An exploratory examination of the strategic direction of the Gaelic Athletic Association via the application of sports marketing segmentation bases

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to go beyond the predominantly conceptual or normative approach found in the market segmentation literature and focus not only on its actual application but to review the empirical findings themselves (Foedermayr and Diamantopoulos, 2008) so as to provide the basis for identifying and understanding new segments and assessing the strategic development of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in Ireland in order to ensure its continued survival, growth and prosperity.

Design/methodology/approach – An exploratory methodology is operationalised in this study using qualitative data obtained from 27 participants possessing relevant knowledge and experience of Gaelic football via a range in-depth interviews and focus groups.

Findings – This study identifies those existing segmentation bases that are both applicable and non-applicable, to the indigenous amateur game of Gaelic football in Ireland, whilst additionally identifying and developing an understanding of new segmentation bases. Furthermore, it highlights the challenges and opportunities that will require strategic management if the GAA is to successfully maintain and develop its domestic market whilst simultaneously developing its overseas markets.

Research limitations/implications – The findings of this study are limited to the indigenous amateur game of Gaelic football in Ireland. They reaffirm the need to develop segmentation bases for individual sports markets. They highlight issues that will have a strategic impact upon the operations of the GAA and make recommendations for addressing and realising the opportunities that these will present.

Originality/value – This study addresses a research gap in the knowledge in regards to the strategic development and application of existing sports marketing segmentation bases to indigenous amateur sport.

Keywords Marketing, Segmentation, Sport

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Sporting events have been organised since the dawning of ancient civilisation (Brasch, 1986; Guttman, 1985). They traditionally took place in and around actual venues but the dawn of capitalism has moved them not only into people's homes, via traditional and new media platforms, but also increasingly into away-from-home or on-the-go

formats that are facilitated by progressively more sophisticated wireless internet and mobile technology and consumer electronics (Carter, 2011). As a result, what was once considered as a diversion from work or serious matters[1] has grown into a global industry worth a conservatively estimated $750billion p.a. (Davis and Hilbert, 2013) and that contributes a further $600billion p.a. via sport tourism – according to the UN World Tourism Organisation. As a result, the global sporting landscape has become increasingly cluttered with highly competitive and complex marketplaces and sports organisations are faced with the constant struggle of finding better ways to attract and maintain sports their consumers' attention and attendance (Kelley and Turley, 2001; Mullin et al., 2007; Ratten and Ratten, 2011; Clemes et al., 2011).

Although major sports industries were once considered to be recession-proof, many professional sports organisations have felt the consequences of the recent global economic downturn (Chadwick, 2009; Fullerton and Johnson, 2009; Humphreys, 2010) as have non-professional sports associations (Taks, 2010). Sports organisations now, more than ever, need to secure their survival, not only on a short term but also on a long-term basis, and sports marketing professionals need to increase not only sources of revenue but also proactively obtain relevant market knowledge to underpin their marketing strategies and activities, so as to avoid the dangers inherent in a myopic approach to their operations (Freyer, 2003; Fabisch, 2006; Lindahl, 2010; Shilbury et al., 2009; Gallagher et al., 2012).

The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) is the largest and most ubiquitous sporting organisation in Ireland and has been synonymous with its sporting tradition since its formation in 1884 (Keeler and Wright, 2013). At the very core of its organisation are the ideals of community, amateurism, volunteering, sport-for-all and the welfare of its participants[2]. It plays an integral part in the social, economic and cultural fabric of life in Ireland (Delaney and Fahey, 2005; Keeler and Wright, 2013). The prosperous boom-years of the Celtic Tiger (1996-2007) brought unprecedented economic and cultural growth to Ireland. It has resulted in a more urban, cosmopolitan, secularised and multicultural society where a new generation of consumers with more discerning and sophisticated tastes have become accustomed to an increased standard of living. They are now more capricious in their choice of leisure pursuits and how they spend their disposal income including their choice of sporting spectatorship (Bartley and Kitchin, 2007; Kuhling and Keohane, 2007; Connolly and Dolan, 2012). However, to-date very little is known about the nature of this new generation of consumers and the effect of this upon their sports consumption and consequently upon the business of the GAA in Ireland. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis and the continued competitive threats presented by globalisation itself (Frost, 2004), questions could therefore be raised about the viability of the GAA's current business model knowledge as they seek to ensure their current and future customer base amongst this new generation of consumers.

This study aims to address this knowledge gap by examining the application of existing sports marketing segmentation bases to the indigenous amateur sport of Gaelic football in Ireland – one of the two main sports of the GAA, along with Hurling. This application will provide the basis for identifying and understanding new segments and assessing the strategic development of the GAA in order to ensure the continued survival, growth and prosperity of the organisation.

2. Background to study
Playing members of the GAA compete on a strictly non-paying amateur basis and there is a heavy dependence upon volunteers to provide the administration at local club and county level. With local identity and the community a focal point of the

organisation, it is not surprising that its players, administrators and followers have a deeply rooted and emotionally intense sense of attachment and affiliation with their team(s) (Connolly and Dolan, 2012). However, despite its amateur status, a business-orientated approach has been ever-present in the strategic development of the GAA. It has long been regarded as a radical, innovative and entrepreneurial organisation with a vision-driven momentum that has propelled it to its current dominant position in the Irish sporting marketplace as the largest sporting, cultural and community organisation (Quinn, 2009; Hassan, 2010).

It is an increasingly commercially aware and professionally run business entity, with physical assets worth approx. €3billion and annual revenue in excess of £50million. It has astutely evolved and strategically developed in order to incorporate and deal with the prevailing political, cultural and socio-economic conditions of the time. The extensive redevelopment of its iconic headquarter stadium at Croke Park throughout the 1990s provided a modern 82,300 capacity facility that now generates substantial additional revenue from a new history museum, a hotel and corporate hospitality facilities; as well as from hosting large international sporting events and concerts.

The GAA has successfully incorporated the developmental opportunities that live satellite television and global media communications, increased private sponsorship and social media have afforded sport in order to defend its current dominant position in Ireland in the face of increasing domestic and globally complex competition. It has embraced the challenge of globalisation and the opportunities presented by new means of communication, it has even exploited these to redress the perennial problem of Irish emigration (and its previously negative impact upon both participation and spectatorship of games) to maintain, develop and grow its member/customer base outside of Ireland amongst the Irish diaspora in all five continents around the world (Darby, 2006). In April 2014 it announced an historic three-year deal worth in excess of €10million p.a. with Sky Sports to show 20 live games per year in a deliberate move designed to make the sport accessible to Irish people overseas.

Frost (2004) argues that the future success of any indigenous sports code, in the face of globalisation, would most likely not be affected by the global nature of the challenges themselves but by how effective it is in its own organisation and management. To-date, and at least in terms of their strategic planning and policies, the GAA have successfully answered these challenges by reviewing and developing its strategic vision and action plans on a regular basis with strategic plans, punctuated with marketing, PR, communication and finance policies that are designed to ensure it meets the needs of its current members and supporters as well as ensuring its continued survival; as well as expansion overseas.

The GAA is now entering a period of unprecedented opportunity for both consolidation and growth. However, if it is to maintain both its dominant position in the sporting marketplace of Ireland, as well as the coveted and distinct amateur status so central to its existence, it must continue to evolve and develop its strategic decision making, to identify and develop new business opportunities and to continue to be innovative in all aspects of its business operations (Darby, 2006; Hassan, 2010; Keeler and Wright, 2013). The future success of the GAA depends on managing its extremely marketable product (Devine and Devine, 2006) and effectively developing its strategic direction in order to deal with the oxymoronic challenge of maintaining, developing and growing its domestic market in Ireland in the face of the challenges presented by increased globalisation – whilst simultaneously taking advantage of the opportunities afforded by that same globalisation to expand and develop its market overseas

amongst an extensive global diaspora wishing to both express their Irishness and maintain bonds with their native land (Delaney and Fahey, 2005; McAnallen *et al.*, 2007; Hassan, 2010; Ratten and Ratten, 2011).

3. The strategic importance of market segmentation in sport marketing

The strategic importance of market segmentation has long been recognised within the marketing discipline (Smith, 1956; Wind, 1978; Beane and Ennis, 1987; Dickson and Ginter, 1987; Dibb, 1998; Foedermayr and Diamantopoulos, 2008). The identification and exploitation of the differences between groups of consumers presents organisational benefits and facilitates improved decision making and the development of strong marketing strategy (Hooley *et al.*, 2004; Muhamad *et al.*, 2012). These benefits include a better understanding of customer needs, behaviours and characteristics and improved matching of company products and services to these needs; facilitating the development of niche markets; allowing for more accurate and informed marketing approaches; and the achievement and/or reinforcement of superior competitive advantage (Tapp and Clowes, 2002; Harris and Elliott, 2007). In short, market segmentation is the cornerstone of successful business models that provides relevant market knowledge to underpin successful marketing – it is "an effective strategy for enhancing marketing performance" (Craft and Hassan, 2015, p. 26).

In an increasingly cluttered global sporting landscape, with highly competitive and complex marketplaces, the application of market segmentation is both logical and essential. It is imperative to identify those segmentation bases that directly or indirectly influence the consumption of sport (Hansen and Gauthier, 1989; Mullin *et al.*, 2007). The sport marketing literature acknowledges that there is no one single applicable profile of the sports consumer, with each sport attracting a distinct type of consumer, and that it is therefore more appropriate to specific sport marketing knowledge and develop segmentation bases appropriate for each individual sports market (Stewart *et al.*, 2003; Costa, 2005; Fullerton, 2007; Mullin *et al.*, 2007).

A review of the extant literature provided the authors with 11 sports segmentation bases that are potentially applicable to the indigenous amateur game of Gaelic football in Ireland (see Table I).

Stewart *et al.* (2003) provide three models for examining and understanding the complex and disparate nature of sport consumption typologies that provide the foundation for models of market segmentation. Early dualistic models in the 1970/1980s concentrated on differentiating and contrasting one form of behaviour with its opposite, e.g. "Traditional vs Modern" or the "Die-hard vs the Less-loyal". The early 1990s saw sports consumers differentiated and the ranked according to their beliefs and behaviour in tiered models. Tapp and Clowes (2002) considered the "match-day" behaviour found in the English Premier League by identifying six segments of sports spectators as "Mine's a pint", "Juggling the kids", "Thermos at Row D", "Season Ticket Friendlies", "Loyal Cash and Chanters" and "Dads and Sons". Based on wider considerations such as involvement, participation, social needs, identification, appreciation and sex appeal, Watson and Rich (2000) identify six segments of sports spectators as "players", "patriots", "appreciators", "socialites", "friends" and "voyeurs".

The multi-dimensional models of the mid-1990s saw the development of typologies that ran across two or more dimensions to produce a wider array of sport consumer types and provide a more holistic view of sport consumption. Hunt *et al.* (1999) considered motivation and behavioural loyalty of US professional basketball and baseball fans to identify five segments of sports spectators as "temporary", "local",

Base	Description
1. The temporary supporter	Short-term team supporter who becomes a lesser/non-supporter after a period of interest is over
2. The celebrity follower	Temporarily follows another winning team or specific player for short period; becomes a lesser/non-supporter after a period of interest is over
3. The professional wanderer	Supporter of the team where they happen to live; their team changes depending on where they live
4. The local supporter	Supporter of the team where they were born; support diminishes if they move away
5. The devoted regular (attend 10+ games p.a.)	May have started as temporary/local but a long-term supporter despite where they live or the results; team is one of a number of important things in defining of who they are (alongside family, friends, job, etc.); enjoys game despite the results (level-headed)
6. The theatre-goer	As per "devoted regular" but wants entertainment and/or close contest; "team" and "quality of game" matters
7. The fanatical supporter (attend 18+ games p.a.)	As per "devoted regular" but team is more central in defining who they are (just behind family, friends, job, etc.); only the team winning matters (quality of game irrelevant); paints their body, goes in costume, buys memorabilia, has a "shrine" and family and their friends do not mind!
8. The dysfunctional supporter	Team is main aspect in defining who they are (above family, friends, job, etc.); more important than even life! Could even be antisocial (often involving alcohol or hooliganism), deviant or disruptive
9. The aficionado/purist	Not team loyal but goes to any good quality game, only the quality of game matters
10. The reclusive partisan	Strong supporter of his team but does not often attend any games
11. The supporter-by-proxy	Akin to a temporary supporter but with a sustained vested interest; strong supporter of a "2nd" team because a relative/friend plays for them or has family who support that team; a soft-spot!

Sources: Synthesised for this research from Hunt *et al.* (1999), Stewart *et al.* (2003), Tapp and Clowes (2002) and Watson and Rich (2000)

Table I.
Existing sport
marketing
segmentation bases

"devoted", "fanatical" and "dysfunctional". Giulianotti (2002) considered the levels of loyalty and identity to professional football clubs to identify taxonomy of "supporters", "followers", "fans" and "flaneurs".

The use of multi-dimensional models continues with the consideration of attachment, self-expression and involvement in professional Greek Soccer (Alexandris and Tsiotsou, 2012) and commitment, participation and purchase intention in US tennis (Casper, 2012). Funk and James (2001) moved beyond the tiered approach and developed a Psychological Connection Model that postulates that the sport and team identification of sport consumers was contingent on them moving through a four stage behavioural framework of "awareness", "attraction", "attachment" and "allegiance".

However, despite calls to address the "uneven amounts of coverage of the basic sport marketing concepts, sport industry segments and different sports" (Pedersen and Pitts, 2001, p. 23) and encouragement for sports research grounded in parent disciplines' theory (Costa, 2005) there has been a comparative lack of empirical research examining the application and development of market segmentation bases in sport. A content analysis

of the leading *European Journal of Management* between 1994 and 2012 revealed that only 6.1 per cent of the 307 articles published during this time were concerned with sports marketing (Pitts *et al.*, 2014) and a similar study in the leading US journal *Sport Marketing Quarterly* only six articles were concerned with market segmentation/targeting between 1992 and 1999 (Shannon, 1999) and this had not increased at all by 2011 when only five articles of the 346 published in the same journal between 1992 and 2011 were concerned with sport industry segmentation (Peetz and Reams, 2011).

4. Research aim, objectives and methodology

The primary focus of the empirical work to-date on market segmentation bases in sport has been upon professional sports, with relatively little application or analysis within the context of indigenous amateur sports. The purpose of this study is to address this gap in the literature and close the long-recognised gulf between academia and practitioners in both the sports marketing and market segmentation areas (Dibb, 1998; Ratten and Ratten, 2011). In a country that has recently experienced unprecedented economic and cultural growth that has produced a new generation of consumers it is vital that attention is paid to fan behaviour in this changing context in order to ensure that gulf in knowledge is addressed to provide theoretical development in the area and the relevant business model knowledge of the GAA (Stewart *et al.*, 2003; Ratten and Ratten, 2011).

The main aim of this study is to go beyond the predominantly conceptual or normative approach found in the market segmentation literature by focusing not only on its actual application to the indigenous amateur sport of Gaelic football in Ireland but to review the empirical findings themselves (Foedermayr and Diamantopoulos, 2008) so as to provide the basis for identifying and understanding new segments and assessing the strategic development of the GAA in order to ensure the continued survival, growth and prosperity of the organisation.

Based on this research aim, the following research objectives were established to assist in the exploration of the research area:

(1) to identify which of the currently existing sports segmentation bases are applicable for the indigenous amateur sport of Gaelic football in Ireland;

(2) to identify which of the currently existing sports segmentation bases are not applicable for the indigenous amateur sport of Gaelic football in Ireland; and

(3) to identify and develop an understanding of previously unidentified new segmentation bases for the indigenous amateur sport of Gaelic football in Ireland.

This study used a qualitative methodology. Qualitative research allows the researcher to get close to the study in order to understand their real perceptions and experiences (Silverman, 2006), and to study the unfolding of social processes (Van Maanen, 1979). The community-centred culture and life of the GAA predetermined that a qualitative methodology was the most appropriate to gain a relevant and true reflection of the current supporter base.

The methodology was operationalised using a range of qualitative techniques with 27 participants in the form of nine in-depth interviews and three focus groups. Focus groups were selected to obtain insights into the real-life nature perspectives and experiences of participants. Focus groups are important for learning about participants' "conceptualisations of particular phenomena and the language they use to describe them" (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990, p. 15).

A purposive sample was used to select all participants in this study based on their possession of relevant knowledge (an interest in the GAA) and experience specific to the topic of interest (previous attendance at games) (Kumar *et al.*, 1993). Three focus groups each containing six members were conducted. These groups were conducted to capture information from 18 to 25 year olds and ensure a complete range of information. To support the research gleaned from the focus groups, nine in-depth interviews were conducted with key Gaelic football stakeholders with the specialist knowledge and/or capacity to provide the desired information relevant to the study's objectives (see Table AI for profiles of participants).

As part of the qualitative data analytical process, attaching codes to data and generating concepts have important functions in enabling the researcher to rigorously review what the data is saying (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). The literature presents various procedures to coding qualitative data such as categorisation, unitising data and recognising relationships (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). In this analysis data were categorised during the process of coding, and labels were attached to particular chunks of data (units of data) relating to the phenomenon (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005). Table I provided an initial list of existing codes that were used in the initial iterations of the data analysis, whilst subsequent emergent codes provided for a fuller and more complete analysis of all the data. All data were analysed using Nvivo9 to ensure for complete control and full in-depth analysis of a range of data sources (Richards, 1999; Krippendorf, 2004; Bazeley, 2011; Peetz and Reams, 2011).

In order to ensure validity and consistency in the research findings each interview was recorded and diligently transcribed. All interviews were conducted in surroundings familiar to participants, e.g. their work office or local community centre and the same three stage semi-structured discussion and question format was employed across all interviews and focus groups. All participants were initially shown a short three-minute highlights video to make them feel at ease with the study; they were then asked to describe three typical supporters found at Gaelic football games and provide real-life examples where possible to illustrate their description; finally they were presented with each of the 11 identified segmentation bases (from Table I) and asked to discuss their relevance. This ensured for depth and intimacy of discussions and consistency in the research process. Furthermore, participants were revisited, when necessary, for clarification and/or further discussion of the meaning and interpretation of the data, and all were presented with a final copy of the research findings and invited to make comment and provide further feedback (Carson *et al.*, 2001).

5. Research findings
The main aim of this study was to go beyond the predominantly conceptual or normative approach found in the market segmentation literature by focusing not only on its actual application to the indigenous amateur sport of Gaelic football in Ireland but to review the empirical findings themselves (Foedermayr and Diamantopoulos, 2008) so as to provide the basis for identifying and understanding new segments and assessing the strategic development of the GAA in order to ensure the continued survival, growth and prosperity of the organisation. The findings of this study are presented in line with the objectives established in the exploration of this aim:

(1) to identify which of the currently existing sports segmentation bases are applicable for the indigenous amateur sport of Gaelic football in Ireland;

(2) to identify which of the currently existing sports segmentation bases are not applicable for the indigenous amateur sport of Gaelic football in Ireland; and

(3) to identify and develop an understanding of previously unidentified new segmentation bases for the indigenous amateur sport of Gaelic football in Ireland.

5.1 The existing sports segmentation bases applicable for the indigenous amateur sport of Gaelic football in Ireland

The findings of this study illustrate that the nature of Gaelic football supporters in Ireland challenges the applicability of the existing sports marketing segmentation bases (from Table I). With local identity and the community a focal point of the GAA, it is not surprising to find that its supporters' allegiance and loyalty to their team is strongly held and that the success of that team matters above all else in their spectatorship:

> The whole ethos and culture around the GAA is one club for life (R26).

> The bottom line is the team winning. If it is a good game then it is fantastic, if not so good a game it's still your team has won (R9).

As a result, participants were only able to identify and describe in detail the existence of five of the existing 11 sports marketing segmentation bases:

5.1.1 The temporary supporter. In total, 25 of the participants agreed that this segmentation base was applicable and its existence as very much a part of Gaelic football in Ireland. Terms such as "sunshine", "floating" or "fair-weather" were used to describe these supporters; as well as phrases such as "jumping on the bandwagon". These supporters characteristically align their support with key periods that are synonymous with on-field success by their respective teams:

> You'll find these especially when the team is doing well and once the team is out their interest would just wain (R24).

> […] successful teams tend to generate the short term team supporter who follows success (R22).

5.1.2 The devoted regular. All participants agreed that this segmentation base was applicable and very much the norm in terms of supporters found at games. They follow their team regardless of where they live and, whilst they ultimately want their team to win, they are level-headed if they are defeated or eliminated from competition:

> […] you see the same people (at games), in the same place all the time, they know everybody's name, they know how long the player is training with the team, how well the team is training and all the inside information from the team (R11).

> The regulars get their point across but don't be aggressive […] they always have (team) colours on, but they might not be kitted out head to toe. They are aware of all the players and who everyone is (R21).

5.1.3 The fanatical supporter. All participants agreed that this segmentation base was applicable but only to a small section of supporters, whose devotion to their team is well recognised by others but not in a negative sense:

> I know a guy and every match he goes to he is well known. Everyone knows who he is and beyond. Who doesn't! (R9).

Some families can be like that. I know ones where families are totally devoted, have flags everywhere and the whole lot of them, the whole family circle (R7).

5.1.4 The reclusive partisan. All participants agreed that this segmentation base was applicable. The findings illustrate that the existence of these supporters is very prevalent and that their strong attitudinal loyalty in many cases is not translated into behavioural loyalty due to their economic and social circumstances that present practical barriers to their attendance. Participants did not view these as "lesser" supporters and in many cases highlighted the critical role that they play in the sport:

There is another type of supporter who is the strong GAA person who is heavily involved in their local club and may play with their local club, but may not go to too many county matches […] while they would not be regular supporters of the team they certainly would not be fair-weather as they are heavily involved in their club. In one way they would be true GAA people for me (R25).

Multiple barriers to attendance were discussed with challenges relating to the affordability of tickets, family circumstances, limited time and work commitments impacting on physical attendance; and overcome via traditional news media, the internet or social media:

Sometimes when people get married the partner is not a great supporter and that can have an effect on going to watch a game. Travelling distances can put you off too, away travelling all day on a Sunday with 2 kids in the back of the car and then the cost as well; people don't want to drive 200 miles, 4 meals, 4 tickets, 4 everything and that puts people off (R20).

[…] students with part-time jobs at weekends, they just can't get to it, but they still follow or watch it on social media and websites as not all games are on TV now (R5).

5.1.5 Supporter-by-proxy. With this base being akin to a temporary supporter it was also agreed by all participants that this segmentation base was applicable. This support, however, is secondary and manifested only after interest in their own team has ended as a result of defeat or competition elimination:

If my team is knocked out, I would always try to support the remaining teams from my province (R1).

A Leitrim fella who moves to Dublin will always want Leitrim to win but he'll get behind Dublin if he is involved in a club there and he knows people playing or something – a different level of support, like a second team because of where they live (R23).

5.2 The existing sports segmentation bases not applicable for the indigenous amateur sport of Gaelic football in Ireland
Participants could not identify and describe in detail the existence of supporters to whom the remaining six existing 11 sports marketing segmentation bases (from Table I) could be applicable:

5.2.1 The celebrity follower. Participants provided very little support for the application of this existing sports marketing segmentation base. Where it was said to possibly exist it was against a strong conviction that their own team and their own success was predominant above all else and it tended to be in regards to an individual player or a manager from within a team rather than another team and for sporting rather than celebrity-related reasons:

Celebrity is not the right word – an admiration more like (R24).

Most GAA fans to be honest do appreciate other teams and players. GAA fans love having a debate and have begrudging admirations for other counties. But someone who isn't team loyal? I don't know. I think everyone is team loyal to an extent but there are others that can appreciate other teams (R23).

5.2.2 The professional wanderer. All participants were adamant that this base was not applicable to Gaelic football in Ireland with words such as community, home and heart permeating participant's discussions:

I don't think people ever change their team but I know people who move counties but their heart is always at their home county (R19).

I don't think this happens. The GAA still has that community ethos and people will follow the team where they are from (R20).

You may take an interest if you move somewhere, even a club, but never change. You don't change even if they have never won anything ever. It is not soccer! (R4).

5.2.3 The local supporter. All participants rejected the idea that support diminishes if Gaelic football supporters move away and were adamant that this base was not applicable. In fact many participants suggested that the opposite occurs and that support actually increases as a result of distance with the GAA and their team acting as a form of identity for those who were living or working abroad:

I think you become more of a supporter if you are living outside of the county, to be honest with you (R12).

I think people want to hold on to where they are from (R7).

5.2.4 The theatre-goer. The applicability of this base was the source of much discussion amongst participants with half initially indicating that it was applicable and all participants fully agreed that an ideal game would consist of their team winning as a result of a good quality of game. However, after considered discussion, it emerged that if the "entertainment" sought by theatre-goers would be at the expense of team success then it would not strictly be applicable. Participants agreed that this was more of an aspiration and that whilst the quality of the game was an important factor in their attendance, it was superseded by a desire to see their team win:

I think every devoted/regular would have a bit of a theatre-goer within them. I think they want to see the team play well and a good quality game. Every supporter wants to see the team play well and a good quality game and regardless of that they still want to come back […] no matter what GAA supporter you speak to they are going to want the team to win (R20).

The bottom line is the team winning. If it is a good game then it is fantastic, if not so good a game it's still your team has won (R14).

5.2.5 The dysfunctional supporter. With local identity and the community a focal point of the GAA it was not surprising to find that all participants were adamant that this base was not applicable and were at pains to highlight that it was something that would not be tolerated and is rarely found at games. The absence of this supporter was also a source of much pride for many participants and a significant reason for their interest in the sport:

I can't think. Maybe some swearing and that and I'd challenge that but I can't see GAA person like that. Maybe a very few but GAA is who you are, family, friends and if you are in this category you are in trouble!! But it is something we'd try and clamp down upon (R26).

It is down to your home club, which would be the team that were the roots are. Where you have grown up with a mutual respect for other teams, ok still want to beat them but not that much that you'd wreck their ground or injure them or anything (R24).

5.2.6 The aficionado/purist. As with the theatre-goer, the applicability of this base was the source of much discussion amongst participants. All participants agreed that this base was applicable but only after their primary team had been defeated or eliminated from competition and that it tended to be found in older supporters with both available time and money available to pursue their spectatorship in this way. Many participants discussed supporters who attend other games where they had no vested interest in the actual teams playing in the game but that their primary motive for attending was the quality of the game itself. Whilst a desire to see a good quality game was recognised as a trait inherent in most supporters, the idea that a supporter would not be team loyal makes this base not applicable:

I know they exist but I don't know any. They would support a team and follow someone loyally, not totally independent I suppose (R4).

There wouldn't be many of them (purists). I would go and watch any good game but Antrim will always be number one and my team at heart (R27).

It does exists when you are older, more money and with time on your hands. Pastime for retirees (R15).

5.3 The previously unidentified new segmentation bases for the indigenous amateur sport of Gaelic football in Ireland
Following the complete analysis of the data it was apparent that two further emergent segmentation bases were identifiable in the form of a "digital diaspora", whose behavioural loyalty is not realisable due to circumstances beyond their control but whose consumption and attitudinal loyalty is equivalent to that of a devoted regular supporter and obtained vicariously via digital technology, and a "socialite" whose primary reason for spectatorship is not sport-related. When the data analysis went beyond a conceptual and normative approach the very strong and developing behavioural trait of the "socialiser" could be clearly identified as underpinning and complementing the spectatorship of the five identified applicable segmentation bases of the temporary, devoted regular, fanatical, reclusive partisan and supporter-by-proxy.

5.3.1 The digital diaspora. The analysis revealed that there are many supporters in Ireland who now utilise digital technology to supplement their spectatorship through GAA forums or websites, listening to games via the internet or contributing to a social media site linked to their team. It is also evident from the earlier analysis that the reclusive partisan supporter, who cannot physically be in attendance at the games, also uses digital technology in lieu of their physical attendance:

There is the modern day supporter, who attends when it is easy. Otherwise they will read online papers or check the website for match information (R15).

I have a virtual presence, I watch the TV, look at the Internet, you would be familiar with who is on the team and who is coming through from what clubs, but I am not in the position to go to game (R22).

However, it is the use of digital technology by supporters no longer living in Ireland, that provides the basis for the emergence of a very real and highly involved new

segment in the form of a digital diaspora who are keen to not only maintain cultural bonds with their native land but also their spectatorship of their indigenous game. Those supporters who are living overseas but who utilise a wide range of online and social media to follow the fortunes of the team– in many cases to a greater extent than those physically at home and attending games in person:

> I have a son in Oz who still supports Derry and it is at the same level. They follow the club and county through me and FB, websites etc. Media keeps them engaged now. He nearly knows as much of what is going on here as I do and he is 1000's of miles away (R26).

> I know people who have gone to live overseas, to Sydney, and are playing there but still are constantly on social networks like Facebook and Twitter and keeping up to date with their teams on a weekly basis. The affiliation to your team doesn't diminish when you go overseas and in some cases gets stronger and the social media makes it a lot easier now (R20).

5.3.2 The socialite. A further segmentation base that was identified through the analysis of participant discussions was the increased prevalence of what participants referred to as the "socialite". An individual who attends games, usually finals or high-profile games, with the primary motive "to be seen" or "to network and do business". Whilst, this may be attributable to the changing socio-economic status of Ireland, it is a recent trend that would not have been found in great abundance in this indigenous sport until recent times:

> [...] the GAA became more corporate hospitality [...] there are now more big games, a corporate personality that kicks in (R19).

> [...] the businessmen in the community who only go as it looks good that they are going and they want to service another agenda rather than follow the team [...] a prawn sandwich brigade! (R20).

This individual is similar in behaviour to a temporary supporter but with no real interest in the game itself – the socialite wants to be seen at large events for personal or business benefits:

> People given tickets complimentary by a sponsor and they haven't a clue about the game. Floating in and out [...] (R25).

> The people that got their tickets for free [...] business people. They don't tend to attend all games, just more of the bigger games. They would not know any of the player's names (R21).

5.3.3 The socialiser. The final and most significant finding of the analysis was the clear identification of a strong behavioural trait, rather than an explicit segmentation base, that participants referred to as the "socialiser". The discussion revealed that this trait is found in the vast majority of Gaelic football supporters irrespective of whether they were a temporary, devoted regular, fanatical, reclusive partisan or supporter-by-proxy. It was established that, whilst the game and winning the game were the primary focus in these supporters' spectatorship, another underlying condition for their attendance was their enabling of social relationships with family and friends who are very much a part of the game day experience. Participants were clear that many supporters now use their game day as the occasion for a "day-out" or to "catch up with family and friends" and their interest in the game focused on wanting their team to win regardless of the quality of the game:

> [...] there is a social aspect to it, as it does keep people together [...] it is a great way of catching up with family and friends when you're going to the match. You arrange to meet them [...] and it is a part of it (the game) (R19).

Getting away, meeting other people, seeing people you haven't seen (in a while) maybe only
see them at the matches now (R24).

A number of participants expressed concern regarding the misconstruction of this trait
amongst a limited number of predominantly younger temporary supporters who could
potentially provide negative consequences akin to the dysfunctional supporter where
they use their spectatorship as an occasion to consume too much alcohol. However, due
to supporter self-policing and initiatives by the GAA, this has not yet resulted in
significant problems arising from deviant behaviour or disruptive hooliganism:

[…] a few supporters at big games have been criticised because they are getting to matches
early, going to the pub and getting drunk, then onto matches with too much alcohol or maybe
not even getting there at all (R23).

[…] it is important that other spectator behaviour is well behaved so we roll out programmes
like "watch your mouth" and "No Foul Language" to try and manage that (R26).

6. Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study was to address an existing research gap in the indigenous
amateur sports marketing literature and close the long-recognised gulf between
academia and practitioners (Dibb, 1998; Ratten and Ratten, 2011). Addressing this gap
provides the relevant business model knowledge required by the GAA, who operate in
a country that has produced a new generation of consumers as a result of recent
unprecedented economic and cultural growth, for identifying and understanding new
applicable segmentation bases and an assessment of the strategic development of the
GAA in order to ensure the continued survival, growth and prosperity of the
organisation.

As a result of the central role of the GAA in people's lives and identities in Ireland
and the over-riding desire of supporters that their team success mattered above all else
in their spectatorship, only five of the 11 segmentation bases original identified in the
extant literature were found to be applicable and six were found to be not applicable
(see Table II).

The main aim of this study was to go beyond the actual application of sport
marketing segmentation bases and the predominantly conceptual or normative

Base	Applicability
1. The temporary supporter	Applicable
2. The celebrity follower	Not applicable
3. The professional wanderer	Not applicable
4. The local supporter	Not applicable
5. The devoted regular (attend 10+ games p.a.)	Applicable
6. The theatre-goer	Not applicable
7. The fanatical supporter (attend 18+ games p.a.)	Applicable
8. The dysfunctional supporter	Not applicable
9. The aficionado/purist	Not applicable
10. The reclusive partisan	Applicable
11. The supporter-by-proxy	Applicable

Sources: Synthesised for this research from Hunt *et al.* (1999), Stewart *et al.* (2003), Tapp and Clowes
(2002) and Watson and Rich (2000)

Table II.
The applicability of
existing sport
marketing
segmentation bases
to the indigenous
amateur game of
Gaelic football
in Ireland

approach found in the market segmentation literature to review the empirical findings themselves (Foedermayr and Diamantopoulos, 2008) so as to provide the basis for identifying and understanding new segments and assessing the strategic development of the GAA in order to ensure the continued survival, growth and prosperity of the organisation. In this regard, the overall findings of this study provide cautious support of the GAA's current strategic direction of developing and growing its domestic market in Ireland in tandem with developing its overseas markets. The identification of further segmentation bases in the form of the digital diaspora and socialite bases, as well as the behavioural trait of the socialiser, that underpins the five identified applicable segmentation bases, provides key strategic issues for the GAA to address.

The identification of the digital diaspora base provides strong justification for the GAA to continue with the strategic development of its overseas markets and vindication of its incorporation of the developmental opportunities that live satellite television and global media communications have afforded. The findings demonstrate that there is a significant overseas market available for the spectatorship of games and the recent decision to show 20 live games per year with Sky Sports has a sound basis. However, the challenge now is to look beyond the revenue generated by the initial three year deal, worth €10million p.a., to not only increase the value of that agreement but to also take advantage of other revenue streams that arise from their globalised approach and from a potential 70 to 100 million diaspora worldwide.

The identification of the socialite whose spectatorship is superseded by a sole need for business networking and social development has already been noted in the literature on professional sports (Watson and Rich, 2000) in terms of fans who are "corporate" (Nash, 2000) or "rational" in seeking commercial benefits through their spectatorship (Quick, 2000). However, the identification of this as a distinct segmentation base in an indigenous amateur game is an unexpected discovery in this study. Whilst, this may be attributable to the changing socio-economic status of Ireland, it is noted as a recent trend that would not have been previously been found in great abundance amongst Gaelic football supporters. Whilst the needs of this segment are well met by the GAA at the headquarter stadium at croke park, through the provision of various corporate hospitality facilities and activities, a very real strategic challenge is presented in the provision of these facilities at smaller regional stadiums where many games currently take place. The continued absence of these facilities will result in missed revenue opportunities and the potential opportunity to convert these socialite supporters into more regular attendees.

The identification of the behavioural trait of the socialiser provides evidence that a new generation of consumers in Ireland presents a strong strategic challenge to the GAA in its domestic market in Ireland. The socialiser's spectatorship is inversely complemented and often enhanced by their ability to socialise with friends and family and has now become very much part of their match-day experience. Whilst previous studies have identified this trait as an actual segmentation base, e.g. "Camaraderie consumers" (Kahle *et al.*, 1996; Stewart *et al.*, 2003), this study identifies it as trait that underpins existing applicable bases (see Table II) and challenges the contention that this type of social consumer will display the lowest levels of commitment (Stewart *et al.*, 2003). To-date the GAA has been slow to both recognise and capitalise on this trait and this will present challenges and opportunities that will require measured strategic management.

If left unchecked, there is a strong possibility that a potential increase in the activities of the misconstrued socialiser whose over-consumption of alcohol is part of their social experience could possibly lead to the realisation of an applicable

dysfunctional segmentation base and their associated negative consequences. The GAA must strategically manage this threat and provide the requisite guidance and adequate measures that ensure the continuation of a safe environment that is fundamental to its supporters.

Furthermore, the GAA has been slow to recognise the central role that social facilitation can play in sports marketing (Coe *et al.*, 1992; Mullin *et al.*, 2007) and has made very little provision that could see it capitalise on a potentially lucrative revenue stream. The observation that supporters whose team is not successful on the field-of-play might change the focus of their spectatorship to other aspects rather than dwell on the negative (Fisher and Wakefield, 1998) provides opportunities for the GAA to supplement the spectatorship of supporters of less-successful teams and provide them with other reasons to maintain their attendance. In this regard, lessons can be borrowed from the social experience provided by other sports and the potential service-based revenue generating encounters that they can provide, e.g. the tailgating arrangements put in place at many US College football games not only provides for a controlled environment for socialising but also a significant source of income (Nemec and Martin, 2011).

7. Implications of this study
The primary focus of the empirical work to-date on market segmentation bases in sport has been upon on professional sports, with relatively little application or analysis within the context of indigenous amateur sports. The findings of this study reiterate the need for sports marketing to develop segmentation bases for each individual sports markets (Fullerton, 2007; Mullin *et al.*, 2007); especially in areas where there has been changing social, economic and cultural context (Stewart *et al.*, 2003; Ratten and Ratten, 2011).

Furthermore they highlight that by going beyond a predominantly conceptual and normative approach to market segmentation and reviewing the actual empirical findings of their application provides evidence to assess the strategic development of the sports organisation. Not only highlighting the organisation's strategic achievements but it will highlight areas of strategic shortcomings or potential oversights in the development of that strategy.

This study used an application of existing sports marketing segmentation bases to examine the indigenous amateur sport of Gaelic football in Ireland and the findings have provided relevant market knowledge for the GAA about a new generation of sports consumers in Ireland in the form of a behavioural-based trait of the socialiser whilst highlighting the emergence of significant socialite and digital diaspora segments.

Changing consumption practices are presenting challenges and opportunities that will impact upon the GAA's current strategic direction. If managed effectively then the key strategic issue of developing overseas markets will be well served by the identified digital diaspora segment base. However, this has to be done in conjunction with the strategic development of its domestic market in Ireland and in serving the emergent needs of the socialite, and particularly, the trait of the socialiser. Given the business approach inherent within the GAA, it can be confident in addressing these challenges and providing the desired continued growth and prosperity of the organisation in Ireland and its developing overseas markets. The assured position that delivering this growth and prosperity can deliver will inevitably and ironically present the organisation with the future challenge of protecting its core ideals of community, amateurism, volunteering and sport-for-all in the face of the inevitably

increase in calls for the payment of players on-the-field. As the GAA becomes more professional off-the-field, it is inevitable and understandable that it will face greater calls for professionalism on-the-field.

8. Study limitations and future research

The findings of this study are limited to the indigenous amateur game of Gaelic football in Ireland. Whilst confidence in generalisations regarding the way organisations segment their markets has already been questioned (Foedermayr and Diamantopoulos, 2008) the findings do raise significant questions and knowledge that will have significant impact upon the operations and strategic development of the indigenous games such as Gaelic football. The findings of this study are also limited in the choice of the single sport chosen as its focus. Future research should include the other main Gaelic game of Hurling and other amateur indigenous sports, such as Shinty in Scotland, so as to provide a wider view of this type of supporter's spectatorship and a more holistic examination of the strategic development of indigenous amateur sport in general.

Future research is required to further develop our understanding of the supporter of indigenous amateur sports such as Gaelic football. This could include understanding how a reclusive partisan or socialite can be moved to be a more devoted/fanatical supporter in terms of their actual match-day attendance. Future research is also needed into how sports organisations can realise or increase the revenue benefits of having an existing digital audience and the impact this has upon actual spectatorship of games.

On a broader level, future research could be conducted to investigate the potential impact that a move from amateurism to professionalism in the GAA would have upon its spectatorship and wider marketing appeal. This study highlights the increasing role of the "social experience" in amateur sports marketing and future work should be conducted to further conceptualise and develop measures of the construct of a "social experience" and its relationship with other factors that are known to increase sports attendance.

Notes

1. Sport as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, September 2014.

2. The GAA Strategic Vision and Action Plan 2009-2015.

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Further reading

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Appendix

Respondent	Sex	Age	Research method	Participant description
1	M	21	Focus group	Current player and student
2	M	20	Focus group	Current player and student
3	M	20	Focus group	Current player and student
4	F	20	Focus group	Current player and student
5	F	22	Focus group	Current player and student
6	F	20	Focus group	Current player, youth coach and student
7	F	19	Focus group	Current player and student
8	F	19	Focus group	Current player and student
9	F	21	Focus group	Current player and student
10	F	22	Focus group	Current player and student
11	F	24	Focus group	Current player and student
12	F	23	Focus group	Current player and student
13	M	22	Focus group	Current player and student
14	M	22	Focus group	Current player and student
15	M	25	Focus group	Current player, youth coach and student
16	M	21	Focus group	Current player and student
17	M	21	Focus group	Current player and student
18	M	22	Focus group	Current player and student
19	M	65	In-depth interview	Former player, manager and senior administrator
20	M	35	In-depth interview	Former player and current GAA development officer
21	F	25	In-depth interview	Current player and current GAA development officer
22	M	48	In-depth interview	Former player and senior administrator
23	M	48	In-depth interview	National TV and newspaper journalist
24	M	58	In-depth interview	Former player, manager and current referee
25	M	50	In-depth interview	Senior administrator and national online journalist
26	M	52	In-depth interview	Former player, manager and current senior administrator
27	M	22	In-depth interview	Current player and student union official

Table AI.
Profile of study
participants

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