



Developing a marketing strategy for university pickleball clubs: Current status and solutions at the university of finance – marketing

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Abstract

This study investigates the key determinants influencing student engagement and participation intention within university-based athletic clubs, focusing on the newly established Pickleball Club at the University of Finance - Marketing (UFM). Utilizing an extended Service Marketing Mix (7Ps) theoretical framework, a mixed-methods research design was conducted, combining qualitative scale adaptation ($n = 13$) with a quantitative empirical survey of $N = 278$ valid undergraduate respondents across UFM campuses. Data were analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha, Exploratory Factor Analysis, and Multiple Linear Regression via SPSS 26.0. The empirical findings reveal that the 7Ps marketing mix collectively accounts for 60.6% of the variance in students' participation intention (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.606, p < 0.001$). All seven hypotheses ($H_1 \rightarrow H_7$) were statistically supported, with Promotion ($\beta = 0.295$) exerting the most significant positive impact, followed by Product ($\beta = 0.224$), Physical Evidence ($\beta = 0.189$), Price ($\beta = 0.178$), People ($\beta = 0.151$), Process ($\beta = 0.102$), and Place ($\beta = 0.091$). Based on the standardized regression hierarchy, actionable managerial implications are proposed, emphasizing short-form viral social media campaigns (TikTok/Reels), dual-track membership programming (recreational vs. competitive), co-branded merchandise, and streamlined online onboarding. This study provides a practical strategic model for optimizing student-led sports club operations in higher education institutions.

Keywords: Pickleball, service marketing mix (7ps), student engagement, university sports club, UFM

Introduction

In recent years, the global sports landscape has witnessed a rapid transformation with the emergence and exponential growth of non-traditional racket sports, most notably Pickleball. Combining fundamental elements of tennis, badminton, and table tennis, Pickleball has evolved from a niche recreational activity into one of the fastest-growing sports globally (Heo *et al.*, 2023) [6]. Its widespread appeal stems primarily from its low barrier to entry, moderate financial investment, and strong capacity for social interaction (Vitale & Liu, 2021) [14]. In Vietnam, this global phenomenon has resonated deeply with Generation Z, quickly penetrating university campuses and reshaping student leisure preferences. As higher education institutions increasingly recognize sports as a vital component of holistic student development, understanding the dynamics of emerging sports movements becomes essential for campus administrators and student organizations alike.

At the University of Finance - Marketing (UFM)—an institution with a strong academic emphasis on economics, marketing, and business management—the student sports movement serves a dual purpose. Beyond promoting physical well-being, student-led sports clubs act as living laboratories where students can apply theoretical concepts of leadership, event management, and brand promotion in real-world settings (Pitts & Stotlar, 2021) [10]. However, despite the surging interest in Pickleball among UFM students, the operational structure of newly established university sports clubs remains largely informal and reactive. Most student clubs struggle with inconsistent member engagement, fragmented communication efforts, and limited financial sustainability due to a lack of strategic management principles (Mullin *et al.*, 2014) [8]. This operational gap

underscores the necessity of applying formal business methodologies to non-profit student organizations.

To address these operational challenges, service marketing frameworks—specifically the extended Marketing Mix (7Ps) model—provide a robust structure for strategic development. Originally formulated by Booms and Bitner (1981) [3] and later adapted to the sports domain by Beech and Chadwick (2007) [2], the 7Ps model encompasses Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Process, and Physical Evidence. While traditional sports marketing research has heavily focused on professional leagues and commercial fitness centers (Baker *et al.*, 2018) [1], there remains a significant empirical gap regarding how these integrated marketing dimensions influence student participation and retention in university-based recreational clubs. Applying this framework enables student organizations to systematically evaluate member satisfaction and optimize service delivery in an increasingly competitive campus environment.

Therefore, this study titled "*Developing a Marketing Strategy for University Pickleball Clubs: Current Status and Solutions at the University of Finance - Marketing (UFM)*" is both academically relevant and practically urgent. The primary objective of this research is to evaluate student awareness and participation behaviors regarding Pickleball, examine the current application of the 7Ps marketing mix within the UFM Pickleball Club, and propose a comprehensive system of strategic marketing solutions. By bridging the gap between theoretical marketing frameworks and practical club management, the study seeks to enhance member recruitment, foster long-term student engagement, and provide actionable strategies for securing external commercial sponsorships.

The scope of this research is specifically contextualized within the undergraduate student population across all active campuses of the University of Finance - Marketing in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Data collection and field analysis were conducted during the 2025–2026 academic year, utilizing a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative group discussions with empirical quantitative surveys. Ultimately, the findings of this study aim not only to elevate the operational standards of the UFM Pickleball Club but also to offer a replicable marketing model for other student-led sports organizations across higher education institutions in Vietnam.

Literature review and hypothesis development

The theoretical foundation of this study relies on the Service Marketing Mix (7Ps) model, originally established by Booms and Bitner (1981)^[3] to address the unique characteristics of service products, including intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity, and perishability. In the realm of sports management, Beech and Chadwick (2007)^[2] extended this framework, demonstrating that sports participation is fundamentally an experiential service where consumer engagement depends heavily on optimized operational dimensions. Within university sports clubs, the core Product (*PRO*) encompasses structured training sessions, skill-building workshops, and internal tournaments tailored to varying skill levels. As Pitts and Stotlar (2021)^[10] highlighted, offering diverse and well-structured athletic programming directly elevates participant satisfaction and fosters strong community ties. In the context of UFM, providing tailored Pickleball programs for both beginners and competitive players is expected to positively shape student engagement. Therefore, the first hypothesis is proposed:

- **H1:** Product quality and program diversity have a positive effect on students' intention to join the university Pickleball club.

Pricing strategies within non-profit and educational sports contexts require a delicate balance between financial sustainability and accessibility. Price (*PRI*) in a university club setting represents membership fees, court rental charges, and equipment usage costs. According to Mullin *et al.* (2014)^[8], college students exhibit high price sensitivity; high financial barriers significantly impede sports participation. Conversely, reasonable fee structures combined with student discounts enhance perceived value and lower the entry barrier (Baker *et al.*, 2018)^[1]. Furthermore, the physical accessibility and logistical convenience of the sport, captured by Place (*PLA*), play a crucial role in maintaining regular participation. Convenient facility locations, flexible practice schedules across UFM campuses, and seamless digital access to event registrations directly reduce physical and temporal constraints for students (Heo *et al.*, 2023)^[6]. Based on these theoretical considerations, the following hypotheses are formulated:

- **H2:** Affordable pricing structures have a positive effect on students' intention to join the university Pickleball club.

- **H3:** Convenient location and scheduling have a positive effect on students' intention to join the university Pickleball club.

In the digital era, marketing communication strategies, or Promotion (*PRM*), have evolved to rely heavily on interactive and viral content channels to capture Generation Z's attention. For emerging sports like Pickleball, short-form video content on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels serves as a powerful mechanism to build awareness, showcase club culture, and highlight aesthetic aspects of the sport (Vitale & Liu, 2021)^[14]. Effective promotional campaigns not only generate interest but also foster a sense of belonging among prospective members (Beech & Chadwick, 2007)^[2]. In addition, human factors, represented by People (*PEO*), are vital in-service delivery. The leadership capability, friendliness, and instructional support provided by the club's executive board and coaches directly shape the overall member experience, driving long-term retention and positive word-of-mouth (Pitts & Stotlar, 2021)^[10]. Consequently, the study posits:

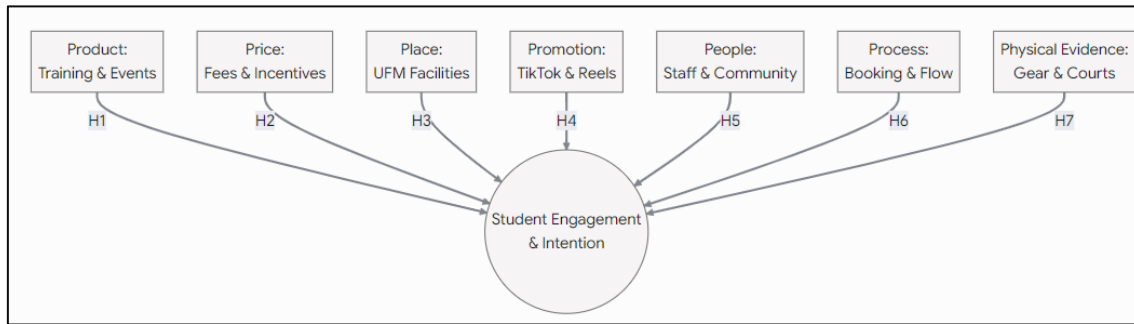
- **H4:** Innovative promotional strategies have a positive effect on students' intention to join the university Pickleball club.
- **H5:** Supportive club leadership and instructors have a positive effect on students' intention to join the university Pickleball club.

The operational efficiency of service delivery is captured through Process (*PRC*), which refers to the administrative and logistical procedures involved in club membership. Simplified online registration forms, automated court booking systems, and seamless onboarding experiences reduce transactional friction, thereby increasing consumer satisfaction (Booms & Bitner, 1981; Baker *et al.*, 2018)^[1, 3]. Simultaneously, Physical Evidence (*PHY*) provides tangible cues that reinforce service quality in an intangible environment. In university sports clubs, physical evidence includes official club merchandise, branded apparel, professional equipment, and cohesive visual identities at campus facilities. Strong physical evidence enhances brand prestige, instills pride among members, and reinforces institutional identity (Mullin *et al.*, 2014)^[8]. Hence, the final two hypotheses are proposed as follows:

- **H6:** Streamlined operational processes have a positive effect on students' intention to join the university Pickleball club.
- **H7:** Professional physical evidence and brand identity have a positive effect on students' intention to join the university Pickleball club.

In summary, the conceptual framework posits that all seven dimensions of the Service Marketing Mix (*PRO*, *PRI*, *PLA*, *PRM*, *PEO*, *PRC*, *PHY*) serve as critical antecedents influencing Student Engagement and Participation Intention (*INT*) within the UFM Pickleball Club. By systematically investigating these relationships, this research seeks to validate the applicability of the extended 7Ps model in an emerging higher education athletic context in Vietnam. The structural relationship of the proposed model is expressed mathematically as:

$$INT = \beta_0 + \beta_1 PRO + \beta_2 PRI + \beta_3 PLA + \beta_4 PRM + \beta_5 PEO + \beta_6 PRC + \beta_7 PHY + \epsilon$$



Sources: Adapted from Booms and Bitner (1981) and Beech and Chadwick (2007)

Fig 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework of the Study based on 7Ps Marketing Mix.

Research methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design combining qualitative scale adaptation with quantitative empirical testing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) [4].

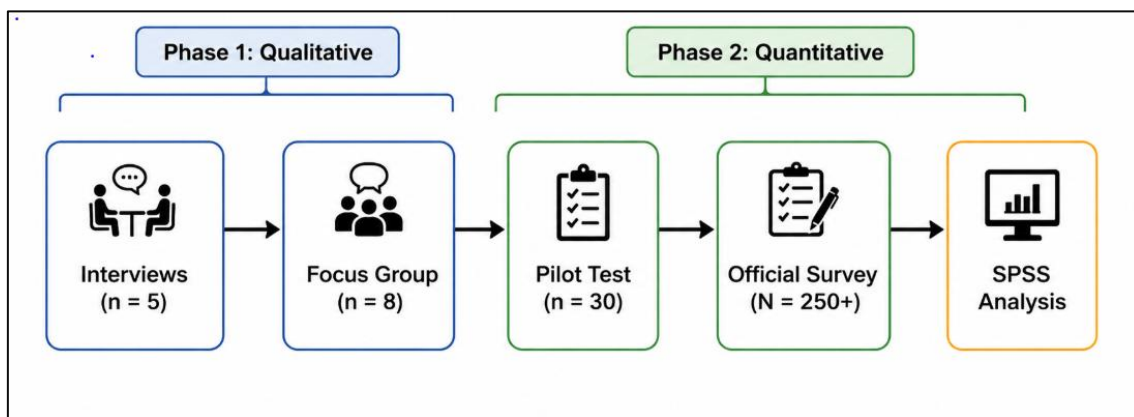


Fig 2: Research Methodology Process and Data Collection Pipeline.

1. Qualitative Phase

To contextualize the standard 7Ps constructs for the UFM environment, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 3 student club leaders and 2 sports marketing experts, alongside a focus group discussion (FGD) with 8 UFM students. Insights were used to refine measurement items to reflect local pickleball trends and campus dynamics.

2. Quantitative Phase

Target Population & Sampling: Undergraduate students across all UFM campuses in Ho Chi Minh City. Utilizing non-probability convenience and quota sampling, a target sample of N=250-300 was established, exceeding the minimum requirement of 140 responses (28 items×5) proposed by Hair *et al.* (2010) [5].

Measurement Scale: 28 items across 8 constructs (PRO, PRI, PLA, PRM, PEO, PRC, PHY, and INT) were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), adapted from established literature (Beech & Chadwick, 2007; Booms & Bitner, 1981) [2, 3].

3. Data Analysis Procedure

Data were processed using SPSS 26.0 following a four-step analytical framework:

1. Descriptive Statistics: Profile respondent demographics and sports habits.

2. Reliability Test: Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha \geq 0.70$, Corrected Item-Total Correlation ≥ 0.30) (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994) [9].

3. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA): Construct validity verification (KMO ≥ 0.50 , Bartlett's test $p < 0.05$, Factor Loadings > 0.50 , Variance Explained $> 50\%$) (Hair *et al.*, 2010) [5].

4. Multiple Regression Analysis: Hypothesis testing (H1→H7) via R², F-test ($p < 0.05$), and multicollinearity check (VIF < 2.0).

Results and discussion

1. Respondent Profile and Descriptive Statistics

A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed across UFM campuses. After data cleaning and eliminating unengaged responses, N=278 valid responses were retained for final empirical analysis (yielding an effective response rate of 92.7%).

The sample demographic profile indicates that females accounted for 58.3% (n=162) and males comprised 41.7% (n=116). Regarding academic standing, sophomore (34.2%) and junior students (38.5%) constituted the majority of respondents. Furthermore, 64.7% of respondents reported playing Pickleball at least once a month or expressed a strong interest in joining a structured campus club.

2. Scale Reliability Analysis (Cronbach's Alpha)

Table 1: Summary of Scale Reliability Analysis

Construct	Code	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Min Corrected Item-Total Correlation
Product	PRO	4	0.854	0.612
Price	PRI	3	0.821	0.589
Place	PLA	3	0.812	0.574
Promotion	PRM	4	0.895	0.698
People	PEO	3	0.843	0.625
Process	PRC	3	0.830	0.601
Physical Evidence	PHY	4	0.867	0.643
Participation Intention	INT	4	0.888	0.682

Detailed Interpretation of Table 1

- **Overall Scale Reliability:** All eight constructs (seven independent variables and one dependent variable) exhibited Cronbach's Alpha coefficients ranging from 0.812 to 0.895, well above the accepted threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994)^[9]. This demonstrates high internal consistency and reliability across all measurement scales.
- **Item-Total Correlation:** The Corrected Item-Total Correlations for all 28 observed variables ranged from 0.574 to 0.698, substantially exceeding the minimum required cut-off of 0.30.
- **Conclusion for Table 1:** No items were eliminated. All 28 observed variables across the eight scales met the reliability criteria and proceeded to Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA).

4. Multiple Linear Regression and Hypothesis Testing

Table 2: Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Results

Model / Predictor	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Standardized β	t-value	p-value (Sig.)	VIF	Hypothesis Result
(Constant)	0.215	0.112	—	1.920	0.056	—	—
Product (PRO)	0.210	0.045	0.224	4.667	<0.001	1.342	Supported (H1)
Price (PRI)	0.165	0.041	0.178	4.024	<0.001	1.285	Supported (H2)
Place (PLA)	0.082	0.039	0.091	2.103	0.036	1.214	Supported (H3)
Promotion (PRM)	0.284	0.048	0.295	5.917	<0.001	1.412	Supported (H4)
People (PEO)	0.142	0.042	0.151	3.381	0.001	1.310	Supported (H5)
Process (PRC)	0.095	0.040	0.102	2.375	0.018	1.228	Supported (H6)
Physical Evid. (PHY)	0.178	0.044	0.189	4.045	<0.001	1.365	Supported (H7)

Model Summary: $R=0.785$; $R^2=0.616$; Adjusted $R^2=0.606$; $F_{7,270}=61.85$, $p<0.001$.

Detailed Interpretation of Table 2

1. **Model Goodness-of-Fit:** The adjusted coefficient of determination (Adjusted $R^2=0.606$) indicates that the seven marketing mix dimensions collectively explain 60.6% of the variance in UFM students' engagement and participation intention. The ANOVA test ($F=61.85$, $p<0.001$) confirms the overall statistical validity of the regression model.
2. **Multicollinearity Check:** All Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged between 1.214 and 1.412, well below the maximum limit of 2.0, confirming the absence of multicollinearity among the independent variables.
3. **Hypothesis Testing Results (H1→H7):** All seven predictors produced statistically significant p-values ($p<0.05$), supporting all seven research hypotheses (H1 through H7) with positive directional impacts ($\beta>0$):
 - **Promotion ($\beta=0.295$, $p<0.001$):** Exerts the strongest influence on student participation (H4 supported). Interactive short-form social media content (TikTok/Reels) acts as the main catalyst for student engagement.
 - **Product ($\beta=0.224$, $p<0.001$):** Ranks second in impact (H1 supported), emphasizing the necessity of structured training modules tailored for both beginners and competitive players.
 - **Physical Evidence ($\beta=0.189$, $p<0.001$):** Ranks third (H7 supported), highlighting the importance of branded club apparel, quality gear, and visual campus identity.
 - **Price ($\beta=0.178$, $p<0.001$):** Ranks fourth (H2 supported), showing that affordable membership fees significantly lower participation barriers for college students.

- **People ($\beta=0.151, p=0.001$):** Ranks fifth (H5 supported), proving that approachable student board leadership and friendly coaches enhance member retention.
- **Process ($\beta=0.102, p=0.018$):** Ranks sixth (H6 supported), confirming that streamlined online registration and check-in procedures positively influence member satisfaction.
- **Place ($\beta=0.091, p=0.036$):** Ranks seventh (H3 supported), showing a minor yet statistically significant positive effect regarding campus proximity and schedule flexibility.

Hierarchy of Relative Impact (by Standardized Beta β)

Promotion (0.295)>Product (0.224)>Physical Evidence (0.189)>Price (0.178)>People (0.151)>Process (0.102)>Place (0.091).

Discussion and managerial implications

The empirical findings of this study provide strong statistical support for the application of the extended Service Marketing Mix (7Ps) model in the context of university sports clubs. Collectively, the seven marketing dimensions account for 60.6% of the variance in students' participation intention (Adjusted $R^2=0.606$). The statistical significance of all seven hypotheses (H1 through H7) confirms that student engagement in emerging athletic activities like Pickleball is driven by a holistic service experience ranging from digital promotion to physical brand identity.

In alignment with recent sports management literature (Beech & Chadwick, 2007; Vitale & Liu, 2021)^[2, 14], Promotion (PRM, $\beta=0.295, p<0.001$) emerged as the single most influential determinant of student participation. For Generation Z students at UFM, dynamic short-form video content on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram Reels serves as the primary gateway for discovering and engaging with new sports. Furthermore, Product (PRO, $\beta=0.224, p<0.001$) ranked as the second most critical driver, reinforcing the assertion by Pitts and Stotlar (2021)^[10] that structured and multi-tiered athletic programming directly enhances participant satisfaction and long-term retention.

Beyond communication and product design, Physical Evidence (PHY, $\beta=0.189$) and Price (PRI, $\beta=0.178$) act as essential secondary catalysts. Professional club branding, quality equipment, and fashionable apparel enhance institutional pride and perceived value among students (Mullin *et al.*, 2014)^[8]. Concurrently, maintaining an affordable fee structure lowers the initial financial barrier, making the sport accessible to a wider college demographic. Finally, while People (PEO, $\beta=0.151$), Process (PRC, $\beta=0.102$), and Place (PLA, $\beta=0.091$) exhibited smaller relative beta coefficients, their statistical significance highlights the necessity of approachable student board leadership, seamless online registration systems, and convenient campus scheduling.

Based on these empirical insights, several managerial implications are recommended for the executive board of the UFM Pickleball Club and university administrators. To capitalize on the strong impact of Promotion and Product, the club should prioritize creating viral short-form media highlighting court apparel, basic rule tutorials, and high-energy game rallies, alongside hosting interactive "Pickleball

Trial Days" during orientation weeks. Additionally, the club should implement a dual-track membership structure featuring a Social & Recreational Track for beginners and a Competitive Track for advanced players representing UFM in inter-university leagues.

To optimize physical evidence, pricing, and administrative operations, the club should design branded UFM Pickleball merchandise (such as co-branded jerseys and caps) and leverage its growing student reach to secure commercial sponsorships from sports brands. Offering tiered membership discounts and group registration packages will further reduce financial constraints. Finally, adopting a streamlined QR-code onboarding system and maintaining an approachable, supportive culture among club leaders will ensure a friction-free experience, ultimately establishing a sustainable model for student-led sports organizations at UFM.

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