



# The future of football: The impact of the Icon League's influencer partnership strategy on brand awareness, customer engagement and retention within the small-sided football space

Moritz Moebus

Dissertation written under the supervision of Professor Silvia  
Almeida

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the MSc in  
Management, at the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 05.01.2025.

## **Abstract**

This study examines the impact of influencer partnerships on brand awareness, customer engagement, and retention in the niche sports market of small-sided football, focusing on the Icon League. A mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey of 133 respondents, evaluates the effectiveness of influencer strategies through Aaker's Brand Equity Model, Social Capital Theory, and the Fogg Behavior Model. The findings reveal that influencer collaborations significantly enhance brand recognition, with 74% of respondents citing influencers and social media as their primary discovery channels. Trust, authenticity, and emotional connections were critical for engagement, while gamified participation and interactive content deepened audience involvement and strengthened community bonds. Regression analysis identified trust in influencers and sustained engagement as key predictors of retention, though over-commercialization and influencer fatigue posed risks to long-term loyalty. The study also highlights demographic gaps, suggesting tailored approaches for older audiences. Recommendations include diversifying influencer collaborations, introducing gamified strategies, expanding gameday events across Germany, and launching personalized loyalty programs. Community outreach through schools and local clubs is emphasized to enhance visibility and grassroots support. This research offers a robust framework for optimizing influencer marketing strategies in niche sports, balancing inclusivity, authenticity, and community engagement to drive sustainable growth.

Title: The future of football: The impact of the Icon League's influencer partnership strategies on brand awareness, customer engagement, and customer retention within the small-sided football space

Author: Moritz Moebus

Key Words: Influence Partnerships, Brand Awareness, Customer Engagement, Customer Retention, Small Sided Football, Go-to-Market Strategy

## Sumário

Este estudo analisa o impacto das parcerias com influenciadores no conhecimento da marca, envolvimento do cliente e retenção no futebol de pequena dimensão, focando-se na Icon League. A metodologia mista combina entrevistas qualitativas e um inquérito a 133 participantes, avaliando a eficácia das estratégias com base no Modelo de Brand Equity de Aaker, na Teoria do Capital Social e no Modelo de Comportamento de Fogg.

Os resultados mostram que colaborações com influenciadores aumentam o reconhecimento da marca, com 74% dos inquiridos a identificarem influenciadores e redes sociais como principais canais de descoberta. A confiança, autenticidade e ligações emocionais foram cruciais para o envolvimento, enquanto a gamificação e o conteúdo interativo reforçaram os laços comunitários. A análise identificou a confiança e o envolvimento sustentado como factores-chave para a retenção, embora a comercialização excessiva represente riscos para a lealdade. O estudo sublinha lacunas demográficas, recomendando abordagens personalizadas para públicos mais velhos, diversificação de colaborações, introdução de estratégias gamificadas, expansão de eventos na Alemanha e programas de fidelização. O envolvimento com escolas e clubes locais é essencial para aumentar a visibilidade e apoio, oferecendo uma estrutura sólida para impulsionar o crescimento sustentável dos desportos de nicho.

Título: O futuro do futebol: O impacto das parcerias com influenciadores da Icon League no reconhecimento da marca, envolvimento do cliente e retenção no futebol de pequena dimensão.

Autor: Moritz Moebus

Palavras-Chave : Parcerias de Influência, Conhecimento da Marca, Envolvimento do Cliente, Retenção do Cliente, Futebol de Pequena Dimensão, Estratégia Go-to-Market

## **Acknowledgments**

I want to thank everyone who contributed to my study.

Firstly, I really want to thank my supervisor, Professor Silvia Almeida for her constant support, extremely valuable guidance and her exceptional responsiveness throughout my journey. Her feedback was crucial for completing this work.

I also want to thank the interviewees to share their insights and perspective on my topic as well as the respondents of my survey, which significantly supported my research.

I am also extremely grateful to CLSBE for giving me the chance to immerse myself in their culture and to support me finishing my academic journey at this amazing institution.

## Table of content

<b>List of tables &amp; figures</b> .....	<b>VIII</b>
<b>List of Abbreviations</b> .....	<b>IX</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>2. Key explanatory information</b> .....	<b>13</b>
2.1. <i>Understanding Small-Sided Football</i> .....	13
2.2. <i>The Icon League’s Influencer Partnership Strategy</i> .....	13
<b>3. Literature review</b> .....	<b>15</b>
3.1. <i>Overall Framework</i> .....	15
3.2. <i>Influencer Impact</i> .....	16
3.2.1. Influencer Impact in Sports .....	16
3.2.2. Influencer Strategies.....	17
3.2.3. Source Credibility Theory .....	18
3.2.4. Social Capital Theory .....	19
3.3. <i>Brand Awareness</i> .....	19
3.3.1. Brand Awareness in Sports Marketing.....	19
3.3.2. Aaker’s Brand Equity Model .....	20
3.4. <i>Engagement</i> .....	22
3.4.1. Customer engagement in sports marketing .....	22
3.4.2. Fogg Behavior Model.....	23
3.5. <i>Customer retention</i> .....	24
3.5.1. Customer Retention and Loyalty in Sports .....	24
3.5.2. Relationship marketing .....	25
3.6. <i>Challenges in influencer marketing</i> .....	26
<b>4. Research Methodology</b> .....	<b>28</b>
4.1. <i>Research Philosophy</i> .....	28
4.1.1. Epistemology.....	28
4.2. <i>Research Design</i> .....	28

4.2.1.	Design.....	28
4.2.2.	Methodology Approach.....	29
4.2.3.	Hypotheses .....	30
4.3.	<i>Data Collection</i> .....	30
4.3.1.	Collection Methods .....	30
4.3.2.	Sampling strategy .....	31
4.3.3.	Data Analysis .....	32
4.4.	<i>General research information</i> .....	33
4.4.1.	Ethical considerations .....	33
4.4.2.	Limitations and Scope .....	34
4.4.3.	Coherence.....	35
<b>5.</b>	<b>Findings</b> .....	<b>36</b>
5.1.	<i>Brand Awareness</i> .....	36
5.1.1.	Qualitative Findings on Brand Awareness .....	36
5.1.2.	Quantitative Findings on Brand Awareness .....	36
5.2.	<i>Customer Engagement</i> .....	38
5.2.1.	Qualitative Findings on Customer Engagement.....	38
5.2.2.	Quantitative Findings on Customer Engagement .....	38
5.3.	<i>Customer Retention</i> .....	40
5.3.1.	Qualitative Findings on Customer Retention .....	40
5.3.2.	Quantitative Findings on Customer Retention .....	40
<b>6.</b>	<b>Discussion</b> .....	<b>43</b>
6.1.	<i>Brand awareness</i> .....	43
6.2.	<i>Customer engagement</i> .....	44
6.3.	<i>Customer retention</i> .....	46
6.4.	<i>Strategic implications</i> .....	48
6.4.1.	Short-term initiatives .....	49
6.4.2.	Long-term initiatives .....	50
6.4.3.	Broader applicability .....	50
6.5.	<i>Limitations</i> .....	51

<b>7. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>8. Reference.....</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>9. Appendices .....</b>	<b>58</b>

## List of tables & figures

Figure 1 - Overall Framework.....	15
Figure 2 - Aaker's Brand Equity Model .....	22
Figure 3 - Fogg Behaviour Model.....	23
Figure 4 - Distribution of demographics .....	36
Figure 5 - Engagement channels .....	39
Figure 6 - Strategic implications .....	49
Table 1 - Regression Analysis visibility and engagement. ....	37
Table 2 - Heatmap of Engagament Likelyhood .....	39
Table 3 - Regression analysis of Key Predictos of Customer Retention .....	41

## List of Abbreviations

CLV .....	<i>Customer Lifetime Value</i>
FBM .....	<i>Fogg Behavior Model</i>

## 1. Introduction

Small-sided football has experienced a remarkable surge in popularity in recent years. This variation of the sport, characterized by smaller teams (typically 5–7 players), compact pitches, and shorter game durations, has become increasingly accessible and appealing, particularly to younger audiences (The FA, 2010). In modern society, where time and space constraints are common, the flexibility and dynamic nature of small-sided football have resonated with urban populations seeking quicker and more engaging sporting experiences (The FA, 2018). As a result, leagues and tournaments such as the Icon League, Baller League, and Kings League have rapidly expanded across Europe (Sport Marke Medien, 2024).

This rise is mirrored by the growth of influencer marketing, particularly in digital spaces tailored to niche markets. Leveraging platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, influencer marketing has proven to be an effective tool for reaching broader audiences. Unlike traditional advertising, this approach offers an authentic and relatable connection with consumers, fostering trust and engagement (Rebecca Kowalewicz, 2024). In niche markets, influencer collaborations can significantly boost brand awareness and loyalty, particularly in industries such as sports, where emotional connections play a vital role (Business Research Insights, 2024). For sports brands, leveraging influencers is a powerful strategy to build recognition and foster long-term relationships with fans (Rebecca Kowalewicz, 2024).

While extensive research exists on influencer marketing in mainstream sports such as the meta analytic review from Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science (Pan, Blut, Ghiassaleh, & Lee, 2024), its role in niche sports like small-sided football remains largely unexplored. Existing studies in sports marketing tend to focus on well-known leagues and broad-market strategies, overlooking the unique dynamics of smaller, specialized audiences. Additionally, while relational and emotional aspects of influencer marketing are acknowledged, limited research connects these to measurable outcomes such as brand awareness, customer retention, and sustained audience engagement within niche sports. This dissertation addresses these gaps by examining influencer marketing strategies in the growing yet under-researched domain of small-sided football, contributing valuable insights to the academic and practical understanding of marketing in specialized sports contexts.

The Icon League exemplifies this intersection of small-sided football and influencer-driven marketing. By partnering with 24 team heads from the sports and lifestyle sectors, the league

effectively targets younger audiences. Its success is further amplified by the efforts of its two presidents, Toni Kroos, Germany's most decorated footballer, and Elias Nerlich, a prominent influencer (Theo Stodiek, 2024). Together, they have cultivated a vibrant community around the league, using their platforms to drive fan engagement and establish the Icon League as a distinctive entity within the small-sided football space (Theo Stodiek, 2024).

Sports marketing is based on two key objectives: enhancing brand awareness and fostering customer retention, both critical for a brand's growth and long-term sustainability (Nielsen, 2022). Target audiences use brand awareness to identify and remember brands. In the sports industry, having a sizable presence of a brand in the market supports the ability to win over new fans, get sponsorships, and achieve sustained performance.

Customer retention emphasizes maintaining a loyal fan base over time. Loyal fans not only contribute to recurring revenue through event attendance and merchandise purchases but also help build a community that strengthens the brand's identity (Stokburger-Sauer & Teichmann, 2014). In niche sports like small-sided football, retaining a dedicated audience is particularly important due to the smaller market size. Strong retention strategies ensure continued engagement and growth in such competitive spaces (Gray & Wert-Gray, 2012).

Influencers play a pivotal role in achieving these goals by enhancing brand identity and deepening audience connections. Through collaborations, influencers lend authenticity, relevance, and trend alignment to brands, particularly resonating with younger, digitally savvy consumers (Joshi, Lim, Jagani, & Kumar, 2023). In niche sports, this dynamic is even more critical. Influencers provide unique insights, behind-the-scenes content, and engaging narratives that foster loyalty and long-term commitment among fans (Durau, 2022) (Burmam & Frese, 2023).

Despite the growing influence of small-sided football and the increasing adoption of influencer marketing, there remains a significant gap in understanding the effectiveness of influencer-driven strategies within niche sports. While extensive research has explored influencer marketing in mainstream sports, its application in specialized markets such as small-sided football has received limited academic attention. This study aims to bridge this gap by analyzing the case of the Icon League, examining how its partnerships with influencers contribute to brand awareness, customer engagement, and long-term retention.

Specifically, the research seeks to understand how influencer collaborations help the league grow its fan base, improve recognition within its target audience, and sustain loyalty over time. These insights will provide valuable guidance for optimizing Go-to-market strategies in niche sports.

“To what extent does the Icon League’s influencer partnership strategy impact brand awareness, engagement and customer retention within the small-sided football space?”

The paper follows a structured approach. It begins with an introduction to establish the research’s purpose, followed by a discussion on small-sided football and the Icon League. The literature review will delve into the core concepts of influencer impact, brand awareness, and customer retention. Subsequently, survey results will be analyzed and discussed in dedicated chapters, providing insights into the research question and its implications.

## **2. Key explanatory information**

To provide a clear foundation for this research, this chapter will explore the key concepts of small-sided football and the Icon League. Understanding these topics is essential for grasping the broader context of the study. The discussion begins with an overview of small-sided football within the framework of the Icon League, followed by an in-depth look at the league's partnership strategy and its overall concept.

### **2.1. Understanding Small-Sided Football**

Small-sided football offers a fresh and dynamic alternative to traditional 11-a-side football, characterized by fewer players, smaller pitches, and a faster-paced style of play. Its accessibility and flexibility, particularly in urban settings, have made it increasingly popular across Europe. This format attracts players looking for a casual yet competitive football experience, aligning with modern preferences for shorter, high-energy games (Dominik Sander, 2024).

The Icon League serves as a standout example of small-sided football, delivering a structured and exhilarating experience for both players and fans (Alex Truica, 2024). The league's core features include:

- Matches played on a 22x45 meter pitch enclosed by walls.
- Two 12-minute halves for each game.
- Teams comprising five players, including a goalkeeper.
- The absence of an offside rule, with tie games resolved through overtime featuring a golden goal and the innovative "Rulebreaker" feature.
- A season format consisting of 13 regular game days, culminating in playoffs and a final eight tournament.

As a well-organized small-sided football league, the Icon League exemplifies the potential of this niche sport to captivate a younger, urban, and digitally connected audience. Its unique platform offers brands an opportunity to engage authentically through sponsorships, strategic partnerships, and influencer-driven marketing, making small-sided football an ideal space for modern marketing approaches (Dominik Sander, 2024).

### **2.2. The Icon League's Influencer Partnership Strategy**

The Icon League has strategically placed influencer partnerships at the core of its marketing efforts to enhance brand visibility and engagement within the small-sided football community. In the niche realm of sports marketing, where building authenticity and fostering

deep audience connections are critical for sustained success, collaborations with influencers have proven invaluable.

The league partners with influencers who seamlessly connect football culture with urban lifestyle, ensuring the brand resonates with its target audience. These influencers are chosen not only for their ties to sports but also for their ability to captivate younger, digitally active followers (The Icon League, 2024). By sharing content focused on matchdays, special events, and personal interactions, these influencers have cultivated a thriving online community. For example, the league's Instagram account now boasts nearly 537,000 followers, showcasing the effectiveness of its influencer-driven strategy (Instagram, 2024).

Prominent figures driving this initiative include Elias Nerlich, a celebrated YouTuber, and Toni Kroos, one of Germany's most iconic footballers, both serving as presidents of the Icon League. Their involvement has played a pivotal role in boosting the league's profile, attracting a diverse audience, and expanding its fan base (Marco Tito Aronica, 2024).

The influencer strategy has been a cornerstone in raising awareness and engaging fans both within and beyond the league's immediate community. By collaborating with influencers across football and lifestyle sectors, the league generates dynamic and interactive content on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitch—spaces where its target demographic frequently interacts. The authenticity and enthusiasm these influencers bring foster trust, driving both customer loyalty and long-term retention (Durau, 2022).

One particularly successful pre-launch campaign demonstrated the potential of this approach. The Icon League's Instagram account revealed new teams weekly, creating a sense of anticipation and excitement among fans. This campaign significantly accelerated the league's initial growth. Featuring team captains like football stars Franck Ribéry, Antonio Rüdiger, and David Alaba, alongside renowned YouTubers and musicians such as Luciano and Sidney Eweka, the league effectively combined star power and influencer reach to amplify its popularity (Marco Tito Aronica, 2024).

### 3. Literature review

This chapter provides an overview of the trend of small-sided football, with a particular emphasis on the development of the Icon League. Influencer partnership strategies are gaining growing significance in the digital marketing landscape, particularly in niche sports such as small-sided football. This literature review aims to explore the impact of influencer partnership strategies on two key marketing outcomes: brand awareness and customer retention.

In the specific context of the Icon League, these partnerships have played a pivotal role in building its brand and growing its audience. The review will address the main research question: *“To what extent does the Icon League’s influencer partnership strategy impact brand awareness, engagement and customer retention within the small-sided football space?”*

By developing a deeper understanding of these strategies, this literature review will offer insights into their effectiveness in building the Icon League’s brand and retaining its customer base. Furthermore, this exploration will contribute to a broader understanding of influencer strategies within the sports and digital marketing sectors.

#### 3.1. Overall Framework

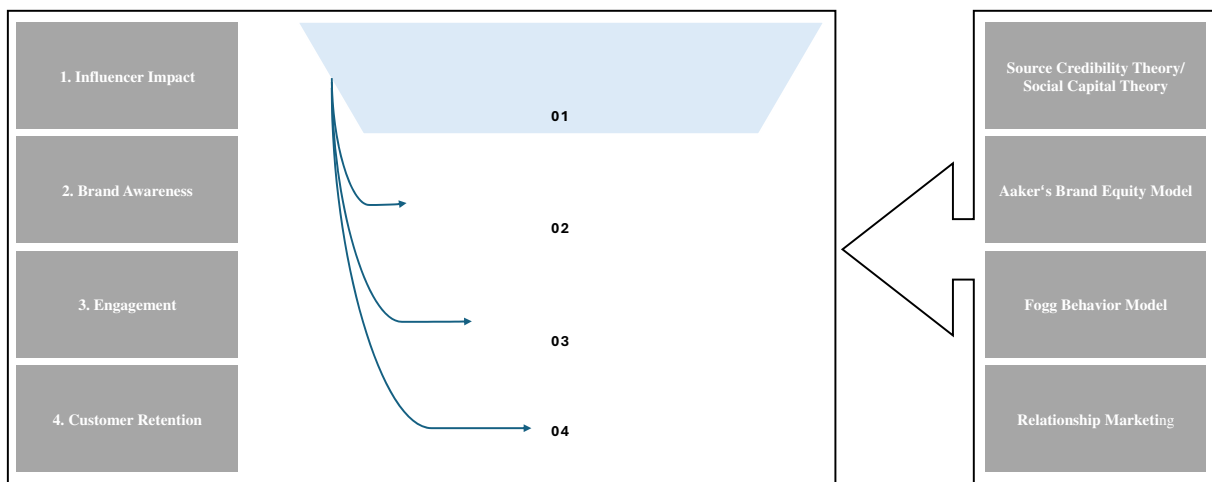


Figure 1 - Overall Framework

This literature review employs a self-developed framework designed to structure the analysis of influencer marketing and its role in brand building. The framework encompasses four key components: the roles of influencers, the development of brand awareness, the dynamics of customer engagement, and strategies for customer retention. It begins with an exploration of the influencer’s role in marketing, examined through two distinct theoretical perspectives.

This is followed by an analysis of how influencer marketing shapes brand awareness. Next, the focus shifts to customer engagement, critically evaluating the interactions among customers, influencers, and the brand. Finally, customer retention is addressed, emphasizing strategies to build and sustain long-term loyalty among newly acquired customers. Each of these components is systematically analyzed and tied back to the central research question, providing a cohesive structure for the review.

## **3.2. Influencer Impact**

### **3.2.1. Influencer Impact in Sports**

Influencer marketing can be defined in various ways, especially within the context of sports. One definition describes it as a strategy that leverages social capital to increase brand awareness and foster trust by connecting brands with targeted audiences through authentic engagement (Khasgiwala Professor, Kumar Agrawal Professor, & Chouhan Associate Professor, 2024). Another perspective frames it as a marketing approach that uses influential individuals to communicate brand messages in an organic way, allowing brands to tap into pre-existing communities of engaged followers (Xu, 2023). Both definitions emphasize the core elements of influencer marketing, highlighting how it connects brands with audiences through trusted and relatable figures.

However, these general definitions do not fully capture the unique dynamics of sports. A more fitting description for this context defines sports influencer marketing as a dynamic form of digital marketing that brings brands closer to sports fans by integrating products into everyday sports routines, live coverage, and interactive content, driving both brand awareness and loyalty (Carrero, García, & García-Chamizo, 2024). This definition highlights the role of influencer marketing in enhancing fan experiences and fostering stronger brand loyalty, aligning closely with the strategies employed by the Icon League to increase brand awareness and drive customer retention. While the definition emphasizes loyalty and engagement, it presumes that the success of influencer marketing is universally applicable across all sports. However, niche sports derive disproportionate benefits from influencer strategies due to their capacity to target smaller, highly engaged audiences (Carrero et al., 2024). This observation underscores an important consideration regarding the scalability of such strategies, particularly in industries characterized by smaller, community-driven fanbases.

Synthesizing these perspectives reveals the multifaceted role influencers play in sports marketing, balancing brand visibility with maintaining audience trust. This balance is particularly crucial for niche sports like small-sided football, where authenticity and emotional connections are essential for fostering meaningful audience engagement.

### 3.2.2. Influencer Strategies

Influencer relationships, which leverage trusted personalities to reach specialized audiences, have emerged as a significant growth approach for niche sports industries. Case studies reveal that influencers have effectively raised awareness of sports like ultimate frisbee and small-sided football by showcasing their distinctive features to dedicated communities (Ms. Shital Kene & Mr. Sanjay Kene, 2024). This strategy fosters brand growth for niche sports through community-building and direct engagement, connecting with highly involved consumers who might not respond to traditional advertising (Zhang, Ghosh, & Ali, 2024).

A critical component of success in niche sports marketing is the alignment between the influencer's persona and the brand identity, which enhances authenticity. For instance, influencers who exemplify values like community service and sportsmanship frequently partner with small-sided football leagues, strengthening the brand's identity and creating a more genuine connection with the audience (Xu, 2023). Sharma warns that over-reliance on influencer personas can result in inconsistencies if their personal brand conflicts with the league's values. This highlights the need to carefully select influencers whose long-term goals and image align with the brand, minimizing the risk of misalignment or reputational harm. This alignment ensures that influencer campaigns resonate with the target audience, as fans are more likely to trust influencers who embody the sport's ethos (Carrero et al., 2024).

Furthermore, long-term collaborations with influencers outperform one-time partnerships by fostering consistent engagement, building trust, and helping the brand cultivate a loyal following over time (Dheerika Sharma, Dr. Deepika Saraf, & Manzoor Ahmad Dar, 2023). Influencers also enhance audience engagement through interactive content, such as Q&A sessions, live event coverage, and personal stories, which give followers a greater sense of involvement and connection with the brand. This type of content is especially impactful in sports, where fans seek community and direct interaction with the influencers they admire (Xu, 2023). Authenticity and transparency further amplify these connections, as fans respond positively to influencers who genuinely love the sports they support (García & Yábar, 2023).

By integrating these elements, interactive, authentic content, long-term collaborations, and strategic alignment brands in niche sports markets can build enduring relationships with their audiences.

Synthesizing these findings reveals that while influencer strategies are highly effective in niche sports, their success hinges on balancing authenticity with strategic alignment. For the Icon League, blending long-term partnerships to build trust with periodic, high-impact campaigns targeting new audiences can optimize both audience loyalty and brand reach.

### 3.2.3. Source Credibility Theory

The Source Credibility Theory serves as a framework for analyzing the influence of perceived expertise and trustworthiness on audience engagement, particularly within the realm of influencer marketing. This theory posits that an influencer's perceived knowledge, skill, or experience in a specific field significantly impacts the audience's trust in their recommendations. Trust, in this context, stems not only from the influencer's expertise but also from their authenticity, honesty, and reliability. When audiences view influencers as credible, an emotional connection is formed, bridging the gap between the brand and its potential customers. This emotional resonance enhances the relatability of the message, making it more impactful and likely to drive engagement (Ohanian, 1990).

In the context of this research, Source Credibility Theory underpins the argument that influencers act as catalysts for brand awareness. By leveraging their credibility, influencers not only elevate brand visibility but also reduce the perceived risk associated with a product or service. For instance, when a trusted influencer endorses a brand, they effectively mitigate customer hesitations, encouraging a transition from mere awareness to active engagement and, eventually, retention. Such dynamics underscore the importance of selecting influencers whose expertise and trustworthiness align with the brand's identity and target audience. The strategic alignment ensures that the partnership yields maximum effectiveness in conveying the brand message and fostering long-term relationships (Han & Balabanis, 2024).

Furthermore, this theoretical foundation highlights the dual role of influencers: as amplifiers of the brand's voice and as architects of trust within the consumer community. By weaving authenticity into their narratives, influencers humanize the brand, making its message resonate on a personal level. This personalized touch not only attracts attention but also deepens audience engagement, reinforcing the value of carefully curated influencer partnerships in brand strategy (Ohanian, 1990).

#### 3.2.4. Social Capital Theory

The social capital theory is comprised of three key components, each of which plays a critical role in understanding the effectiveness of influencer partnerships. The first component is social networks. Influencers leverage their established networks to disseminate brand messages, serving as intermediaries between the Icon League and its target audience. Through their platforms, influencers amplify the league's visibility and engagement, ensuring that brand messages reach a diverse and extensive audience.

The second component centers on trust and reciprocity. Trust cultivated within an influencer's community fosters a sense of shared values between the audience, the influencer, and the Icon League. This trust encourages followers to view the league through a positive lens, believing in its authenticity and relevance. Reciprocity further enhances this dynamic, as audience members support the Icon League out of their loyalty to and trust in the influencer, creating a mutually beneficial relationship between all parties.

The final component, capital, is divided into two types: bonding and bridging capital. Bonding capital represents the strong ties between influencers and their loyal followers, which establish deep emotional connections with the brand. This capital is invaluable for fostering a dedicated and engaged fan base. On the other hand, bridging capital refers to the weak ties that enable influencers to introduce the Icon League to new audiences who may not yet be familiar with the brand. Together, these forms of capital extend the league's reach and reinforce its presence in the small-sided football community (Tsounis, 2024).

Influencers act as network amplifiers, converting the trust they've built into active support for the brand. A robust social capital foundation ensures the authenticity of these partnerships, aligning the Icon League with the values and culture of the small-sided football community. By fostering community participation and loyalty, social capital not only supports immediate engagement but also promotes long-term fan retention and brand advocacy (Tristan Claridge, 2018).

### 3.3. Brand Awareness

#### 3.3.1. Brand Awareness in Sports Marketing

Brand awareness refers to the strength of a brand's presence in the customer's memory, achieved through continuous visibility, familiarity, and positive associations (García & Yábar,

2023). It is a cornerstone of marketing, ensuring that a brand remains top of mind for consumers during purchasing decisions, often reinforced by consistent, meaningful interactions (Dheerika Sharma et al., 2023). Strong brand awareness enhances consumers' ability to recall a brand and fosters favorable perceptions, a crucial element in sports like football, where credibility and trust are key to building authentic connections.

For the Icon League, establishing a loyal fan base relies on this foundation. A well-suited definition of brand awareness in sports marketing emphasizes the extent to which consumers can recall and recognize a brand, a critical factor for fostering long-term engagement and loyalty in the highly emotional and community-driven sports industry (Carrero et al., 2024).

Social media also plays a pivotal role in building brand awareness. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitch offer access to vast audiences and enable direct interactions that are essential for digital marketing strategies. These platforms help brands not only reach potential fans but also deepen relationships with existing ones, making them indispensable tools for increasing brand awareness (Dheerika Sharma et al., 2023). While social media enhances visibility, it does not always lead to meaningful engagement or loyalty (García & Yábar, 2023). This highlights the need for awareness-building strategies that emphasize authenticity and sustained interaction to foster lasting brand connections.

For the Icon League, these findings suggest that leveraging social media effectively requires balancing visibility with trust and emotional resonance. Influencers, who can integrate personal storytelling with promotional content, play a pivotal role in achieving this equilibrium, creating deeper and more authentic connections with the audience.

### 3.3.2. Aaker's Brand Equity Model

Aaker's Brand Equity Model outlines four key dimensions that collectively shape a brand's overall value. The first dimension, brand loyalty, measures the commitment customers have toward a brand. High loyalty indicates strong emotional and behavioral ties, crucial for sustaining long-term engagement. Loyal customers often act as brand advocates, promoting the brand through word-of-mouth and contributing to its reputation within the market. This dimension is particularly important in niche markets, where customer retention is key to sustained success and growth, as it ensures a stable fan base despite limited market size.

The second dimension, brand awareness, reflects the strength of a brand's presence in the minds of consumers. Awareness is the foundational step in customer engagement, as it ensures that potential customers are familiar with the brand and its offerings. Influencer partnerships and social media campaigns play a pivotal role in increasing this awareness by reaching audiences in an authentic and relatable manner. By consistently reinforcing the brand's presence across digital platforms, awareness transforms into recognition, making the brand top-of-mind for its target demographic. This recognition is particularly important in the Icon League's efforts to penetrate the small-sided football market and stand out as a leader in the niche.

Perceived quality forms the third dimension, capturing the customer's assessment of a brand's value in comparison to competitors. This perception is not solely based on tangible aspects like product performance but also on intangible factors such as trust and consistency. When influencers highlight the quality and reliability of a brand through personal endorsements, they enhance its perceived value. This creates a competitive edge, as customers begin associating the brand with excellence and dependability, setting it apart in the crowded marketplace. For the Icon League, perceived quality supported by trusted influencers helps position it as a premium experience in small-sided football, attracting players and fans who value professionalism and excitement.

Finally, brand associations encompass the emotional and experiential connections that customers build with a brand. These associations are shaped by their interactions with the brand and the narratives created around it, often facilitated by influencers who connect the brand's identity to shared values and memorable experiences (Aaker, 1992). Strong associations foster a deeper emotional connection, turning customers into passionate advocates who feel aligned with the brand's mission. In niche sports like small-sided football, these associations can tap into a sense of community and belonging, further solidifying the brand's position in the market.

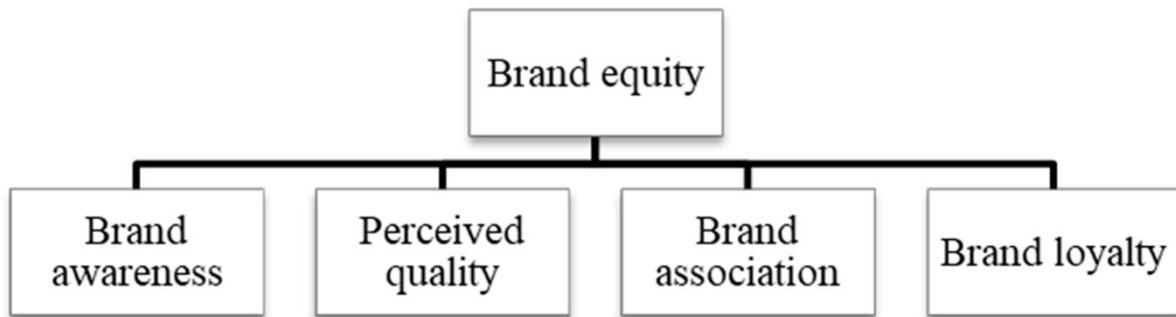


Figure 2 - Aaker's Brand Equity Model

Aaker's model is particularly relevant in addressing the research question of how the Icon League's influencer partnership strategy impacts brand awareness and customer retention. The model's framework illustrates how influencer efforts incrementally build brand equity, starting with awareness, strengthening perceived quality, and fostering loyalty. This directly ties to the study's focus on how influencers can transform audience trust into lasting brand commitment. By applying Aaker's principles, the research highlights how the Icon League can leverage influencer partnerships to sustain engagement and foster a loyal community, ensuring its continued growth and relevance in the niche market of small-sided football.

### 3.4. Engagement

#### 3.4.1. Customer engagement in sports marketing

Customer engagement in sports marketing captures the dynamic, interactive relationships between sports organizations and their fans, encompassing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects. It is crucial for understanding how sports brands like the Icon League build meaningful connections with their audiences. Customer engagement is an emerging perspective that provides a holistic view of the ways in which customers' interactive experiences with organizations create value for both parties (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011). This highlights the mutual benefits of interaction, resonating with sports where fans actively participate in events or digital communities, co-creating experiences with brands.

Customer engagement is also described as a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative customer experiences with a focal agent or object (Brodie et al., 2011). This emphasizes the emotional and psychological bonds fans develop, such as their loyalty to teams or influencers. For the Icon League, influencers play a critical role in deepening these connections by creating relatable and engaging content.

For the Icon League, Brodie et al.’s definition is most fitting, emphasizing interactive experiences and value co-creation. It aligns with how influencers foster engagement, creating shared moments and strengthening connections within the small-sided football community. This engagement is key to increasing brand awareness and ensuring customer retention, aligning directly with the research objectives.

3.4.2. Fogg Behavior Model

The Fogg Behavior Model (FBM), developed by Dr. B.J. Fogg, provides a framework for understanding the elements that drive human behavior: Motivation, Ability, and Prompt. Behavior occurs when these three elements converge simultaneously. Motivation reflects the emotional or psychological desire to act, such as a fan’s enthusiasm for football or admiration for an influencer. Ability highlights the importance of reducing barriers, ensuring the behavior is easy to perform. A prompt serves as the external trigger, such as an influencer’s reminder to engage with content or attend an event (Filippou et al., 2015).

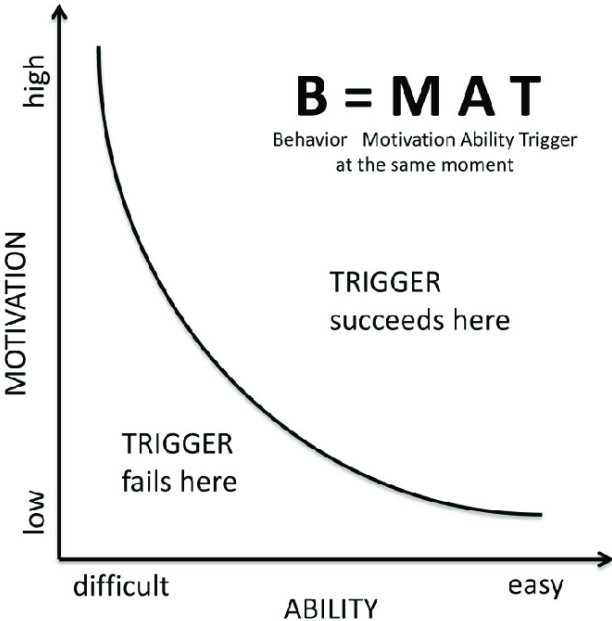


Figure 3 - Fogg Behaviour Model

This model is highly relevant to the Icon League’s influencer partnership strategy, as influencers effectively address all three elements. They boost motivation by creating relatable, inspiring content that builds emotional connections with fans. By offering clear instructions or direct links to events, influencers lower barriers and increase fans’ ability to engage.

Additionally, influencers act as prompts, using timely social media posts or calls-to-action to trigger immediate participation, such as attending matches or buying merchandise.

By applying the FBM, the Icon League can optimize its influencer strategy to drive fan engagement and action. This approach not only deepens audience connections but also encourages long-term loyalty and retention within the small-sided football community.

### **3.5. Customer retention**

#### **3.5.1. Customer Retention and Loyalty in Sports**

Retaining customers is a more cost-effective and impactful strategy than constantly acquiring new ones, as loyal customers typically spend more over time and contribute to a stable revenue stream. In the sports industry, customer retention is particularly valuable because dedicated fans are more likely to invest in events, merchandise, and other brand-related offerings. Retention not only ensures financial stability but also strengthens brand identity and fosters a sense of community, which is essential in sports where emotional connections drive fan loyalty (Zhang et al., 2024).

Despite its benefits, it gets noted that retention strategies are more difficult in niche markets due to their smaller scale and limited customer touchpoints (Zhang et al., 2024). In contrast, it is suggested that niche markets often enjoy stronger community bonds, which naturally foster loyalty (Gray & Wert-Gray, 2012). These differing perspectives underline the importance of retention strategies that leverage both the strengths and challenges of niche markets. For instance, niche sports can deepen emotional connections by capitalizing on their community-driven nature while simultaneously creating more consistent engagement opportunities to sustain loyalty.

Influencers significantly contribute to customer engagement and loyalty by creating personalized and relatable content that strengthens fans' connections to a brand. For the Icon League, influencers can deepen these bonds by sharing exclusive content or narratives that resonate with the audience's admiration for sports figures and digital personalities (Xu, 2023). This personalized approach is particularly powerful in sports, where fans often form aspirational relationships with influencers, further embedding their loyalty to the brand.

Two key metrics are especially relevant for measuring retention in the Icon League. Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) estimates the total revenue a customer generates over their relationship with the brand, encompassing ticket sales, merchandise, and other expenditures (Dheerika Sharma et al., 2023). Engagement rate, another vital metric, reflects how actively fans interact with social media content, such as likes, comments, and shares. A high engagement rate typically indicates a more loyal and invested customer base (Dheerika Sharma et al., 2023).

Effective strategies for retention in sports include loyalty programs, influencer-driven content strategies, and initiatives that encourage community engagement (García & Yábar, 2023). These approaches nurture long-term relationships with fans, turning casual participants into devoted brand advocates. By integrating these metrics and strategies, this research aims to provide actionable insights to enhance the Icon League's fan engagement and brand loyalty, ensuring sustained success in the competitive small-sided football market.

Synthesizing these insights reveals that influencers play a pivotal role in customer retention for niche sports. Their ability to deliver community-focused content and offer exclusive access reinforces the emotional connections that underpin long-term loyalty. For the Icon League, utilizing these influencer-driven strategies can foster sustained engagement and ensure financial stability within the small-sided football community.

### 3.5.2. Relationship marketing

Relationship Marketing is a customer-focused strategy centered on building long-term relationships through trust, commitment, and emotional connections (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Unlike transactional marketing, which targets immediate sales, Relationship Marketing prioritizes sustained engagement and loyalty by fostering meaningful interactions. Trust, defined as confidence in a brand's reliability and integrity, and commitment, the customer's willingness to maintain a long-term relationship, are foundational to this approach. The significance of emotional connections is important, showing that brands capable of forming personal bonds with their customers achieve higher levels of loyalty (Fournier, 1998). These principles are especially relevant in sports marketing, where fans often form deep emotional attachments to teams, events, and the communities surrounding them.

Influencers seamlessly integrate into the Relationship Marketing framework by acting as trusted intermediaries who foster emotional bonds between brands and audiences. Leveraging their authenticity and relatability, influencers create micro-communities around brands,

strengthening loyalty through shared experiences and values. It is also emphasized that community involvement is a powerful driver of loyalty, as it transforms customer relationships into communal experiences (Mcalexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). Additionally, influencers promote value co-creation by encouraging followers to engage in brand-related activities, such as attending events, sharing content, or participating in campaigns (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

These dynamics are directly aligned with the Icon League's objectives to boost engagement and retention within the small-sided football community. By employing Relationship Marketing principles, the league can deepen emotional connections with its audience, building a loyal fan base that feels a strong sense of belonging. This strategy not only sustains customer engagement but also cultivates advocacy, where fans actively promote the brand, ensuring the Icon League's long-term success and resonance in its niche market.

### **3.6. Challenges in influencer marketing**

Influencer fatigue occurs when audiences become disengaged due to repetitive or overly promotional content, leading to decreased trust and interaction. This challenge is particularly significant in niche sports like small-sided football, where the community is smaller and more interconnected. Fans in these spaces expect authentic, diverse, and creative content, and repetitive campaigns can erode enthusiasm for the brand (Seo, Primovic, & Jin, 2019). However, it is argued that the smaller scale of niche sports allows for greater authenticity, as influencers often have closer, more personal connections with their audience. This perspective suggests that while influencer fatigue is a concern, niche sports can mitigate this risk by leveraging their unique ability to foster genuine relationships, provided campaigns remain varied and personalized (Carrero et al., 2024).

Over-commercialization presents another obstacle, especially in niche sports communities where authenticity and passion are deeply valued. Excessive promotional content can make campaigns feel transactional, undermining trust and alienating fans who expect genuine interactions. Insights from Medium highlight the importance of balancing organic, lifestyle-oriented posts with promotional messaging to preserve audience loyalty and trust (Sarstedt & Pick, 2021). For the Icon League, collaborating with influencers who naturally incorporate the league into their content, such as sharing personal experiences with small-sided football or showcasing their participation in events, can ensure campaigns remain engaging and credible while reinforcing the league's authenticity.

Authenticity pitfalls arise when influencers promote products or services that conflict with their personal values or lifestyles, leading audiences to view their endorsements as insincere. This risk is particularly acute in tight-knit communities like small-sided football, where trust is paramount, and perceived inauthenticity can quickly damage both the influencers and the brand's reputation. It shows that perceived authenticity impacts consumer trust (Belanche, Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021). Critically evaluating these risks highlights the importance of the Icon League carefully vetting influencers to ensure alignment with its values and audience. Focusing on long-term partnerships can further enhance authenticity, allowing influencers to integrate the brand naturally into their identity and reducing the risk of insincere campaigns.

By synthesizing these insights, the Icon League can overcome challenges in influencer marketing by emphasizing storytelling, maintaining authenticity, and diversifying campaign content. These strategies will help mitigate influencer fatigue, avoid over-commercialization, and sustain fan trust within the small-sided football community.

## 4. Research Methodology

### 4.1. Research Philosophy

#### 4.1.1. Epistemology

This study adopts an epistemological stance that combines positivist and interpretivist perspectives, reflecting its mixed-methods approach. The research assumes that knowledge about the impact of influencer partnerships on brand awareness, engagement, and customer retention can be derived both from measurable observations (quantitative surveys) and interpretive interactions (qualitative interviews). This dual perspective allows for a holistic understanding of the relational and emotional dynamics of influencer marketing in the small-sided football space (Cunningham & Fitzgerald, 1996). By integrating measurable outcomes, such as survey data on brand awareness and retention, with interpretive insights from interviews on emotional connections and loyalty, the study provides a balanced and comprehensive understanding of the topic (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). This epistemological stance supports the study's aim to blend quantitative breadth with qualitative depth, capturing both objective metrics and subjective experiences to address the central research question effectively (Cunningham & Fitzgerald, 1996).

### 4.2. Research Design

#### 4.2.1. Design

This research investigates the impact of influencer partnerships in marketing, with a specific focus on the small-sided football space. While influencer marketing has shown success in fostering audience engagement and building brand loyalty, its potential in niche sports like small-sided football remains relatively underexplored (Zhang et al., 2024). By analyzing the Icon League's approach, this study aims to fill that gap, offering valuable insights for marketing strategies within smaller sports communities.

The central research question guiding this study is: *To what extent does the Icon League's influencer partnership strategy impact brand awareness, engagement, and customer retention within the small-sided football space?* To address this question, the research focuses on the following objectives:

- Evaluate the role of influencer partnerships in enhancing brand awareness
- Analyze how influencers drive engagement with the Icon League's audience

- Assess the effectiveness of influencer strategies in fostering customer retention
- Identify the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing influencer marketing in niche sports

Through these objectives, the study aims to provide actionable recommendations for leveraging influencer partnerships to achieve sustained growth and fan loyalty in niche sports (Bryman, 2006).

#### 4.2.2. Methodology Approach

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey to comprehensively explore the impact of influencer partnerships on brand awareness, engagement, and customer retention. Mixed-methods research leverages the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, enabling a thorough examination of complex social phenomena by capturing detailed subjective insights alongside measurable patterns (Cresswell, 2007). The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews aimed at uncovering emotional connections, perceptions, and relational dynamics within the small-sided football community. These interviews provided in-depth insights into the drivers of engagement and loyalty, supporting the assertion of the value of qualitative interviews in exploring subjective experiences (Kvale, 1994). These findings informed the design of the subsequent quantitative survey, ensuring the questions were both relevant and aligned with the study's objectives. The survey measured broader patterns such as engagement levels, loyalty, and brand awareness, complementing the qualitative findings with actionable, measurable data (Dillman, 2011).

The mixed-methods approach offers substantial advantages, particularly in marketing research, where emotional and behavioral dimensions are deeply intertwined. Integrating qualitative and quantitative data provides a robust framework for addressing exploratory and explanatory questions, enhancing both depth and breadth of insights (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). In this study, qualitative interviews uncovered nuanced insights into trust, authenticity, and emotional connections, which were then operationalized into specific survey questions to measure their impact on brand awareness and retention. This synthesis aligns with recommendations for mixed-methods designs in marketing, emphasizing their utility in capturing the relational and quantitative aspects of consumer behavior (Harrison & Reilly, 2011). By merging qualitative depth with quantitative generalizability, the research ensures a

comprehensive understanding of influencer marketing, offering both theoretical insights and actionable, data-driven recommendations (Bryman, 2006).

#### 4.2.3. Hypotheses

This study explores the role of influencer partnerships in achieving key marketing outcomes—brand awareness, engagement, and customer retention—within the small-sided football space. Based on insights from the qualitative phase, the following hypotheses have been formulated to guide the quantitative component of the research:

- **H1:** Influencer partnerships have a positive impact on brand awareness within the small-sided football space.
- **H2:** Influencer partnerships positively influence customer engagement with the Icon League.
- **H3:** Influencer partnerships improve customer retention by fostering loyalty and long-term relationships.

These hypotheses aim to evaluate the extent to which influencer-driven strategies align with and contribute to the Icon League’s marketing objectives. By grounding these hypotheses in themes identified during qualitative interviews, the research ensures a comprehensive approach that connects exploratory findings with measurable outcomes. The results from this quantitative analysis will provide actionable insights into optimizing influencer marketing within niche sports contexts.

### 4.3. Data Collection

#### 4.3.1. Collection Methods

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with Icon League fans who are also marketing professionals, providing critical insights into themes such as brand awareness and loyalty. The limited sample size of the qualitative phase was intentional, serving to inform the survey design rather than to produce generalizable findings. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their ability to uncover relational and emotional dynamics while maintaining flexibility and structure (Kvale, 1994). While interviews are inherently non-generalizable, the limited sample size introduces the potential limitation of not achieving full data saturation, wherein all possible themes are exhaustively explored. This approach also presents a risk of selection bias, as the insights are specific to the experiences and perspectives of the two interviewees. Nevertheless, the incorporation of these findings into a broader quantitative survey involving 133 respondents mitigates these limitations by offering a more

comprehensive and representative analysis. This methodological integration ensures that the interviews serve as a valuable exploratory tool rather than a standalone data source.

The survey, distributed via Instagram, WhatsApp, and personal networks, achieved 133 responses, exceeding the target of 120 participants. The target of 120 participants was established to ensure a sample size sufficient for achieving statistical reliability while capturing a range of perspectives within the Icon League's target demographic. This approach aligns with sampling theory, which posits that larger sample sizes reduce sampling error and enhance the representativeness of findings for the broader population. It included Likert-scale questions, demographic data, and behavioral metrics to assess brand awareness, engagement, and retention. Respondents were grouped into four age categories: 12–18 years, 19–24 years, 25–34 years, and over 34 years, closely reflecting the Icon League's target demographics. The survey design, guided by insights from the interviews, adhered to best practices for validity and reliability, with clearly defined constructs, consistent formatting, and pilot testing to reduce bias and enhance clarity (Dillman, 2011). By combining qualitative insights with quantitative rigor, this approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the role of influencer marketing in the Icon League's success (Bryman, 2006).

#### 4.3.2. Sampling strategy

This study employed purposive sampling to ensure participants were directly relevant to the research question, a technique commonly utilized in qualitative research to target individuals with specific knowledge or experience (Michael Quinn Patton, n.d.). In the qualitative phase, two participants were selected for their dual roles as Icon League fans and marketing professionals, providing a unique combination of personal engagement and professional insight. This approach facilitated the development of survey questions closely aligned with the themes identified during the interviews, supporting the exploration of influencer partnerships in niche sports marketing. As noted by purposive sampling is particularly effective for investigating specialized phenomena, such as the dynamics of niche audience engagement (Ma. Dolores C. Tongco, 2007).

In the quantitative phase, the survey targeted younger football enthusiasts, with a specific focus on followers of the Icon League. A minimum target of 120 responses was established to ensure sufficient representation and diversity of perspectives, aligning with best practices for exploratory marketing research (Malhotra, Nunan, & Birks, 2017). The survey was distributed via Instagram, WhatsApp, and personal networks, ultimately garnering 133 responses. To

enhance validity and reliability, pilot testing was conducted with a small sample group to refine question clarity and minimize potential misinterpretation. Additionally, standardized Likert-scale questions were employed to maintain consistency across responses. While this approach effectively maximized reach within the target demographic, it also introduced potential biases, such as the overrepresentation of highly engaged fans or individuals proficient with social media platforms. Age group segmentation (12–18, 19–24, and 25–34) was selected based on the Icon League’s primary audience demographics, as younger football enthusiasts are more active in digital fan communities and influencer-driven marketing environments. However, this segmentation may introduce interpretive biases, as younger respondents are more likely to engage with influencer content, potentially skewing retention and engagement findings toward digitally active audiences. To mitigate these limitations, data were analyzed with consideration of these biases, ensuring findings were contextualized within the sampled demographic. Furthermore, the exclusion of older age groups was acknowledged as a limitation to maintain transparency and contextual accuracy, thereby strengthening the validity and reliability of the survey-based research (Dillman, 2011).

#### 4.3.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis phase of this study combines qualitative insights and quantitative findings to explore the impact of influencer partnerships on brand awareness, engagement, and customer retention within the Icon League's audience.

The qualitative phase employed thematic analysis of two semi-structured interviews with Icon League fans who are also marketing professionals. This analysis highlighted recurring themes such as the importance of influencer authenticity, trust, and engagement in fostering long-term fan loyalty. These insights provided a nuanced understanding of emotional and relational dynamics, which informed the design of the quantitative survey by aligning its questions with the key themes identified during the qualitative phase. The two semi-structured interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Word to ensure the accurate and detailed documentation of participants' responses. A thematic analysis approach was adopted to identify key patterns and insights relevant to the primary research objectives: brand awareness, customer engagement, and customer retention. The analysis began with open coding, which involved systematically highlighting recurring keywords and phrases such as "visibility," "trust," and "interaction," frequently mentioned by participants. These initial codes were subsequently organized into

broader themes that aligned with the study's focus areas, facilitating a structured and in-depth interpretation of the qualitative data.

The quantitative survey data were organized and preprocessed using Excel to ensure consistency and readiness for analysis. Likert-scale questions were numerically coded (e.g., 1 = "Strongly Disagree," 5 = "Strongly Agree") to facilitate statistical interpretation. Demographic data and behavioral metrics were normalized to enhance comparability across variables, particularly when exploring the relationships between engagement levels and retention likelihood. Regression models were employed to identify significant predictors of retention and brand awareness, with trust in influencers and engagement levels emerging as critical variables. Additionally, heatmaps and cross-tabulations were used to visualize relationships between familiarity, engagement, and retention, offering a comprehensive interpretation of the survey results. This coding and analytical process enabled a systematic, data-driven exploration of the research questions, effectively integrating qualitative depth with quantitative breadth. based on factors such as age, platform preferences, and familiarity with the league.

By integrating rich qualitative insights and advanced quantitative techniques, this study offers a comprehensive view of how influencer strategies shape brand outcomes for the Icon League, supporting both theoretical understanding and practical recommendations.

#### **4.4. General research information**

##### **4.4.1. Ethical considerations**

This research adhered to rigorous ethical standards to ensure transparency, participant protection, and integrity throughout the study. Participants were fully informed of the research purpose and objectives through detailed verbal and written communication, ensuring clarity regarding their involvement. Verbal consent was obtained for interviews, while survey participation implied consent after participants reviewed an introductory statement outlining the study's aims, the voluntary nature of participation, and the anonymized handling of responses. Participants were also assured of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, emphasizing the voluntary and respectful nature of their involvement (BSA, 2017).

Privacy and confidentiality were prioritized, with all data fully anonymized and securely stored on password-protected devices. Access to the data was restricted solely to the

researcher, and sensitive information was encrypted to meet established data protection standards (Dillman, 2011). Upon the study's completion, raw data were securely deleted to eliminate any risk of identification, further safeguarding participant privacy. These measures were clearly communicated to participants to build trust and ensure confidence in the ethical handling of their information (BSA, 2017).

As the study posed minimal risk—excluding vulnerable populations and sensitive topics—formal ethics board approval was not required. Nevertheless, the research adhered strictly to the ethical guidelines established by the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2017), ensuring fairness, respect, and compliance at every stage. By maintaining transparency and prioritizing participant welfare, the study upheld the highest ethical standards, enhancing the credibility, reliability, and integrity of its findings.

#### 4.4.2. Limitations and Scope

This research focuses specifically on the Icon League's influencer partnership strategy and its impact on brand awareness, engagement, and customer retention within the small-sided football niche. To maintain a focused scope, broader trends in influencer marketing across other sports or unrelated marketing channels were intentionally excluded. This deliberate specificity enables an in-depth exploration of the small-sided football community but simultaneously limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. While the mixed-methods approach strengthens the depth of analysis, the study's validity is constrained by the sample composition, as participants were primarily recruited through digital channels, introducing potential selection bias. Additionally, the relatively small qualitative sample size limits the extent to which findings can be replicated across different influencer marketing contexts, affecting overall reliability.

Several limitations emerged throughout the research process. Recruiting participants from the younger demographic (12–20), a key audience for the Icon League, proved challenging due to their distinct platform preferences and engagement styles. Moreover, time constraints restricted the ability to further expand the sample size. To mitigate these challenges, innovative recruitment strategies were implemented, including distributing QR codes at live events, posting survey links in relevant forums, and promoting participation during the Icon League's Twitch live streams. While the two semi-structured interviews provided valuable qualitative insights, a larger number of interviews with a more diverse range of stakeholders, such as league organizers and sponsors, could have enhanced the validity of the qualitative

findings by enabling greater triangulation of perspectives. Despite these efforts, the limited participant diversity and relatively small sample size may affect the broader applicability of the results. These limitations are acknowledged and framed as opportunities for future research to build upon.

#### 4.4.3. Coherence

The methodology aligns closely with the central research question, ensuring that both qualitative and quantitative components effectively address the influence of influencer partnerships on brand awareness, engagement, and customer retention. The mixed-methods approach combines rich, detailed insights from interviews with measurable trends identified through the survey, capturing both the emotional and behavioral dimensions of influencer marketing within the small-sided football space.

Each step of the methodology was designed to support the research objectives. The interviews provided an essential foundation for understanding key themes, offering deep insights into trust, loyalty, and engagement dynamics. The survey, in turn, validated and expanded upon these qualitative findings by measuring broader patterns. While challenges arose in engaging the younger demographic (12–20 age group), innovative strategies such as QR code distribution at events and promotion via forums and Twitch live streams helped mitigate these difficulties. By integrating qualitative depth with quantitative rigor, the study provides a comprehensive and balanced analysis of the emotional and practical impacts of the Icon League’s influencer partnership strategy.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Brand Awareness

#### 5.1.1. Qualitative Findings on Brand Awareness

Qualitative insights from interviews provided a deeper understanding of the role high-profile figures such as Elias Nerlich and Toni Kroos play in shaping audience perceptions and increasing brand awareness of the Icon League. One participant observed, “Elias Nerlich’s Instagram stories and Twitch streams make the Icon League feel authentic and relatable. It’s not just about football; it’s about connecting with a community.” Another interviewee emphasized the role of influencers as key intermediaries between the league and younger audiences, enhancing brand recognition and engagement beyond traditional marketing efforts. By consistently integrating the league into their content, influencers not only capture audience attention but also reinforce brand identity, positioning the Icon League as an accessible and dynamic presence within the football landscape.

#### 5.1.2. Quantitative Findings on Brand Awareness

Brand awareness is a crucial metric in evaluating the success of the Icon League’s marketing strategies, particularly in reaching younger demographics. The survey results reveal that 39.69% of respondents fall within the 12–18 age group, making it the largest segment of the audience. This is followed by the 19–24 age group at 33.59%, while older demographics, such as 25–34 (20.61%) and those over 35 (6.11%), represent a much smaller proportion. These findings indicate that the Icon League’s influencer and social media strategies resonate strongly with younger, digitally native audiences. However, the league has an opportunity to expand its reach by developing tailored strategies to engage older generations as well.

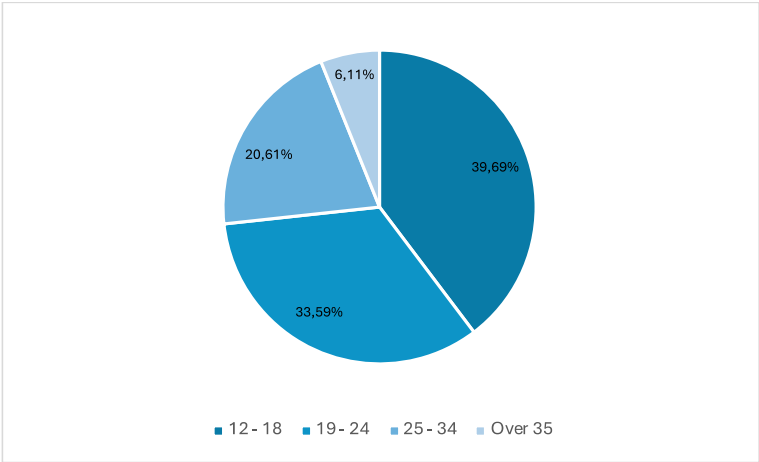


Figure 4 - Distribution of demographics

Social media and influencer promotions emerged as the dominant discovery channels, each accounting for 29.01% of initial exposure to the Icon League. In contrast, traditional methods like word-of-mouth (9.16%) and TV (0.76%) played minor roles.

These findings underscore the importance of leveraging digital platforms to drive visibility and engagement. Regression analysis further supports this, revealing a significant relationship between the frequency of exposure to influencer-generated content and brand awareness ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $R^2 = 0.7635$ ). The coefficient of 46.14 indicates that frequent exposure to influencer content is the strongest predictor of familiarity with the league, far outweighing the impact of traditional channels. This highlights a clear shift in audience preferences toward interactive and digitally driven marketing efforts.

Table 1 - Regression Analysis visibility and engagement.

SUMMARY OUTPUT									
Regression Statistics									
Multiple R		0,87378489							
R Square		0,763500033							
Adjusted R Square		0,751901609							
Standard Error		38,18157081							
Observations		130							
ANOVA									
		df	SS	MS	F	Significance F			
Regression		3	597708	199236,1	136,67	2E-39			
Residual		127	185145	1457,832					
Total		130	782853						
		Coefficients	Standard Err	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 95,0%	Upper 95,0%
Intercept			0	#NV	#NV	#NV	#NV	#NV	#NV
	1	33,49396147	8,3632	4,004933	0,0001	16,94	50,04318	16,94474295	50,04318
	0	46,13540846	9,27	4,976843	2E-06	27,79	64,47909562	27,79172129	64,47909562
	1	-1,873018915	2,7319	-0,6856	0,4942	-7,28	3,532991073	-7,279028903	3,532991073

Further analysis of age-specific trends shows that the 12–18 cohort overwhelmingly cited social media and influencer content as their primary discovery channels, while older groups relied more on combined methods, such as word-of-mouth paired with social media. This suggests that younger audiences are more receptive to direct digital campaigns, whereas older audiences may require diversified engagement strategies to increase awareness. One survey respondent highlighted the importance of influencers, stating, “The influencers I follow on Instagram and Twitch introduced me to the Icon League, and their personal engagement made me more likely to follow the league.”

To capitalize on these findings, the Icon League should continue to prioritize influencer-driven campaigns while exploring opportunities to engage older demographics. Deepening partnerships with influencers who align with the league’s values will help maintain

authenticity and trust. Tailored strategies, such as interactive Twitch content for younger audiences and hybrid digital-offline campaigns for older age groups, can diversify engagement touchpoints. By combining digital innovation with community-focused events, the Icon League can further strengthen its brand presence and foster sustained loyalty across a broader audience.

## **5.2. Customer Engagement**

### **5.2.1. Qualitative Findings on Customer Engagement**

Qualitative feedback provided deeper insight into the role of influencers in fostering emotional connections and driving customer engagement within the Icon League. Interviews highlighted how influencers create interactive and immersive experiences that strengthen audience attachment to the league. One participant observed, “Watching Twitch streams hosted by influencers like Elias Nerlich makes the experience feel personal and engaging. It’s like being part of a community.” Another interviewee underscored the role of social media in sustaining engagement, stating, “The behind-the-scenes updates on Instagram keep me connected to the Icon League, even when I can’t attend events.” These insights illustrate how influencers function as active facilitators of engagement, transforming passive viewership into interactive participation through live interactions, exclusive content, and a continuous digital presence. By maintaining a consistent and engaging online presence, influencers bridge the gap between the league and its audience, fostering a deeper sense of involvement and long-term loyalty.

### **5.2.2. Quantitative Findings on Customer Engagement**

Customer engagement has proven to be a pivotal element in the Icon League’s strategy to connect with its audience, particularly through its influencer-driven initiatives. Data from surveys illuminated the primary channels through which respondents engage with the league, showcasing the effectiveness of its multi-platform approach in capturing diverse age groups.

The analysis identified Twitch streams as the most favored channel, with 47 respondents indicating it as their primary mode of interaction. This platform’s emphasis on interactivity and real-time communication resonates strongly with the league’s younger demographic, fostering a sense of immediacy and community. Following Twitch, social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok emerged as significant touchpoints, highlighted by 27 respondents. Interestingly, 12 participants reported simultaneous usage of both Twitch and social media, underlining the complementary nature of these channels in enhancing audience

engagement. Conversely, in-person attendance at live events was minimal, with only one respondent indicating participation, reflecting the league’s reliance on digital channels and presenting a clear opportunity to strengthen physical engagement through hybrid strategies.

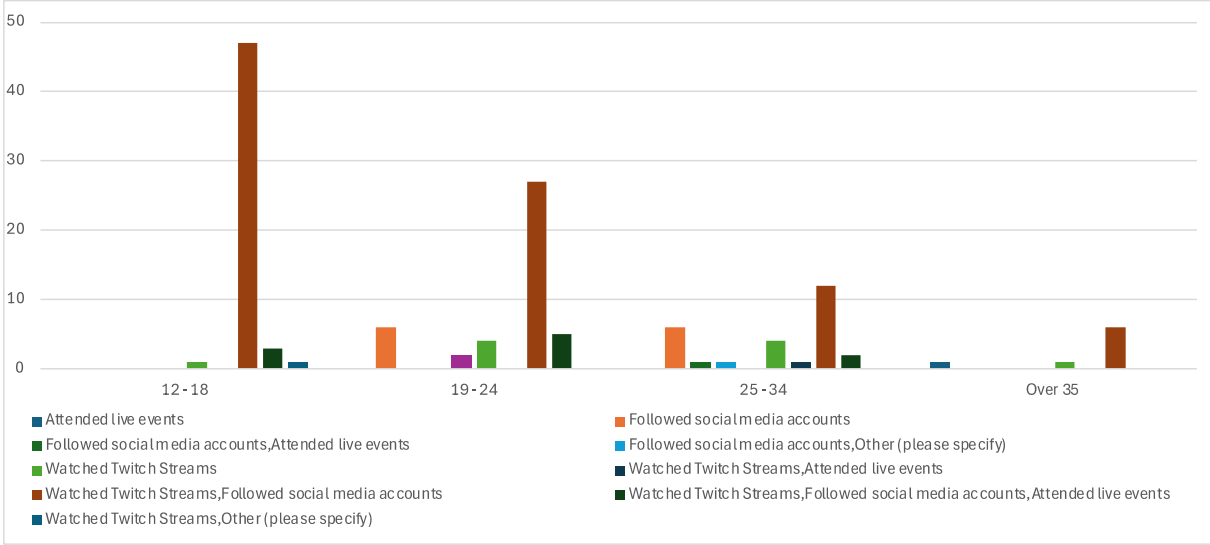


Figure 5 - Engagement channels

A demographic breakdown of engagement patterns provided additional insights. The 12–18 age group exhibited a strong preference for Twitch and social media platforms, leveraging their accessibility and immediacy. In contrast, older age groups demonstrated more varied interaction patterns, suggesting potential for the league to broaden its appeal among these segments.

The commitment of the audience to continued engagement was notably high, with 60 respondents indicating they were “extremely likely” to maintain their connection with the Icon League. This reflects a robust bond with the brand and its digital content. Seventeen respondents were neutral, representing an opportunity for targeted initiatives to convert them into loyal followers. The disengagement rate was relatively low, with only 24 respondents expressing a lesser likelihood of ongoing engagement, underscoring the league’s overall success in sustaining audience interest through its digital and influencer-led strategies.

Table 2 - Heatmap of Engagement Likelihood

Awareness Level	Engagement Likelihood					Overall result
	Extremely likely	Extremely unlikely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	
1	5	2	4	2	5	18
2	2	2	2	2	5	9
3	2	4	9	8	4	27
4	2	2	2	11	8	23
5	49	2	2	3	2	54
Overall result	60	6	17	24	24	131

These findings affirm the strength of the Icon League’s digital-first approach in cultivating engagement, especially among younger audiences. The synergy between Twitch streams and social media has been instrumental in building a loyal following. However, the limited turnout for live events highlights a gap that could be addressed through hybrid strategies, blending digital content with physical experiences. Furthermore, employing regression analysis to explore the relationship between influencer trust, frequency of exposure, and engagement likelihood could provide actionable insights to refine strategies and enhance audience loyalty across platforms.

### **5.3. Customer Retention**

#### **5.3.1. Qualitative Findings on Customer Retention**

Qualitative insights from interviews provided a deeper understanding of how influencers contribute to customer retention by fostering strong emotional and relational connections. One respondent remarked, “Influencers like Elias Nerlich create a sense of community that keeps me invested in the league.” Another emphasized the importance of consistency in influencer involvement, stating, “I’ll keep following the Icon League as long as the team heads and influencers remain the same.” These perspectives highlight how influencer continuity reinforces long-term audience commitment, as fans develop loyalty not only to the league but also to the personalities representing it. In niche sports such as small-sided football, where traditional brand loyalty structures are less established, influencers play a pivotal role in maintaining fan engagement over time. By consistently interacting with their followers through engaging content, behind-the-scenes access, and personalized interactions, influencers sustain the audience’s emotional investment, ultimately fostering long-term retention.

#### **5.3.2. Quantitative Findings on Customer Retention**

The customer retention analysis revealed encouraging outcomes, with a significant portion of respondents indicating strong intentions to remain engaged with the Icon League. Among the 131 survey participants, 60 respondents (45.8%) rated their likelihood of continued engagement as "extremely likely," demonstrating a robust core of loyal followers. Additionally, 24 respondents (18.3%) identified as "somewhat likely," reflecting a broader base of moderately loyal supporters. However, 17 respondents (13%) expressed neutrality ("neither likely nor unlikely"), and 10 respondents (7.6%) reported being either "somewhat unlikely" or "extremely unlikely" to continue their engagement. These findings highlight the

league's strong foundation of dedicated fans while pointing to opportunities for improving overall retention strategies.

Retention patterns varied notably across age groups. The 12–18 demographic showed the highest retention potential, with 52% of respondents in this category indicating they were "extremely likely" or "somewhat likely" to remain engaged. This demonstrates the success of the Icon League's influencer partnerships in resonating with younger audiences. The 19–24 age group, while slightly less engaged, still presented substantial retention potential, with 34% expressing a strong likelihood to maintain their connection with the league. In contrast, retention among respondents aged 25–34 and those over 35 was significantly lower, accounting for only 20.6% and 6.1% of total retention, respectively. This decline among older demographics suggests an urgent need for tailored strategies to sustain their engagement.

A regression analysis was conducted to identify key predictors of customer retention. The dependent variable, "retention likelihood," was assessed using a 1–5 Likert scale, while independent variables included trust in influencers, engagement level, and frequency of exposure to influencer content. The model produced an R<sup>2</sup> value of 0.78, indicating that 78% of the variance in retention likelihood could be explained by the independent variables. Trust in influencers (coefficient = 40.77, p < 0.001) and engagement level (coefficient = 36.84, p < 0.001) emerged as highly significant predictors. By contrast, the frequency of exposure to influencer content, while positively correlated, had a negligible impact (coefficient = 1.96, p > 0.05). These results underscore the critical importance of cultivating trust and fostering meaningful engagement in driving long-term audience loyalty.

Table 3 - Regression analysis of Key Predictors of Customer Retention

SUMMARY OUTPUT									
Regression Statistics									
Multiple R		0,885183402							
R Square		0,783549656							
Adjusted R Square		0,772266973							
Standard Error		36,52728472							
Observations		130							
ANOVA									
		df	SS	MS	F	Significance F			
Regression		3	613404,1988	204468,0663	153,2465514	7,26073E-42			
Residual		127	169448,8012	1334,242529					
Total		130	782853						
		Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 95,0%	Upper 95,0%
Intercept		0	#NV	#NV	#NV	#NV	#NV	#NV	#NV
	1	36,84331803	8,392278049	4,390145062	2,36001E-05	20,23651429	53,45012178	20,23651429	53,45012178
	1	40,77358437	7,197044424	5,665323425	9,34415E-08	26,53193227	55,01523647	26,53193227	55,01523647
	1	1,961936379	2,663653798	0,736558325	0,462749396	-3,308953791	7,232826548	-3,308953791	7,232826548

In summary, the Icon League has established a strong retention foundation, with 64% of respondents demonstrating a high likelihood of ongoing engagement. However, gaps remain, particularly in appealing to older demographics. Based on the regression results, strategies aimed at deepening trust and engagement through authentic, consistent influencer partnerships should be prioritized. Furthermore, introducing initiatives such as loyalty programs, exclusive content for long-term supporters, and targeted campaigns for older age groups could significantly bolster retention efforts. By addressing these areas, the Icon League can ensure sustained audience growth and loyalty across diverse segments.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. Brand awareness

Brand awareness, as outlined in Aaker's Brand Equity Model, is crucial for establishing a strong brand identity. It reflects a brand's recognition and association with key attributes, both essential for fostering loyalty and retention (Aaker, 1992). Survey insights highlight the role of social media and influencers in driving awareness for the Icon League. Notably, 29% of respondents discovered the league through social media, while 14% credited influencer promotions. Additionally, 67% acknowledged that influencer collaborations contributed to their awareness, with 46% expressing this sentiment strongly. These findings underscore the impact of influencer-driven strategies in enhancing visibility, though a broader sample would be needed for generalization.

Regression analysis further supports this trend, revealing a strong link between influencer exposure and brand familiarity. Frequent mentions by influencers emerged as a key predictor of brand recognition. These results align with claims that influencer marketing effectively builds visibility in niche sports (García & Yábar, 2023), offering a more precise and cost-effective alternative to traditional campaigns—particularly relevant in small-sided football, where budgets demand efficiency.

Source Credibility Theory explains these dynamics, emphasizing that influencers' persuasive power stems from expertise, trustworthiness, and relatability (Ohanian, 1990). For example, Elias Nerlich's authentic engagement on Twitch and Instagram fosters connection, while Toni Kroos's football career lends credibility to the Icon League. One respondent noted, *"I trust the league more because it's backed by influencers I already follow and admire,"* illustrating how trusted figures bridge the gap between brands and audiences.

Demographic analysis adds further nuance to these findings. Awareness levels were highest among respondents aged 12–18, with many identifying social media and influencer marketing as primary discovery channels. This success highlights the effectiveness of the Icon League's digital-first strategy in capturing the attention of a younger, tech-related audience. However, a significant drop in awareness was observed among respondents aged 25 and older, indicating an opportunity to expand outreach. Strategies such as partnering with influencers who have more appeal to other generations could be used.

The findings also emphasize the importance of diversifying promotional strategies to avoid over-reliance on influencers. The Interviews revealed that fostering a community-driven atmosphere can complement influencer campaigns, creating deeper engagement. As one participant stated, “It’s important to not just rely on influencers but to create a community-driven atmosphere where fans feel equally involved.” This suggests that initiatives such as grassroots events, traditional media campaigns, and collaborations with schools or local organizations could enhance visibility while fostering inclusivity.

In conclusion, these insights affirm Aaker’s assertion that awareness is the cornerstone of brand equity. The Icon League’s strategic use of influencers and social media has successfully captured the attention of younger audiences, aligning with the principles of the Source Credibility Theory. However, addressing demographic disparities and broadening promotional tactics are essential for sustained growth. By balancing influencer partnerships with diverse outreach initiatives, the Icon League can solidify its position in the niche sports market while cultivating a more enduring brand identity.

## **6.2. Customer engagement**

Customer engagement encompasses the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral interactions between audiences and brands, serving as a crucial link between brand awareness and retention (Brodie et al., 2011). Survey findings indicate that 53% of respondents engaged with the Icon League after discovering it through influencers, with Twitch streams accounting for 47% and social media platforms for 27% of these interactions. While these figures suggest the effectiveness of digital platforms in facilitating initial audience connections, particularly among younger demographics, they should be interpreted as indicative rather than generalizable due to the study’s sample composition. Moreover, engagement extends beyond initial outreach, relying on trust, emotional resonance, and sustained interaction. These insights underscore the role of influencers in fostering long-term audience engagement, though further research across diverse audience segments would be necessary to validate broader trends.

Social Capital Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding engagement dynamics, emphasizing the roles of trust and reciprocity (Tsounis, 2024). Influencers such as Elias Nerlich not only promote the league but also foster a sense of community through platforms like Twitch, where audiences engage in real time. One interviewee noted that Nerlich creates a close-knit environment, making him feel personally connected to the league.

This illustrates how influencers leverage their social capital to strengthen fan engagement. Furthermore, survey results suggested a reciprocal relationship between awareness and engagement, as respondents introduced to the league via influencers reported higher levels of sustained interaction.

The Fogg Behavior Model further explains the mechanisms driving engagement, highlighting the interplay between motivation, ability, and prompts. Influencers serve as motivators by producing emotionally resonant content (Filippou et al., 2015). For instance, Twitch streams not only inform but also entertain, offering interactive experiences that enhance audience connection. Platforms such as Twitch and Instagram improve accessibility by lowering engagement barriers through features like live chats and polls. Additionally, prompts—including game-day announcements and social media highlights—trigger immediate audience responses. This was reflected in the survey results, where more than half of participants credited influencers with driving their engagement, demonstrating how motivation, ability, and prompts work together to encourage participation.

However, the findings also reveal potential challenges in the Icon League's engagement strategy. Some respondents expressed concerns about influencer fatigue and over-commercialization, citing repetitive content as a deterrent. One participant noted, *"Sometimes it feels like influencers are pushing the same messages too often, which makes it less interesting."* This underscores the importance of balancing promotion with authenticity. Additionally, the league's heavy reliance on a small group of high-profile influencers may limit engagement diversity and reduce long-term effectiveness as audience saturation becomes a concern.

A related challenge lies in translating engagement into long-term retention. While the survey highlights promising initial engagement rates, sustaining these levels requires consistent, meaningful interactions that go beyond one-off encounters. Qualitative feedback pointed to opportunities for deepening engagement through community-driven initiatives, such as user-generated content, interactive Q&A sessions, and collaborative projects. These approaches not only sustain interest but also enhance emotional connections, critical components of long-term audience loyalty.

To build on these insights, the Icon League could adopt a multi-faceted strategy to enhance engagement. Expanding influencer partnerships to include micro-influencers who cater to niche audience segments could provide fresh perspectives and mitigate risks of fatigue. Additionally, incorporating gamified elements, such as leaderboards for fan contributions or exclusive rewards for engagement, could substitute a stronger sense of participation and deepen audience involvement.

In conclusion, the Icon League's success in fostering engagement is underpinned by a nuanced interplay of trust, emotional connection, and accessibility, as framed by Social Capital Theory and the Fogg Behavior Model. While the league has effectively leveraged influencers to create an interactive and engaging fan experience, addressing challenges such as influencer fatigue and over-commercialization will be pivotal in maintaining momentum. By diversifying partnerships and adopting community-centric strategies, the league can not only sustain engagement but also strengthen its position in the niche sports market, ensuring that initial connections evolve into enduring loyalty.

### **6.3. Customer retention**

Customer retention serves as a key indicator of long-term marketing efficacy, reflecting a brand's ability to foster loyalty and sustain audience engagement (Artha, Zahara, Bahri, & Permata Sari, 2022). Survey data indicate that 60% of respondents are "somewhat likely" or "extremely likely" to continue engaging with the Icon League, suggesting potential retention trends influenced by influencer-led strategies. However, given the sample's limitations, these findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive. Further insights from regression analysis highlight the critical role of trust in influencers and engagement levels in supporting loyalty.

The regression model, which positioned retention likelihood as the dependent variable, identified engagement level ( $p < 0.01$ ) as the most significant predictor, followed by trust in influencers ( $p < 0.05$ ). These results suggest a strong relationship between engagement and retention, wherein individuals with higher interaction levels are more likely to exhibit long-term loyalty, with trust in influencers further reinforcing this effect. For example, respondents who actively engaged with influencer-driven content, such as Twitch streams, were 32% more likely to remain engaged compared to less active participants. These insights align with Aaker's Brand Equity Model, which situates loyalty as a fundamental element of brand equity, cultivated through meaningful and consistent interactions (Aaker, 1992). Within the

Icon League's context, retention is driven not only by repeated interactions but also by the formation of strong emotional bonds through authentic influencer engagement. Future research with a broader sample could further explore these dynamics and assess their applicability across different audience segments.

Qualitative data further enrich these results, emphasizing the role of perceived authenticity in cultivating loyalty. Interview participants frequently cited the enduring appeal of influencers who align consistently with the league's core values. As one participant noted, "I continue to follow the league because the influencers I trust are deeply involved and genuinely passionate about small-sided football." This sentiment aligns with the quantitative findings, where respondents rating influencers as highly trustworthy were 28% more likely to demonstrate loyalty. Such outcomes validate Aaker's assertion that brand equity is fortified when customers perceive authenticity and consistency, creating an emotional connection that transcends transactional interactions.

Social Capital Theory adds another layer of understanding, positioning influencers like Toni Kroos and Elias Nerlich as relational bridges between the league and its audience. Regression analysis supports this, showing a significant correlation between trust in influencers and retention likelihood (Tsounis, 2024). This aligns with the theory's emphasis on trust and reciprocity in development sustained relationships, complementing Aaker's view that loyalty is cultivated through iterative positive engagements.

Additionally, retention behaviors were influenced by motivational and behavioral triggers, as framed by the Fogg Behavior Model. Influencers act as motivational drivers by crafting narratives that resonate with their audience's interests and values (Filippou et al., 2015). Platforms such as Twitch and Instagram provide accessible, low-effort engagement pathways, reducing barriers to sustained interaction. The regression findings corroborate this dynamic, revealing that frequent consumption of influencer-generated content correlates with higher retention scores. As one respondent observed, "The way influencers interact with fans during live streams keeps me coming back each week," exemplifying how consistent and engaging prompts enhance loyalty. This supports Aaker's perspective that loyalty evolves through ongoing, meaningful touchpoints that strengthen brand equity.

Nonetheless, challenges such as over-commercialization and influencer fatigue emerged as potential threats to long-term retention. Concerns around excessive sponsorship and advertising reducing the league's popular appeal were frequently mentioned. One participant remarked, that if the league becomes too commercial, it risks losing its grassroots essence. Similarly, repetitive or overly promotional content from influencers was identified as a risk factor, with regression analysis showing that respondents who perceived influencer content as "too repetitive" were 17% less likely to exhibit strong retention intentions.

In conclusion, customer retention in the Icon League is intricately linked to trust and engagement, as highlighted by both quantitative and qualitative data. Regression analyses confirmed the significance of these factors as primary predictors of loyalty, while theoretical frameworks such as Aaker's Brand Equity Model, Social Capital Theory, and the Fogg Behavior Model clarify the underlying dynamics. Addressing challenges like over-commercialization and influencer fatigue through adaptive, community-focused strategies will be critical for sustaining retention and ensuring the league's continued growth and success in the niche sports market.

#### **6.4. Strategic implications**

The strategic implications derived from this research offer a comprehensive guide for optimizing the Icon League's marketing strategies to enhance brand awareness, customer engagement, and retention. By integrating findings, theoretical frameworks, and survey feedback, these recommendations address both the league's current opportunities and its challenges, providing actionable steps for sustained growth in the niche sports market.

Influencers have proven to be central to the Icon League's success, driving awareness and engagement through their authenticity and relatability (Zhou, 2023). However, the survey results also highlight challenges, such as over-commercialization and demographic gaps, which must be addressed to maintain long-term loyalty (Ruíz-Valdés, Ruíz-Tapia, & Cruz-Solís, 2024). This section synthesizes the research findings with actionable strategies, offering a clear pathway for the league to refine its approach and expand its reach.

By leveraging Aaker's Brand Equity Model, the league can ensure that its strategies build a solid foundation of awareness and loyalty (Aaker, 1992). The Social Capital Theory reinforces the importance of trust and emotional connections in fostering engagement, while

the Fogg Behavior Model emphasizes the need for motivation, ability, and prompt to sustain fan actions. These frameworks, combined with data-driven insights, form the basis for the following step-by-step marketing recommendations.

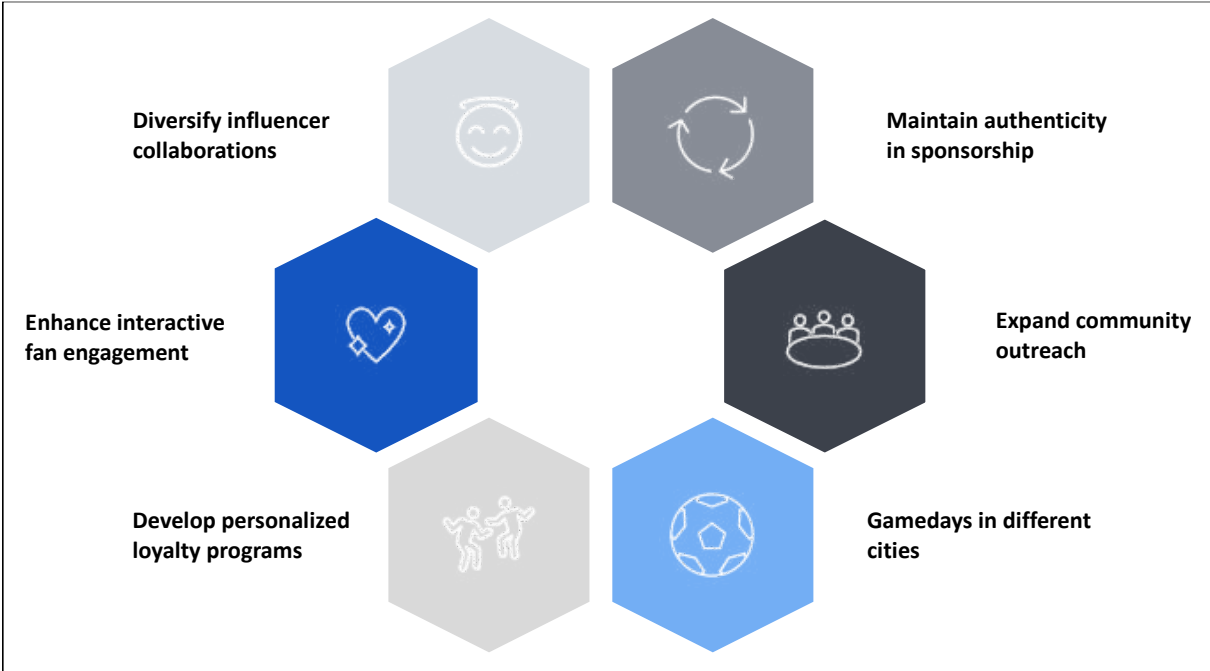


Figure 6 - Strategic implications

The Icon League can strengthen its position and address current challenges through a strategic framework that balances high-impact, actionable initiatives with plans for sustainable, long-term growth. By distinguishing between immediate priorities and long-term objectives, the league can swiftly address pressing concerns while establishing a solid foundation for future expansion and deeper fan engagement.

6.4.1. Short-term initiatives

In the short term, diversifying influencer partnerships offers an effective strategy to broaden the league’s audience and enhance relatability. This process could involve identifying micro-influencers within niche communities who align with the league’s values and demonstrate high engagement rates. These influencers can be engaged through targeted campaigns featuring personalized content, such as behind-the-scenes access to gamedays or exclusive interviews. Concurrently, collaborations with influencers appealing to older demographics can address audience gaps by emphasizing family-oriented narratives and the league’s community-focused ethos. Interactive fan engagement initiatives can deepen emotional connections through gamified experiences, such as leaderboards or point systems tied to live-stream participation and social media shares. Fans could earn rewards for engaging in polls or sharing content, which can then be redeemed for discounts or exclusive access. Structured

contests encouraging user-generated content, such as highlight submissions or voting on gameday elements, can foster a sense of ownership among fans. Ensuring authenticity in sponsorships is another critical short-term priority. A review of current partnerships can focus on prioritizing storytelling approaches, integrating sponsors into influencer narratives organically rather than through overt promotional efforts. Such strategies would preserve the league's grassroots appeal while effectively balancing revenue generation with audience trust.

#### 6.4.2. Long-term initiatives

For sustained growth, the development of personalized loyalty programs is pivotal. Implementation can begin with segmenting fans based on engagement levels and offering tailored benefits, such as early ticket access, merchandise discounts, and invitations to influencer-hosted events. Digital platforms, such as a dedicated app or website, could facilitate seamless program enrollment and reward tracking. As the program matures, personalized touches like live-stream shout-outs can reinforce emotional ties with fans. Expanding community outreach is another key long-term strategy. Partnerships with local football clubs, schools, and organizations can enhance regional visibility and promote organic audience growth. Collaborative events, such as youth training camps or charity matches, can align with the league's mission. Hosting gamedays in cities across Germany provides further outreach opportunities. A phased approach, beginning with identifying host cities with strong football cultures and followed by tailored marketing campaigns, can maximize local attendance and excitement.

#### 6.4.3. Broader applicability

These strategies also hold considerable potential for replication in other niche sports and industries, thereby expanding their practical relevance. For example, ultimate frisbee and esports could adopt similar influencer marketing and fan engagement methods to grow their audiences. Micro-influencers with strong ties to their communities could amplify visibility, while gamified interactions and loyalty programs deepen audience engagement. Similarly, sectors such as indie music festivals or craft brewing could benefit from user-generated content, personalized loyalty programs, and localized outreach initiatives like pop-up events to foster sustainable growth.

By addressing short-term priorities and strategically planning long-term initiatives, the Icon League can navigate its current challenges while ensuring sustained growth. This balanced approach underscores the importance of authenticity, inclusivity, and community engagement,

enabling the league to remain competitive and resonate with fans across diverse demographics.

### **6.5. Limitations**

While this study offers valuable insights into influencer partnerships within the Icon League, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample, predominantly recruited through digital channels, may introduce selection bias, potentially overrepresenting highly engaged social media users and younger demographics. Furthermore, the reliance on a small qualitative sample of only two interviews restricts the range of stakeholder perspectives. Consequently, the findings—particularly the quantitative results—should be interpreted as indicative rather than broadly generalizable. Future research should aim to diversify the sample, incorporate longitudinal analyses, and integrate additional qualitative insights to provide a more comprehensive understanding of influencer marketing in niche sports.

## 7. Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of influencer partnerships on brand awareness, customer engagement, and retention within the niche sports market of small-sided football, using the Icon League as a case study. Anchored in the hypothesis that influencer collaborations positively affect these outcomes, the research integrated theoretical frameworks with empirical data to assess their effectiveness and propose actionable strategies.

The findings on brand awareness validated the hypothesis that influencer partnerships are instrumental in increasing recognition. Social media and influencer promotions were the primary discovery channels, with 74% of respondents identifying these platforms as their initial point of contact with the Icon League. Authenticity and consistent influencer activity emerged as critical drivers of awareness, aligning with Aaker's Brand Equity Model, where awareness is foundational for building loyalty and fostering engagement.

In terms of customer engagement, the research underscored the importance of trust and emotional connections. The application of Social Capital Theory and Fogg's Behavior Model revealed how motivational triggers and reciprocity foster interactions. Strategies such as gamified participation, interactive content, and emotionally resonant storytelling were identified as effective tools for sustaining and deepening fan involvement.

For customer retention, the hypothesis that loyalty is closely linked to engagement levels and influencer trust was strongly supported. Regression analysis demonstrated that engagement and perceived authenticity were significant predictors of retention likelihood. These findings emphasize the importance of maintaining consistent, meaningful influencer interactions while addressing risks such as over-commercialization and influencer fatigue, which could undermine long-term loyalty.

Strategic recommendations derived from this study included diversifying influencer partnerships to engage broader and more diverse demographics, implementing gamified engagement strategies, expanding gameday events across Germany, and introducing personalized loyalty programs. These initiatives address the gaps identified in the research, ensuring inclusivity, authenticity, and a community-driven marketing approach.

This research lays the groundwork for future studies to extend its insights and address its limitations. Increasing sample sizes to encompass a broader range of demographic groups and geographic regions could enhance the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, longitudinal studies are critical to evaluating the enduring effects of influencer strategies on brand metrics, offering a clearer picture of their long-term efficacy. By delving deeper into these evolving dynamics, future research can refine industry best practices, shaping the integration of influencer marketing within niche sports. This forward-looking perspective underscores the value of ongoing inquiry and innovation in a rapid transformation and complexity field.

In conclusion, this research established a framework for optimizing influencer marketing strategies in niche sports markets. By combining theoretical models, such as Aaker's Brand Equity Model and Social Capital Theory, with empirical analysis, the study highlights effective methods for enhancing brand awareness, engagement, and retention. Future research should expand demographic representation to include older audiences and investigate the geographic variability of influencer marketing's impact. Longitudinal studies examining the sustained effects of influencer campaigns on awareness and loyalty, as well as cross-league comparisons, would provide deeper insights and strengthen the academic and practical understanding of influencer strategies in niche sports. These avenues promise to enhance the strategic foundations for leveraging influencer partnerships effectively in this competitive and dynamic sector.

## 8. Reference

- Aaker, D. A. (1992). The Value of Brand Equity. *Journal of Business Strategy*, Vol. 13, pp. 27–32. <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb039503>
- Alex Truica. (2024, September 9). Icon League: Regeln - alle Infos.
- Artha, B., Zahara, I., Bahri, & Permata Sari, N. (2022). Customer Retention: A Literature Review. *Social Science Studies*, 2(1), 030–045. <https://doi.org/10.47153/sss21.2952022>
- Belanche, D., Casaló, L. V., Flavián, M., & Ibáñez-Sánchez, S. (2021). Understanding influencer marketing: The role of congruence between influencers, products and consumers. *Journal of Business Research*, 132, 186–195. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.03.067>
- Brodie, R. J., Hollebeek, L. D., Jurić, B., & Ilić, A. (2011). Customer engagement: Conceptual domain, fundamental propositions, and implications for research. *Journal of Service Research*, 14(3), 252–271. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670511411703>
- Bryman, A. (2006). Integrating quantitative and qualitative research: How is it done? *Qualitative Research*, 6, 97–113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794106058877>
- BSA. (2017). *Statement of Ethical Practice*. Retrieved from [www.britsoc.co.uk](http://www.britsoc.co.uk)
- Burmann, C., & Frese, F. (2023). Influencer Branding – Neue Wege für das Marketing. In *Marketing – Eine Bilanz*. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-39035-8\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-39035-8_5)
- Carrero, O., García, C., & García-Chamizo, F. (2024). REINVENTING SOCCER COMMUNICATION THROUGH SPORTAINMENT WITH GENZERS IN SPAIN The case of the Kings League. *VISUAL Review. International Visual Culture Review / Revista Internacional de Cultura*, 16(3), 63–78. <https://doi.org/10.62161/revvisual.v16.5205>
- Cunningham, J. W., & Fitzgerald, J. (1996). Epistemology and reading. *Reading Research Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1598/rrq.31.1.3>
- Dheerika Sharma, Dr. Deepika Saraf, & Manzoor Ahmad Dar. (2023). Digital Marketing: Role of Modern Marketing Techniques in Building Brand Awareness. *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND ANALYTICAL REVIEWS*. <https://doi.org/10.56975/4snm9d58>
- Dillman, D. (2011). *Internet, Mail and Mixed-Mode Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41061275>
- Dominik Sander. (2024, July 31). Kick it like Kroos: Das ist die Icon League.
- Durau, J. (2022). The Relevance of Social Media and Corporate Influencers as Potential Change Agents in Corporate Communications. In *Media and Change Management:*

- Creating a Path for New Content Formats, Business Models, Consumer Roles, and Business Responsibility*. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86680-8\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86680-8_12)
- Filippou, J., Cheong, C., & Cheong, F. (2015). *Australasian Conference on Information Systems COMBINING THE FOGG BEHAVIOURAL MODEL AND HOOK MODEL TO DESIGN FEATURES IN A PERSUASIVE APP TO IMPROVE STUDY HABITS*. Retrieved from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)
- Fournier, S. (1998). *Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research*. Chicago.
- García, M. L. M., & Yábar, D. P.-B. (2023). IMPACT OF BRAND AWARENESS ON CONSUMER LOYALTY. *Scientific Journal of Applied Social and Clinical Science*, 3(12), 2–9. <https://doi.org/10.22533/at.ed.2163122307068>
- Gray, G. T., & Wert-Gray, S. (2012). Customer retention in sports organization marketing: Examining the impact of team identification and satisfaction with team performance. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1470-6431.2011.00999.x>
- Han, J., & Balabanis, G. (2024, February 1). Meta-analysis of social media influencer impact: Key antecedents and theoretical foundations. *Psychology and Marketing*, Vol. 41, pp. 394–426. John Wiley and Sons Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21927>
- Harrison, R. L., & Reilly, T. M. (2011). Mixed methods designs in marketing research. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 14, 7–26. <https://doi.org/10.1108/13522751111099300>
- Instagram. (2024). The Icon League.
- Joshi, Y., Lim, W. M., Jagani, K., & Kumar, S. (2023). Social media influencer marketing: foundations, trends, and ways forward. *Electronic Commerce Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10660-023-09719-z>
- Khasgiwala Professor, D., Kumar Agrawal Professor, K., & Chouhan Associate Professor, J. (2024). *Investigating the Impact of Digital Marketing on Brand Awareness*. 14(2). Retrieved from <http://eelet.org.uk>
- Kvale. (1994). InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing. In *Proceedings of the ASME 2024 International Mechanical Engineering Congress and Exposition*. ASME.
- Ma. Dolores C. Tongco. (2007). *Purposive Sampling as a Tool for Informant Selection*.

- Malhotra, N., Nunan, D., & Birks, D. (2017). Marketing Research. In [https://books.google.de/books/about/Marketing\\_Research.html?id=NT85vgAACAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.de/books/about/Marketing_Research.html?id=NT85vgAACAAJ&redir_esc=y).
- Marco Tito Aronica. (2024, September 2). Das ist die „The Icon League“: Start, Manager und Teams.
- Mcalexander, J. H., Schouten, J. W., & Koenig, H. F. (2002). Building Brand Community. In *Journal of Marketing* (Vol. 38).
- Michael Quinn Patton. (n.d.). *qualitative-research-evaluation-methods-by-michael-patton*.
- Morgan, R. M., & Hunt, S. D. (1994). *The Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing*.
- Ms. Shital Kene, & Mr. Sanjay Kene. (2024). The Impact of Influencer Collaborations on Brand Awareness for Start-ups. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Science, Communication and Technology*, 133–140. <https://doi.org/10.48175/ijarsct-17821>
- Nielsen. (2022). Sportsponsoring schafft mehr als nur Markenbewusstsein.
- Ohanian, R. (1990). Construction and validation of a scale to measure celebrity endorsers' perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. *Journal of Advertising*, 19(3), 39–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1990.10673191>
- Pan, M., Blut, M., Ghiassaleh, A., & Lee, Z. W. Y. (2024). Influencer marketing effectiveness: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-024-01052-7>
- Prahalad, C. K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2004). Co-creation experiences: The next practice in value creation. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 18(3), 5–14. <https://doi.org/10.1002/dir.20015>
- Rebecca Kowalewicz. (2024). The Power Of Micro-Influencers In Niche Markets.
- Ruíz-Valdés, S., Ruíz-Tapia, J. A., & Cruz-Solís, I. del R. (2024). Customer loyalty and retention. A marketing strategy based on the creation of promotional content and its effect on the consumer through the relationship with influencers. *Journal of Bussines and SMEs*, 11–19. <https://doi.org/10.35429/jti.2024.25.10.11.19>
- Sarstedt, M., & Pick, M. (2021). *Influencer Marketing as a Counterstrategy to the Commoditization of Marketing Communications: A Bibliometric Analysis*. Munich. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346975256>
- Seo, Y., Primovic, M. J., & Jin, Y. (2019). Overcoming stakeholder social media fatigue: a trialogue approach. *Journal of Business Strategy*, 40(6), 40–48. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JBS-04-2019-0071>

- Sport Marke Medien. (2024, September 18). Sponsoringvergleich: Traditionelle Ligen vs. Baller League und Co.
- Stokburger-Sauer, N. E., & Teichmann, K. (2014). The relevance of consumer—brand identification in the team sport industry. *Marketing Review St. Gallen*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1365/s11621-014-0337-z>
- Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (1998). Mixed Methodology. <https://Us.Sagepub.Com/En-Us/Nam/Mixed-Methodology/Book6245>.
- The FA. (2010). *Small Sided Football Good Practice Guide*.
- The FA. (2018). *Small-sided Football Insight Report: Informing Local Football Facility Plans*.
- The Icon League. (2024). Teams.
- Theo Stodiek. (2024, September 3). Rivalität im Kleinfeld: Wie die Icon League und die Baller League den traditionellen Fußball herausfordern.
- Tristan Claridge. (2018). *Introduction to Social Capital Theory SOCAP101 Tristan Claridge*. Retrieved from [www.socialcapitalresearch.com](http://www.socialcapitalresearch.com)
- Tsounis, A. (2024). *Social Capital Theory*. Retrieved from <https://open.ncl.ac.uk>
- Xu, X. (2023). Influencer Marketing with Social Platforms: Increasing Brand Awareness and User Engagement. In *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences BMHEE* (Vol. 19).
- Zhang, X., Ghosh, A., & Ali, A. (2024). *Academic Journal of Management and Social Sciences Research on Marketing Strategy Management based on Customer Retention*. 6(2), 66.
- Zhou, Y. (2023). Branding in the Digital Age: How Influencers Marketing and Authenticity Reshape Brand Perceptions. In *Business, Economics and Management EDMS* (Vol. 2023).

## **9. Appendices**

### **Appendix A – Interview guide**

#### **A. Questions about Brand Awareness**

1. How aware are you of the Icon League currently? How did you first hear about it?
2. To what extent do you think the collaboration of the Icon League with influencers affects its visibility in the football community?
3. Have you noticed any influencers associated with the Icon League that caught your attention?
  - If yes, how did that affect your perception of the brand?
4. What role do you think influencers play in promoting smaller football leagues like the Icon League?

#### **B. Questions about Customer Engagement/Retention**

1. How likely are you to engage with the Icon League again after consuming content from an influencer?
2. Do you think the partnership of the Icon League with influencers helps to retain a loyal customer base?
  - Why or why not?
3. Can you describe specific interactions or content from influencers that made you feel a stronger connection to the Icon League?

#### **C. General Questions about Influencers and Their Strategy**

1. What is your opinion on the use of influencers in sports marketing, especially in small-field football?
2. What type of influencer content appeals to you the most when it comes to sports leagues like the Icon League?
3. What suggestions do you have for the Icon League to improve its influencer strategy?

#### **D. Open Final Questions**

1. Is there anything we haven't discussed that you think is important regarding influencer marketing and small-field football?
2. Do you have any final thoughts on how the Icon League could strengthen its brand awareness and customer loyalty through influencers?

## **Appendix B – Interviews**

### **Interview partner 1**

**Active follower of the Icon League & marketing professional**

#### **A. Questions about Brand Awareness:**

##### **How aware are you of the Icon League currently? How did you first hear about it?**

I regularly watch the Icon League streams every Monday and follow the latest news and updates through various Instagram profiles. I first heard about the Icon League when Elias Nerlich mentioned it on his Instagram channel.

##### **To what extent do you think the collaboration of the Icon League with influencers affects its visibility in the football community?**

I think that nowadays everything has changed a bit, and especially the younger generation follows YouTube or Twitch much more and doesn't watch TV as much. Therefore, the influence of influencers is very significant today, in my opinion.

##### **Have you noticed any influencers associated with the Icon League that caught your attention?**

- **If yes, how did that affect your perception of the brand?**

I have noticed several prominent people involved with Icon, such as many well-known footballers, which I believe helps increase the Icon League's visibility. Additionally, they have managed to collaborate with many well-known artists and musicians, which further boosts their profile.

##### **What role do you think influencers play in promoting smaller football leagues like the Icon League?**

I can't say much about the Kings League as I don't really follow it. However, I would say that for the Baller League, the visibility of some prominent influencers also contributes to more people following these events and engaging with the whole topic.

## **B. Questions about Customer Retention:**

### **How likely are you to engage with the Icon League again after consuming content from an influencer?**

The likelihood is very high because influencers today manage to create a very close connection with their viewers. People who regularly follow influencers on Twitch or Instagram have a very close bond with the person and, in my opinion, automatically try to engage with the topic of the Icon League.

### **Do you think the partnership of the Icon League with influencers helps to retain a loyal customer base?**

- **Why or why not?**

Influencers, especially Elias Nerlich, manage to build a close community with their fans. Since people watch his Twitch stream for several hours every day and engage with his life, the close contact with influencers naturally helps build a strong bond.

### **Can you describe specific interactions or content from influencers that made you feel a stronger connection to the Icon League?**

What led me to engage more closely with the Icon League from the beginning were definitely many Instagram posts from Elias, in which he introduced the team heads and gave the impression that we could look forward to the league starting soon and being able to watch it.

## **C. General Questions about Influencers and Their Strategy:**

### **What is your opinion on the use of influencers in sports marketing, especially in small-field football?**

The use of influencers has many advantages in my opinion, but it also has many problems. One problem was, for example, when ViscaBarca, an influencer, together with Trimacs, another influencer, invested in a club and gave the fans or ultras the impression that they only joined to gain more money and reach and didn't really engage with the club. I think this example shows that you have to be careful because many people have problems with the use of influencers. In the Icon League, it's a bit different. In small-field football, it's the other way around; it's really positive because it's not about changing an existing club in a certain way,

but rather building something completely new, where the foundation already consists of well-known people, influencers, and musicians.

**What type of influencer content appeals to you the most when it comes to sports leagues like the Icon League?**

I mostly follow Icon League content on Instagram and Twitch. On Instagram, you can get many impressions in advance, and on Twitch, you can watch the events live and see the individual players.

**What suggestions do you have for the Icon League to improve its influencer strategy?**

I think it's important to establish close contact with the community, with the people who engage with it, and to adjust the content over time accordingly. This means that if many viewers think something should be adjusted, such as certain rules like the Rulebreaker, they should address it and adjust the rules accordingly.

**D. Open Final Questions:**

**Is there anything we haven't discussed that you think is important regarding influencer marketing and small-field football?**

Currently, there are many rumors that the Baller League and the Icon League are buying viewer clicks for their live events on Twitch. I think it's important to create transparency here. Additionally, there is somehow a lack of fan loyalty to specific teams, which is present in regular football.

**Do you have any final thoughts on how the Icon League could strengthen its brand awareness and customer loyalty through influencers?**

In my opinion, brand awareness and customer loyalty could be strengthened if the individual leagues, such as the Baller League and the Icon League, did not join forces and form a large league. You could also have the winners of both leagues play against each other to build a certain connection.

**Interview partner 2**

**Active follower of the Icon League & working in Marketing**

## **A. Questions about Brand Awareness:**

### **How aware are you of the Icon League currently? How did you first hear about it?**

I first interacted with the Icon League via Instagram on a weekly basis when the Teamheads were announced. Since the league started, I have been watching it on a weekly basis. I am also following their social media accounts which makes the Icon League really aware for me.

### **To what extent do you think the collaboration of the Icon League with influencers affects its visibility in the football community?**

I think that the approach of the Icon League, which uses influencers to create a big visibility in the football community, has been a success. They work together with so many big names, which extends their way of reaching the younger generations especially.

### **Have you noticed any influencers associated with the Icon League that caught your attention?**

- **If yes, how did that affect your perception of the brand?**

I am a huge football fan so Toni Kroos, David Alaba and Antonio Rüdiger are names that helped me catch attention. In regards of perception of the brand this had a positive influence and made me get even more into the topic of the league.

### **What role do you think influencers play in promoting smaller football leagues like the Icon League?**

The role of these influencers are huge. Especially younger generations get influenced easier and follow these people on a daily base. If they say that the Icon League is a great project, then most of the younger generations will follow it and expand the reach of it even more.

## **B. Questions about Customer Retention:**

### **How likely are you to engage with the Icon League again after consuming content from an influencer?**

I think it is quite high because it already got me to watch the league after they announced the Teamheads which are people that I also follow on a regular base.

**Do you think the partnership of the Icon League with influencers helps to retain a loyal customer base?**

- **Why or why not?**

Influencers are just going to keep growing their fanbase in the future and these fans will keep following them. Therefore, I think that will help the Icon League retain customers, because the customers will also keep following the Influencers even after the first season is over. It also depends if the Teamheads are going to be the same in the future.

**Can you describe specific interactions or content from influencers that made you feel a stronger connection to the Icon League?**

I have been following the big football names my whole life such as Toni Kroos or Franck Ribery as an example. Based on that it created a stronger connection and also helped me build a stronger connection to the Icon League.

### **C. General Questions about Influencers and Their Strategy:**

**What is your opinion on the use of influencers in sports marketing, especially in small-field football?**

It can be positive and negative. On the one hand side, people might have the view of the Icon League as a League just to make money. This can be true, but the younger generation does not have that point of view. On the other hand, it can be positive, because people can interact with influencers they like and might even be able to see them in person at the game days.

**What type of influencer content appeals to you the most when it comes to sports leagues like the Icon League?**

I follow the Icon League on Instagram, and Twitch and have also been to the second Game Day. Especially the recap of the Game days on Twitch are really appealing to me.

**What suggestions do you have for the Icon League to improve its influencer strategy?**

I think it's important to adjust rules if needed. That can then also be influenced by the community which creates interaction.

### **D. Open Final Questions:**

**Is there anything we haven't discussed that you think is important regarding influencer marketing and small-field football?**

I think everything is said from my side. Thank you!

**Do you have any final thoughts on how the Icon League could strengthen its brand awareness and customer loyalty through influencers?**

I think brand awareness and customer retention could be strengthened if the Icon leagues stick with the team heads/ influencers that are already there and might change a few in the upcoming years.

## **Appendix C – Survey guide**

### **A. Questions on Brand Awareness:**

1. **On a scale of 1-5, how familiar are you with the Icon League?**
  - 1 = Not familiar at all, 5 = Very familiar
2. **How did you first hear about the Icon League?** *(Select all that apply)*
  - Social Media
  - Influencer Promotion
  - Word of Mouth
  - TV
  - Other (please specify)
3. **Which influencers associated with the Icon League have caught your attention?**  
*(Select all that apply)*
  - Elias Nerlich
  - Toni Kroos
  - David Alaba
  - Antonio Rüdiger
  - Other (please specify)
4. **To what extent do you believe influencer collaborations have increased your awareness of the Icon League?**
  - Scale 1-5

### **B. Questions on Customer Retention:**

1. **How likely are you to continue following or engaging with the Icon League after encountering content from an influencer?**

- Very unlikely / Unlikely / Neutral / Likely / Very likely
2. **To what extent do the Icon League's influencer partnerships influence your loyalty as a fan?**
    - Not at all / Slightly / Moderately / Significantly / Extremely
  3. **Have you engaged with the Icon League after discovering it through an influencer? Yes / No**
  4. **If yes, where have you engaged with the Icon League? (Select all that apply)**
    - Watched streams
    - Followed social media accounts
    - Attended live events
    - Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
  3. **How important is it for you that the Icon League keeps the same influencers (Team Heads) in future seasons?**
    - Scale 1-5

**C. Questions on Influencers and Strategy:**

1. **Which type of influencer content related to the Icon League resonates most with you?**
  - Live Twitch Streams
  - Instagram Recaps/Posts
  - YouTube Highlights
  - Other (please specify)
2. **To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "The use of influencers in the Icon League enhances my overall experience with the brand."**
  - Strongly disagree / Disagree / neither agree or disagree / Agree / Strongly agree

**D. Open-Ended Questions**

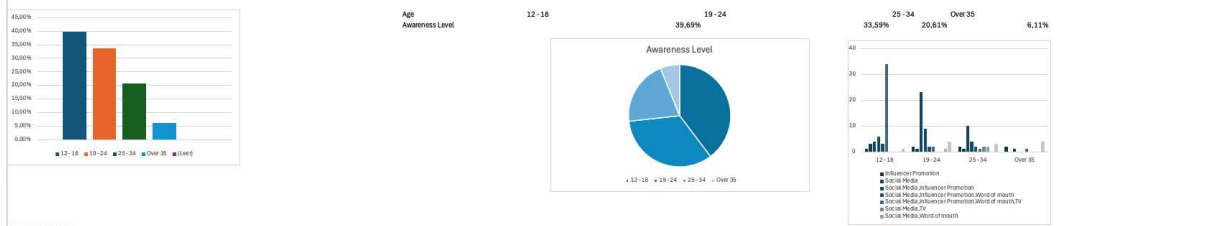
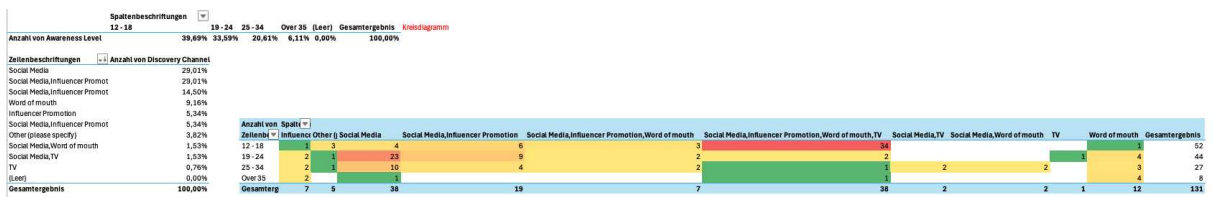
1. **What improvements would you suggest for the Icon League's influencer strategy to strengthen brand awareness?**
2. **In your opinion, how can the Icon League build stronger fan loyalty and customer retention**

# Appendix D – Survey results – Raw Data

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q7a	Q7a, 4, TEXT	Q8	Q9	Q8, 4, TEXT	Q10	Q11	Q12	Q13
Number	On a scale of 1-5 How did you first hear about you first	Which platform	Is what extent do you	How likely are you to continue to use	To what extent do you think	Have you engaged with the	If yes, where	Where have you engaged	How important is it to	Which type of influencer content	To what extent do you agree with the following	What do you think	In your opinion	What age group are you in?	
1	Social Media, Influencer Promotion, Word of mouth, TV	Elis, Kross	5	Extremely likely		Yes	Followed social media accounts		5	Live Twitch Streams, Instagram Recept/ Posts	Strongly agree	Cooperate with audience on twitch	None	12- 18	
2	Influencer Promotion	Elis, Twitch	4	Neither likely nor unlikely	Moderate	Yes	social media accounts		3	Live Twitch Streams, Instagram Recept/ Posts	Strongly agree			25- 34	
3	Word of mouth	Toni Kross	4	Somewhat likely	Slightly	Yes	Attend live events		2	Instagram Recept/ Posts	Neither agree nor disagree			Over 35	
4	Social Media, Influencer Promotion, Word of mouth, TV		5	Extremely likely		Yes	Watched Twitch Streams, followed social media accounts		5	Live Twitch Streams, Instagram Recept/ Posts	Strongly agree			12- 18	
5	Social Media		2	Somewhat unlikely	Not at all	No	Watched Twitch Streams, followed social media accounts		1	Instagram Recept/ Posts	Neither agree nor disagree			25- 34	
6	Word of mouth	none	1	Somewhat unlikely	Not at all	No	Watched Twitch Streams		1	Youtube Highlights	Somewhat disagree			25- 34	
7	Social Media	None	4	Extremely likely	Moderate	Yes	Watched Twitch Streams, followed social media		3	Live Twitch Streams, Youtube Highlights	Strongly agree			25- 34	
8	Social Media, Influencer Promotion	Toni Kross	4	Neither likely nor unlikely	Not at all	No	Watched Twitch Streams, followed social media accounts		2	Instagram Recept/ Posts	Somewhat disagree	Identify fanclubs		25- 34	
9	Social Media	Elis, Kross	5	Extremely likely	Extremely	Yes	Watched Twitch Streams, followed social media accounts		4	Live Twitch Streams, Instagram Recept/ Posts, Youtube Highlights	Somewhat agree			19- 24	
10	Social Media	voca, balika, elis, toni kross	3	Somewhat unlikely	Slightly	No	Watched Twitch Streams, followed social media accounts		2	Instagram Recept/ Posts	Neither agree nor disagree			19- 24	

# Appendix E – Survey results – Brand Awareness

Respondent	Awareness Level	Discovery Channel	Frequency of Influencer Exposure	Age group
1	5	Social Media, Influencer Promotion, Word of mouth	5	12-18
2	4	Influencer Promotion	4	25-34
3	1	Word of mouth	4	Over 35
4	5	Social Media, Influencer Promotion, Word of mouth	5	12-18
5	4	Social Media	2	25-34
6	2	Word of mouth	1	25-34
7	3	Social Media	4	25-34
8	3	Social Media, Influencer Promotion	4	25-34
9	5	Social Media	5	19-24
10	3	Social Media	3	19-24
11	1	Word of mouth	1	19-24
12	4	Social Media, Influencer Promotion, Word of mouth	5	12-18
13	5	Social Media, Influencer Promotion, Word of mouth	5	12-18
14	2	Social Media	2	25-34
15	5	Social Media, Influencer Promotion, Word of mouth	5	25-34
16	1	Word of mouth	1	Over 35
17	3	Social Media	5	19-24
18	4	Influencer Promotion	3	Over 35
19	2	Word of mouth	2	Over 35
20	2	Word of mouth	4	Over 35
21	2	Social Media	2	Over 35
22	4	Social Media	3	19-24
23	1	Word of mouth	1	25-34
24	5	Social Media, Influencer Promotion	4	12-18
25	4	Social Media	4	19-24
26	1	Social Media	2	19-24
27	3	Social Media, Influencer Promotion, Word of mouth	5	19-24
28	4	Social Media, Influencer Promotion	5	25-34
29	1	Social Media	1	12-18
30	5	TV	4	19-24
31	4	Influencer Promotion	5	Over 35
32	3	Social Media, Word of mouth	5	25-34



SUMMARY OUTPUT

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0,87378449
R Square	0,76350033
Adjusted R Square	0,751901609
Standard Error	38,16157061
Observations	130

ANOVA					
	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F
Regression	3	597798	199236,1	136,67	2E-39
Residual	127	185145	1457,632		
Total	130	782943			

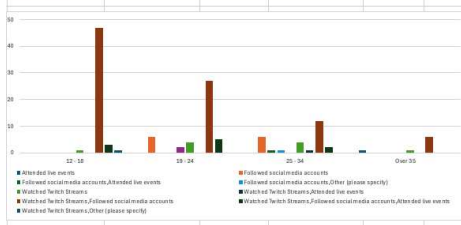
  

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%
Intercept	0	48,881	0	1,0000	-48,881	48,881
12-18	33,49396147	8,3632	4,004933	0,0001	16,84	50,04318
19-24	46,13540846	9,27	4,976843	2E-08	27,79	64,47909962
25-34	-1,873091815	2,7319	-0,6856	0,4942	-7,28	3,532991073
Over 35						

# Appendix F – Survey results – Customer Engagement

Response ID	Engagement Likelihood	Engagement (Yes/No)	Engagement Method	Age Group
1	5 Extremely likely	Yes	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	12-18
2	4 Neither likely nor unlikely	Yes	Followed social media account	25-34
3	1 Somewhat likely	Yes	Attended live events	Over 35
4	5 Extremely likely	Yes	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	12-18
5	4 Somewhat unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	25-34
6	2 Somewhat unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	25-34
7	3 Extremely likely	Yes	Watched Twitch Streams	25-34
8	3 Neither likely nor unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	25-34
9	5 Extremely likely	Yes	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	19-24
10	3 Somewhat unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	19-24
11	1 Somewhat unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	19-24
12	4 Extremely likely	Yes	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	12-18
13	5 Somewhat likely	Yes	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	12-18
14	2 Somewhat unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams	25-34
15	5 Extremely likely	Yes	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	25-34
16	1 Somewhat unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	Over 35
17	3 Somewhat unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams	19-24
18	4 Somewhat unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	Over 35
19	2 Somewhat unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams	Over 35
20	2 Neither likely nor unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	Over 35
21	2 Neither likely nor unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	Over 35
22	4 Somewhat unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	19-24
23	1 Neither likely nor unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	25-34
24	5 Extremely likely	Yes	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	12-18
25	3 Somewhat likely	Yes	Watched Twitch Streams	19-24
26	1 Somewhat unlikely	Yes	Other (please specify)	19-24
27	5 Extremely likely	Yes	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	19-24
28	4 Somewhat likely	Yes	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	25-34
29	1 Extremely unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	12-18
30	3 Neither likely nor unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	19-24
31	4 Somewhat likely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	Over 35
32	3 Extremely unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	25-34
33	4 Somewhat unlikely	No	Followed social media account	25-34
34	1 Neither likely nor unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	19-24
35	1 Extremely unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	19-24
36	3 Neither likely nor unlikely	Yes	Followed social media account	19-24
37	1 Neither likely nor unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	19-24
38	3 Somewhat likely	Yes	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	19-24
39	4 Somewhat unlikely	Yes	Watched Twitch Streams	25-34
40	3 Neither likely nor unlikely	Yes	Followed social media account	19-24
41	3 Somewhat likely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	25-34
42	5 Somewhat unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	Over 35
43	3 Somewhat likely	Yes	Followed social media account	19-24
44	5 Somewhat unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	25-34
45	1 Neither likely nor unlikely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	25-34
46	4 Somewhat likely	Yes	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	19-24
47	1 Somewhat likely	No	Watched Twitch Streams_Follow	19-24
48	4 Neither likely nor unlikely	Yes	Followed social media account	19-24
49	3 Somewhat likely	Yes	Watched Twitch Streams	19-24

Anzahl von Respondent ID	Spaltenbeschreibungen	Attended live events	Followed social med	Followed social media acco	Followed social n (please spec	Watched Twitch Streams	Watched Twitch S	Watched Twitch Streams, Followed social media accounts	Watched Twitch Streams, Followed social media ac	Watched Twitch S	Gesamt Ergebnis
12-18			5			2	1	4	47	3	52
19-24							4	1	27	5	44
25-34			6	1	1		4		12	2	27
Over 35		1					1		6		8
<b>Gesamt Ergebnis</b>			<b>12</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>131</b>



Anzahl von Respondent ID	Spaltenbeschreibungen	Extremely likely	Extremely unlikely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely (Leer)	Gesamt Ergebnis
1		5	2	4	2	5	18
2		2		2	5	5	9
3		2	4	9	8	4	27
4		2		2	11	8	23
5		49		3	3	2	54
(Leer)							
<b>Gesamt Ergebnis</b>		<b>60</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>131</b>

Awareness Level	Engagement Likelihood					Overall result
	Extremely likely	Extremely unlikely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	
1	5	2	4	2	5	18
2	2		2	5	5	9
3	2	4	9	8	4	27
4	2		2	11	8	23
5	49		3	3	2	54
<b>Overall result</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>131</b>



Respondent ID	Retention Likelihood	Engagement (1/ No)	Age group
1	1	1	1
2	1	1	3
3	1	1	4
4	1	1	1
5	1	0	3
6	0	0	3
7	1	1	3
8	0	0	3
9	1	1	2
10	1	0	2
11	1	0	2
12	1	1	1
13	1	1	1
14	1	0	3
15	1	1	3
16	1	0	4
17	1	0	2
18	1	0	4
19	1	0	4
20	0	0	4
21	0	0	4
22	1	0	2
23	1	0	3
24	1	1	1
25	1	1	2
26	1	1	2
27	1	1	2
28	1	1	3
29	1	0	1
30	1	0	2