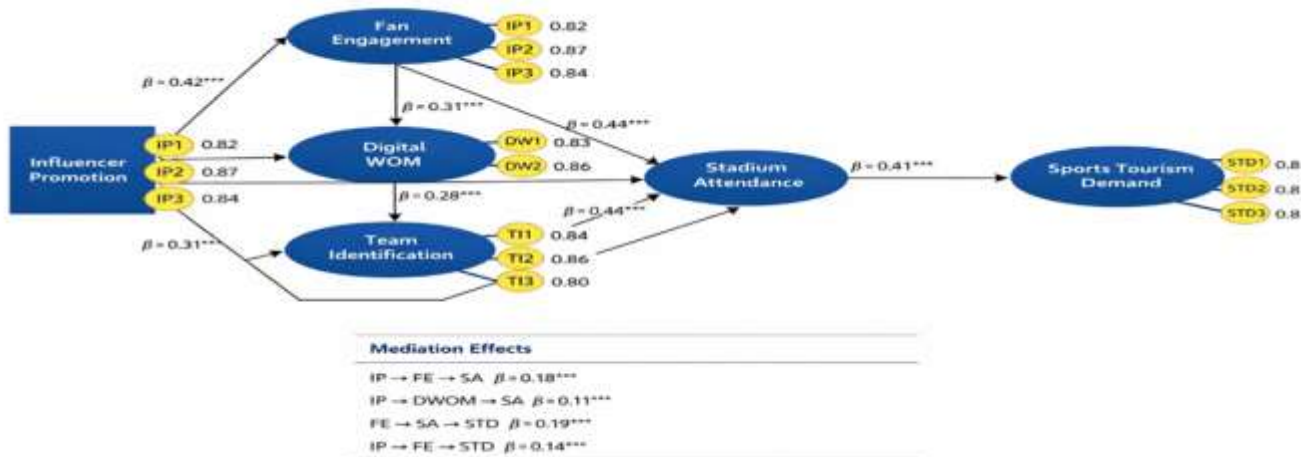


Figure 6: SmartPLS model showing hypotheses and mediation paths

Table 3: Structural Path Results and Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	Influencer Promotion → Fan Engagement	0.42	7.88	<0.001	Supported
H2	Influencer Promotion → Digital WOM	0.39	6.74	<0.001	Supported
H3	Influencer Promotion → Team Identification	0.36	6.11	<0.001	Supported
H4	Team Identification → Fan Engagement	0.31	5.92	<0.001	Supported
H5	Fan Engagement → Stadium Attendance	0.44	8.05	<0.001	Supported
H6	Digital WOM → Stadium Attendance	0.28	4.89	<0.001	Supported
H7	Stadium Attendance → Sports Tourism Demand	0.41	7.23	<0.001	Supported
H8	Fan Engagement → Sports Tourism Demand	0.33	5.77	<0.001	Supported

Mediation Analysis

To further understand the mechanism through which influencer promotion contributes to sports tourism development, mediation analysis was conducted using bootstrapping (5000 resamples).

Table 4: Mediation Effects

Mediation Path	Indirect Effect β	t-value	p-value	Result
IP → FE → SA	0.18	4.82	<0.001	Significant
IP → DWOM → SA	0.11	3.97	<0.001	Significant
FE → SA → STD	0.19	5.21	<0.001	Significant
IP → FE → STD	0.14	4.36	<0.001	Significant

Table 4 shows partial mediation effects where fan engagement mediates the relationship between influencer promotion and stadium attendance, digital word-of-mouth mediates the effect of influencer promotion on stadium attendance, and stadium attendance mediates fan engagement and sports tourism demand. These results indicate that influencer-driven digital engagement increases tourism outcomes through behavioural mechanisms rather than direct effects alone.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Social Media Influencer Promotion and Fan Engagement

The findings show that fan engagement is considerably increased by influencer promotion ($\beta = 0.42, p < 0.001$). The Social Influence Theory, which holds that reputable opinion leaders impact people's behaviors, is supported by this study (Kelman, 1958). Social media influencers serve as reliable middlemen in today's digital environments, influencing audience attitudes and interaction patterns. Influencer marketing greatly increases customer engagement by boosting perceived authenticity and emotional connection, according to recent empirical research (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). With influencer-generated content encouraging active involvement and community engagement, social media platforms have emerged as crucial conduits for fan contact in sports contexts (Filo et al., 2015; Parganas et al., 2017). Furthermore, by enabling fans to communicate with teams outside of live events, digital engagement improves experiential consumption, according to recent tourism and sports marketing research (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Abeza et al., 2020). Therefore, the current research supports the idea that influencer marketing is relational and experiential rather than just informational, resulting in higher levels of fan engagement.

Influencer Promotion and Digital Word-of-Mouth

Additionally, the study demonstrates that influencer marketing has a considerable impact on digital word-of-mouth ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < 0.001$). This result is consistent with recent studies showing that influencers are essential for promoting online discussions and information distribution (De Veirman et al., 2017; Ki et al., 2020). In tourism and hospitality environments, digital word-of-mouth is widely acknowledged as a significant factor influencing customer decision-making (Litvin et al., 2008; Filieri et al., 2021). Social media interactions have a substantial impact on travel intentions and destination views, according to recent studies (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014; Leung et al., 2013). By generating social buzz and collective expectation, influencer-driven conversations in sports tourism can raise awareness of sporting events and boost participation (Abeza et al., 2020; Vale & Fernandes, 2018). Therefore, the results bolster the claim that influencers facilitate the spread of sports-related content on digital networks by acting as information distributors and engagement catalysts.

Team Identification and Fan Engagement

The findings show that fan engagement is considerably increased by influencer promotion ($\beta = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$). The Social Influence Theory, which holds that reputable opinion leaders impact people's behaviors, is supported by this study (Kelman, 1958). Social media influencers serve as reliable middlemen in today's digital environments, influencing audience attitudes and interaction patterns. Influencer marketing greatly increases customer engagement by boosting perceived authenticity and emotional connection, according to recent empirical research (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). With influencer-generated content encouraging active involvement and community engagement, social media platforms have emerged as crucial conduits for fan contact in sports contexts (Filo et al., 2015; Parganas et al., 2017). Furthermore, by enabling fans to communicate with teams outside of live events, digital engagement improves experiential consumption, according to recent tourism and sports marketing research (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Abeza et al., 2020). Thus, the current research supports the idea that influencer marketing is experiential and relational rather than just informational, leading to higher levels of fan engagement.

Fan Engagement and Stadium Attendance

Fan engagement and stadium attendance have one of the greatest correlations found in the study ($\beta = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$). This outcome demonstrates that active fans are more likely to go to live sporting events. This result is in line with earlier studies (Trail et al., 2005; Yoshida et al., 2014) that demonstrate the substantial impact of fan interaction on sports consumption behavior. Active supporters look for immersive experiences that let them interact with other supporters and show their support. The importance of fan experience in influencing attendance and involvement has also been highlighted in recent sports tourism research (Hallmann et al., 2021; Biscaia et al., 2023).

Fans are encouraged to attend games because live sporting events offer distinctive emotional and social experiences that cannot be duplicated digitally. According to the results, influencer-driven interaction raises stadium attendance by improving the perceived value of live experiences.

Digital Word-of-Mouth and Stadium Attendance

The study also shows that stadium attendance is highly influenced by digital word-of-mouth ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$). The significance of peer-to-peer communication in influencing behavioural intentions is shown by this research. Consumers heavily rely on internet evaluations and recommendations when making decisions, according to research in marketing and tourism (Filiari et al., 2021; Litvin et al., 2008). Digital discussions on games and fan experiences in sports environments generate social momentum that boosts attendance. Additionally, recent research shows that social media interactions impact participation decisions and increase the appeal of events (Vale & Fernandes, 2018; Abeza et al., 2020). Therefore, the results validate that digital word-of-mouth serves as a behavioural trigger, transforming online interaction into offline involvement.

Stadium Attendance and Sports Tourism Demand

The findings indicate that the demand for sports tourism is strongly influenced by stadium attendance ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$). This result is consistent with research on sports tourism, which shows that important factors influencing travel behaviour are spectator events (Gibson, 1998; Higham & Hinch, 2018). According to recent studies, sporting events improve a destination's reputation, draw tourists, and generate income (Getz & Page, 2016; Fourie & Santana-Gallego, 2011). Due to their capacity to draw sizable and varied crowds, spectator sporting events—especially football games—have significant tourist potential. Sports tourism is becoming more widely acknowledged as a strategy for destination branding and economic growth in emerging economies (Preuss, 2019; Hallmann et al., 2021). Thus, the results verify that stadium attendance is a crucial factor in the conversion of sporting events into tourism demand.

Fan Engagement and Sports Tourism Development

Additionally, the study reveals that demand for sports tourism is directly influenced by fan engagement ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$). This finding emphasizes how crucial behavioral and emotional engagement is in influencing travel behavior. Traveling to see games, take part in fan events, and visit host cities are all more common among involved fans. This result is in line with recent research that highlights the significance of fan interaction and emotional experiences in sports tourism (Biscaia et al., 2023; Hallmann et al., 2021). Additionally, the way that digital involvement is integrated with in-person experiences indicates how sports tourism is changing, with online interactions influencing offline participation (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Mediation Effects

Important insights into the mechanisms behind the observed connections are provided by the mediation analysis. The results show that stadium attendance mediates the relationship between fan engagement and sports tourism demand, digital word-of-mouth mediates the relationship between influencer promotion and attendance, and fan engagement mediates the relationship between influencer promotion and attendance. These findings align with modern marketing models (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Dwivedi et al., 2021) that highlight multi-stage consumer decision processes encompassing awareness, engagement, and behavioral consequences. The results imply that influencer marketing works through indirect channels, highlighting the significance of social contact and involvement in influencing tourism outcomes.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR SPORTS TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

The findings provide several policy insights for sports tourism development, particularly in destinations such as Enugu State, where Rangers International F.C. have strong cultural significance.

Integrating Influencers into Sports Tourism Marketing

Tourism authorities should formally integrate digital influencers into sports destination marketing strategies. Influencers such as Okwuluora demonstrate how grassroots digital advocacy can mobilise fan communities and promote match attendance. Collaborations between sports clubs, tourism boards, and influencers could include: match-day promotional campaigns, live digital storytelling, and fan travel promotions.

Development of Match-Day Tourism Packages

Government agencies and tourism operators should develop sports tourism packages that combine match tickets, hotel accommodation, transportation, and city tours. Such integrated packages could transform football matches into destination experiences, encouraging fans from other regions to travel to host cities.

Investment in Sports Infrastructure

Improving stadium facilities, fan experience zones, and surrounding tourism infrastructure would enhance the attractiveness of sports destinations. Policies should prioritise modern stadium amenities, digital ticketing systems, and fan entertainment districts. These investments can position cities as competitive sports tourism hubs.

Strengthening Digital Fan Communities

Sports clubs should establish official digital fan communities to maintain engagement beyond match days. Key initiatives may include online fan forums, exclusive digital content, and virtual fan events. These initiatives can sustain fan loyalty and encourage repeat visits.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of social media influencer marketing in promoting sports tourism development through fan engagement and stadium attendance. Focusing on Rangers International F.C. in Enugu State, the research demonstrates how digital influencers such as Okwuluora can mobilise fan communities and contribute to the growth of sports tourism. The findings reveal that influencer promotion significantly strengthens team identification, fan engagement, and digital word-of-mouth communication among supporters. These behavioural outcomes subsequently translate into increased stadium attendance and sports tourism demand. The mediation analysis further highlights that fan engagement and stadium attendance serve as key pathways through which influencer marketing contributes to tourism development. From a theoretical perspective, the study extends Social Influence Theory and Fan Engagement Theory by demonstrating how digital influencers function as catalysts for sports tourism development in emerging economies. The findings illustrate that influencer-driven communication can bridge the gap between online fan communities and physical sporting experiences, thereby transforming digital engagement into tourism activities.

From a practical standpoint, the study highlights the importance of integrating digital influencers into sports tourism marketing strategies. Policymakers and sports organisations should recognise influencers as strategic partners capable of mobilising fans, promoting sporting events, and enhancing destination visibility. By leveraging influencer-driven marketing and strengthening digital fan communities, sports destinations can attract visitors, stimulate economic activity, and enhance their global competitiveness. Overall, the study underscores the transformative potential of influencer marketing in promoting sports tourism development. As digital communication continues to reshape the relationship between sports organisations and their supporters, influencer-driven engagement is likely to become an increasingly important tool for destination promotion and tourism growth.

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