The Benefits of Phygital Marketing in Sports Events

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Considering the importance and ever-increasing growth of technology in sports, this study was conducted to identify the benefits of phygital marketing in sports events.

Methodology: This study employed a qualitative, exploratory approach, utilizing a thematic analysis method. The study's research population consisted of experts in the fields of sports and modern technologies, and 15 individuals were purposively selected as research participants based on their expertise. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter until theoretical saturation was achieved.

Finding: The use of thematic analysis in the analysis of the interviews led to the identification of 82 codes, 12 sub-themes and four main themes. Summarizing and classifying the findings revealed that the benefits of phygital marketing in sports events included: "Event brand development", "Deeper experience", "Service quality", and "Efficient interactions". Considering the growing trend of technology in sports, the findings of this research demonstrated that phygital marketing as one of the key samples of technology can lead to the creation of significant benefits in sports events.

Originality: This research can be considered as one of the first qualitative research that has been conducted in relation to the positive consequences of phygital marketing in sports events on the domestic and international scale.

Keywords: Digital marketing, Physical marketing, Sport events.

منافع فیجیتال مارکتینگ در رویدادهای ورزشی

چکیده

هدف: با توجّه به اهمیت و رشد روزافزون مصادیق تکنولوژی در حوزۀ ورزش، هدف کلی این تحقیق شناسایی منافع فیجیتال مارکتینگ در رویدادهای ورزشی بوده است.

روش: در این مطالعۀ کیفی و اکتشافی از شیوه تحلیل تماتیک استفاده گردید. جامعۀ مشارکت‌کننده‌گان پژوهش عبارت بودند از متخصصان حوزۀ تکنولوژی‌های نوین و ورزش بوده که متناسب با هدف پژوهش ۱۵ نفر به عنوان شرکت‌کننده و به صورت هدفمند تا مرحله دستیابی به اشباع نظری مصاحبه شدند. از یک مصاحبه نیمه ساختارمند به منظور گردآوری داده‌ها استفاده گردید. جهت ارزیابی پایایی یافته‌های مستخرج از مصاحبه‌ها، محاسبۀ توافق درون موضوعی در دستور کار قرار گرفت. همچنین از معیار اعتمادپذیری یا قابلیت اعتماد که در برگیرنده چهار معیار جداگانه اما به هم مرتبط می‌باشد (باورپذیری، اطمینان‌پذیری، انتقال‌پذیری و تأییدپذیری)، جهت ارزیابی کیفیت و روایی یافته‌ها استفاده شد.

یافته‌ها: استفاده از تحلیل تماتیک در بررسی مصاحبه‌ها به شناسایی ۸۲ کد، ۱۲ مؤلفۀ فرعی و چهار مؤلفۀ اصلی ختم گردید. تجمیع و طبقه‌بندی یافته‌ها نشان داد که منافع فیجیتال مارکتینگ در رویدادهای ورزشی عبارتند از: "توسعۀ برند رویداد"، "تجارب عمیق‌تر"، "کیفیت خدمات"، و "تعاملات اثربخش". با توجّه به ظهور و توسعۀ مصادیق فنّاوری در ورزش، یافته‌های این پژوهش نشان می‌دهد که فیجیتال مارکتینگ به عنوان یکی از مصادیق تکنولوژی می‌تواند منجر به ایجاد مزایای قابل‌توجّهی در رویدادهای ورزشی شود.

اصالت و ابتکار مقاله: این تحقیق را می‌توان یکی از اولین مطالعات کیفی دانست که در رابطه با پیامدهای مثبت بازاریابی فیجیتال در رویدادهای ورزشی در مقیاس داخلی و بین المللی انجام شده است.

واژه‌های کلیدی: بازاریابی دیجیتال، بازاریابی فیزیکی، رویدادهای ورزشی.

1. Introduction

Sport is an industry, and sports events beside marketing approaches have a close and mutual relationship. Due to periodic changes, marketing is a field that is constantly evolving and adapting to new conditions (Çelik et al., 2023). These changes will always bring benefits and challenges with themselves, and organizations will be more successful in these changes that take the most advantage of the changes and adopt the best coping strategies. In today's rapidly evolving marketplace, one of the greatest marketing challenges lies in ensuring a seamless and cohesive customer experience across physical and digital channels. With the increasing prevalence of hybrid environments, where physical and digital elements coexist and interact simultaneously, marketers must find innovative ways to balance the unique demands of both worlds (Belghiti et al., 2018).

The dawn of the digital age in the 1990s brought about a key change in the world of marketing, as advances in computer and Internet technology reshaped the very foundations of the field. With each emerging technology bringing new opportunities and tools to marketers, the traditional approach to marketing gave way to a digital-first strategy that leveraged the potential of digital platforms to transform the customer journey and reach more engaged audiences (Kotler et al., 2021). The dawn of the Internet era revolutionized the marketing landscape, obliterating the limitations of distance and time to create an unprecedented level of consumer comfort and demand. In today's fiercely competitive marketplace, businesses are under pressure to adapt to the evolving expectations of their customers if they are to gain a competitive edge. One such innovative approach is phygital marketing, a term coined by Momentum, an Australian marketing agency, in 2013. Phygital marketing is a hybrid approach that integrates traditional marketing strategies with digital tactics, leveraging the strengths of both worlds to create a unique and immersive experience for consumers (Van Tiechelen, 2019).

Phygital refers to an environment in which both the physical and digital tools are simultaneously applied. Phygital experiences bridge the physical and digital worlds, offering consumers a unique, holistic experience that builds trust, enhances value, and minimizes confusion (Purcărea, 2018). Phygital experiences are relevant to next-generation technology that provides new experiences that cannot be achieved without modern technologies (Hollebeek et al., 2019). With the inexorable rise of digitalization, a new path to consumers has emerged, offering a novel and efficient means for businesses to engage, interact, and drive value in an increasingly connected world. Therefore, in this era of digital transformation, businesses must master the art of straddling the physical and virtual worlds. These combined services have enabled companies to be proactive throughout the entire customer journey. As technology continues to march forward, the global exchange of knowledge about goods and services, as well as the collective sharing of contact experiences has improved (Kotler et al., 2021).

The turn of the millennium witnessed a seismic shift in the marketing landscape, as focus shifted from purely digital to the phygital realm. This paradigm shift marked the beginning of a new era in marketing research (Banik, 2021). Phygital is a term that describes the current era in which the physical, digital and virtual worlds are intermingled through the use of digital and ICT technologies and smart technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), and big data (Huang et al., 2024). Phygital marketing is a modern, hybrid strategy that seeks to seamlessly blend traditional and digital marketing tools to create an engaging and interactive experience for the tech-savvy, experience-hungry consumers of the 21st century. Today's customers crave brands that set themselves apart from the competition, crafting bespoke, emotionally resonant experiences that delight and excite, while forging a deeper, more meaningful connection between brand and consumer (Mamina & Tolstikova, 2020). Whether it's infusing the digital into the physical realm through technology like augmented reality, or transporting the real into the virtual world via digital tools like virtual shopping, phygital offers a dynamic and innovative approach to marketing that engages consumers on both a tangible and intangible level (Delinikolas et al., 2022). Phygital is a response to the need to adapt to the changing behavior and needs of customers. In fact, customers of a brand continue to buy products only when brands can surprise them and adapt to the way and the world they live in (Dal Colle, 2022). Phygital marketing presents an opportunity to satisfy the sophisticated and discerning needs of the modern consumer by seamlessly merging the proven tactics of traditional sales

promotion with the innovative and immersive power of digital brand activation, crafting a cohesive and captivating customer journey that bridges the physical and digital realms (Singh et al., 2019).

By applying phygital marketing strategies, we can provide individuals with experiences that can only be provided through digital tools. In addition, entrepreneurs have much to gain from embracing the technological revolution, leveraging new tools and techniques to reduce costs, streamline inventory management, and unlock deeper consumer insights through data collection (Johnson & Barlow, 2021). Phygital marketing can also lead to increased customer satisfaction by decreasing waiting time (Delinikolas et al., 2022). Brands that adopt phygital marketing strategies strive to deliver unforgettable, one-of-a-kind shopping experiences, differentiating themselves from the competition and establishing a leadership position in their respective markets (Bevolo & Amati, 2024). Interactive technologies have the power to bridge the gap between the physical and virtual realms, creating a seamless, immersive phygital journey for customers (Siregar & Kent, 2019).

Phygital forge a deeply personalized, interactive, and compelling experience that forges lasting bonds of loyalty between brand and consumer (Van Tiechelen, 2019). Phygital marketing offers consumers a revolutionary shopping experience, enabling them to engage with products and tools in intelligent, intuitive ways (Chang & Chen, 2021).

The adoption of smart technologies in the virtual arena has exceeded the entertainment market and digital games, and this phenomenon in the field of business and learning is still at the beginning of the transformation path (Huang et al., 2024). Digitization has greatly affected the industry and has contributed to the emergence of new concepts to provide a unique experience for customers (Pangarkar et al., 2022). Digital transformation provides an opportunity for customers to move freely in different virtual channels (Cavalinhos et al., 2021). Environmental features not only entice customers to engage more actively with their surroundings but also allow them to craft a unique, memorable experience that heightens their overall interaction with the environment (Mohd-Ramly & Omar, 2017). Phygital marketing transcends traditional boundaries, enabling consumers to inhabit both the physical and digital realms simultaneously, creating a shopping experience that is both immersive and unforgettable (Banik, 2021).

As an electronic great company, Amazon also revealed that they will apply a multi-channel method to accomplish their mission and expand it gradually (Fung & Haddon, 2019). Companies like Nike and Adidas also guide and support their customers by developing a phygital environment and using different applications in their physical centers (Mishra et al., 2021). Digital technologies enable customers to plunge into a world of engrossing, interactive experiences that create indelible emotional moments and memories (Foster & McLelland, 2015).

It seems that phygital elements can offer more personalized experiences for individuals and lead to increased loyalty, value creation, and customer-based brand equity (Singh et al., 2019). The rise of digitalization has shaken the foundations of luxury consumerism, fundamentally altering the way consumers purchase and engage with these high-end products. As a result, luxury brands must adapt their marketing strategies to maximize the experiential value of the customer journey, blurring the boundaries between physical and digital realms through "phygital" approaches. In phygital conditions, through the online channel, people will have the opportunity to search and collect information about the product or service and then meet the physical environment to finish the purchase process (Mishra et al., 2021). Consumer empowerment is contingent upon the trust and assurance they have in the accuracy and authenticity of information gleaned from a variety of online and offline channels (Broniarczyk & Griffin, 2014). Multichannel communication effectively creates positive customer attitudes and increases trustworthiness (Heinberg et al., 2018).

Phygital marketing helps to promote the brand and improve the brand image (Kwon & Lennon, 2009), and fosters positive changes in attitude, behavioral intention, perceived risk, word of mouth, satisfaction, and loyalty (Qin et al., 2021). From a business perspective, phygital marketing offers numerous advantages, including cost savings, enhanced customer data capture, diverse purchasing options, and improved shopping experiences (Çelik et al., 2023).

The findings of Mele et al.'s study (2024) provided an integrated model for customer experience in the phygital space and revealed the dynamic nature of the phygital environment. A study by Samat et al. (2023) examined the use of phygital marketing in the context of the Olympic Games and found that phygital marketing can be effective in increasing brand awareness and interaction with Olympic fans. The results of Delinikolas et al.'s (2022) studies showed that a combination of physical and digital elements is very important to help audiences get used to immersive media. According to the findings of Çelik et al. (2023), the evolution of marketing based on phygital marketing will continue. Bonfanti and Yfantidou (2023) believe that the phygital experience may provide a memorable experience that finally results in greater customer interaction to the environment. The findings of Mishra et al. (2023) showed that phygital integration has an impact on consumers' phygital experience by increasing the feeling of power and satisfaction, and it helps to retain consumers and leads to long-term relationships with them. Çelik et al.'s findings (2023) showed that brand purchase intention, decision making process, dissatisfaction/satisfaction issues are raised in traditional marketing, online reviews based on TAM theory have become important in digital marketing. Based on the findings of Van Tiechelen (2019), the implementation and use of phygital channels can be a promising solution to fill the gap between physical marketing and digital marketing. The results of the research of Aydo et al. (2021) showed that playing in the phygital space led to a sensory, interactive, pleasure and suspense experience. Betat (2022) showed that the phygital phenomenon has fluidized customers' journeys from online to offline and vice versa, and responds to their tangible (quality needs) and intangible (emotional needs) needs according to consumers' values. The study of Hyun et al. (2022) has revealed that emotional appeal; web design and customer service in the phygital space had a positive effect on customer-oriented brand equity and positively contributed to satisfaction and repurchase intention.

According to literature review, the researches on the phygital setting were mostly descriptive (Shi et al., 2020), and because phygital is a new concept, previous authors have defined it according to relevant terms like omni-channel and multi-channel integration (Batat, 2019). Although the application of the phygital phenomenon is mostly used in the field of business, this phenomenon lacks an academic conceptualization. The current studies explain this term according to the approach of the marketing domain, where phygital is mostly used in relation to multi-channel, cross-channel or omni-channel approaches. This narrow view of phygital marketing understates its full potential and undersells its ability to revolutionize customer experiences (Batat, 2022). Del Vecchio et al. (2023) pointed out that the studies published in the field of phygital lack coherence and a clear and specific concept, and therefore the study of this concept in different fields can help to clarify this concept and coherence in definitions. Since creating phygital experiences for customers has become a "main priority" for both marketing researchers and businesses (Batat, 2022), studying the dimensions of applying this marketing approach in the field of sports events is considered an important necessity for the future of sports.

Managing the customer experience requires a multi-pronged marketing approach that involves analyzing customer data, prioritizing marketing initiatives, deploying resources, monitoring performance, disseminating brand messaging, and designing visually engaging collateral that aligns with customer needs and preferences (Jacob et al., 2023). Therefore, phygital marketing can be defined as one of the key tools in guiding the customer experience in the field of sports, which makes them have a deeper and more exciting experience of sports events. Because consumers in today's markets, instead of searching for goods, are looking for experiences that take place in mixed phygital environments, companies are forced to change from a product-oriented approach to a more experience-oriented way of thinking by revising their marketing methods (Batat, 2024). Therefore, paying attention to these capacities in sports and sports events as an attractive and growing industry is inevitable. Considering that customers' needs and expectations are constantly changing (Bonfanti & Ifantido, 2021), sport managers and marketers must carefully monitor these changes in expectations among sports fans and spectators in various sports events and predict the necessary strategies in order to apply the necessary and continuous changes. A review of research literature shows that many marketing researchers believe that academic research on customer experience management in the field of phygital is very limited (Klaus, 2021) and since the consequences of the combined approach of phygital marketing remain largely unknown, the study of potential benefits

of phygital marketing in sports events can help to better understand the long-term consequences of this marketing approach in the sports industry. Therefore, considering the importance and necessity of phygital marketing in sports, the purpose of this research was to identify the benefits of phygital marketing in sports events.

2. Methodology

This research was a qualitative-exploratory study that adopted an interpretive-constructivist approach and used thematic analysis. It is considered applied research and was conducted from March to June 2023. In the current study we conducted Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis model for content analysis. The research population consisted of specialists and experts in the field of sports and emerging technologies. Fifteen experts were purposively selected as research participants based on research inclusion criteria. Participants were selected based on their research, educational, and executive backgrounds in technology and sports. Participants were selected using the theoretical sampling method until reaching the theoretical saturation stage. Having experience and background in conducting researches and education relevant to the field of marketing in sports events, as well as mastery of theoretical foundations in the field of new technologies were taken into consideration for selection of the participants. A semi-structured interview method was used in the research process, which involved direct face-to-face and virtual interviews through social media. Interviews were conducted over a duration ranging from 20 to 45 minutes, with an average duration of 28 minutes. In order to guide flow of the interview, a central and main question was used based on the title and main purpose of the research. The main question guiding the interview flow was: "What are the positive consequences of using the phygital marketing environment for sports events?". According to the answer given to this question, other questions were raised to extract benefits and advantages of phygital marketing in sports events. The study used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage model for data analysis. The first stage involved becoming familiar with the data by reviewing the interviews. Then, initial coding was performed based on the main research question in the second stage. The third stage involved searching for main themes. After searching for main themes, in the fourth stage, themes were reviewed more accurately, and several rounds of review and expert consultation led to the classification and naming of the main themes. In the fifth stage, themes were defined and named. Finally, the sixth stage involved interpreting themes based on the main research question. Reliability or trustworthiness was used to assess the quality of qualitative findings, which included four separate but interrelated criteria: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Credibility refers to the internal validity of qualitative studies. Multiple data sources, multiple analysts, and multiple methods are among the suggested approaches to enhance credibility, all of which were considered in this study. Dependability indicates the ability to identify the source of data, how it was collected, and how it was used in a particular study. One way to increase the reliability of the results is member checking, in which the researcher controls their assumptions with one or several individuals who are familiar with the subject under investigation. Member checking is used throughout the data collection process to verify the accuracy of the data and the researcher's interpretation as they emerge. In this study, the opinions of two interviewees as well as the research team were used to control the data and the results at various stages of data analysis. In addition, re-testing can also be an important step in validating the findings of this study. The transferability of the research results indicates the generalizability of the results to other similar groups and environments. By extracting and presenting the maximum findings (as much as possible), this aspect of the validity of the study can be somewhat assured, which in this study, by reviewing multiple interviews and extracting the maximum and non-repetitive content, an attempt was made to implement this recommendation. The research findings can be confirmed when others can clearly follow the direction and process of the research conducted by the researcher. In this study, the researcher has also tried to report the different stages of the research with maximum details to address this issue.

3. Research Findings

Thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2006) was conducted to analyze the research data. Based on this, in the first step, the raw data related to the interviews were reviewed for several times to get a complete knowledge of the raw data in the first stage. Making sure that the data was carefully analyzed at this stage, the second stage started with the initial coding. At this stage, the primary codes were extracted based on the main research question, in the form of the 82 codes. After coding the data, the search was started to explore the main themes and possible sub-themes. Therefore, at this stage the codes were analyzed and the codes with more semantic affinity were classified under a main theme. The themes in this stage include the major organized concepts (Braun and Clarke, 2013). "Event brand development", "Deeper experience", "Service quality", and "Efficient interactions" (four main themes). In the fourth stage, after different revision and applying the opinions of experts, the classification and naming of the main themes was ensured. By conducting several and detailed revisions, at this stage, the sub-themes relevant to each main theme were identified. By re-examining the codes and conforming to the main themes, sub-themes (12 sub-themes) were identified. At this stage, the sub-themes were extracted according to their semantic and conceptual affinity (Table No. 1). In the fifth stage, the themes were defined and labeled as presented in the following table.

Table 1. Codes, sub-themes and main themes

Main themes	Sub-themes	Participants	Codes
Event brand development	Brand awareness (9 codes)	p7, p8, p13, p10	• Gaining more information about events
		P3, p9, p12, p14	• Receiving more accurate information about clubs
		P5, p8, p11, p15	• Becoming more familiar with favorite sports
		P1, p6, p7, p13, p14	• Getting up-to-date and timely information
		P2, p4, p9	• Identifying favorite athletes better
		P2, p6, p8, p12	• Understanding better where events take place
		P3, p4, p7, p9	• Receiving news from various sources
		P5, p7, p14, p15	• Recognizing club logos better
		P5, p9, p10, p14	• Increased awareness of sponsors in sports
	Brand image (7 codes)	P2, p3, p7, p9	• Positive mindset towards the event
		P3, p6. P8, p11	• Receiving memorable images from events
		P8, p12, p13	• Positive image of events
		P9, p11, p14	• Positive mental image of sporting competitions
		P10, p13, p15	• Imagining exciting images in the mind
		P3, p4, p15	• Not forgetting events and events around them
		P6, p8, p11	• Unique and memorable image
	Brand loyalty (7 codes)	P2, p3, p8, p9	• Becoming attached to events
		P6, p7, p10	• Commitment to favorite clubs and events
		P7, p12, p15	• Returning to events
		P1, p8, p10, p11	• Repurchasing event tickets
		P3, p9, p11, p14	• Encouraging others to attend events
		P2, p5, p11, p15	• More follow-up of events
		P3, p4, p8	• Recommending events to others
	Brand identity (7 codes)	P4, p12, p13, p15	• Creating a distinct identity for the event
		P8, p9, p11	• Differentiating the event from similar events
		P5, p9, p10, p13	• Differentiation from competitors
		P1, p9, p11, p14	• Understanding the full dimensions and nature of events
		P1, p6, p11, p12, p13	• Gaining a more real understanding of events
		P2, p4, p5	• Understanding the details and nuances of events
		P3, p5, p12, p15	• Closeness of identity with sports events
		P6, p7, p9	• A greater sense of closeness to athletes

Deeper experience	**Sport experience** **(6 codes)**	P1, p5, p11, p12, p14	• A more colorful experience of being present at events
		P4, p5, p9, p12, p15	• Deeper sports experiences at events
		P2, p6, p10, p12, p14, p15	• A greater sense of participation in the flow of organizing events
		P2, p7, p11, p12	• A reduced physical distance between fans and members of sports events
		P5, p6, p9, p12	• More and better engagement with members of sports events
	Non-sport experience **(5 codes)**	P3, p4, p9, p12, p14, p15	• Deeper understanding of the Phenomena around sport events
		P2, p5, p8, p9	• Greater involvement with side events
		P11, p13, p14	• Greater involvement with event marketing activities
		P5, p7, p9, p10	• Greater involvement with event sponsors
		P1, p3, p4	• Deeper personal and social experiences.
Service quality	**Easy access** **(6 codes)**		• Easy ticket purchase
		P1, p6, p7, p13, p14, p15	• Facilitated product purchase
		P8, p9, p11, p13	• Easy access to essential needs
		P3, p4, p6, p7, p12	• Easy chair selection
		P1, p5, p4, p7	• Access to news and information related to the event
		P5, p8, p11, p12	• Better access to athletes and members of sporting events
	Entertainment and excitement **(8 codes)**	P3, p9, p12, p13	• Combination of physical and virtual games
		P2, p3, p11, p15	• Increased appeal of events
		P1, p4, p12	• More enjoyment from events
		P10, p14, p15	• Greater diversity in entertainment at events
		P7, p10, p11	• More entertainment on event days
		P1, p3, p6, p11, p12, p13	• Greater excitement at events
		P8, p11, p12, p15	• More opportunities for attendance and participation
		P2, p9, p11, p15	• A wider variety of engaging and exciting games
	Better support **(7 codes)**	P7, p9, p10, p12	• Better guidance to places
		P5, p11, p14	• Facilitating responsiveness to expectations
		P9, p13, p14, p15	• Provision of pre-event services
		P6, p7, p10, p12	• Provision of post-event services
		P1, p10, p13	• Faster review of complaints and problems
		P2, p8, p9, p14	• Faster provision of services
		P5, p11, p13, p15	• Faster provision of information and data related to the event
Efficient interactions	**Interaction with fans** **(7 codes)**	P1, p9, p10, p14	• Getting familiar with other fans
		P2, p6, p13	• Establishing more communication with the fans
		P11, p13, p14	• Closer communication with the fans
		P3, p7, p9, p10	• Higher cohesion and coordination of the fans
		P8, p10, p12, p13	• Better management of fan bases
		P1, p2, p10, p12	• Development of fan bases
		P4, p9, p13	• Getting to know more about the fan community
	Interaction with managers **(6 codes)**	P3, p5, p11, p13	• The possibility of remote communication with managers
		P5, p6, p8, p11	• Closer communication with managers
		P7, p12, p13, p15	• More communication with managers on a virtual platform
		P1, p13, p15	• Creating multi-channel ways to communicate with managers
		P1, p9, p10, p11	• Better communication channels with managers
		P4, p5, p12, p15	• Providing the prompt feedback from managers
	Interaction with sponsors and marketers **(7 codes)**	P10, p12, p14, p15	• Increased visibility of financial supporters and sports marketers
		P3, p4, p9, p10	• Better visibility of financial supporters and sports marketers
		P2, p5, p6, p12	• Multi-channel interaction with financial supporters and

			sports marketers
		P9, p10, p11, p15	• **Increased attention to financial supporters and sports marketers**
		P3, p3, p9, p13	• **Better communication with financial supporters and sports marketers**
		P1, p2, p5, p7	• **More support from financial supporters and sports marketers**
		P2, p6, p9, p11, p14	• **More purchases from sponsors**
4 main themes	**12 sub-themes**	**82 codes**	

After examining the content of the interviews, four major themes and several sub-themes were explored. The first theme was "Event brand development". The importance of this theme is evident in the following statements by P3:

"By applying the phygital tools in sport events the fans and spectators will have this opportunity to get more accurate information about different issues around the clubs, events, and athletes. This helps them to be more update and have a pleasant image of the event".

The second theme was "Deeper experience". The significance of this theme is evident in the following statements by P12:

"The fans and spectators enjoy their time when they attend the match with their friends. They can experience deeper excitement by experiencing virtual tools beside physical ones."

The next theme was "Service quality". The following statements by P11 reinforce this claim:

"Applying both virtual and physical tools facilitate responsiveness to expectations of attendees, because this environment is more fast and flexible".

The forth theme was "Efficient interactions". P9 expressed his view about this theme as follows:

"Phygital environment provides the possibility of remote communication with managers, fans, and other spectators. This environment helps individuals to have more and closer interactions".

The findings in table one has been illustrated in the following graphic model (Figure. 1)
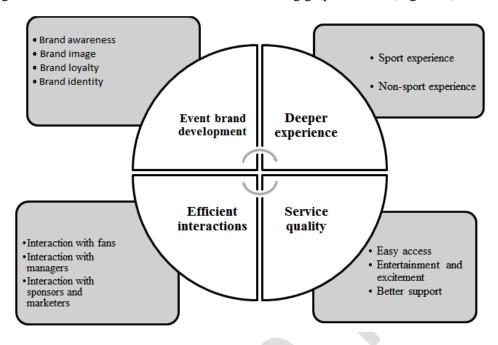

Figure 1. The model of the benefits of phygital marketing in sports events

Figure one represents the research model based on the thematic analysis of data, including four main themes and 12 sub-themes as the benefits of phygital marketing in sports events.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This research was conducted to identify the benefits of phygital marketing in sports events. This research can be considered as one of the first qualitative research that has been conducted in relation to the positive consequences of phygital marketing in sports events on the domestic and international scale. The findings revealed that the benefits of phygital marketing in sports events included "Event brand development", "Deeper experience", "Service quality", and "Efficient interactions". Considering the growing trend of technology in sports, the findings of this research demonstrated that phygital marketing as one of the key samples of technology can lead to the creation of significant benefits in sports events.

Event brand development: Brand development of sport events was found to be one of the key advantages of phygital marketing in sport setting. Phygital marketing, which combines physical and digital experiences, can influence brand development. Samat et al. (2023) found that phygital marketing in Olympic Games can be effective in increasing brand awareness and interaction with Olympic fans. Phygital marketing helps to promote the brand and influence the consumers' behavior and attitude (Kane et al., 2021). The phygital elements offer personal experiences for buyers and lead to increased store interaction, increased loyalty, value creation, customer engagement, and customer-based brand equity (Singh et al., 2019). Hyun et al. (2022) demonstrated that emotional appeal; web design and customer service in the physical space had a positive effect on customer-oriented brand equity and positively contributed to satisfaction and repurchase intention. Digitalization plays critical role in shopping behavior of consumers, and the brands attempt to elevate the value experienced by customers via "phygital" marketing (Hyun et al., 2022). Phygital marketing can also lead to increased customer satisfaction by reducing waiting time (Delinikolas et al., 2022). By integrating physical and digital channels, brands can reach a wider audience and increase awareness of their products or services. Phygital experiences can create a more immersive and engaging experience for customers, leading to higher levels of brand loyalty and customer retention. A consistent and well-executed phygital strategy can help establish a unique

brand identity and differentiate a brand from its competitors. By blending the physical and digital realms, phygital events can create more engaging, immersive, and memorable experiences for attendees, which can help to reinforce the event brand and create a lasting impression. Phygital events offer opportunities for interactivity, gamification, and personalized content that can keep attendees engaged and involved, developing a sense of community and belonging around the event brand.

Deeper experiences: Deeper experiences in sport events were found to be other significant advantages of phygital marketing in sport setting. Digitization has greatly affected the industry and has contributed to the emergence of new concepts such as Phygital, to provide a unique experience for customers (Pangarkar et al., 2022). Phygital helps customers live in the physical and digital environment simultaneously to gain more purchasing experience (Banik, 2021).Through phygital marketing there are a variety of experiences that involve a combination of physical and digital touch at the same time and in the same place (Belgiti et al., 2018). The consumers in the current age favor brands that distinct themselves from other rivals and offer personal, exciting, and special experiences that stimulate the feelings (Mamina and Tolstikova, 2020). Phygital experiences are a harmonious blend of the physical and digital realms, creating transformative, unique experiences that transcend the limitations of traditional methods (Halibek et al., 2019). Companies like Nike and Adidas also guide and support their customers by developing a physical environment and using different applications in their physical centers (Mishra et al., 2021). Digital technologies unlock the gateway to immersive, engaging experiences for customers, where the boundaries between the virtual and physical dissolve, creating a heightened level of entertainment, interaction, and personalization (Foster and McLelland, 2015). Through applying phygital marketing strategies, it may provide consumers with experiences beyond those that can only be provided through digital tools. Phygital experiences can create a more immersive experience for sport fans, blending physical and digital elements in ways that allow them to fully engage with the event. The use of augmented reality technology can enhance the physical environment, making it more interactive and engaging for customers. Phygital marketing can help events to personalize experiences for fans, creating a deeper connection between the brand and the sport fans. Phygital events often offer more opportunities for attendees to engage with the content, each other, and the event in creative and interactive ways. This can include everything from augmented reality exhibits to interactive displays and virtual networking platforms. By leveraging digital technologies, phygital events can offer personalized experiences tailored to individual attendee preferences and demands. This can help create a more intimate, engaging experience that resonates more deeply with attendees.

Service quality: Service quality in sport events were found to be other significant advantages of phygital marketing in sport setting. Iduado et al. (2021) showed that playing in the phygital space led to a sensory, interactive, pleasure and suspense experience. Phygital marketing reduces costs, captures consumers' data, offers the customers with more purchasing options, and enhances the buying experience (Selik et al., 2023). Betat (2022) stated that the phygital phenomenon responds to their tangible (quality needs) and intangible (emotional needs) needs according to consumers' values. The phygital offers consumers with a distinctive experience by providing value and trust while reducing confusion (Perkaria, 2018). Brands that follow phygital marketing approaches try to present a special experience to their customers and stay on the cutting edge in the face of fierce competition (Biolo & Amati, 2024). The findings of Mishra et al. (2023) showed that phygital integration has an impact on consumers' phygital experience by increasing the feeling of power and satisfaction, and it helps to retain consumers and leads to long-term relationships with them. By integrating physical and digital channels, sport events can provide more responsive and personalized service to customers, leading to a higher level of fans' satisfaction. Digital tools beside the physical assets can streamline processes and make it easier for sport events to deliver efficient and effective service to sport fans. The integration of digital and physical tools can enable the managers of sport events to collect and analyze data more effectively, allowing the personnel to identify opportunities for service improvement. Integrating digital technologies into physical environments, phygital environments can offer more channels for customer service, making it easier for attendees to get help, provide feedback, or engage with event staff in real time. Digital technologies can automate processes and

streamline operations, resulting in faster and more efficient service, which can contribute to a higher quality experience for attendees.

Efficient interactions: According to the findings, efficient interactions in sport events were found to be other significant advantages of phygital marketing in sport setting. Bonfanti et al. (2023) found that the Phygital experience provide indelible memories that result in greater customer interaction with the environment. Shook et al. (2021) found that Phygital marketing can be effective in interacting with sports fans. Interactive technologies act as a bridge between the virtual and physical worlds, breaking down barriers and creating a seamless, intuitive phygital journey for customers (Siregar & Kent, 2019). Phygital marketing offers the consumers a new opportunity to buy and allows them to intelligently interact with products and tools (Chang & Chen, 2021). Environmental features serve as catalysts for enhanced customer participation and interaction, empowering them to co-create unique, memorable experiences that leave a lasting impact on their perception of the environment (Mohd Ramli & Omar, 2017). The consumers only feel empowered when they are confident of data from various online and offline channels (Bruniarzyk & Griffin, 2014). Multichannel communication creates positive customer attitudes and increases reliability (Heinberg et al., 2018). The phygital experience transcends the realm of consumer preferences and tastes, instead delving into the psychological underpinnings of modern marketing. The harmonious blend of physical and digital elements shapes consumers' perceptions of products, brands, and values, driving individual interpretations and preferences that can be harnessed to create compelling, lasting experiences. The development of technology has opened the way for the widespread exchange of information about goods and services, while sharing the experiences of contacting them. By integrating physical and digital channels, sport events can make it easier for fans and spectators to interact with other parts of the event, reducing the amount of time and effort required to get information or receive assistance. Digital tools such as chatbots and self-service portals can enable fans and spectators to access information and resolve issues on their own, without the need for direct interaction with a customer service representative.

Marketing has undergone a seismic shift in recent years, driven by rapid technological advancements, shifting consumer behavior, and intense competition. This evolution, which shows no signs of slowing down, presents a host of challenges for managers, who must grapple with uncertainty, volatility, and unpredictability in their efforts to reach, engage, and influence today's consumers. In this constantly evolving landscape, businesses must stay agile, adaptable, and responsive, continuously monitoring trends, harnessing new technologies, and developing innovative strategies that resonate with customers and deliver tangible business value. Review of the research literature reveals that many scholars believe that academic research on customer experience management in the field of phygital is very limited (Klaus, 2021), and while the consequences of the combined approach of phygital marketing remain largely unknown, this study contribute to the field by identifying the potential benefits of phygital marketing in sports events to provide a better understanding of the long-term consequences of this marketing approach in the sports industry. The results of this research enable sports managers and sport marketers to understand the significance of phygital marketing in sport setting and integrate physical and digital channels to increase the revenue generation. Intense competition makes clubs and sports organizations reconsider their marketing strategies in order not to miss opportunities to contact more fans and combine online and offline channels as a strategic movement to improve the phygital experience of their stakeholders. Providing exclusive phygital clubhouses that offer personalized, immersive experiences, including VIP access to players and coaches, unique merchandise, Augmented Reality, and Virtual Reality (AR/VR) technologies can be very effective. Establishing host live and virtual watch parties that blend real-world social interactions with interactive digital experiences, can be very critical in fostering community and fan engagement. Moreover, developing interactive digital platforms that allow fans to engage with their favorite teams and players, even when they can't be at the game, through activities like virtual training sessions or video chats make sport marketers and managers to use the benefits of phygital environment in sport events efficiently.

Future studies can investigate phygital marketing in other sport research fields. In addition, the qualitative analysis used by this study cannot be a guarantee for the generalization of the findings of this research.

Therefore, an important way for future research can be to test the proposed framework on larger samples using quantitative methods. Future studies can focus on various phygital tools such as artificial intelligence systems etc. in sports on a case-by-case basis. In particular, generation Z fans consumers that do not see a difference between the virtual and real worlds compared to other generations can be one of the important population for studying the phygital marketing activity dimensions. Concerns related to the privacy and data security of customers and sports fans in the phygital space can also be one of the interesting topics in future studies.

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