EVOLVING APPROACHES TO SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING STRATEGY OF ENGLISH FOOTBALL CLUBS: A BRAND PERSPECTIVE

JEFF MCCARTHY

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Evolving Approaches to Social Media Marketing Strategy of English Football Clubs: A Brand Perspective

JEFF MCCARTHY

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Department of Marketing, Retail and Tourism
Faculty of Business and Law
Manchester Metropolitan University

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Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification at this or any other university or institute of learning.

Signed

Jeff McCarthy

Abstract

Social media marketing strategy is constantly evolving. This thesis seeks to contribute to understanding of evolving organisational approaches to social media marketing strategy, how it is operationalised, and the role of the brand in social media communications. The context is football clubs. The study contributes to knowledge in three areas: social media marketing strategy; operationalisation of social media marketing strategy; the role of the brand in a social media context. The study is the first to feature a range of football clubs across three tiers of the English football pyramid, using several social media marketing platforms. It therefore addresses knowledge gaps in social media marketing strategy in sport.

Methodologically, the study adopts the ontological and epistemological position that reality is socially constructed by people. Using a phased qualitative approach, the preliminary study of four football clubs was followed by the main study of eighteen representatives at eight football clubs in addition to two industry experts. Data gathering used semi-structured interviews with social media marketing strategy practitioners in football clubs, access to whom is extremely rare. Thematic analysis was used to develop insights from the rich data.

The findings revealed that social media marketing has been adopted as a key strategic marketing channel and has evolved considerably over time. Five themes for the evolving organizational approaches to social media marketing strategy of football clubs are: **Trust**; **The Collective**; **Bandwagon**; **Content Marketing Strategy**; and **Strategic Development**. Together they illustrate how clubs have evolved from a degree of discomfort of social media marketing strategy, to a more open approach that is integral to how they communicate. Regarding how football clubs operationalise their social media marketing strategy, the study identifies two themes of: **Communication**; and **Power and Impact of Social Media Marketing**. These reveal how clubs communicate, to realise the benefits and minimise the risks of social media marketing strategy. In a tribal and emotional sport such as football, important insights are provided about the dark side of social media. Collectively, when combined with the organisational approaches to social media marketing strategy, this study contradicts established frameworks that encourage a linear process of strategy development, implementation, and measurement. Instead, an

iterative process is encouraged through a framework appropriate to football clubs and sport. Finally, the role of the brand in social media communications is found to be **Brand as Badge of Honour**.

This study has implications for scholars as it contributes to our understanding of how social media marketing strategy and the role of the brand has evolved, with lessons being continually learned in a rapidly changing sporting and social media landscape. For practitioners, the study provides an industry-evidenced conceptualisation for developing and implementing social media marketing strategy, that incorporates the central unifying role of the 'Brand as Badge of Honour', around which clubs can nurture a trust-based club-fan relationship.

Key contributions to social media marketing strategy theory and to brand theory are made through the provision of conceptual frameworks: (i) **Social Media Marketing Strategy Value Proposition Planner**; (ii) **Risk:Reward Perceptual Map** (for operationalising the power and impact of social media marketing strategy); (iii) **Brand as Badge of Honour** honeycomb; (iv) **Enabling and Constraining Industry Forces of Social Media Marketing Strategy**; and (v) **Forces Influencing Stages of Social Media Marketing Strategy Development**.

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"It always seems impossible until it's done" Nelson Mandela

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Research Output from this Thesis

Journal Articles (n = 2)

McCarthy, J., Rowley, J. and Keegan, B. J. (2022) Social media marketing strategies in English Football Clubs, *Soccer and Society*, Vol 23. Iss 4-5, pp. 513-528.

McCarthy, J. Rowley, J. Pioch, E. and Ashworth, C.J. (2014), Managing brand presence through social media: the case of UK football clubs, *Internet Research*, Vol. 24 Iss 2, pp. 181-204.

Book Chapters (n = 1)

Rowley, J. Ashworth, C. McCarthy, J. (2014) "Social Media: The Issues, Benefits and Strategies for Brands", In Lee, I. (ed.) *Integrating Social Media into Business Practice, Applications, Management, and Models*, Hershey: IGI Global, pp. 98-126.

Conference Papers (n = 8)

- McCarthy, J., Keegan, B.J, Rowley, J. (2019) Football club social media strategies in a tribal and polarised climate, *Proceedings of The Football Collective Conference 2019: From Grassroots to hyper commodification*, Sheffield.

- McCarthy, J. and Keegan, B.J. (2016) The evaluation of social media use: A longitudinal study. In McLeay, F., Woodruffe-Burton, H., Hart, D., Coates, N. (eds.) *Proceedings of the Academy of Marketing Conference 2016: Radical Marketing*, Academy of Marketing, Newcastle.

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Other Research Impact

- BBC Sport, 2023, PhD Findings, June 2023.
- Futsal Industry Conference 2019 "Building an Online Audience in Emerging Sports", Manchester, March 2019.
- University of Wolverhampton 2019, PhD Findings, April 2019.

1 Introduction to the Research

1.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a thesis overview before outlining the key trends and aspects of the social media marketing industry, followed by a brief outline of the football industry and the growth of social media marketing by football clubs. The research scope and style of presentation are then outlined, followed by the researcher motivations and values. Then the research aims and objectives of both the preliminary study and the main study are confirmed. Finally, the thesis structure is detailed, using a synopsis of each chapter.

1.2 Thesis Overview

In the social media marketing strategy, sport and football literature, there are many calls for research, including how the studies may be conducted (e.g. Aral et al., 2013; Filo et al., 2015; Vale and Fernandes, 2018; Aichner, 2019). This is a qualitative study adopting a social constructionist perspective, exploring the phenomena of social media marketing strategy in the context of English football clubs. Conducted in two phases, the research ultimately investigates evolving use of social media marketing strategy, how they are operationalised, and finally, the role of the brand in social media marketing communications. Semi-structured interviews with practitioners of social media marketing strategy at English football clubs were conducted. During the preliminary study they had limited experience of social media marketing strategy, whereas during the main study, practitioners had built up to eight years of experience in this field.

Building on the literature, thematic analysis of the qualitative data and discussion of the findings of this study resulted in six conceptual frameworks in the main study, following one arising from the preliminary study. The first featured in a 2014 published journal article and was the **key emergent themes related to social media marketing strategy issues perceived and potential benefits**, as understood by football clubs at that time (Figure 4-1, pp.139). This work helped set the research agenda that followed. The second conceptual framework is the **Risk:Reward Perceptual Map** (Figure 5-7, pp.235) informed by the positive and

negative aspects of operational social media marketing communication, and its power and impact. The third conceptual framework is the **Brand as Badge of Honour** honeycomb (Figure 5-8, pp.246) that provides an integrated approach to enact the role of the brand in social media marketing communications. The fourth conceptual framework is the **Social Media Marketing Strategy Value Proposition Planner** (Figure 5-9, pp.250). Published in 2022, it is the first social media marketing strategy framework based solely on sport, i.e., football, and insights from practitioners across a range of clubs at different levels of football, using a variety of social media marketing platforms. The fifth framework is the **Enabling and Constraining Forces of Social Media Marketing Strategy** (Figure 6-2, pp.256), based on the temporal data of the entire phased study. The sixth conceptual framework, **Forces Influencing Stages of Social Media Marketing Strategy** (Figure 6-4, pp.260), is also based on that temporal data.

This thesis therefore offers a range of new perspectives from practitioner interviews that enhance the theoretical foundation of social media marketing strategy, in addition to its application in sport.

1.3 The Social Media Marketing Industry

Digital marketing consists of several channels, including social media marketing, as shown in Figure 1-1. It is important to set into context the growing importance of the social media marketing industry between the timings of the preliminary study and the main study. This section begins by providing an insight into the tendency for marketers to use social media marketing in 2014, before reviewing current global and UK social media marketing industry trends. Comparison between 2022 and 2014 is provided where appropriate to help demonstrate the growing importance of social media marketing to brands. The section then focuses on social media marketing audience trends, resulting in a section that articulates the importance of this industry to the contemporary media landscape and why it warrants academic research.

Figure 1-1: Types of Digital Marketing

Types of Digital Marketing
Search Engine Marketing (SEM)
Content Marketing
Social Media Marketing
Pay Per Click (PPC)
Affiliate Marketing
Native Advertising
Marketing Automation
Email Marketing
Online PR
Inbound Marketing
Sponsored Content
Instant Messaging Marketing

Source: Adapted from (Alexander, 2022)

As early as 2014, marketers claimed that social marketing activity had: (i) generated more exposure for their organisations (92%); (ii) increased [website] traffic (80%); and (iii) developed loyal fans (72%) (Stelzner, 2014). Those top three benefits were highly relevant to football clubs evaluating how they could develop social media marketing strategy at that time and the potential benefits to be derived. The perceived issues and benefits of social media marketing strategy from the preliminary study are evidenced in the Findings and Discussion in Chapter Four. Despite 94% of marketers claiming to use Facebook in 2014, only 34% thought they were using the platform effectively, and even that was difficult to measure at the time (Stelzner, 2014). This compares to 2022 when 77% of marketers claiming social media marketing is very or somewhat effective (Needle, 2022).

1.3.1   Global and UK Social Media Industry Trends

Social media advertising has developed to become one of the most popular and disruptive forms of digital marketing techniques globally (Fenton and Helleu, 2018;

Statista, 2022b). Global internet advertising spend (Display) in 2022 is expected to reach $289.8 billion, with social media advertising overtaking search advertising for the first time at $187 billion vs $164.6 billion respectively (Statista, 2022e). This compares to a total global spend of $63.3 billion in 2014 with social media at $14.9 billion and search at $55.4 billion (Statista, 2022e). Globally, internet advertising spend continued to grow in value and as a proportion of overall spend, despite the impact of the Covid pandemic (WARC, 2020). Examples of 2021 vs. 2020 growth in social media advertising spend by country include: Brazil 23%; China 19%; UK 8.9%; and US 10.9% (WARC, 2020).

The UK is the leading European country in internet advertising spend (Statista, 2022e), with £31.2 billion in 2022 accounting for almost 80% of total advertising spend that year (Statista, 2022a). Figure 1-2 shows the growth of UK advertising spend from 2014 when internet advertising was £7.1 billion and 45% of total UK advertising spend, demonstrating the rapidly growing prominence of internet advertising in the UK digital marketing landscape. UK social media advertising spend is expected to reach £8.5 billion in 2022, with social media advertising on mobile accounting for 70.5% of that figure in 2022, compared to 65.4% five years previously (Statista, 2022h).

As of November 2021, marketers worldwide were planning to increase their spending on social media platforms. For example, the percentage of marketers planning to increase their spending on specific platforms was: TikTok 84%; Instagram 64%; Facebook 37%; Snapchat 26%; Twitter 23% (Statista, 2022g). Such intentions reflect behaviour of UK and Ireland consumers, who are most likely to connect with a brand via public social media engagement and by social media direct messaging on social media, rather than use live chat, phone or text (Murnaghan, 2022).

Figure 1-2: UK Advertising Spend from 2014 to 2027, by media type (in million GBP)
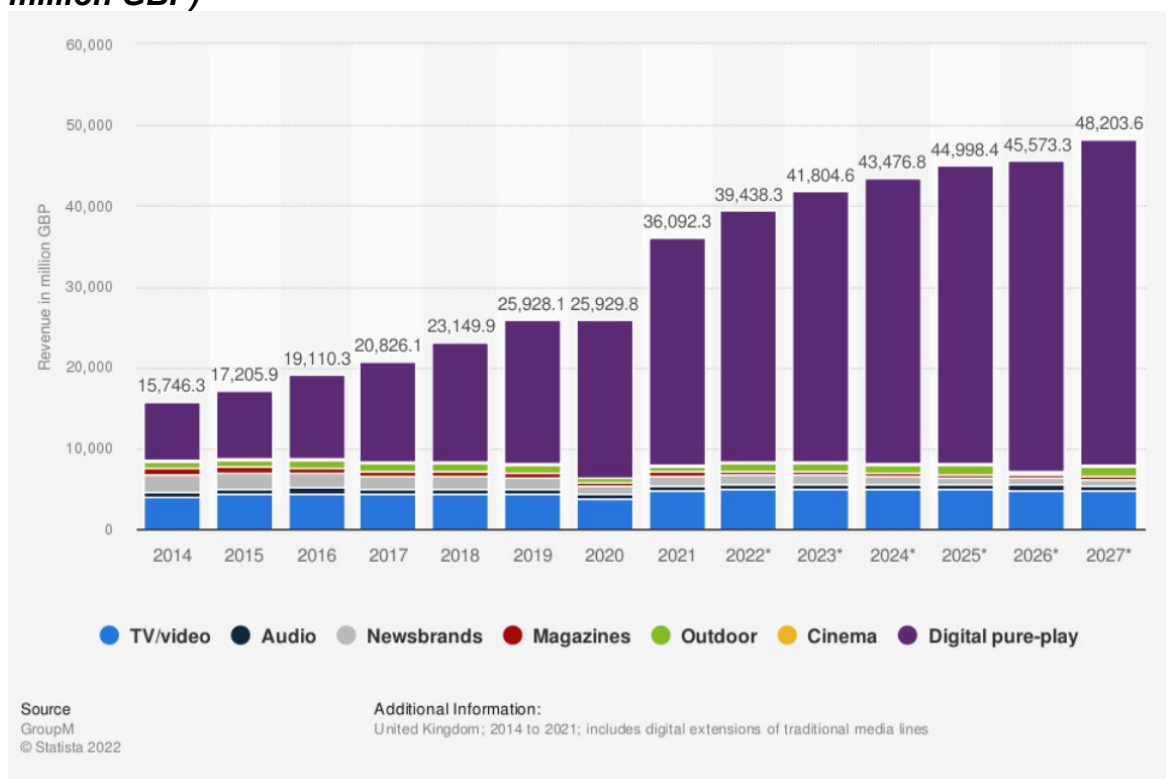
Source: (Statista, 2022a)

With the need to generate a return on their own investment, social media platforms are continuing to encourage marketers to use paid social media marketing by reducing the reach of organic content (Gurd, 2022). Hashtags are an excellent means of community building, using organic social media marketing based on a shared passion or interest (Macready, 2022), and for increasing reach and engagement and amplifying brand content (Forsey, 2022). Hashtags can have a longevity around which a community can be developed over many years. For example, in football #YNWA (You'll Never Walk Alone) and #LFC for Liverpool Football Club, #TRFC for Tranmere Rovers Football Club. In other sports, #NBA for The National Basketball Association, #LeTourFemmes for the Tour De France Femmes. Even #PhDchat in academia. Increasingly however, marketers are having to consider paid social media to amplify their message and campaigns. This may be done through generating lookalike audiences on the platform, or targeting based on self-identified interests people have (Gurd, 2022).

Sport has played a major role in the growth of social media marketing and vice versa (Fenton, 2018), with fans being very keen to hear and talk about their supported

team or athlete (Barnhart, 2020). In the US, sport and recreation account for 15% share of voice on social media marketing platforms and media and entertainment 29% (Comscore, 2021). Emotional connection is key to successful advertising campaigns and inclusivity has a positive impact on brand trust (WARC, 2022a). In sports such as football, that emotional connection is key to fan support of their team (Vale and Fernandes, 2018) and trust can be facilitated via social media (Faria et al., 2022). A human tone for a brand can facilitate effective social media marketing communication and help to build a strong brand over the long-term (WARC, 2022b). From the brand perspective, social media marketing has enabled clubs and teams to humanise their organisation and their athletes, for example by showing their community work, using humour to be less corporate, and bringing teams and athletes closer to fans through social media marketing content and occasional dialogue (Barnhart, 2020).

As Figure 1-3 illustrates, Facebook continues to be the dominant social media platform by reach, growing to 2.6 billion users in 2022 (Statista, 2022i). Instagram, Sina Weibo, Snapchat, and Twitter have all shown steady growth since 2017. TikTok has emerged and embarked on a steep growth trajectory, overtaking Instagram in 2021 to now reach 1.7 billion users in 2022 (Statista, 2022i). Brands have continued to respond to such trends and reach is a major reason why 70% of marketers advertise on Facebook (Needle, 2022). Instagram has emerged as the most popular and effective social media marketing platform for influencer marketing (Needle, 2022) at a time when the global influencer marketing market size has more than doubled from $6.5 billion in 2019 to $13.5 billion in 2021 (Statista, 2022d).

However, the social media marketing industry is not all positive. For example, trolling of celebrities and individuals often goes unpunished due to user anonymity (Pavliuc, 2021; Hansen et al., 2022). Racism in football, expressed on social media marketing platforms continues to be a problem, with platforms being encouraged to do more to tackle the issue (Armstrong, 2021). Other forms of online abuse experienced in the UK include harassment and sexism (Statista, 2022j). Racism and other forms of social media abuse are issues brands are increasingly taking note of and playing a more proactive role in addressing. For example major brands such as Mars, British Gas signed an open letter to Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat demanding that more be done to take action against racist abuse of England footballers during the

Euros (Jefferson, 2021). Similarly, many sports such as football, cricket, rugby union, and brands associated with those sports have taken part in campaigns demanding an end to toxic abuse on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram (Barker, 2021).

Figure 1-3: Reach by Social Media Platform Worldwide 2017-2022

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Facebook	1581.57	1795.37	1994.52	2368.92	2561.64	2605.87
TikTok	162.99	347.08	653.47	1034.8	1406.57	1719.11
Instagram	608.32	805.22	867.8	1071.34	1213.38	1245.14
Sina Weibo	399.92	445.73	499.26	538.31	567.36	592.21
Snapchat	221.61	245.16	311.94	408.54	493.74	548.97
Twitter	310.05	303.04	313.47	347.51	377.24	397.24
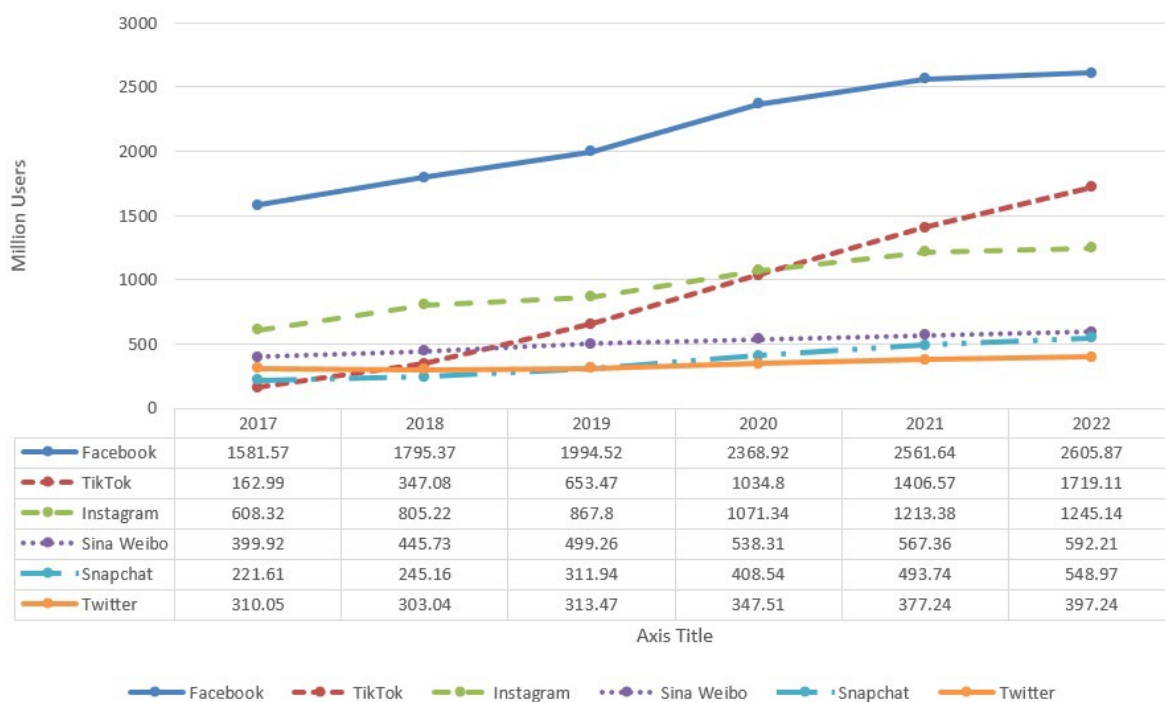
Source: (Statista, 2022i)

1.3.2 Global and UK Social Media Audience Trends

With 4.62 billion active users, social media is the second most popular online activity behind search and has grown from 1.9 billion active users in 2014 (Wearesocial.com, 2022). As of January 2023, Facebook has reached 3 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2023), compared to 1.3 billion in Q2 2014 (Statista, 2022c). The equivalent for Instagram has reached 2 billion as of January 2023, up from 0.3 billion in 2014 (Statista, 2022f). Twitter has grown to 0.56 billion users in January 2023 (Statista, 2023) and Snapchat to 0. 46 billion (Statista, 2023). It is notable that Instagram is the favourite social media platform of 16-24 year olds, specifically 25.6% of females and 22.8% of males (Wearesocial.com, 2022). In the UK, Facebook and Messenger reach 94% of adults, Instagram reaches 73%, Twitter reaches 62%, and Snapchat reaches 24% (Ofcom, 2022b). Figure 1-4 provides an overview of UK social media usage and time spent in more detail. The sheer

coverage in the UK and globally demonstrates the significance of social media to people's lives.

A total of 96.2% of global internet users now own a smartphone (Wearesocial.com, 2022), reflecting consumer preference for the app experience (Dolan, 2022). From 2011 to 2021 smartphone media consumption has grown by 460% (Ali, 2021), playing a major part in social media platform growth and engagement (Wearesocial.com, 2022). Almost 100% of social media users have a presence on multiple platforms. The average global figure is 7.5 platforms and in the UK it is 6.3 (Wearesocial.com, 2022). Of those using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, the lowest percentage overlap between platforms is 31.9% (Facebook users also using Snapchat), with the highest being 83.7% of Twitter users also using Facebook (Wearesocial.com, 2022).

Figure 1-4: Social media reach and time spent by UK adult visitors, by platform: July 2021– February 2022
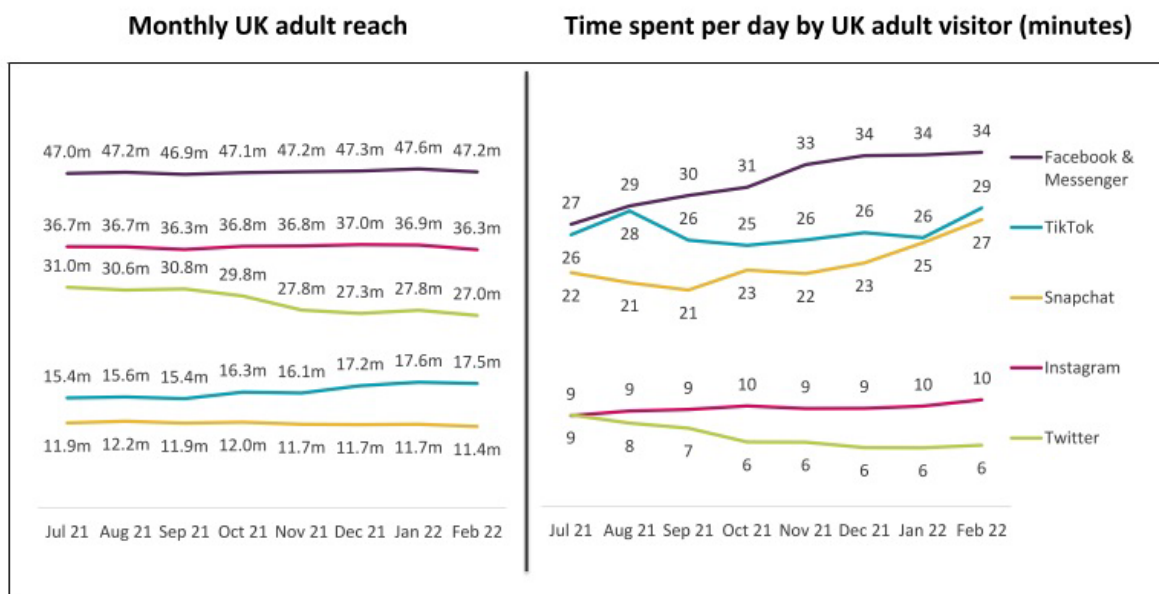
Source: (Ofcom, 2022b: 34)

Multiple platform usage affects total time spent. On average, the global time spent using social media is now 2 hours 27 minutes per day, with 22% citing their main reason as watching or following sports (Wearesocial.com, 2022). In the UK the average has grown to 1 hour 48 minutes per day across all social media platforms (Wearesocial.com, 2022). Facebook and Messenger continue to be the platform where UK users spend most time, as shown in Figure 1-4. Finding up-to-date

information, entertaining content, and following or finding brand and product information continue to be the most commonly cited reasons for people using social media marketing platforms (Chaffey, 2022; Wearesocial.com, 2022). Facilitated by social media, connecting with others who share the same interest, sharing opinions and having a voice are all important aspects of self-expression to UK internet users (Ofcom, 2022b). 22.6% of global internet users and 17% of UK internet users follow influencers on social media (Wearesocial.com, 2022). Facilitated by platforms such as Instagram (Needle, 2022), influencer marketing is set to continue its growth because of the positive brand impact influencers can have on their followers, and with platforms increasingly investing in creator content (McGrath, 2022).

Figure 1-5 provides a demographic profile of UK social media users across several of the main platforms. The data indicates the continuing trend that younger audiences prefer newer and emergent platforms, such as Snapchat and TikTok currently, compared to the relatively older profile of the Facebook and Twitter audiences (Ofcom, 2022b). Not present on the chart are the 58% of 3-15 year-old children in the UK who use a social media platform despite a minimum age being required on most platforms (Ofcom, 2022b). Again, relatively newer platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok tend to be popular in this age range.

Figure 1-5: Top ten social media platforms by UK adult reach, adult audience composition by age: September 2021
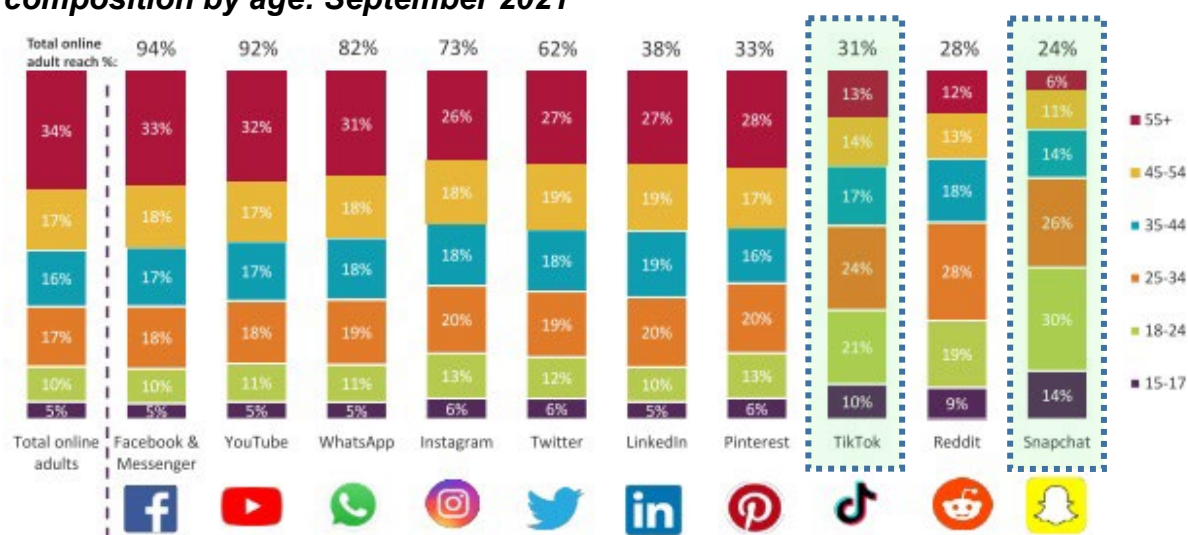
Source: (Ofcom, 2022b: 60)

Of real concern is that 47% of UK internet users have reported coming across potential harm while using social media and only 60% of those take any action against it (Ofcom, 2022b). Social media is responsible for over three times the proportion of the second most media (email) and at 45%, Facebook is by far the most encountered source of harm compared to Instagram at 12% and Twitter at 11% (Ofcom, 2022b). However, it should be noted that users consider the positives to far outweigh the negatives (Ofcom, 2022a).

Overall, this section has evidenced why a thorough investigation of social media marketing strategy practice across several platforms is appropriate. A global and UK context have been provided due to the profile of English football clubs on the global stage (English Football League, 2022; Parnell et al., 2022; The Premier League, 2022a). The following section discusses the UK football industry as well as the importance of social media marketing as a form of communication for clubs.

1.4 The UK Football Industry

There are 92 clubs in the top four tiers of English football, operating on a system of promotion and relegation, as summarised in Table 1-1 below. For clarity, the term 'football' refers to the sport often known in markets such as North America and Chinas as 'soccer'.

Table 1-1: English Football Club Leagues and Structure

Level	League [sponsor shown in preceding brackets]	No. Clubs	Promoted automatically	Promoted via playoffs	Relegated
1	English Premier League (EPL)	20	n/a	n/a	Bottom 3
2	EFL [Sky Bet] Championship	24	Top 2	One from 3rd to 6th-place finisher	Bottom 3
3	EFL [Sky Bet] League One	24	Top 2	One from 3rd to 6th-place finisher	Bottom 4
4	EFL [Sky Bet] League Two	24	Top 3	One from 4th to 7th-place finisher	Bottom 2

Source: Premier League (2021) and English Football League (2021)

The English Premier League (EPL) is the most popular football league in the world, drawing the highest global television audience of any football league (Parnell et al.,

2022; The Premier League, 2022b). It is also the wealthiest football league in the world with half of the top twenty clubs in revenue terms being from the EPL (Deloitte, 2022). EPL turnover is 60% larger than its nearest rival, The Bundesliga in Germany, and was expected to widen the gap in 2021/22 (Deloitte, 2021b). The importance and impact of the EPL to club revenues is shown by the inclusion of Wolverhampton Wanderers in the top twenty Football Money League for the first time in 2022 (Deloitte, 2022). After returning to the EPL in 2018/19, the club saw revenue jump to €219 million (2020/21), up from €30 million (2017/18), thanks mostly to the broadcasting revenue boost provided by global coverage of the EPL (Deloitte, 2022).

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis caused the first ever revenue reduction in the history of the EPL, and the first for European football since the 2008/09 financial crisis, as European football revenue declined by 13% in 2019/20 from €28.9 billion to €25.2 billion (Deloitte, 2021b). The cost to UK professional football was £2 billion (Walmsley, 2021), primarily due to matchday revenues plummeting thanks to fixtures having to be played behind closed doors (Nauright et al., 2020). Total EPL clubs' revenues fell from £5.2 billion in 2018/19 to £4.5 billion in 2019/20 (Deloitte, 2021b). To set this in context, 2013/14 revenues for EPL clubs passed £3 billion for the first time in 2013/14 (Deloitte, 2015). Despite the impact of the pandemic, EPL club revenues bounced back to £5.5 billion in 2021/22 (Deloitte, 2023). English Football League (EFL) clubs are more reliant on matchday revenues than EPL clubs, however the impact of the pandemic was somewhat offset by a 35% increase in broadcast rights (Deloitte, 2021b).

Because of the riches to be gained and the brand awareness to be achieved (Manoli and Kenyon, 2018), many EFL Championship clubs gamble on promotion to the EPL. This historic trend shows no sign of slowing in a climate that will see EPL broadcast rights break £10 billion in the next three seasons to 2024/25 (Ziegler, 2022). In this deal, overseas rights have increased by 30% to £5.3 billion with domestic rights hitting £5.1 billion and commercial contracts making up the balance to a total to £10.5 billion (Ziegler, 2022). Average EPL club revenues reached £277 million in 2021/22 to be almost ten times that Championship clubs at £28 million (Deloitte, 2023). The preparedness for Championship clubs to gamble on promotion to EPL was reflected in their wage/revenue ratio hitting a record 126% for 2020/21

(Deloitte, 2023). Once promoted they spend further to try to avoid an immediate return to the Championship. For example in 2018/19 the clubs promoted to the EPL increased their wages by 55% and in 2019/20 the promoted clubs increased their wages by 45% (Deloitte, 2021b). The mechanism of EPL parachute payments offers considerable compensation by being the single biggest revenue contribution to total Championship clubs' revenues, accounting for 30% (Deloitte, 2020). For 2019/20, the six Championship clubs receiving parachute payments earned average revenues of £52 million, compared to an average of £20 million by clubs without the parachute payment (Deloitte, 2021b). In total, at £1 billion, the combined 2021/22 revenues of clubs in all three EFL divisions (Championship, £676 million; League 1, £220 million; and League 2, £124 million) are 18.5% of the EPL total (Deloitte, 2023).

Interest in football, particularly the EPL, has coincided with a digital revolution that has changed the way we consume football-related content. Driving this is the rapid growth of the social media marketing industry, via platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat (Dwivedi et al., 2020). Figure 1-6 shows the dominance of Facebook in Western Europe and the US, compared to Sina Weibo in China, however that is not to understate the importance of other platforms to football clubs seeking to attract and engage a diverse fan base. The current consumption of football through social media is therefore referred to as 'Social globalisation' which Beek et al. (2018: 24) argue to be the fourth stage of globalisation of football. The three previous being: (i) Geographical globalisation (ii) Commercial globalisation; and (iii) Digital globalisation. Football fans continue to express a preference for engaging with football clubs via social media (Deloitte, 2021a) and it is an essential source of football club and sponsor visibility, for fans in the UK and globally (Statista, 2021). In 2021, 98.8% of global social media users accessed social media platforms via their mobile phones (Wearesocial, 2021) Coupled with matchday content and game highlights consistently being among the most desired football club content (Statista, 2021), this shows the importance of providing fans with timely information to a device that is responsible for over 50% of global daily internet time (Wearesocial.com, 2022).

Figure 1-6: Top 3 most popular social media platforms for football by country
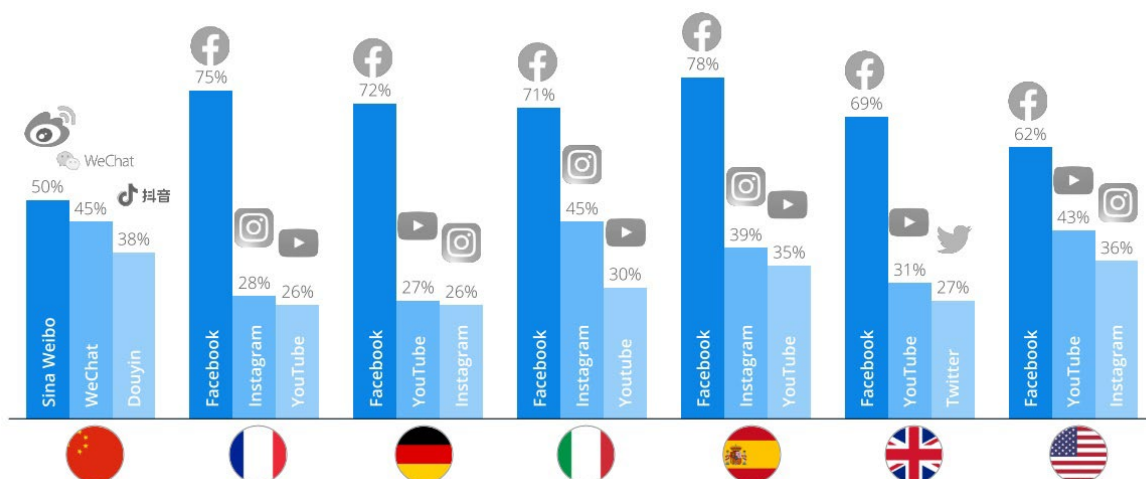
Source: (Statista, 2021)

The EPL specifically is either the most or second most followed league around the world (Statista, 2021; Parnell et al., 2022) whilst all EPL clubs in the top 20 Football Money League 2022 are also in the top 20 of social media followers across each platform (Deloitte, 2022). Of those, the most followed EPL club is Manchester United with 197.5 million followers across all platforms (KPMG, 2022), and the least being Wolverhampton Wanderers with 7.2 million followers in total (Deloitte, 2022). Clubs, players, and leagues or club competitions are consistently the major reasons for fans across the world to follow clubs on social media (Statista, 2021). This further demonstrates the importance of clubs being able to use their social media marketing strategy to capitalise on the increased exposure (Fenton and Helleu, 2018), thanks to: broadcasting rights for their respective league and club competitions, such as EPL, Championship, UEFA Champions League, FA Cup; and players and their own following globally and from their native country. There is always a need to evolve social media marketing strategy due to the constant change in the digital and social media marketing landscape, in addition to the sporting and cultural landscape (Beek et al., 2018). For example, in a recent survey, between 22% and 48% of fans feel that football clubs need to improve their social media output, such as showing more game highlights (Statista, 2021).

In summary, this section has demonstrated the global profile of English football clubs and the importance of social media marketing strategy to their ability to communicate with local, national, and global audiences.

1.5 Research Scope and Style of Presentation

The research was conducted in two phases, providing an opportunity to explore the evolution of social media marketing strategy knowledge and practice in sport, over two points in time (Halinen et al., 2012; Drummond et al., 2022). First, the preliminary study (up to end 2013) was conducted at a time when organisational approaches to social media marketing strategy were one of the most under-researched and understood areas (Aral et al., 2013). The paper published from the preliminary study was one of the earliest studies in this field, in the context of sport, and formed part of the much more extensive body of academic knowledge that developed (Filo et al., 2015; Dwivedi et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020). The main study (up to 2022) was therefore able to build on that wider volume of literature and provide deeper levels of understanding in the process.

Second, at the point in time of the preliminary study data gathering, practice in social media marketing strategy was in its relative infancy (Hoffman and Novak, 2012) which meant a very small number of football clubs were prepared to participate in the research. The research aim and objectives of the preliminary study were developed accordingly, focusing on perceived issues and benefits of social media marketing strategy at that time. For the main study, it was important to generate empirical insights to demonstrate how social media marketing strategy practice had evolved during the eight-year period since the preliminary study. In terms of the research agenda, the main study was also a response to calls for more understanding of social media marketing strategy, in the specific context of sport (Filo et al., 2015; Aichner, 2019). The research aim and objectives for that main study were focused on the evolving organisational approaches to social media marketing strategy, how this was operationalised and the role of the brand in that context. Longer term research is used in qualitative case study research, (Bell et al., 2019) and offers a temporal insight of a particular phenomenon (Torregrosa et al., 2015; Drummond et al., 2022), in this case, evolving social media marketing strategy at English football clubs.

Third, the main study was able to access a wider sample of eight different football club cases, consisting of a total of eighteen interviewees, plus two experienced

social media marketing strategy practitioners acting as consultants to football clubs and sports brands. That wider sample was receptive to being involved due to their peers being involved in the earlier preliminary study, hence the credibility of the researcher had been established in the practitioner community (Bell et al., 2019). Finally, the methodology of the main study was informed by the preliminary study, for example using semi-structured interviews for data gathering again. The difference was in the focus of the interview protocol for the main study, being influenced by the extant literature from 2014 onwards, following the Internet Research paper, in particular that of the Filo et al. (2015) literature review.

For these reasons, the chapter two Literature Review is split into: preliminary study; and main study. Both articulate the academic understanding and research gaps, at the point in time of each study. This approach to presentation follows in the Findings and Discussions chapters. Chapter four is focused on the preliminary study and compares the findings to the extant literature up to late 2013, thus allowing empirical practitioner insights to be compared to the literature up to that point in time. Such context is relevant as it helps demonstrate how this field has evolved from 2014 to 2022. That is the focus of Chapter five in its presentation of the findings from the main study and a discussion in comparison to the more recent extant literature. In doing so it facilitates some comparisons of social media marketing strategy practice between the timings of the main and preliminary studies, thereby helping achieve the research aim and objectives of the main study and the entire thesis. Chapter six adds further depth by using the temporal data to explain and illustrate social media marketing strategy evolution and how each club has progressed in this respect.

1.6 Researcher Motivations and Values

It is argued that qualitative researchers should be transparent about their values and any motivations for their study (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Saunders et al., 2019). This is especially important in business research where investigation is not value-free (Bell et al., 2019). In keeping with the axiology (values) discussed in Chapter Three, the following section outlines the researcher's motivations, role, and values in this thesis. Hence it is written in the first person.

My motivations stemmed from my industry background and curiosity about a relatively new phenomenon. Having specialised in digital marketing since 1999, I set up my own agency in 2003, building up a track record of working with several sports brands and clubs in different sports, including over thirty-five football clubs. For almost a ten-year period I was specialising in electronic catalogues, while still working in other areas of digital marketing, such as email and mobile. At a time when social media was so new, it was considered a disruptive and potentially exciting form of digital marketing and football club practitioners were no different in this view. This led to many football clubs seeking my views on a new aspect of digital marketing which had piqued the same natural curiosity that previously influenced me pursuing a specialism in digital marketing and electronic catalogues. I was also asked to speak at two sports industry events focused on the changing digital landscape. As football clubs seemed increasingly worried about social media marketing, how to respond and what to do, I was naturally motivated to learn more about their views and understand them. I was also confident of gaining access to football club practitioners, even though I had made a career switch to Higher Education and was no longer working with clubs and sports brands daily. I knew this represented a rare opportunity to conduct research from the football club perspective, which I found to be very limited in published articles.

My wealth of digital marketing experience meant I was regularly asked to deliver guest lectures, and to become a key tutor on the very first MSc Digital Marketing Communications. After the career switch to Higher Education I became Programme Leader on bespoke Executive Education programmes for: PG Certificate in Digital (McCann); and MSc Multi-Channel Retailing (JD Sports group). Coupled with delivering training and qualifications for the Institute of Data and Marketing and Chartered Institute of Marketing, this experience highlighted a gap in practitioners across all sectors understanding the best ways to use social media marketing strategy. I wished to combine all my experience with a lifelong passion for sport and football, to contribute to knowledge in this intriguing area of research.

A desire to explore the nascent field of social media marketing strategy, and to develop a contextual understanding in the football industry, led to an interpretivist study using qualitative methods. The research has informed my teaching for several years. For example, students want to learn how to use digital and social media

marketing communications to build product or service and brand awareness, in addition to nurturing customer relationships. My own research and that of the academic community has been used to achieve learning outcomes with students at all levels.

Over several years, I have been lucky to have opportunities to write about and present my methods and the findings of my phased research in academic and industry conferences, journal papers, and a book chapter. These include two Academy of Marketing conferences, The Football Collective, MindTrek, Digital Cultures, and Doctoral Symposiums. My research has also resulted in three guest lectures at two other Universities. I have developed my research expertise by reviewing over twenty conference and journal papers and joining Editorial Boards of The Football Collective and Cogent Social Sciences Sport section. To date, this thesis has directly contributed to two peer-reviewed journal papers and one book chapter, and it has led to several media engagements on behalf of Manchester Metropolitan University. Through my proactive and curious approach, and guided by my supervisors, I have benefitted from building an extensive network in the academic community. Many people have been helpful in passing on their own suggestions, offering positive encouragement. and allowing me to mentor less experienced researchers. These forms of mutual academic citizenship have been extremely enjoyable and rewarding.

In summary, the values I as researcher have brought to this study are those of a digital and social media marketer who has passionately engaged with the practitioner and academic community. My keen interest in sport and football as a fan, coach, participant, practitioner, and blogger feeds into wanting to understand and explore social media marketing strategy from a qualitative perspective, to achieve the research aim and objectives.

1.7 Research Aim and Objectives

Preliminary Study

The aim of this research is to examine the issues and benefits faced in relation to social media marketing strategy development, in the context of English football clubs. Specifically, the objectives of this research are:

1. To gather insights into the issues that football club management perceives in relation to developing a social media marketing strategy; and

2. To develop an understanding of football club management's perceptions of the potential benefits to be realised through developing effective social media marketing strategies

Main Study

The aim of this study is to explore the evolving use of social media marketing strategy in the context of English football clubs. To further understanding of the approaches to managing social media marketing presence, the following research objectives have been developed:

1. To explore the evolving organisational approaches of football clubs to **social media marketing strategy**.

2. To examine the **operationalisation of** social media marketing strategy by football clubs.

3. To explore the role of the **brand** in social media marketing communications of football clubs.

4. To propose a framework for **social media marketing strategy** in football clubs.

1.8 Thesis Structure

Chapter One - Introduction

This chapter outlines the increasing importance of social media marketing strategy in the context of the UK football industry. It explains and discusses key trends relating to the growth and dynamism of the research domain of this thesis, presenting an opportunity for empirical studies in an evolving field. A rationale for the research aims and objectives of both the preliminary study and the main study has been provided.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

Chapter Two presents a critical literature review relating to the research objectives of the preliminary study and the main study. It is therefore split into two time periods: firstly, Literature Review (preliminary study) discusses the relevant body of

knowledge and knowledge gaps, up to the end of 2013; and secondly, Literature Review (main study) provides a critical evaluation of the body of knowledge from 2014 to mid-2022, demonstrating how extant literature, knowledge gaps and calls for further research have evolved.

Chapter Three - Methodology

Chapter Three explains and justifies the research philosophy and methodology engaged through this thesis. The ontological, epistemological, and axiological position is established. A qualitative case study approach, utilising semi-structured interviews with social media marketing strategy practitioners from English football clubs is discussed. Use of thematic analysis and how the preliminary study informed the main study is explained. Thus the link between the two studies is justified.

Chapter Four – Findings and Discussion: Preliminary Study

Chapter Four presents the findings and discussion related to the aim and objectives of the preliminary study. This approach allows the empirical insights to be presented in the context of practice in comparison to the extant literature during the period to late 2013. At that time, interviewees were right at the beginning of their experience of social media marketing strategy and social media was in the very early stages of its disruptive influence on how brands would communicate with their audience. As such, it clearly presents what was learned at that point in time. That research was published in Internet Research early 2014 (McCarthy et al., 2014).

Chapter Five – Findings and Discussion: Main Study

Chapter Five then presents the findings and discussion related to the aim and objectives of the main study. In doing so, the thesis provides extensive and rich empirical insights from interviewees at football clubs with up to eight years more experience of social media marketing strategy. Where appropriate, comparisons to the preliminary study are made, to demonstrate how social media marketing strategy of football clubs has evolved. Moreover, the discussion primarily concentrates on the extant literature from 2014 to mid-2022 so the findings are contextualised in comparison to the current body of knowledge. The main study is the basis of a paper published in a very recent special issue of Soccer & Society (McCarthy et al., 2022).

Chapter Six – Abstracting From This Study

Chapter Six uses the temporal data of the preliminary study and the main study to discuss and visualise how football clubs: (i) have increased levels of sophistication of social media marketing strategy over time; and (ii) are at different stages of social media marketing strategy development. This chapter is key to achieving the overall research aim of the evolving use of social media marketing strategies by English football clubs.

Chapter Seven – Conclusions and Future Research Agendas

Chapter Seven articulates the key conclusions of this thesis. Each research objective of the study is revisited, detailing the key findings and contributions to knowledge and practice. Through furthering understanding of the approaches to managing social media marketing presence, this study produces transferrable knowledge in social media marketing strategy, operationalisation of social media marketing strategy, and the role of the brand in social media communications. Contributions to knowledge are summarised in Table 7-1, pp.263. The contributions to practice are also discussed, prior to proposing. a future research agenda which may be of value to academic researchers in the football, sport, social media marketing strategy, and social media brand communities fields of study.

1.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter has justified the need for this research by providing an industry context for social media marketing and how it has grown and evolved. As this thesis is conducted from the perspective of football clubs, this introductory chapter has also provided insight into the UK football industry, and the growing importance of social media marketing strategy to that industry. A transparent explanation of the researcher motivations, role and values has been provided. The research aims and objectives of the preliminary and main studies have been articulated, as has the scope of the research, together with a justification for the style of presentation. Finally, the thesis structure was outlined. In summary, this chapter makes a strong case for exploring the evolving use of social media marketing strategy in the context of English football clubs.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The focus of this thesis is social media marketing strategy. The emergence of social media as a marketing channel has increasingly shaped digital marketing strategy, which itself has increasingly influenced marketing strategy. To articulate that context, this chapter therefore begins with a short discussion of marketing strategy and digital marketing strategy.

The focus then turns specifically to the preliminary study, providing a critical review of the academic literature up to the time of the 2014 preliminary study publication, to clearly position the body of knowledge at that point. The fields discussed are: emergence of social network sites and social media; branding and the social media effect; early social media and football research; and communities and relationships in football. This helps to situate the preliminary study and facilitates a comparison to the much wider body of literature that followed, and which is reviewed, for the 2014-2022 period covering the main study. It also helps demonstrate how the more recent extant literature helped to inform the main study. Specific literary fields discussed are: social media marketing strategy; social media marketing strategy in sport; and branding in social media communities in sport.

2.1.1 Marketing Strategy and Digital Marketing Strategy

Since the 1990s, digital marketing strategy has become increasingly important to successful marketing strategy. Defined as "the application of digital media, data and technology integrated with traditional communications to achieve marketing objectives" (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019: 10), digital marketing strategy is now a fundamental element in how organisations: communicate with customers; gain customer and competitor insights; communicate and deliver their value proposition; build strong brands; and interact with their customers and partners (Kotler and Keller, 2016; Chaffey and Smith, 2017; Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Dibb et al., 2019). The more recent rise of sustainability and ethical issues, mean the academic discipline of marketing strategy as a whole has become more reflective and critical (Kotler and Keller, 2016; Dibb et al., 2019).

Kotler and Keller (2016) argue that strategies are crucial to the long-term sustainability of an organisation seeking to achieve a series of goals over time. Fairbanks and Buchko (2018: 5) define strategy as "an integrated set of actions and resource commitments that position an organisation within the competitive environment so as to generate superior results over time". Such work builds on the seminal work of Porter (1996: 43) that focused on the competitive advantage to be achieved through effective strategy which he defined as "the creation of a unique and valuable position, involving a different set of activities". To achieve that competitive advantage and generate superior results over time, a strategy should include specific objectives, target audience(s), in addition to resources required to deliver that strategy effectively (Dutta, 2010).

Marketing strategy identifies target markets and a clear value proposition, based on analysis of opportunities in the market or landscape in which an organisation operates (Kotler and Keller, 2016). Kotler and Keller (2016: 52) argue that successful marketing management is crucial to the sustainability of an organisation and that it "includes developing marketing strategies and plans, capturing marketing insights, connecting with customers, building strong brands, creative delivering and communicating value, and creating long-term growth".

Looking at the basis of an effective digital marketing strategy, Smith's (2022) SOSTAC® framework uses the following components: situation analysis; objectives setting; strategy; tactics; actions to enable successful implementation; and control and analysis. This is in keeping with Kotler and Keller's (2016) approach of scenario planning, creating a vision, objectives, success factors, values and measures, in addition to the more recent Dibb et al. (2019) model for marketing strategy which took into account the growing importance of digital marketing. Table 2-1 summarises these similarities, to demonstrate the link between digital marketing strategy and marketing strategy. As can be seen, all begin with analysing the current situation and that includes external factors such as market trends, digital trends, and audience behaviour. Models such as SWOT and PEST are encouraged by all, to help with such analysis. All include roll out of the strategy, in the form of implementation of marketing tactics. All involve evaluation, in the form of control. It is interesting to note that only two models explicitly separate the setting of objectives

as a step in their own right (Kotler and Keller, 2016; Smith, 2022) while the Dibb et al. (2019) model incorporates this into the planning step.

Table 2-1: Marketing Strategy and Digital Marketing Strategy Models and Steps

Marketing Strategy Models		Digital Marketing Strategy Model
Kotler and Keller (2016)	Dibb et al. (2019)	Smith (2022)
Marketing Analysis	Analyse	Situation Analysis
	Evaluate	
Marketing Objectives		Objectives
Marketing Planning	Plan [includes objectives]	Strategy
Marketing Implementation	Implement	Tactics
		Action
Marketing Control	Control	Control
	Review	

In their narratives of how the models are used and why they are useful, all authors take into account the importance of social media marketing to marketing strategy and digital marketing strategy, and acknowledge the need for more interactive communications with customers, brand building, and customer insights (Kotler and Keller, 2016; Dibb et al., 2019; Smith, 2022).

The marketing strategy of an organisation benefits from the effective use of social media for communication, increasing customer engagement and developing the customer relationship (Filo et al., 2015; Alalwan et al., 2017), such that social media marketing has a strategic role to play in digital marketing strategy (Alalwan et al., 2017). However, it does not necessarily follow that organisations deploy social media marketing strategically or as a more tactical operational instrument. There may be a prevalence to one approach (Filo et al., 2015), and often there is a blend (Coursaris et al., 2016; Grossberg, 2016; Alalwan et al., 2017).

The overall research aim of this thesis is to explore the evolving use of social media marketing strategy in the context of English football clubs. Therefore, to convey its importance as a field of research, this section has shown how digital marketing

strategy and marketing strategy have been increasingly influenced by social media marketing strategy.

Preliminary Study

2.2 Introduction to Preliminary Study

Focusing on the literature up to late 2013, in accordance with the timings of the preliminary study, the themes now discussed are: (i) the emergence of social network sites and social media; (ii) branding and the social media effect; (iii) early social media and football research; and (iv) communities and relationships in football. When citing articles from this phase, the reason for some mixed terminology of social network sites, social media, social media marketing, is that researchers were creating a new body of work that included using the terms interchangeably. The preliminary study literature review conclusion includes a summary of the major findings and the positioning of the preliminary study research contribution, including a table highlighting the knowledge gaps at that time.

2.3 The Emergence of Social Network Sites and Social Media

The emergence in popularity of what were initially referred to as 'social network sites' (SNS) led to a new body of academic literature emerging, in particular the highly influential and pioneering work of boyd and Ellison (2008). Their paper proposed a "comprehensive definition" (2008: 210), as shown in Table 2-2, which encapsulated the ways in which individuals could create profiles, connect with others and communicate with them. They therefore viewed SNS as "services" (: 211) that enabled connections through people's visible social networks. Their work drew a response from Beer (2008: 516) whose premise was that SNS was a "web application", and that any broader term such as Web 2.0 would be more appropriate than SNS in seeking to include a more comprehensive range of sites. Despite his narrower scope of SNS definition, Beer (2008) agreed with boyd and Ellison (2008) that SNS may change how we define friendship in the future, and that overly commercial use of a particular SNS space could see users migrating to a competitor. Mitchell (2008) also warned against replicating the commercially focused traditional marketing model in such a social space. As early as 2009 it was argued that traditional advertising had not proven very effective at exploiting the potential of

virtual worlds (Tikkanen et al., 2009), however it should be acknowledged that virtual worlds are not the same as SNS as they involve users inhabiting a game or social oriented virtual world, using avatars in the form of humanoids. More generally, the practical implications of their research suggested three factors of interest to marketers in the post-internet era: value for customers; high interactivity applications; and community management (Tikkanen et al., 2009). Keenan and Shiri (2009) also argued that interaction and community, in addition to frequent updates, were key factors in the immersive user experience of sites such as Facebook and Twitter, transforming how people were using the internet.

As the body of knowledge grew and popularity of Facebook and Twitter in particular accelerated, researchers began to use the broader term of social media (e.g. Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Hanna et al., 2011). Table 2-2 includes six such comprehensive definitions and perspectives. It can be seen that Mangold and Faulds (2009) used 'social media' as the term to encompass the wider range of services that boyd and Ellison (2008) proposed within their definition of SNS. Equally, rather than 'network', they use 'networking' in SNS as suggested by Beer (2008). In their widely cited paper, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) build on Beer's suggestion of 'Web 2.0' as the umbrella term, by arguing that 'social media' is the term that has evolved from those Web 2.0 foundations. Finally, Hanna et al. (2011) draw attention to the potential commercial impact offered by social media, as initially highlighted by Beer (2008) and boyd and Ellison (2008). It is notable that all papers cited in this section draw specific attention to the interactive nature of SNS and social media, such as connectedness, conversation, and exchange of user generated content.

Summarising some of the early SNS and social media literature, Aral et al. (2013: 3) sought to further develop the research agenda, claiming that social media is "fundamentally changing the way we communicate, collaborate, consume and create". They argued there was a "dearth of scholarly work" (2013: 8) regarding understanding social media strategy of firms and sectors. One example they provided to warrant this argument was the claim that one of the most under-researched and understood areas relates to "the best ways in which companies should organise and manage social media." (2013: 9).

These studies are examples of a small and very early body of work informed by key definitions and interpretations of social media and SNS. It is clear from the very early definitions of boyd and Ellison (2008) and Beer (2008) that the authors anticipated some changes in terminology, technology and usage. The boyd and Ellison definition and perspective sought to help set a conceptual and scholarly backdrop for this field of study. Beer (2008) highlighted how we should not forget that the wealth of data to be accessed via SNS applications, plus how companies building and owning those platforms, are effectively forming a transactional relationship with the user in the form of data. For example, he correctly suggested this was "likely to provide information used to predict things about us" (2008 :525). This view typifies the more commercially focused perspectives and definitions so prominent in the literature that followed (Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Hanna et al., 2011). This body of work highlighted how those responsible for customer interactions could influence and shape the conversations and relationships using social media as the enabler.

Table 2-2: Social Media and Social Network Sites definitions and interpretations

Literature	Scope	Definition/Interpretation of Social Media and Social Network Sites
(boyd and Ellison, 2008)	Social Network Sites	"…web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site." (: 211)
(Beer, 2008)	Social Network(ing) Sites	"[SNS are] commercial spaces…a kind of transactional data set enriched by the types of previously hard to access, private and mundane aspects of everyday life that they communicate." (: 523-525).
(Mangold and Faulds, 2009)	Social Media	"Social media encompasses a wide range of online, word-of-mouth forums including blogs, company-sponsored discussion boards and chat rooms, consumer-to-consumer e-mail, consumer product or service ratings websites and forums, Internet discussion boards and forums, blogs and social networking websites…marketing managers can shape the consumer-to-consumer conversations which are now driving the marketplace to a greater extent than ever before." (: 358)
(Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010)	Social Media	"Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content." (: 61)
(Hanna et al., 2011)	Social Media	"In the new social media-driven business model defined by customer connectivity and interactivity, content goes hand in hand with technology, producing far-reaching effects for the way marketers influence current and potential customers." (: 266)
(Aral et al., 2013)	Social Media	"Social media are fundamentally changing the way we communicate, collaborate, consume, and create. They represent one of the most transformative impacts of information technology on business, both within and outside firm boundaries. Social media have revolutionized the ways organizations relate to the marketplace and society, creating a new world of possibilities and challenges for all aspects of the enter-marketplace and society…" (: 3)

The notion of social media as a tool for promotions and communications (Mangold and Faulds, 2009) and interaction (Hanna et al., 2011) was typical of the prevailing view within social media marketing literature (Zamani, 2013). There was also early recognition that social media had profoundly changed company-customer

communication from being one-way and unilateral, to far more dynamic, interactive and two-way (Zamani, 2013). This led to changes in consumer behaviour and the power of customers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Hanna et al., 2011). Evaluating the strategic decision of how firms actively manage their social media presence, in light of such transformation of the company-customer relationship, it was argued that the marketing department should not exclusively manage or fund social media (Miller and Tucker, 2013). Rather it should be diffused across the organisation and be client focused if it was to lead to marketing results. The growing popularity and importance attached to social media, for practitioners and researchers, led to a call for deeper understanding of social media, to inform strategic decisions of organisations on "how to employ social media to engage and influence their customers" (Hoffman and Novak, 2012: 69).

Many companies were not prepared for the major challenge of cultural change required to accept some loss of control and reputational risk, fuelled by social media growth and customer behaviour (Heidemann et al., 2012). Such attitudes were reflective of what were claimed to be 21st century marketing myths of product and promotion, such as: companies controlling their message through marketing communications; and it being dangerous and risky to provide a forum for customers to talk (Hanna et al., 2011). They argued that, in seeking to influence potential and existing customers, the focus of marketing should be on "both capturing *and* continuing attention via engagement" (2011: 267). Both Bury et al. (2013) and Romero and Huberman (2011) found that most fans and social media users respectively are passive readers of information. However, the opportunity for social media users to become influential within a network, by actively engaging with information shared by organisations, was identified (Romero and Huberman, 2011).

2.4 Branding and the Social Media Effect

Social media is well suited to a brand that is consistent with a users' self or personal identity, due to the extent of self-presentation and self-disclosure (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Consumers talk to others who tend to reflect their desired self-image (Mangold and Faulds, 2009) and, in the case of football fans, this is an important factor in their relationship to the club they support (Tapp and Clowes, 2002; Dionísio et al., 2008). However, as evidenced in the case of NUFC (McLean

and Wainwright, 2009), command and control branding will not be tolerated online (Christodoulides, 2009). It could be seen how opinions shared between members of NUFC fans regarding club ownership (McLean and Wainwright, 2009), impacted attitudes and behaviours they held as a community (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004).

Even before the exponential growth in social media, researchers recognised the possible threats to companies having little or no control over negative messages from dissatisfied customers online (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Maclaran and Catterall, 2002). Social media research only served to demonstrate the ongoing shift in balance of power from the organisation to the consumer, in relation to brand (Li and Bernoff, 2008; Fisher and Smith, 2011). With customers empowered to comment on their brand experiences, including a brand narrative different to that disseminated by the brand owners, it was argued post-internet branding was about facilitating brand-related conversations (Christodoulides, 2009). Such a call for a rethink of brand theory got to the heart of what Hanna et al. (2011: 266) argued to be a marketing myth that "brand managers own and orchestrate their brands" and control the message. Hence, commercialising the social media space could become problematic for brand owners not willing to shift their mindset (Christodoulides, 2009).

The effect of social media on brands had therefore become a focus of researchers wanting to understand how marketers could engage in social media. In 2008 it was suggested brands should test social media as it could provide them with a trusted, personal, and direct access to consumers and vice-versa (Drury, 2008). In their research examining the relative impact of social media and traditional media in brand equity creation, Bruhn et al. (2012) discovered social media impacted brand image more whereas the influence of traditional media was stronger on brand awareness. Interestingly, they also found that organisation-created social media had a strong impact on functional brand image, whilst customer communications on social media had a major influence on hedonic brand image. Linking back to the earlier advocacy of Christodoulides (2009) for a rethink of branding theory, Fisher and Smith (2011: 347) encouraged a mindset of "predictable unpredictability" for marketers dealing with decentralised brand communications.

An empirical study investigated the impact of brand posts on the social media brand fan pages in six product categories: accessories, alcoholic beverages, cosmetics, food, leisure wear, and mobile phones (de Vries et al., 2012). They found that interactivity, positioning, and vividness were the key drivers of popularity of brand social media posts. Fans tended to like the vivid posts more whilst they would comment more on interactive posts and those in the top position on the social media page. In a further development to the findings of Bruhn et al. (2012), de Vries et al. (2012) found that hedonic brand posts would drive a higher volume of positive and negative fan comments, thereby increasing post popularity. Research into retail apparel brands' use of social media found brand centrality was strongest on Twitter than on Facebook (Smith et al., 2012). The Smith et al. (2012) research also suggested that brands with proactive social media marketing strategies, that offered a space for conversations to happen, were most likely to reap the rewards. Examples included facilitating positive brand sentiment, through the provision of valuable content and news that people would share on Twitter or, validating customer participation in discussion by responding to them. Other positive effects of brand communities on social media included that brand trust plays a crucial role in achieving brand loyalty, based on a customer centric approach (Laroche et al., 2012). Some caution was also recommended for brand activities on social media due to the risks associated with negative comments from an increasingly powerful customer base (Laroche et al., 2012). This is further evidence of social media and brand communities being a dynamic phenomenon that is constantly evolving (McAlexander et al., 2002; Schau et al., 2009). Developing an understanding of how brand messages were reaching consumers, and brand engagement, through the use of metrics was advocated (Hanna et al., 2011; Lipsman et al., 2012).

In summary, the wider impact of social media in a sporting context and football had yet to be examined from the perspective of the brand owner. There was a major gap in research related to brand building potential for global brands (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013), such as English Football Clubs.

2.5 Early Social Media and Football Research

Sports fans have extremely high product involvement (Mullin et al., 2007) which appears to be linked to their tribal behaviour around their shared passion (Kozinets,

1999; Cova and Cova, 2002). In the case of football fans, the link is the club (Dionísio et al., 2008), thus fans are an example of a tribal network of people who are advocates rather than more passive customers (Cova and Cova, 2002). By 2010, the internet had become "a key source of interaction between fans themselves and between fans and their clubs" (Gibbons and Dixon, 2010: 602). The internet offered potential for interaction on an "unprecedented scale and scope" (Lee, 2005: 50), and led to a call for academics to take more seriously the impact of the online environment transforming the practices of football fans and the English clubs they supported (Gibbons and Dixon, 2010).

The first study of SNS and football was conducted slightly earlier, in 2009 (McLean and Wainwright, 2009). That research adopted a critical social theory approach to examine structures and processes of communication between fans, football clubs, media, and general public. Findings revealed how football fans were increasingly being construed as 'consumers', to help maximise the profits of clubs and their owners, in addition to other vested interests such as media companies. Moreover, in the case of Newcastle United Football Club (NUFC), the club was manipulating fan speech and public opinion of the club by exerting pressure on website owners allowing club-fan related discussion. For example, the club threatened to withhold club information from the local paper if they refused to modify or delete fan forum comments that were critical of, or offensive towards the owners. Such actions by clubs are evidence of practitioners being unwilling to cede control to their audience in the post-internet era (Christodoulides, 2009). McLean and Wainwright (2009) had demonstrated how prevailing attitudes of trying to control fan discussion undermined trust between fans and club owners. They had also shown club communications, based on a commercial or transactional relationship (Adamson et al., 2006), were not necessarily appropriate in an environment where fans interact online (Gibbons and Dixon, 2010). Such football and SNS research was a very early contribution to addressing the research gap of understanding football club and fan interaction in a "technology-laden society" (Gibbons and Dixon, 2010: 599). The preliminary study aimed to build on this early understanding by researching more than one football club.

2.6 Communities, Fandom and Relationships in Football

At this point, to help with understanding fan-club interactions, it is important to review the literature on football fan behaviours and attitudes towards the club they support, in addition to their collective identity as supporters of a particular club. With social media being so interactive (Zamani, 2013) it was changing the way brands and consumers communicate amongst each other (Hanna et al., 2011; Aral et al., 2013). Insights regarding fan communities and relationships with clubs was needed to help achieve the preliminary study research objectives relating to perceived issues and potential benefits of social media marketing strategies for football clubs. As discussed in the previous section, with only one published study exploring social media in connection with NUFC (McLean and Wainwright, 2009), it was clear that social media in the context of sport and football was an area in need of further study. No research at that time had explored the challenges and opportunities of social media marketing strategy for football clubs.

Fandom

It is important to recognise that the football fan relationship with their club and each other involves much more than being a typical 'customer' (Adamson et al., 2006). The strong sense of community between sports and football fans had long been understood (Wann, 2009; Sweeney, 2010), therefore it was increasingly argued that for fans, the relationship extended far beyond that of a transaction-based customer (Healy and McDonagh, 2012). To different degrees, being a fan of a football club forms part of their self-identity (Tapp and Clowes, 2002; Theodorakis et al., 2012) and involves *doing* something to demonstrate their shared emotional attachment and belonging to their club (Abosag et al., 2012), in addition to their social and cultural attachment (Supports Direct, 2010). For example, sharing club myths, symbols and traditions (Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder, 2011), sharing songs and lyrics in online communities and in the physical matchday environment, creating banners and flags to be displayed, are all evidence of how fans are a vital part of the experience they co-create with their supported clubs (Healy and McDonagh, 2012). As well as exhibiting certain behaviours, fans would also demonstrate their strong commitment through season ticket or regular ticket purchase, often internalising the values of their club (Bee and Kahle, 2006). In 2002 two highly influential papers were published: (i) The conceptual paper of Giulianotti (2002) and his taxomonies of spectator identities in football; and (ii) the Tapp and Clowes (2002)

study of UK football supporters. All classifications in both papers are evidence of Wann's (2009) conceptualisation of team identification as a fan having a psychological connection to a team and the team's performances.

Based on the exponential growth in football finances, media profile and a cultural shift away from 'supporters' in the traditional local sense, Giulianotti (2002) argued that hypermodification of the game, had led to four ideal-type categories of football spectator: spectator; follower; fan; flâneur. As shown in Figure 2-1 below, he classified them according to two binary opposites of hot-cool and traditional-consumer. His argument was that more traditional spectators (supporter and follower) would have a local and popular cultural identification with the club, whereas the consumer spectators (fan and flâneur) would have more of a market-centred relationship to the club (Giulianotti, 2002).

Figure 2-1: Taxonomies of Spectator Identities in Football
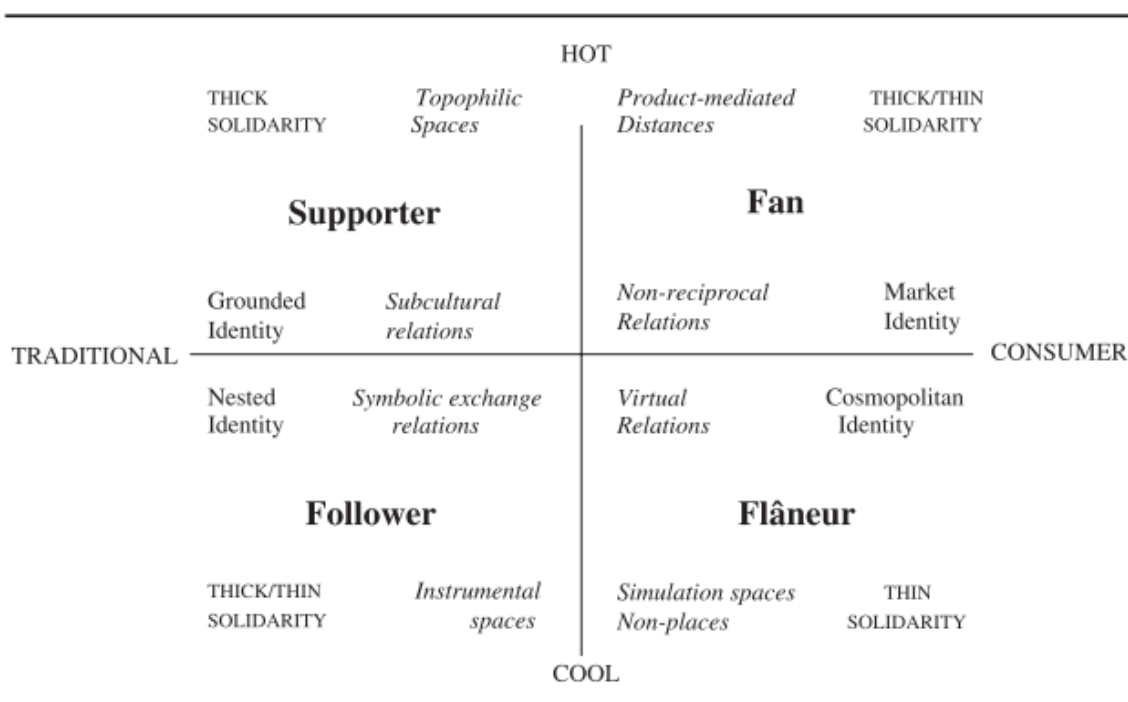
Source: Giulianotti (2002). Figure 1: Taxonomies of Spectator Identities in Football, pp.31

In Giulianotti's (2002) taxonomies, it is the supporter who is what may be considered as the more traditional classification with a close personal and emotional connection to the club, often long-term. The follower is, by comparison, not as strong in their self-identity being associated with the club. Instead, he or she is more interested in

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keeping abreast of latest club developments, and may be drawn to the club due to a favoured interest, such as a star signing. The fan is argued to develop a love for the club or specific players, however this tends to be demonstrated by purchase of merchandise such as replica kit, pay-per-view and other market-centred factors. Finally, the flâneur is considered to have the most fluid identity with the club, through a more detached relationship with the club. Expressed through an identity with competitive success, star players, and purchasing of club-related fashion rather than replica kit.

There are overlaps with the work of Tapp and Clowes (2002) who, in studying UK football fans, identified new segments as shown in Figure 2-2. The x-axis shows a continuum of differing levels of commitment different supporter groups have to their club. For example, 'fanatics' have the deepest connection and see the club as part of their self-image, particularly those with a deep passion for their club. By comparison, 'casuals' may change club allegiance if their current club is no longer winning trophies, thus becoming 'glory hunters'. The y-axis shows the relative importance of winning or entertainment to supporters. For example, 'carefree casuals' are happy with a highly entertaining 3-3 draw, whereas 'committed casuals' will far prefer a 1-0 win for their team.

Figure 2-2: Linking together sub groups of "casuals", "regular" and "fanatic" supporters
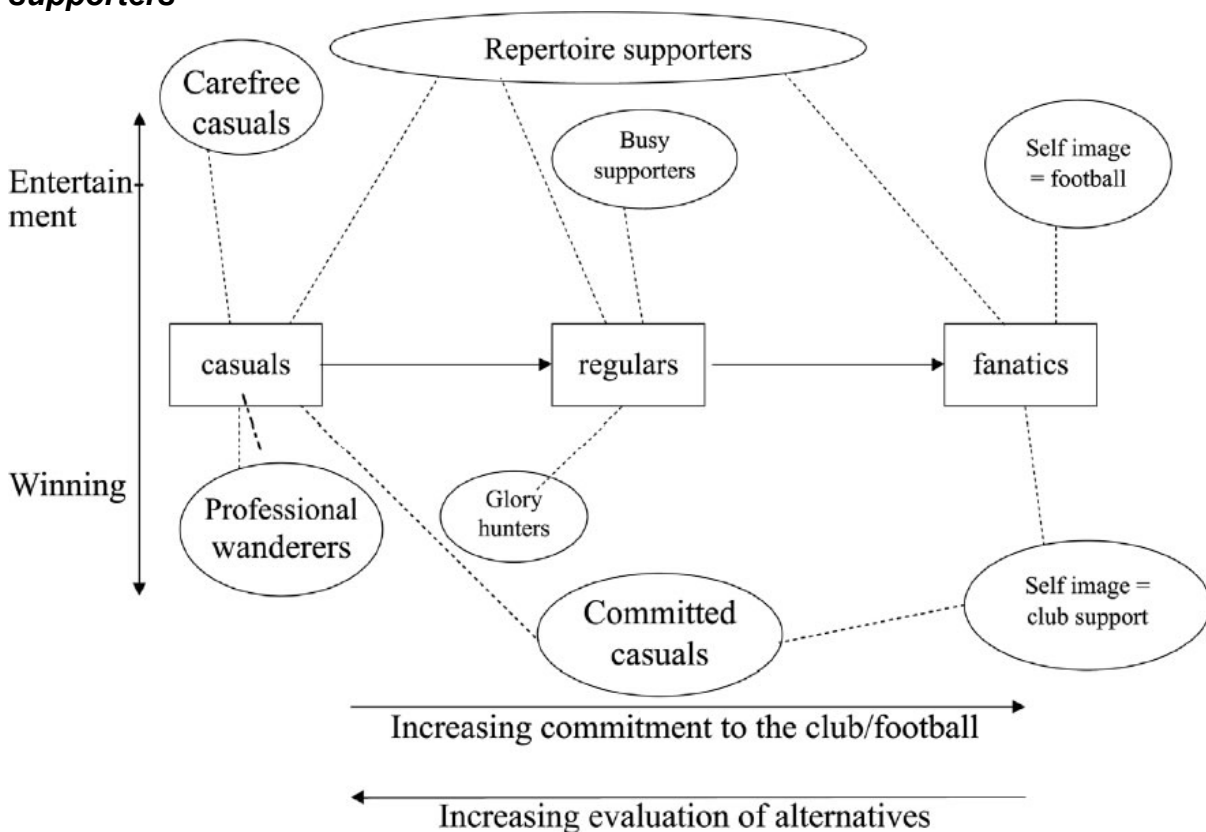
Source: Tapp and Clowes, (2002). Figure 7: Linking together sub groups of "casuals", "regular" and "fanatic" supporters, pp.1266

In summary, there was therefore agreement that sports and football fans had a unique and often strong relationship with who they supported (Adamson et al., 2006; Chadwick and Beech, 2007; Bühler and Nufer, 2010), and that fans had a strong sense of community with their club (Underwood et al., 2001; Wann, 2009) and with each other as a tribe supporting the same team (Dionísio et al., 2008). Overall team identification can be a predictor of behavioural loyalty for sport and football fans (Theodorakis et al., 2012). The sense of intrinsic belonging can therefore lead to dependence based commitment (Fullerton, 2005), and internalised attitudes that can be positive or negative (Bee and Kahle, 2006), leading to euphoria or despair for more loyal fans (Raney, 2009). The consequences for highly identified fans are that their self-worth can be affected by team results and off-field actions (Wann, 2009). For tribal football fans this can cause tensions between those classed as 'fanatics' or 'supporter' for whom the club is part of their self-image, and the 'carefree casuals', 'glory hunters', or 'flâneur' who have less intrinsic links to the club (Giulianotti, 2002; Tapp and Clowes, 2002).

Commercialisation and Globalisation

Sport had been argued to have unique characteristics, when compared to other institutions. Most notably: (i) high levels of product and brand loyalty; (ii) prioritising winning over profit; (iii) being subject to varying product and performance quality; and (iv) fixed supply schedule, via competition structures (Smith and Stewart, 2013). There was therefore a trend of tensions developing due the increasing commercialisation of football and the club-fan relationship (Chadwick et al., 2008; Gibbons and Dixon, 2010; Supporters Direct, 2010) which contradicted the historic ethos of professional clubs originating in the local community (Sir Norman Chester Centre for Football Research, 2002; Smith and Stewart, 2013). Unprecedented global internet and social media growth was also shaping fandom (Giulianotti, 2002; Gibbons and Dixon, 2010) which was leading to similar tensions. This was especially the case for major clubs (Nash, 2000), such as those with a history of European or extensive domestic success. Fans were being attracted globally thanks to more widespread and faster media coverage and internet access (Raney, 2009; Gibbons and Dixon, 2010; Kerr and Emery, 2011; Rookwood and Chan, 2011), often exhibiting similar variations of attachment and commitment behaviours to those at a more local level (Nash, 2000; Rookwood and Chan, 2011). At the same time, there was concern the historic link between the more local fan community and the club was gradually being broken (Beech et al., 2000c; Chadwick and Beech, 2007; Chadwick et al., 2008). In this context, the prevailing theoretical view was that fans disapproved of the notion of their club as a brand (Chadwick and Beech, 2007), a stance contradicted by Abosag et al. (2012), who found that fans with a strong emotional attachment to Norwegian clubs took a more pragmatic view of branding being important to future success of their football club. These points were important to the preliminary study as the research objectives were examining the perceived issues and benefits of social media marketing strategy from the brand perspective.

2.6.1 Trust and Complex Relationships with Football Clubs

In the context of growing exposure to global audiences, there was a general lack of understanding of relationship marketing in the sport industry (Stavros and Westberg, 2009), despite the attitudes and behaviours of sports fans being linked to commitment, involvement, shared values, and trust (Bee and Kahle, 2006). The

work of Bee and Kahle (2006) highlighted the complex nature of trust for sport consumers to discuss how different levels of trust could impact on the relationship.

The limited body of knowledge consisted of trust and commitment between football clubs and sponsors (Farrelly and Quester, 2003), loyalty and segmentation (Tapp and Clowes, 2002; Tapp, 2004), value-based segmentation (Kwon and Armstrong, 2002; Mullin, et al., 2007), and relationship marketing and club websites (Beech et al., 2000a). Much of this work appeared to have been shaped by the commitment-trust-based theory which asserted "relationship marketing refers to all marketing activities, directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges" (Morgan and Hunt, 1994: 22).

The work of Adamson et al., (2006) sought to address the knowledge gap, by proposing the supporter-centric conceptual framework of Fan Relationship Management (FRM), as shown in Figure 2-3. The framework was based on the fundamental premise that "fans need to be treated like customers but recognised as fans" (Adamson et al., 2006: 168) and took into account that fans were not typical customers because they had different levels of loyalty, and had differing needs and levels of involvement due to the emotional nature of football. It was an attempted move away from the often short-term transaction-focused marketing approach (Christy and Oliver 1996) and limited use of relationship marketing on club websites (Beech et al., 2000a). The FRM framework was informed by the only major study of UK football supporters at that time (Tapp and Clowes, 2002), which showed that fans are very different from customers of conventional organisations. As such, the primary focus was to facilitate a stronger relationship approach to committed fans, taking into account the varying levels of loyalty, differing psychological and physical needs from their club, differing value to the club, and varying geodemographic traits (Adamson et al., 2006).

Figure 2-3: A 'fan relationship marketing' implementation tool for football clubs

FRM characteristic	Implementation considerations
1. Strategic vision and leadership	• Is FRM part of an company strategy? • Is there commitment from the appropriate business leaders? • Is the vision consistent with the brand values aspirations?
2. Fan loyalty strategy	• How will loyalty be developed, nurtured, recognised and rewarded? • How will fans be recognised and rewarded, eg loyalty card?
3. Fan-centric approach 4. Integrated and holistic	• Is organisational wide approach to FRM including a review of all customer touch points? • Are the human resources structures and policies in place to support FRM? • Are cross functional project teams in place with agreed plans? • Have the relevant change management issues been considered?
5. Understanding fan needs 6. Database marketing 7. Life time value	• Have fans been consulted regarding the implementation? • Is there a methodology is place to collect information regarding fans' and potential fans' needs? • Is the customer data accurate and consistent? • Will there be the ability to specifically segment, target and communicate to different groups of fans and measure success? • Is there the ability to measure lifetime value of fans?
8. Appropriate technology	• Is the technology appropriate for the overall strategy? • Is the technology part of the overall solution rather than leading it?

Source: Adamson et al. (2006). Figure 6: A 'fan relationship management' implementation tool for football clubs, pp.167

Veloutsou et al. (2002) had stated that there had been very limited research on how firms could support relationships through the internet, and this continued to be the case following the arrival and undoubted popularity of social media. Indeed, the FRM framework itself did not take social media into account. Early social media research from the fan perspective had demonstrated how a club would seek to limit and control disaffected supporters having club-related discussion online (McLean, and Wainwright, 2009), in the context of the "rabid commercialisation" of the EPL (Brown et al., 2008: 310). In summary, it was evident that more research was required that explored social media marketing strategy in the context of football, particularly how opportunities and risks related to club-fan communications, the relationship between fans and clubs, and brand-related discourse.

2.7 Summary of Preliminary Study Review

This literature review as of the time of the published preliminary study has demonstrated how little was known about the impact of social media in the football industry. More generally, it reveals how early research had begun to identify the potential for social media to build customer relationships, and to enable customer interaction with each other and with brands. A proactive social media marketing

strategy had been shown to improve marketing results for organisations. For brand managers wishing to utilise the potential of social media, several tensions have been identified, presenting challenges for those responsible for managing a social media presence. For example, balancing the relationship without disengaging fans through too much emphasis on commercialisation, and risks associated with empowered customers being able to take some control of the brand-related social media conversation. Yet research has evidenced the incongruity of clubs seeking to limit what fans can say about a football club and its owners, without damaging the trust that is a core tenet of the fan-club relationship and associated commitment.

In summary, the wider impact of social media in a sporting context and football had yet to be examined from the perspective of the brand owner. There was a major gap in research related to brand building potential for global brands (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013), such as English football clubs. Table 2-3 summarises the key knowledge gaps at the time of the preliminary study. In seeking to address those gaps, the extant literature mushroomed into a much greater body of knowledge regarding the context (e.g. range of sectors) and the lens used to explore, (e.g. social media marketing strategy). The main study literature review is a more extensive examination of research that developed after the preliminary study. A knowledge gap table is provided at the end of each thematic section of the main study. Where appropriate, associated knowledge gaps from Table 2-3 are inserted to make a clear comparison of then and now.

Table 2-3: Knowledge Gaps as of late 2013

Theme	Knowledge Gap Identified as of late 2013
SNS and Social Media	1. A need for deeper understanding of social media, to inform strategic decisions on employing social media to engage and influence customers (Hoffman and Novak, 2012).
	2. Lack of research related to online fan interaction, which is an area that needs to be taken seriously by academics (Gibbons and Dixon, 2010).
	3. One of the most under-researched and understood areas relates to the best ways in which companies should organize and manage social media (Aral et al., 2013).
Branding and Social Media	1. A gap exists in research tracing the dynamism of brand communities in the context of social media. Longitudinal studies enable more insight (Laroche et al., 2012).
	2. A rethink of brand theory in light of post-internet branding and social media (Christodoulides, 2009; Fisher and Smith, 2011; Hanna et al., 2011).
	3. A major gap in research related to brand building potential for global brands (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013).
Community and Relationships in Football	1. A need to identify factors that firms could use to manage the uncertainty of web-based relationships (Veloutsou, Saren and Tzokas, 2002).
	2. A lack of understanding of fan relationships in the sports industry (Adamson et al., 2006), especially since the advent of social media (McLean and Wainwright, 2009).

Main Study

2.8 Introduction to Main Study

This section of Chapter 2 now focuses on important literature contributions from 2014 onwards. The section first draws attention to key points regarding social media marketing strategy to contextualise the rest of the chapter. A detailed discussion on social media marketing strategy literature and key theoretical frameworks then follows. It will then evaluate the rapidly developing body of literature in social media marketing strategy in sport and summarises the calls for contributions. The chapter then evaluates branding in the post-social media era. A rationale for re-evaluating brand literature is offered, through the lenses of sport and fandom. The main study literature review concludes with a summary of the key research gaps of the 2014-2022 literature and a comparative summary of the knowledge gaps up to late 2013. This is followed by a mapping of the knowledge gaps and the research objectives to demonstrate the link with the extant literature and the contributions to knowledge to be made.

2.9 Social Media Marketing Strategy

Social media marketing strategy is an integral part of doing business in the 21st century, yet the literature remains somewhat fragmented (Felix et al., 2017). Organisations should be using social media strategically in order for it to be more effective (Effing and Spil, 2016).

2.9.1 Social Media Marketing Strategy Defined

Before a detailed discussion of the extant literature, it is important to explore how definitions of social media marketing strategy have evolved. As Table 2-2 (pp.42) demonstrated, definitions began with SNS, then progressed to the wider term of social media. From 2014 a cumulative research tradition has continued to develop with more consistent terminology. For example, some have considered social media marketing strategy in relation to brand (Cawsey and Rowley, 2016; Carlson et al., 2018). Other authors have researched social media marketing strategy in a sporting context (Stavros et al., 2014; Filo et al., 2015; Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Parganas et al., 2015; Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016; Cano-Tenorio and

Paniagua-Rojano, 2017; Lardo et al., 2017; Hazari, 2018; Maderer et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019). Summaries and suggestions for developing the social media marketing strategy research agenda have been published (Filo et al., 2015; Alalwan et al., 2017; Rowley and Keegan, 2019; Li et al., 2020). Finally, other authors have attempted to further this research tradition by offering their own frameworks (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Effing and Spil, 2016; Chung et al., 2017; Felix et al., 2017). Those studies are examples of a large body of work, informed by key definitions and interpretations of social media marketing strategy. Table 2-4 provides a selective summary to demonstrate the scope of this field.

The body of work that follows in this literature review very clearly identifies the growing influence of social media marketing strategy. Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014) identified a degree of discomfort on the part of firms using social media marketing strategy for brand purposes, plus overall business performance. In also highlighting how marketers often viewed social media as a threat, Constantinides (2014) argued that it in fact presented new opportunities and proposed two possible social media marketing strategies: a) *Passive* approach focused on listening to customer voice and gathering market intelligence; and b) *Active* approach engaging the audience, influencing customers, personalising products, enabling of co-operation and customer-generated innovation. The work of Filo et al. (2015) summarised the body of work to date in social media in sport and draws particular attention to understanding of social media marketing strategy and management in this context.

Table 2-4: Social Media Marketing Strategy definitions and interpretations

Literature	Definition/Interpretation of Social Media Marketing Strategy
(Constantinides, 2014)	"While often perceived as strategic threats by marketers…The Social Media domain presents businesses with new opportunities of improving their competitive position and creating new forms of customer value that will attract new customers and help building strong relationships with them." (: 41)
(Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014)	Attracted by the rapid penetration of social media into society, firms are increasingly using them as a part of their marketing and brand building activities, although only a small number of firms feel comfortable in the new environment (pp. 328)
(Filo et al., 2015)	"New media technologies facilitating interactivity and co-creation that allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between organisations (e.g. teams, governing bodies, agencies and media groups) and individuals (e.g. consumers, athletes and journalists)." (: 167)
(Effing and Spil, 2016)	"…a goal-directed planning process for creating user generated content, driven by a group of Internet applications, to create a unique and valuable competitive position". (: 2)
(Chung et al., 2017)	"…a better understanding of social media management and its use and adoption by organisations is crucial for academia and practice". (: 1406)
(Felix et al., 2017)	"Social media marketing is an interdisciplinary and cross-functional concept that uses social media (often in combination with other communications channels) to achieve organizational goals by creating value for stakeholders. On a strategic level, social media marketing covers an organization's decisions about social media marketing scope (ranging from defenders to explorers), culture (ranging from conservatism to modernism), structure (ranging from hierarchies to networks), and governance (ranging from autocracy to anarchy). (: 123)
(Tafesse and Wien, 2018a)	[Social media implementation is] "the process by which firms employ social media strategically, for customer-facing purposes, by producing content regularly, engaging customers in an ongoing relationship and generating analytics and customer insights to drive strategic marketing actions." (: 736)
(Li et al., 2020)	"[Social media marketing strategy] is an organization's integrated pattern of activities that, based on a careful assessment of customers' motivations for brand-related social media use and the undertaking of deliberate engagement initiatives, transform social media connectedness (networks) and interactions (influences) into valuable strategic means to achieve desirable marketing outcomes." (: 54)

Effing and Spil (2016) asserted that organisations could improve their overall business performance by becoming increasingly sophisticated in their social media marketing strategy. The link between social media marketing strategy and overall

business performance was taken further by Chung et al. (2017) and Felix et al. (2017), who explored social media in a more holistic sense. Their frameworks more explicitly reflected the cross-functional nature of social media marketing strategy, as did the article by Tafesse and Wien (2018a) when discussing how social media marketing strategy could be implemented using their 'social strategy cone'. Finally, the definition of Li et al. (2020: 54) attempted to capture the "uniqueness of the social media phenomenon" whilst scoping social media marketing strategy and factoring in the basis of marketing strategy. What they claimed made social media marketing strategy unique is: (i) that people must be motivated to engage with firms intellectually, socially, culturally or for other reasons; (ii) the consequences of social media marketing strategy are jointly decided by the organisation and its customers, based on interaction and the organisation-customer relationship; and (iii) customer value is expressed through direct customer engagement, such as buying, and indirect customer engagement, such as word of mouth (Li et al., 2020: 54).

Building on the discussion on the definitions and interpretations of social media marketing strategy provided in Table 2-4, plus the work of McCann and Barlow (2015) and Tafesse and Wien (2018a), this study proposes the following definition of social media marketing strategy in a sporting context:

> Social media marketing strategy is a cyclical, systematic, iterative and flexible process that enables relationship development and interactive communication among and between organisations (e.g. teams, internal stakeholders and departments) and individuals or groups (e.g. consumers, fans) by: (i) analysing the landscape the organisation operates in and the goals of the organisation; setting of broad goals or specific objectives; (ii) developing an implementation plan to include audience, social media platforms, message, content, guidelines and responsibilities; (iii) regular campaign performance monitoring to adapt regular content; and (iv) periodically more detailed analysis to inform data-driven management decision-making for ongoing iterations of the strategy to improve social media marketing performance.

Social media marketing strategy is inter-disciplinary and involves other departments and stakeholders in content generation (Felix et al., 2017; Rowley and Keegan,

2019). It is affected by external influences such as organisational goals and audience behaviour (Filo et al., 2015; Maderer et al., 2018) and the environment the organisation operates in (Effing and Spil, 2016; Felix et al., 2017). It requires the use of appropriate qualitative and quantitative social media marketing data (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a) to gain insights which can then be used to accommodate emerging objectives, as the organisation learns the value that each particular social media platform can contribute to their business (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Chung et al., 2017).

2.9.2 Social Media Marketing Strategy Theoretical Models

After evaluating several theoretical models, four notable exemplars for social media marketing strategy were selected in the context of this research study. They are works by McCann and Barlow (2015), Effing and Spil (2016), Felix et al. (2017), Chung et al. (2017). As well as other research in social media in sports, particularly Filo et al. (2015), three of the models informed the data gathering and data analysis of this study: (i) implementation (McCann and Barlow, 2015); (ii) stage of social media marketing strategy (Effing and Spil, 2016); and (iii) the role of senior management and external influencing factors (Felix et al., 2017).

Measurement of ROI of social media (McCann and Barlow, 2015)

The first model to discuss is that of McCann and Barlow (2015), shown in Figure 2-4. Focusing on particular characteristics of social media marketing and strategy, it is an important development as it built on the established and more generic digital marketing strategy and strategy models (Gay et al., 2007; Chaffey and Smith, 2017; Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Exploring the value and return on investment (ROI) to be gained from social media, the model argues for the importance of planned entry, informing effective implementation and finally, evaluation of benefits in the form of ROI.

Figure 2-4: Measurement of ROI of social media

PLANNING STAGE

Formulate Goals → Define Objectives → Outline Metrics

IMPLEMENTATION STAGE

Implement Appropriate Social Media Tools → Methods for Analysing Social Media → Measure Quantitative Aspects of Social Media (ongoing) / Measure Qualitative Aspects of Social Media (ongoing)

EVALUATION STAGE

Evaluate Short Term Benefits → Evaluate Long Term Benefits → Evaluate ROI
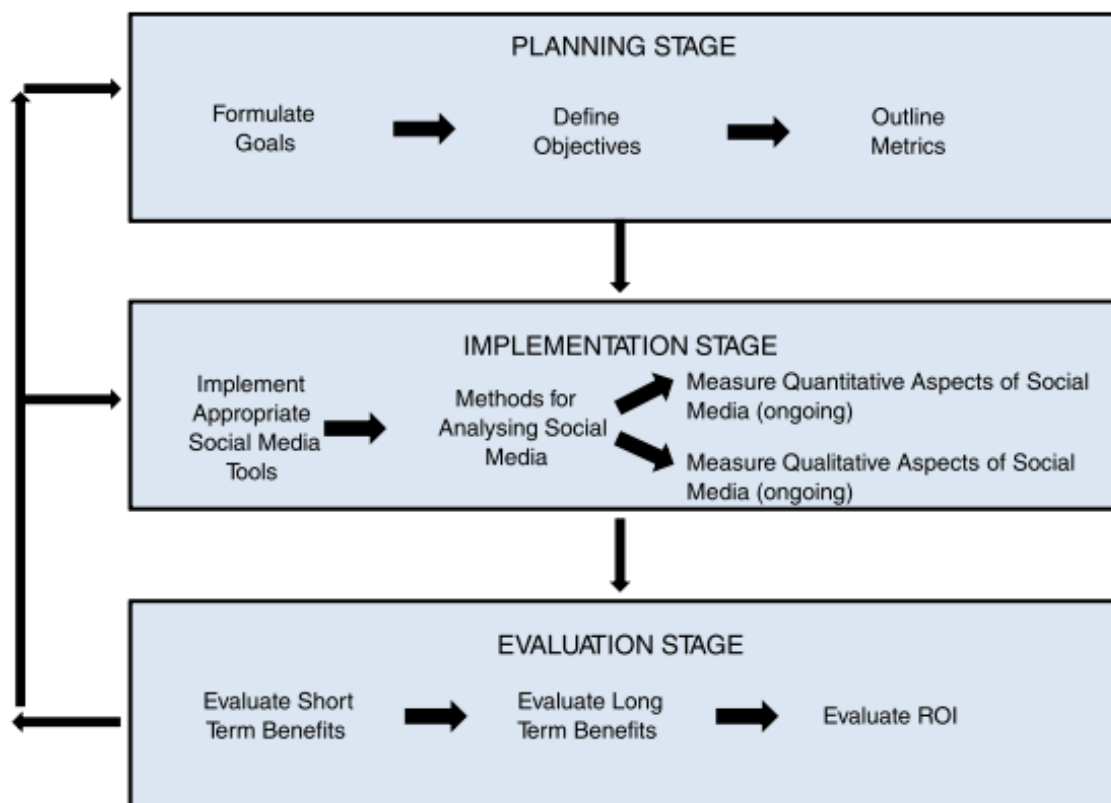
Source: McCann and Barlow (2015). Figure 2: Measurement of ROI of social media, pp.284

It is important to note that the model has close links with the more generic digital marketing strategy and marketing strategy models (Kotler and Keller, 2016; Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019; Dibb et al., 2019; Smith, 2022), as it incorporates clear links between planning and implementation, then evaluation to inform future planning and implementation.

The first stage of the model is Planning. It is argued that a "comprehensive planning process" is vital to social media success in the form of positive ROI (McCann and Barlow, 2015: 276). Using this approach involves the organisation setting goals for social media marketing, defining objectives to be achieved, and outlining appropriate social media metrics to evaluate the impact of social media marketing activity.

Implementation is the second stage. Here the organisation will identify appropriate tools for implementation of the social media marketing strategy, in addition to methods for analysing social media marketing activity. By 'tools' the authors are

referring to social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, plus any other software that may be required (such as database technology) which may be managed by other departments. The measurement very deliberately differentiates qualitative and quantitative data (McCann and Barlow, 2015), reflecting the range and volume of data that is available via social media platforms (Misirlis and Vlachopoulou, 2018), as well as the need to move beyond "traditional conversion metrics" (McCann and Barlow, 2015: 276).

Evaluation is the third and final stage. Crucially, the model proposes the evaluation of both short- and longer-term benefits of social media marketing strategy, using qualitative and quantitative data, to accurately evaluate the ROI of social media marketing activity. Is includes the use of data to inform a shorter-term focus that involves adaptations to the implementation of the social media marketing strategy, in addition to the generation of those insights that will inform longer-term decision-making for the next planning phase. The model therefore encourages a cyclical process to shape short and long-term social media marketing strategy and is more explicit in doing so than earlier models (e.g. Gay et al., 2007).

In describing their own model as "fairly simplistic" McCann and Barlow (2015: 283) articulate how it is designed to be flexible enough for other organisations to adapt to their needs. It is the principles of integrating planning, implementation and evaluation on a cyclical basis that are core tenets. However, the authors do not examine how, in practice, the three-stage process and components of this model can be transitioned iteratively. This may be due to the lack of social media marketing strategy experience of their sample of ninety-six Scottish SMEs (McCann and Barlow, 2015).

McCann and Barlow (2015) also discuss how measuring the success of social media marketing strategy can be problematic for many SMEs, due to the volume of valuable qualitative data that is produced related to less tangible factors such as customer sentiment and brand awareness. For many SMEs with limited resources such as budget and technological capabilities, this can be an issue. Limited social media data insights also impacts on the ability of organisations to achieve their objectives through social media marketing strategy.

Finally, McCann and Barlow's (2015) model did not take into account the relatively new platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat. Despite this, their work provided a foundation for later influential studies.

The Social Strategy Cone (Effing and Spil, 2016)

Effing and Spil (2016) proposed the social strategy cone (Figure 2-5) as a model to assess an organisation's stage of social media marketing strategy. Being incremental and broken down into three key stages of diffusion, it is different to the model proposed by McCann and Barlow (2015) and more general digital marketing strategy models, such as Chaffey and Smith (Chaffey and Smith, 2017).

The first stage of the Effing and Spil (2016) model is Initiation and contains the key elements of channel choice and target audience. The decisions as to which 'channel choice' to make are based on which social media platforms an organisation's target audience are using. An indication of an organisation being at the Initiation stage are that they are taking an experimental approach to their social media marketing strategy, learning as they develop their presence. At this stage they are unlikely to have any clear goals. The authors' model centres on target audience insights, that inform the choice of social media platforms.

The second stage is Diffusion and reflects a more focused approach to social media marketing strategy. There are broad goals in the form of some key performance indicators, however, these are not aligned to business goals and are not monitored. Resources have been agreed, in relation to who is responsible for the social media marketing activity and who therefore has access to the company account or profile. Finally, policies are established in the form of some rules or guidelines for social media marketing content to avoid harming the corporate reputation of the organisation. At this stage they "have not paid attention to the key element of monitoring" their social media marketing activity (Effing and Spil, 2016: 6).

Figure 2-5: The social strategy cone
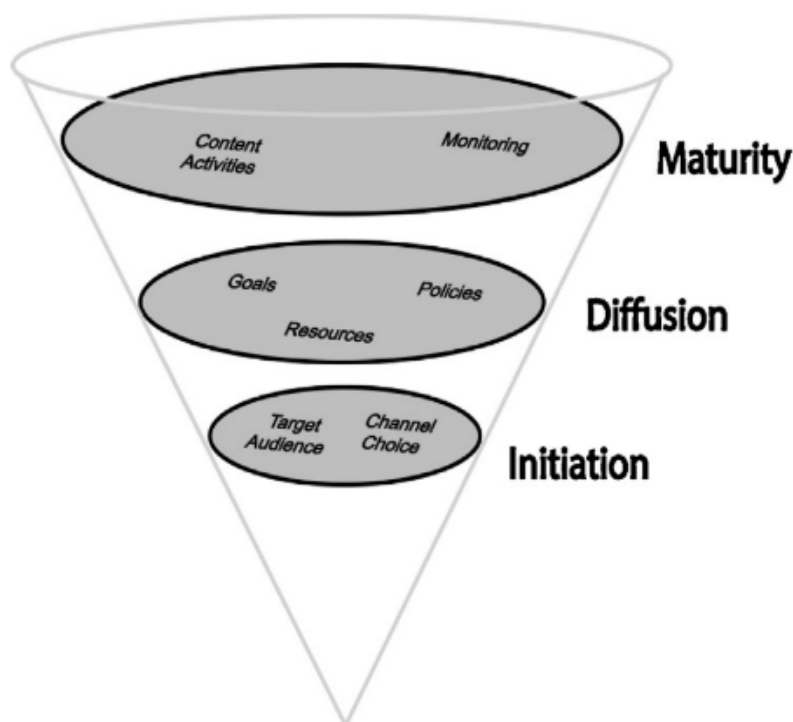
Source: Effing and Spil (2016) Fig. 1. The social strategy cone. pp.7

The final stage is Maturity. Evidencing a more formal and systematic approach, it is claimed content activity planning is in place, together with a more active monitoring of social media marketing activity in relation to key benchmarks. Example benchmarks may be brand awareness, number of followers or reach, and brand advocacy. More resources are allocated to social media marketing, reflecting the increased sophistication of activity and monitoring. There are also likely to be more formal social media codes of conduct and policies. In contrast to McCann and Barlow (2015), content activity planning and monitoring are a mix of implementation and evaluation/control respectively. The model was developed with insights validated by practitioners. It therefore models **what** practitioners are doing rather than **how** they are doing it. The result is a model reflective of levels of maturity rather than a one that sets out steps to work through to develop and roll out a successful social media marketing strategy.

In summary, Effing and Spil (2016) found that organisations: (i) tend to begin social media marketing strategy with a more experimental approach; and (ii) may have very broad goals and roll out a presence on platforms appropriate for their audience, with no clear idea of what can be measured during evaluation. Only as they become

more sophisticated in their implementation, and gain access to more data insights, may they produce actual social media marketing objectives.

The social strategy cone was the first social media marketing strategy model to incorporate a sports brand in its sample (Effing and Spil, 2016). However, as the research was generated from nine very varied companies across a range of sectors, it was not specific to sport, or an individual sport. This thesis will therefore build on their research by focusing on social media marketing strategy practitioners at English football clubs.

Strategic Social Media Marketing Framework (Felix et al., 2017)

The third model (Figure 2-6) recognises the role of other departments in a successful social media marketing strategy. This model (Felix et al., 2017) offers an integrated approach that views social media marketing strategy as integral to business operations and success. In addition, this is the first model to explicitly acknowledge the role of senior management in social media marketing strategy and decision-making.

The model suggests social media marketing strategy and decisions are guided by external influences such as the vision and mission of the organisation, in addition to corporate goals, culture and resources. The inclusion of external factors demonstrates some commonality with the Planning phase of McCann and Barlow's model (2015) and the Analysis stage of the more general digital marketing and marketing strategy models, such as those of (Kotler and Keller, 2016; Dibb et al., 2019; Smith, 2022), summarised in Table 2-3, pp.55.

Figure 2-6: Strategic Social Media Marketing Framework
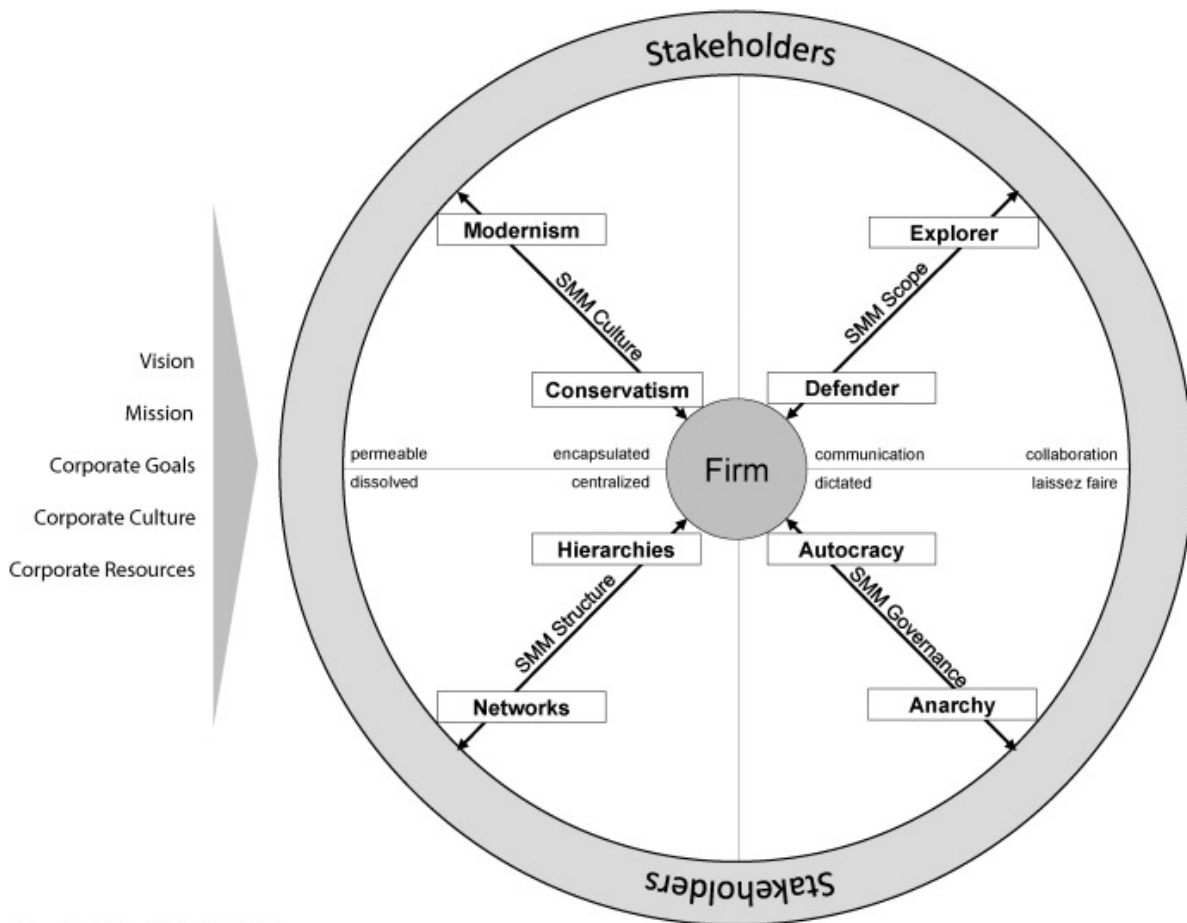
*Source: Felix et al. (2017) Fig. 1. Strategic Social Media Marketing Framework.,
pp.121*

Reflecting the role of other stakeholders beyond the marketing department, the
model enables managers to position their organisation on the four dimensions
shown: Culture; Scope; Structure; and Governance. Felix et al. (2017) recommend
these be used as a continuum rather than extremes of approach. For example,
social media marketing scope may be positioned towards a 'Defender' classification
if communications are more one-way information broadcast. By contrast, as the
continuum shifts to the 'Explorer' classification, social media marketing
communications reflect a more collaborative, two-way interaction. In essence, the
model reflects a more closed, controlling and centralised approach in the centre,
shifting outwards to a more open, collaborative and de-centralised approach (Felix
et al., 2017). This is an interesting approach because rather than social media
marketing strategy being developed and rolled out by moving through phases or
levels of maturity, as the other models encourage (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Effing

and Spil, 2016), the continuum approach of looking inwards and outwards encourages all four elements to be considered collectively (Felix et al., 2017). In this sense it could be argued their Strategic Social Media Marketing Framework is more holistic in its application.

The authors propose five arguments related to strategic social media marketing: (i) social media marketing facilitates organisations being more permeable, collaborative, dissolved and laissez-faire in their approach; (ii) social media marketing offers organisations the opportunity to build relationships with customers, employees and other stakeholders; (iii) the climate in which the organisation operates will influence social media marketing strategy; (iv) stakeholders external to the marketing team should be consulted on social media marketing strategy; and (v) guidelines for what (governance) those responsible (structure) for posting and interacting via social media, should be created as part of a social media marketing strategy (Felix et al., 2017). Each of these five arguments link with the research aim of this thesis, i.e., evolving use of social media marketing strategy, as it is exploring the use of social media marketing strategy of English football clubs, and their approaches to managing social media marketing presence. For example, exploring if football clubs are becoming more permeable and collaborative, how they are using social media marketing strategy to build relationships, the influence of the sporting and social media marketing landscape, links with external stakeholders, and if any social media guidelines are in place.

The one major limitation of this model is that, compared to others associated with strategic development in general (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Kotler and Keller, 2016; Chaffey and Smith, 2017), it does not offer guidance to planning, implementation, or evaluation. The authors do also acknowledge that their sample is focused on a dataset collected from German businesses and suggest further studies in other countries, focusing on specific industries and including the role of stakeholders in social media marketing strategy.

Impact on Further Social Media Marketing Strategy Research
The three studies reviewed above assisted the development of the theoretical foundation of social media marketing strategy academic theory. However, there is an argument that extant social media marketing strategy literature has limited its

relevance to practice, creating a disconnect between theory and practice (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016). The relevance of academic research to practice is a gap this thesis seeks to address, by exploring social media marketing strategy from the perspective of firms and practitioners.

The three social media marketing strategy models discussed above are part of the growing academic body of knowledge that has also produced other influential studies (e.g. by Chung et al., 2017 and Tafesse and Wien, 2018a). These studies are now more briefly reviewed as part of a concluding discussion of social media marketing strategy literature.

The work of Chung et al. (2017) is very comprehensive and was widely cited in a short space of time after publication. Figure 2-7 shows the empirical model which the authors hoped would address the lack of research on understanding how organisations could adopt and manage social media marketing strategy (Chung et al., 2017). Their survey examined value and usefulness of social media in ten areas within organisations: strategy; business process; structure; management style; technologies adopted; application of technologies; impact on skills; impact on internal stakeholders; impact on external stakeholders; and return on investment. They form the categories of benchmark variables on the left of the model. Horizontally, are the stages of growth for each benchmark variable: experimentation and learning; rapid growth; formalisation; consolidation and integration; and institutional absorption.

Holistically the model provides a matrix that can be used to evaluate what stage an organisation is at for each of the variables. For example, during the very early 'Experimentation and Learning' stage, Chung et al. (2017) argue no social media marketing strategies exist. This stage would appear similar to the 'Initiation' stage of the social strategy cone which argues there are no clear goals and use of social media marketing is experimental (Effing and Spil, 2016). By contrast, the more developed 'Institutional Absorption' stage strategies are formalised and social intelligence data feeds into the overall business strategy (Chung et al., 2017). Completing the matrix for all benchmark variables and stages creates a comprehensive "Social Media Business Profile (SMBP)" (2017: 1405) which classifies the organisation, based on its potential use of social media.

There are two limitations with the sample used in the quantitative research to generate the model: (i) a limited sample of disparate Canadian companies; and (ii) "from the 52 surveyed organisations, 35 respondents said that they are aware but not directly involved in social media implementation" (Chung et al., 2017: 1409). This last point raises concerns as to the validity of the findings. Lastly, in being a more extensive and detailed model, it might be considered to run the risk of becoming too prescriptive and too complex to be used in the flexible manner that reflects the experimental nature of social media marketing strategy (Murdough, 2009; Nair, 2011; McCann and Barlow, 2015; Effing and Spil, 2016).

The Chung et al. (2017) study contributed to the development of social media marketing strategy theory, by addressing the research gap relating to the understanding of social media marketing strategy and management in organisations. Elements of their work, such as how firms implement social media marketing strategy, were then incorporated into a study by Tafesse and Wien (2018a), which conceptualised the strategic implementation of social media marketing. Tafesse and Wien (2018a) claimed social media marketing performance is linked to marketing performance, and that social media marketing strategy, customer engagement and social media analytics are three dimensions that positively contribute to that performance. They also found that active presence on social media (regular development of content, of engagement with customers, of testing different social media campaign ideas) did not positively contribute to social media marketing performance (Tafesse and Wien, 2018a). Their findings led them to question models that appeared to encourage a linear process, such as McCann and Barlow (2015), and the sequential stages proposed by Chung et al. (2017). Ultimately, Tafesse and Wien (2018a) called for two research gaps to be addressed through future work: (i) to explore the synchronous and multi-dimensional nature of developing and implementing social media marketing strategy; and (ii) to explore industry-specific contexts and to develop understanding how firms implement social media marketing strategy.

Figure 2-7: Benchmark variables values

	1: Experimentation and Learning	2: Rapid Growth	3: Formalisation	4: Consolidation and Integration	5: Institutional Absorption
1. Strategy	• No strategies	• No strategies	• Strategy is formalised • Steering group created for strategy development	• Strategy is formalised • Incorporate "social intelligence" (i.e., transform data to business strategy)	• Strategy is formalised • Incorporate "social intelligence" (i.e., transform data to business strategy
2. Business Processes	• SMBP has no positive influence on business process	• Employees focus on developing a method to use social media technologies for task driven processes	• SMBP activities linked to business goals and objectives	• SMBP is used to drive fundamental business change • New processes are created to enable a new method of doing business	• Social media technologies affect a systematic approach to improving business processes
3. Structure	• Organic decentralised approach • Grassroots effort from few individuals, often from the marketing or IT department	• Decentralised approach • Efforts by individual or departmental with knowledge from upper management	• More centralised approach • Managed by steering group or social media team • Company-wide structure	• Centralised • Partnering with other organisations • Corporate wide structure	• Decentralised (transparent structure) but with common ideology • Empowering employees to regularly use social media
4. Management Style	• Bottom-up • Minimal guidance and commitment from management • Upper management may be unaware because it is departmentally driven	• Bottom-up widespread user participation coupled with top-down management support • Driven by teams tied to customer relationship	• Top-down and bottom-up • Coordination of business teams for program execution, long-term planning, knowledge sharing and governance	• Top-down and bottom-up • Focused on optimising processes and creating scale with applications	• Top-down and bottom-up • Flat structure to manage sub projects • Style empowers individuals and encourages business wide conversations
5. Technologies Adopted	• Test capabilities of applications • Basic SMBP of up to two applications	• Implementation may expand to include other applications • Support and resources from management will motivated teams or individuals to develop the SMBP	• Management has sufficient resources to develop SMBP • May obtain assistance from external social media experts	• Social media adoption growth is driven by inspiration and passion from key stakeholders	• Focused on sustainability of established applications and no longer exploring new ones • Management does not allow hype of new applications to cloud judgement
6. Application of Technologies	• Individual/departmental driven • Announcing presence of organisation on social media space • Comments, images and videos • Product/service information	• Consumer-centric focus • Internal and external awareness of SMBP accelerates	• Institutionally driven applications • Seek opportunities to integrate SMBP with existing systems and business processes	• Internal use, i.e., advertising vacancies, special interest groups • Evaluate promotional campaigns and test-bed for new products/services • Involve customers and suppliers in product development	• Social Media used for monitoring external environment, idea generation, project management, planning, resource, etc. • Organisational content communities to share information between stake holders

	1: Experimentation and Learning	2: Rapid Growth	3: Formalisation	4: Consolidation and Integration	5: Institutional Absorption
7. Impact on Skills	• Pilot SMBP used to test capabilities and understand the skills required • Basic skills are acquired through practice with the application • No formal training	• Basic skills are acquired through practice with the application with knowledge and support from management • No formal training	• Begin to implement social media training for employees • Organisations should document and share learning across the organisation	• Organisations use social media to work with suppliers and locate expertise within organisation • Social media training for employees	• Training programmes and guidelines are present • Recruitment of personnel skilled in managing SMBP • Empower employees to use social media
8. Impact on Internal Stakeholders	• Minimal impact on internal stakeholders	• Minimal impact on internal stakeholders	• Impact on internal stakeholders through knowledge acquisition (i.e., SMBP training) • Limited in other aspects	• Internal use, i.e., advertising vacancies, special interest groups	• Internal use, i.e., advertising vacancies, special interest groups
9. Impact on External Stakeholders	• Minimal impact on external stakeholders • Basic information provided to external stakeholders through SMBP	• External stakeholders become more engaged and are encouraged to follow, like, and comment on SMBP • Information dissemination to external stakeholders facilitated by SMBP	• External stakeholders become more engaged and are encouraged to follow, like, and comment on SMBP • Information dissemination to external stakeholders facilitated by SMBP	• Customers provided with more integrative social media experience • Involving stakeholder in product and service development	• Customers provided with more integrative social media experience • Involving stakeholder in product and service development
10. Return on Investment	• Minimal return on investment	• Minimal return on investment	• Increase in customer service satisfaction	• More successful products and services • Increase in customer service satisfaction • Customers provided with a means to dialogue and therefore reduce customer turnover	• More successful products and services • Increase in customer service satisfaction • Customers provided with a means to dialogue and therefore reduce customer turnover

Source: Chung et al. (2017) Table 6 Benchmark variables values. pp.141

Summary of Social Media Marketing Strategy Theoretical Models

The summary discussion now returns to the models previously described and evaluated (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Effing and Spil, 2016; Chung et al., 2017; Felix et al., 2017). They reflect a rapidly growing interest in social media marketing strategy research, in the form of empirical journal articles, conceptual papers, literature reviews, conference papers, and textbooks.

All four models (Figure 2-44, pp.61, Figure 2-5, pp.64, Figure 2-6, pp.66, Figure 2-7, pp.70) have influenced the ongoing conceptual work of Tafesse and Wien (2018a) and their exploration of social media marketing strategy. Common to the four models and those associated with marketing strategy and digital marketing strategy (see Table 2-1, pp.38), is their argument that a formal social media marketing strategy should include goals to be achieved (Tafesse and Wien, 2018a). Models such as that of McCann and Barlow (2015) explicitly advocate planning as a key first step in developing an effective social media marketing strategy. However, in such a dynamic field, with social media platforms constantly innovating, marketing capabilities can frequently change (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016). There will therefore be elements of social media marketing strategy development that are more exploratory, as practitioners learn what may or may not work (Effing and Spil, 2016).

There is agreement regarding the need to understand the target audience (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Effing and Spil, 2016; Chung et al., 2017; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a; 2018b), in addition to capabilities of individual social media platforms (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Effing and Spil, 2016; Chung et al., 2017; Felix et al., 2017; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a). It is relatively recently that research has argued firms should adapt their social media marketing presence according to the specific characteristics and dynamics of each platform (Chung et al., 2017; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a). This thesis will explore goals and how target audience insights may inform social media marketing strategy in practice. In addition, it will evaluate how organisations may adapt their social media marketing presence on each platform, which is another under-researched area. Messaging is an important part of that presence (Effing and Spil, 2016; Felix et al., 2017; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a; 2018b).

The growing body of studies has demonstrated how social media marketing strategy is a cross-disciplinary field (Felix et al., 2017; Rowley and Keegan, 2019). All of the models or conceptualisations discussed take into account external factors in their planning stages, whether or not their model explicitly shows this (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Effing and Spil, 2016; Chung et al., 2017; Felix et al., 2017; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a). It is agreed these shape social media marketing strategy (Filo et al., 2015; Maderer et al., 2018) and examples of external factors include new social media marketing platform launches, or innovations to existing platforms (Effing and Spil, 2016; Lamberton and Stephen, 2016). Social media marketing strategy will also often involve internal and external stakeholders, including different departments (Chung et al., 2017). This thesis builds on this body of knowledge by exploring what organisations believe influences their social media marketing strategy. For example, what motivates customers to post and share their opinions on social media marketing platforms (Alalwan et al., 2017) and the influence of external factors and stakeholders (Chung et al., 2017).

In relation to other knowledge gaps this thesis seeks to tackle, there is limited research exploring how social media messaging (or content) or engagement varies between platforms (Alves et al., 2016; Alalwan et al., 2017; Valos et al., 2017). Research studies tend to be either platform specific, such as Twitter (Wood and Burkhalter, 2014; Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Smith et al., 2019), or Facebook (Barcelos et al., 2018; Nisar et al., 2018; Tafesse and Wien, 2018b), or offer a model that leaves room to take platforms into account (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Effing and Spil, 2016; Chung et al., 2017; Felix et al., 2017). Research exploring how organisations may vary their social media marketing strategy by platform is even more scarce (Ngai et al., 2015; Alalwan et al., 2017). It is suggested that one of the reasons for a lack of research from the perspective of the organisation is difficulties in gaining access to practitioner experts (Dwivedi et al., 2020).

What brands are saying via their social media marketing presence is gaining more coverage in academic research (e.g. Dessart, 2017; Liu et al., 2018). For customers to engage with brand content on social media, trust, credibility and reliability all play an important part in successful social media marketing strategy usage by brands (Alalwan et al., 2017). This thesis explores how practitioners at English football clubs

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claim their brand-related content may differ by individual social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. It also investigates the extent to which those expert practitioners believe different platforms may lend themselves to customer engagement.

One final area of consideration for research is that of measurement, evaluation and control in social media marketing strategy decision-making and management (Alves et al., 2016; Misirlis and Vlachopoulou, 2018). For example, it is argued that models can encourage the discipline of a more embedded and systematic approach to social media marketing evaluation in order to inform decision-making (Keegan and Rowley, 2017). Firms should use the insights available to become more "analytics oriented" (Tafesse and Wien, 2018a: 747) to understand and improve the impact of their social media marketing efforts and to measure effectiveness more accurately (Chung et al., 2017). Models encourage a mix of quantitative and qualitative data in this process whilst pointing out the difficulties in acquiring the data and conducting meaningful analysis (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a). For example, it is important to develop understanding of social media marketing metrics, so that practitioners can more accurately demonstrate the effectiveness and return on investment (ROI) of social media marketing strategy (Chung et al., 2017; Rowley and Keegan, 2019).

Social media metrics can lead to higher social media performance which, in turn, can lead to higher marketing performance (Tafesse and Wien, 2018a). It is also essential these metrics are used to produce reports demonstrating the impact of social media marketing strategy on organisational performance (Parveen et al., 2015; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a). Moreover, those reports must be disseminated to stakeholders to enable effective management decision-making (Keegan and Rowley, 2017). This is not always easy in practice where organisations require the breakdown of a silo mentality (Valos et al., 2017; Il-Hyuna and Zamrudi, 2018) and the data is across different digital marketing channels, such as social media marketing platforms, website, and mobile (Grossberg, 2016). During early social media marketing strategy research, social media marketing was in the exploratory stage and certainly not as sophisticated or embedded in organisations as it has now become (Alalwan et al., 2017). The gathering of marketing intelligence for social media marketing strategy based on marketing insights continues to grow in

importance to practice and academic research (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016). This thesis will build on the body of knowledge in relation to the extent to which metrics inform the social media marketing strategy of organisations. The research will also explore how organisational use of social media marketing data insights has evolved.

In summary, more understanding is required for ways to optimise social media marketing strategies (Alves et al., 2016). Lamberton and Stephen (2016) have argued there is a disconnect between academia and practice in this field and one contribution of this thesis is the use of empirical work to gather insights from practitioners of social media marketing strategy.

Thus far, this section has synthesised the literature regarding social media marketing strategy and key theoretical models. Research gaps and some calls for further research relevant to this study have also been stated. In conclusion of the above discussion, Table 2-5 provides an overview of the knowledge gaps in social media marketing strategy.

2.9.3 Summary of Social Media Marketing Strategy

This section has provided an examination of extant knowledge in social media marketing strategy. Beginning with a discussion and definition of strategy, the section then explored in more depth relevant definitions and conceptualisations, before evaluating four social media marketing strategy models and conceptual work (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Effing and Spil, 2016; Chung et al., 2017; Felix et al., 2017; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a). A proposed definition for social media marketing strategy helped discussion of those models and the body of literature they have influenced. Table 2-5 identifies the 2014–2022 knowledge gaps the main study of social media marketing strategy will cover, together with a reminder of the comparative knowledge gaps at the time of the preliminary study. The literature review now turns to the field of social media marketing strategy in sport. As of mid-2022 there does not appear to be any published model that has been developed solely in that context. This and other gaps are discussed in the following section of this Literature Review.

Table 2-5: Knowledge Gaps in Social Media Marketing Strategy

Theme	Knowledge Gap Identified (main study period 2014-2022)	Reminder of preliminary study theme as of late 2013	Reminder of preliminary study Knowledge Gap Identified as of late 2013
Social Media Marketing Strategy	1. Social media marketing strategy is under-researched in individual industry contexts (Felix et al., 2017; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a; Dwivedi et al., 2020).	SNS and Social Media	1. A need for deeper understanding of social media, to inform strategic decisions on employing social media to engage and influence customers (Hoffman and Novak, 2012).
	2. Research using insights from experienced social media marketing practitioners will help to address the disconnect between academia and practice that has been identified (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016).		
	3. Factors influencing the development and management of social media marketing strategy are under-researched (Alalwan et al., 2017; Li et al., 2020).		2. Lack of research related to online fan interaction, which is an area that needs to be taken seriously by academics (Gibbons and Dixon, 2010).
	4. There is limited understanding of social media marketing strategy that incorporates a wider range of platforms (Dwivedi et al., 2020) and explores differences in approach according to the social media platforms being used in practice (Alves et al., 2016; Valos et al., 2017).		
	5. The role of trust in social media marketing strategy of brands is limited (Alalwan et al., 2017).		3. One of the most under-researched and understood areas relates to the best ways in which companies should organize and manage social media (Aral et al., 2013)
	6. How marketing insights, arising from social media marketing activity, inform social media marketing strategy is in need of further research (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016; Keegan and Rowley, 2017).		

2.10 Social Media Marketing Strategy in Sport

This section begins with a critical summary of the extant literature related to social media in sport, before reviewing more specifically the social media marketing strategy in sport literature, and in football. This is done to provide some context as to the extent of the current body of knowledge relevant to this thesis.

2.10.1 Social Media in Sport

The emergence of social media and its exponential growth has had a profound impact on the consumption of sport and content delivered (Filo et al., 2015). On the basis of a surge in interest from academics and practitioners, there has been a significant evolution in the understanding of social media and social media marketing from a theoretical and best practice perspective (Vann, 2014; Meng et al., 2015; Vale and Fernandes, 2018). At the same time new knowledge gaps continue to emerge with the ongoing innovations from social media platforms (Ngai et al., 2015; Abeza et al., 2019), such as Instagram and Twitter, and the launch of newer social media platforms, such as TikTok.

There have been limited literature review papers specifically focused on social media in sport. The majority of literature reviews on social media and social media marketing strategy address a more general context and are not specific to any one industry (e.g. Ngai et al., 2015; Alalwan et al., 2017; Ahmed et al., 2019; Rowley and Keegan, 2019). One notable exception is the seminal paper of Filo et al. (2015), which identified three major categories of social media in sport research: strategic (n=35), operational (n=20), and user-focussed (n=15). The strategic category was split almost equally between primary (n=11*), secondary (n=12*), and conceptual (n=13) research - the * denoting one paper that includes both types. The operational category was dominated by secondary research papers: primary (n=4), secondary (n=14), conceptual (n=2). User-focussed consisted of: primary (n=10), secondary (n=5), conceptual (n=0). These figures are summarised in Table 2-6.

Table 2-6: Social media in sport literature

Research Focus	Total	Type of Data and Paper		
		Primary	Secondary	Conceptual
Strategic	35	11*	12*	13
Operational	20	4	14	2
User-focused	15	10	5	0

Source: Filo et al. (2015)

Filo et al. (2015: 168-169) defined the strategic category as "research examining the role and function of social media (and specific tools) from a brand's perspective (e.g., team, organising body, athlete, event, journalist…)". This includes manager attitudes towards social media use and organisational objectives for social media usage. They defined the operational category as "research reviewing how a brand utilises social media and includes the day-to-day social media actions of brands, and implementation of strategy." (: 169). Their definition of the user-focussed category was "research examining sport fans' motivations, constraints, perceptions, and preferences with regard to social media usage, as well as demographic or user profiling of social media users" (: 169).

The above categories informed the interview protocol of this thesis which explores social media marketing strategy and operations, in addition to communities in sport (in relation to brand and fandom). The catalyst for social media in sport as a research field was the challenges and opportunities characteristic in this industry (Filo et al., 2015), in addition to the explosion in social media popularity discussed in chapter 1. Two points pertinent to Filo et al.'s (2015) findings from their review are: (i) the majority of the social media in sport research is based on sports governing bodies or North American sports (e.g. Eagleman, 2013); and (ii) geographically, out of the 70 studies identified, 12 have no geographic location specified and only 7 are based in Europe or Australia (e.g. Hopkins, 2013). This shows the dominance of North American context for social media in sports studies and reflects how this thesis addresses the call for more research in a European context (Filo et al., 2015).

User-focussed research tends to dominate what European studies of sport and social media have followed, usually based on fan data (e.g. Florea et al., 2018; Maderer et al., 2018; Vale and Fernandes, 2018; Machado et al., 2020; Velicia Martín et al., 2020). Research in a European context, from the perspective of the organisation is still extremely limited (e.g. Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Lardo et al., 2017) and it is a knowledge gap this thesis addresses. This will be achieved by gathering empirical insights from social media marketing practitioners at English football clubs.

Reflecting the ubiquity of social media and how embedded it has become in people's lives (Ahmed et al., 2019), sports brands are increasingly investing significant time and resource into social media marketing activity, and are integrating social media into their marketing strategy (Filo et al., 2015). Thus, as the previous section of this chapter highlighted, research is showing that organisations are focusing on developing their social media marketing strategy. Sport is a sector very much at the forefront of such developments, in the form of professional football clubs such as Liverpool, Manchester City, Bayer Leverkusen; events such as UEFA Champions League, Wimbledon, NBA World Finals; brands such as Nike, Adidas, Puma; and athletes such as Lionel Messi, Roger Federer, and Lebron James (Filo et al., 2015; Tiago et al., 2016). In sport, social media marketing practice has evolved in an attempt to keep pace with how consumers wish to communicate and engage with those they follow (Filo et al., 2015), be it organisation, brand, athlete, or event.

2.10.2 Social Media Marketing Strategy in Sport

Social media marketing has become a key marketing channel for cost effectively: (i) facilitating interaction, collaboration and co-creation; (ii) integrating communication channels; (iii) enabling personalisation or customisation; and (iv) increasing the speed at which content is distributed and feedback received (Shilbury, et al., 2014). As a result, several authors have called for more research into social media marketing strategy in the context of sports (Filo et al., 2015; Effing and Spil, 2016; Alalwan et al., 2017; Felix et al., 2017; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a).

In building on early work that predominantly explored the challenges and opportunities of social media marketing strategy in sport, research has covered the

purpose behind social media, management views of social media, the impact of social media on brand, and the integration of social media with other digital and traditional marketing communications (Filo et al., 2015). Social media marketing strategy opportunities identified in the extant literature consist of: (i) interaction and engagement (Abeza et al., 2013); (ii) communication (Hambrick, 2012); (iii) brand trust (Eagleman, 2013); (iv) relationships (Garcia, 2011); (v) efficiency and revenue generation (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015); and (vi) user co-creation by community participants (Parganas et al., 2015). Social media marketing strategy challenges identified in previous research consist of: (i) lack of control (Price et al., 2013); (ii) balancing team content with commercial and promotion (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015); (iii) constant change (Pedersen, 2013); (iv) resources (Abeza et al., 2013); and (v) integration with traditional media (Schoenstedt and Reau, 2010). Such findings are supported by literature on the operationalisation of social media marketing, claiming that its effectiveness is improved by using a personal and human approach, rather than a corporate approach (Pegoraro, 2010), by brand interaction based on entertaining and engaging content (Wallace et al., 2011), and through a less commercial focus on brand and promotion (McKelvey and Masteralexis, 2013).

Sports studies focused on the purpose of social media marketing use for brands have identified the following as key themes: engagement and interaction; communication; relationship development; monetisation; and branding, which is categorised as: "brands use social media strategically to build relationships and facilitate outcomes with consumers and stakeholders" (Filo et al., 2015: 168). For example, Parganas and Anagnostopoulos (2015) identified four key themes in the customer-focused social media marketing strategy of Liverpool Football Club (LFC): (i) getting closer to fans; (ii) engaging fans; (iii) monetising; and (iv) dealing with challenges. This case study research consisted of interviewing two senior social media marketing managers at the club and is very rare in generating qualitative insights from experienced practitioners at a professional club. Eagleman (2013) researched social media usage by National Governing Bodies (NGBs) in the US and found that most considered social media as a strategic tool to enhance relationships with fans, thereby promoting the sport. She also discovered that a mix of content that educated and informed fans attracted them to brand content and encouraged interaction. Hambrick has published papers in the sport of cycling,

revealing how Lance Armstrong used Twitter to communicate with followers in order to compete against the media narrative regarding his USADA anti-doping investigation (Hambrick et al., 2015), and, less controversially, how cycling race organisers can use twitter to promote and share key information about their events (Hambrick, 2012). From the fan perspective of the National Basketball Association, Stavros et al. (2014: 461) identified four fan motivation types for interacting with their team on social media platforms: passion; hope; esteem; and camaraderie. These are explored in the thesis by gaining the views of football clubs as to why they believe their fans use social media to connection with the club.

Regarding relationship development, grand slam tennis events were found to use Facebook and Twitter to cultivate long-term relationships with fans to develop brand loyalty (Thompson et al., 2018). That study also discovered that the social media marketing strategy of the grand slam events considered differences in those two social media marketing platforms. Indeed one of the central arguments for effective social media marketing strategy and operations is that social media platforms can be a real enabler to building and nurturing relationships with consumers (De Beer and Stander, 2016). For social media marketing strategy to be effective, Filo et al. (2015: 168) suggested that "the achievement of relationship building relies on understanding and executing operational actions to sustain and cultivate relationships".

The wider social media marketing strategy literature suggests trust plays a key role in relationships between digital brands and customers (Heinze et al., 2020), and, as identified in section 2.6.1, trust plays a key role in football fan relationships with their club (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Faria et al., 2022; Lamberti et al., 2022). Sport-specific research has demonstrated that interaction and engagement play a key role in sports brands using social media marketing strategy effectively (Eagleman, 2013; Stavros et al., 2014; Filo et al., 2015), with this being facilitated by social media platforms enabling the multidimensional nature of customer engagement that brands can encourage and achieve through social media marketing activity (Yoshida et al., 2014; Filo et al., 2015). This view was reinforced with research finding that brand-related social media engagement and team identification both contributed to behavioural loyalty (Yoshida et al., 2018). Sports followers are actively involved as community participants (Filo et al., 2015) in their

role as fans of that team, club, or brand (Yoshida et al., 2014; 2018; Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018), and it is important to explore how football clubs use social media marketing strategy in this context.

Social Media Marketing Strategy in Football

Details of social media marketing strategy from the football club perspective are very limited, however some studies have provided insights from a European perspective. An empirical study of Liverpool Football Club (LFC), involving two of their senior social media marketing managers was completed (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015). Their work highlighted how LFC were using social media marketing strategy to raise brand awareness and to get close to local and global fans. Parganas and Anagnostopoulos (2015) found that the passion fans had for the club was being used by LFC as a means of encouraging social media interaction with fans. That built on the work of Stavros et al. (2014) who identified passion as a key motivation for fans engaging with their NBA team on social media. Linking with earlier social media marketing research (e.g. McLean and Wainwright, 2009; Hanna et al., 2011; McKelvey and Masteralexis, 2013), Parganas and Anagnostopoulos (2015) discovered the LFC social media marketing practitioners were aware of the need to balance posts of a commercial or promotional nature, with those that focused on football team news. Similar to later research (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2018), Parganas and Anagnostopoulos (2015) found that too much commercial social media marketing output would risk alienating fans, and losing their trust. LFC were aware of the commercial benefits that could be achieved through an effective social media marketing strategy, such as their social media audience being helpful in attracting sponsors who wanted to access the fan base. Subsequent research has highlighted how sponsors are drawn to football clubs because of the audience attracted to their social media marketing presence (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2018; Weimar et al., 2020).

Research has also shown that football clubs have found social media marketing strategy to be helpful in nurturing long-term relationships with their fans (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Velicia Martín et al., 2020). However, evidence has shown these relationships are not free from negativity. For example, the practitioners at LFC claimed they and other clubs sometimes struggled with a lack of control over brand-related conversations, which could sometimes lead to

emotions overspilling into negative sentiment that could negatively impact the club brand and revenues (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015).

Finally, the use of social media analytics for audience insights was stated as important to a successful social media marketing strategy for LFC (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015), in keeping with the argument that social media analytics are integral to success in this area (Tafesse and Wien, 2018a). It is possible that very large clubs like LFC, who are ranked seventh in the 2022 Football Money League (Deloitte, 2022), are an outlier when compared to the majority of football clubs, including most in the English football pyramid. Indeed, research of social media marketing strategy in a wider range of football clubs and leagues is a knowledge gap identified (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Maderer et al., 2018), and is therefore part of the rationale for this thesis.

Another study of a major European club was that of FC Bayern Munich (Baena, 2019b), arguably another outlier with their third place ranking in the 2022 Football Money League (Deloitte, 2022) confirming their consistent performance as one of the leading revenue generating clubs in the world. In addition to raising fan commitment, Baena's (2019b) research also found that the social media marketing strategy of FC Bayern Munich was helping them to raise brand awareness locally and globally. This was in total agreement with the LFC study by Parganas and Anagnostopoulos (2015). For FC Bayern, ticket sales, and commercial revenues via sponsors, were achieved through enhanced club relationships with fans, facilitated by the club using social media marketing strategy to disseminate club information (Baena, 2019b). A very recent study from the club perspective was published (Fenton et al., 2021b), however this is discussed in section 0, pp.84, as the emphasis is on social media brand communities.

Focusing on the wider body of knowledge of social media marketing strategy from the fan perspective, some key studies are briefly reviewed. In Portugal, the foremost motivations for fans engaging with social media marketing of their clubs were: information seeking; empowerment; and brand love (Vale and Fernandes, 2018). Two other important motivators were a need for integration and for social interaction. Another fan study argued there are four categories of fan responses to LFC and Manchester United (MU) club Instagram posts: aspiring; belonging; criticising; and

loving (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). A recent study of US soccer fans discovered fans reacted more favourably to social media marketing content if it was posted by the club instead of by one of the club's football players (Na et al., 2020). Interestingly, two recent studies argued that fans tend to react more negatively to club sponsors posting on the official social media presence of Bundesliga clubs (Weimar et al., 2020), and Chilean clubs (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2018).

In summary, as of Spring 2022, there does not appear to be any social media marketing strategy framework that has been developed in the context of football and sport. Additionally, this literature review has argued social media marketing strategy from the practitioner perspective is very limited compared to research that is fan-based. This suggests a similar reason to that in wider social media marketing strategy research, in that it requires "access to managers in organisations" (Dwivedi et al., 2020: 14). Table 2-7 offers a summary of the knowledge gaps of social media marketing strategy in sport.

2.10.3 Summary of Social Media Marketing Strategy in Sport

The extant literature of social media marketing strategy in sport has been reviewed in this section. With initial discussion of social media marketing in sport, followed by a more specific focus of research in the football industry, it has demonstrated how and why research from the club perspective is rare compared to studies from the fan perspective.

Table 2-7 has identified the knowledge gaps this thesis will address. There were no comparative knowledge gaps identified during the initial preliminary study. What the table does instead show is where there is alignment between knowledge gaps in social media marketing strategy in sport, and the knowledge gaps in social media marketing strategy, from Table 2-5, pp.76. The chapter now turns to branding in social media communities in sport.

Table 2-7: Knowledge Gaps in Social Media Marketing Strategy in Sport

Theme	Knowledge Gap Identified (main study period 2014-2022)	Aligning Knowledge Gap from Table 2-5 Social Media Marketing Strategy (where applicable)
Social Media Marketing Strategy in Sport	1. There is a lack of European based studies of social media marketing in sport (Eagleman, 2013; Filo et al., 2015) and even less examining social media marketing based on empirical insights from football clubs (Fenton et al., 2021b).	1
	2. Comparatively very few studies have explored social media marketing in sports from the perspective of the organisation. The vast majority are fan/consumer-based studies. (Filo et al., 2015; De Beer and Stander, 2016; Vale and Fernandes, 2018).	2
	3. The range of sports being researched needs to be widened (Hambrick, 2012; Stavros et al., 2014; Meng et al., 2015), particularly a wider range of football leagues and clubs (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015).	1 & 2
	4. A gap exists in how football clubs adapt their social media marketing strategy as they become more sophisticated in their use of social media platforms (De Beer and Stander, 2016), and there is a gap in sport research incorporating a wider range of social media marketing platforms (Filo et al., 2015). .	4 & 6
	5. The question of whether social media marketing strategy informs operational use is under-researched (Filo et al., 2015).	3

2.11 Branding in Social Media Communities in Sport

This literature review now shifts to the third field of social media marketing strategy in sport, that of branding in social media communities. Critical discussion concentrates on the period following the preliminary study and starts with an introductory discussion of branding in the social media era. The narrative then focuses on a critical review of social media brand communities in sport and football, including discussion of the key concept of fandom, in addition to the uniqueness of sport and the globalization of sport.

2.11.1 Branding in the Social Media Era

Research and practice of branding have tended to be dominated by a "control-centric managerial mindset." (Wider et al., 2018: 301). The term 'manage' means "the control and organisation of something" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022c). The term 'control' means "to order, limit, or rule something, or someone's actions or behaviour" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022a). From this perspective, it can be seen how such an approach has long been argued to be outdated since the advent of the internet and social media (Christodoulides, 2009), primarily because consumers can be active participants in social media brand communities (Hollebeek et al., 2017). It is therefore no surprise that practitioners involved in such activity as raising brand awareness through social media marketing sometimes feel a sense of unease due to the lack of control (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014). Their audience behaviour may at times be "uncontrolled and unpredictable" which is an inherent risk posed by social media brand communities (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014: 340). In such an environment, brand managers have to accept they are not in full control of brand-related processes and management (Wider et al., 2018).

For brands motivated to use social media marketing strategy for benefits such as increasing brand awareness, creating and nurturing customer relationships, interacting with customers, and promoting products (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014), it is argued the notion of brand 'control' is a delusion (Wider et al., 2018). For Dessart (2017: 380) customer engagement, via social media, "frames the next generation of brand relationships". His work identified that product involvement, attitudes toward the community, and propensity of online interaction were antecedents of social media engagement. The impacts of high social media

engagement were substantially increased brand relationships which produce higher brand trust, commitment and loyalty (Dessart, 2017). Social media brand community engagement strengthens consumer-brand relationship and can positively influence brand trust (Habibi et al., 2014). Interestingly, the Habibi et al. (2014) research concluded that the customer-other-customer relationship does not negatively influence trust, whereas Laroche et al. (2012) found that customer-other-customer was the strongest variable for increasing brand trust and therefore loyalty. Laroche et al.'s (2012) model (Figure 2-8) shows that brand trust and brand loyalty can be enhanced by social media brand communities. They argued that their study showed the way to achieve this was through nurturing feelings of community, usefulness, and information sharing whilst strengthening the social bonds between community members, plus other facets of the brand (Laroche et al., 2012). Finally, they identified that trust was key to translating those effects into actual brand loyalty. The authors did acknowledge that their model may not be appropriate for all brands due to the different environments in which they operated, and so advised caution in establishing those communities (Laroche et al., 2012). The 441 valid respondents were from any brand communities on any social media platform, so are not necessarily representative of any one platform or population.

Figure 2-8: Estimated Model of the effects of brand community (on social media)
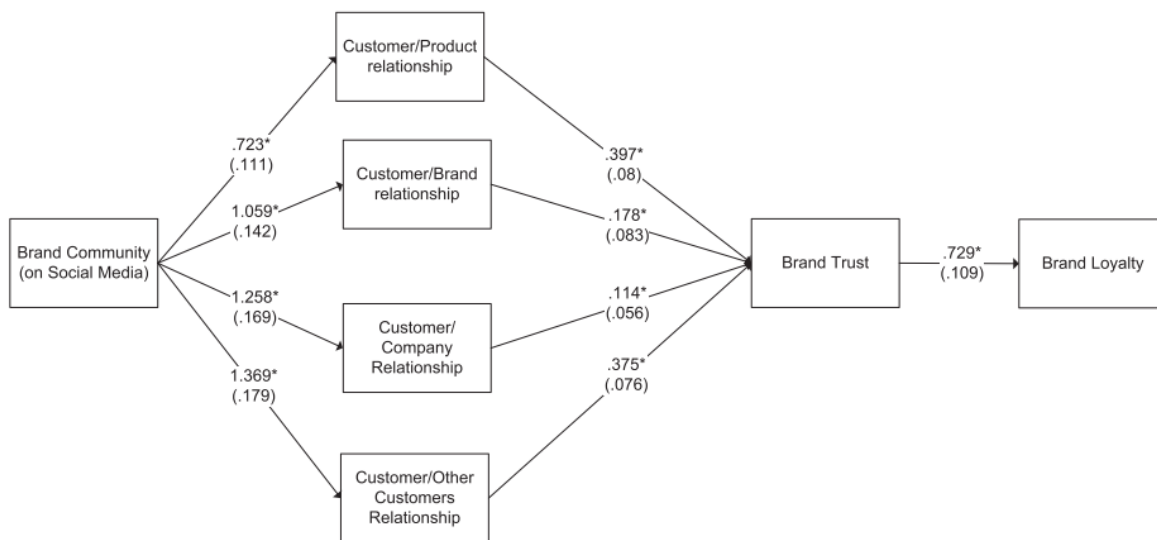
Fig. 3. Estimated model. *$p < 0.05$. *Note*: unstandardized coefficients are used and standard errors are in parentheses.

Source: Laroche et al. (2012) Estimated model of the effects of brand community (on social media), pp. 80.

Another study by Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014) focused on how an organisation develops its brand-related social media brand community strategy, through the creation of a flow chart of the decision-making process. They interviewed managers of brand-related social media in fourteen Greek firms across a range of sectors, not including sport, and found that brands are led to use social media marketing for: (i) social media growth and popularity; (ii) viral nature of social media; (iii) competitors having a social media presence; (iv) headquarters' social media marketing strategy; and (v) cost reduction pressure. The expected benefits were identified as: (i) create, strengthen and enhance customer relationships; (ii) interact-engage with customers and listen to their needs; (iii) gain brand awareness; (iv) access new audiences; (v) support wider marketing actions and product promotion; and (vi) engagement with their audience (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014). It should be noted, that whilst this was relatively early social media brand communities research, involving 14 Greek companies, they did make some key findings that aligned with previous and subsequent studies in general social media marketing strategy literature (Tikkanen et al., 2009; Hanna et al., 2011; Alves et al., 2016; Alalwan et al., 2017), and in social media marketing strategy in sport (McKelvey and Masteralexis, 2013; Dessart, 2017; Islam et al., 2018). For example, the importance of interacting with customers and informing them are just two ways they identified that could lead to higher customer engagement, brand awareness, brand loyalty, and sales (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014).

In relation to social media brand communities, engagement with content is high on the research agenda (Dessart, 2017). For example, Hollebeek et al. (2017) refined the early four component model of brand community engagement practices of (Schau et al., 2009). The result was the VBCEP typology comprising of: greeting; regulating; assisting; celebrating; appreciating; empathising; mingling; and ranking (Hollebeek et al., 2017: 212), as shown in Figure 2-9. Another study of social media brand communities found that extraversion (an individual's tendency to be social and interactive) was the biggest driver of customer engagement in social media brand communities (Islam et al., 2017). This was followed by openness to experience, neuroticism, and agreeableness. The major limitation of that study was that the 390 completed responses from students at a university in India were not specific to any sector or social media brand community. Another study by Mishra (2019) also found an individual's propensity for social interaction to be a key driver

for customer engagement in social media brand communities. Moreover, the social media marketing efforts of the brand were key to generating customer engagement. This thesis explores the evolving social media marketing strategies of football clubs and how it is operationalised, both of which involve customer engagement. In doing so, this thesis also explores the role of the brand in social media marketing communications.

Figure 2-9: Virtual Brand Community Engagement Practice (VBCEP) Typology

VBCEP Type	Description
1. Greeting	Politely welcoming new members, and responding with pleasure to their joining and novel/future participation in the community.
2. Regulating	Providing rules and guidelines to develop members' norms and guide their behavioral expectations in the community.
3. Assisting	Helping other community members with specific (non-)brand-related issues or queries (e.g., regarding community use).
4. Appreciating	Display of thankfulness and gratitude to the community and/or specific other community members.
5. Empathizing	Showing support or understanding for other community members' feelings about specific community, brand-related, or other issues.
6. Mingling	Specific online or offline interactions between community members that extend beyond the focal brand. Mingling includes the development of specific relationships (e.g., friendships) among community members, which may be maintained by undertaking offline meetings, brand-related events (e.g., shopping excursions), etc.
7. Celebrating	Noting and commemorating significant member-, brand- or community-related events or milestones (e.g., the community reaching a particular number of members).
8. Ranking	Virtual brand community members' investments into the development (including formation, maintenance, etc.) of their personal community role, position or status.

Source: Hollebeek et al. (2017) Virtual Brand Community Engagement Practice (VBCEP) Typology, pp. 212.

2.11.2 Social Media Brand Communities in Sport and Football

It is argued that social media offers fans more interactive opportunities than traditional media, for example by publicly showing their loyalties to the wider sport audience, sharing their views and being active on social media whilst viewing a live sporting event (Gantz and Lewis, 2014). Sports fans develop unique relationships with the teams they support and this has implications for customer engagement behaviours in social media brand communities (Vale and Fernandes, 2018).

Social media brand communities is one of the contemporary issues in sport marketing (Manoli, 2018), due to the dynamic nature of both fields (Filo et al., 2015). Focusing on action sports, Thorpe (2017: 574) has also highlighted how the "emerging and related fields of…digital and social media studies…sport and new media studies" provide extensive research opportunities. There is therefore an ongoing and dynamic knowledge gap that needs to be filled (Manoli, 2018).

Fandom and the Globalisation of Football

The argument for the unique nature of sport and management is an area that continues to attract the attention of researchers (Andrew et al., 2021). It is argued that spectator sport is at the heart of the field of sport management (Agha and Dixon, 2021). For example, fans with a strong affiliation will find themselves unable or unwilling to switch allegiance to another team or brand, and rival teams in a league co-create the product of value to spectators. Moreover, that the economic factors of sporting leagues are of an antitrust nature and places of monopoly (Rascher et al., 2021), thereby considered to technically be cartels (Agha and Dixon, 2021).

A further argument for the uniqueness of sport is that it allows key actors such as coaches and athletes the ability to protest, or reinforce hegemonic structures in society, via use of their profile and celebrity with their audience (Cunningham et al., 2021). Such examples can be standing up to racism or homophobia. Such issues demonstrate the link between an increasingly globalised sport and geopolitics. In this context, football has arguably the most commercially successful sport as it has "managed to capitalise on an inherent marketing advantage to evoke strong emotions in its fans, and in doing so encourage loyalty, allegiance, and devotion." (Manoli and Kenyon, 2018: 88).

Further opportunities have been presented by the ongoing growth of digital and social media (Fenton and Helleu, 2018), resulting in football clubs taking advantage of new levels of global brand awareness and brand identity (Manoli and Kenyon, 2018). EPL clubs have benefitted through those new fan audiences further spreading word-of-mouth on behalf of clubs, thanks to the "symbiotic relationship" with media broadcasters (Manoli and Kenyon, 2018: 95) and a global audience of fans on social media to whom some power has shifted (Fenton and Helleu, 2018).

That social media has allowed fans the opportunity to connect, interact and consume football club content means the fan experience extends far beyond the traditional 90 minutes of the matchday (Fenton and Helleu, 2018). Fans play a key role in the product that attracts so much media coverage and revenue, in addition to sponsorship, ticket sales and merchandising revenues (Parganas, 2018). The meeting point of football fans sharing emotions on social media is considered to

work perfectly for sport entertainment (Fenton and Helleu, 2018). There is increasing recognition of sport and entertainment fusing to become 'sportainment' (Richelieu and Webb, 2021), with football clubs seeking to use social media to "create an enhanced entertainment experience alongside the match" (Fenton and Helleu, 2018: 109), to be shared with other fans around the world (Rascher et al., 2021).

Fan Engagement and Interaction

As with social media brand communities in other sectors, considerable attention has been paid to engagement and interaction in sport. Fan engagement via social media marketing strategy, is important to overall brand strategy (Kunkel et al., 2014). In a sporting context, customers are often referred to as fans, as is evident in the literature below. Customer engagement consists of behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions (Lima et al., 2018; Annamalai et al., 2021). By comparison, fan engagement is defined as: "a sport consumer's extrarole behaviors in nontransactional exchanges to benefit his or her favorite sport team, the team's management, and other fans" (Yoshida et al., 2014: 403). Their conceptualisation of fan engagement consists of three key elements: management cooperation; prosocial behaviour; and performance tolerance. Informed by the extant literature, they consist of the following (Yoshida et al., 2014: 404):

> "Management cooperation refers to a sport consumer's collaborative, constructive participation in the value creation and service delivery process at sporting events."
>
> "Prosocial behavior captures the notion that sport consumers engage in network development such as interpersonal and computer-mediated fan-to-fan helping behaviors on behalf of the team."
>
> "Performance tolerance reflects a sport consumer's engagement by the display of team-related products even during unsuccessful team performance."

Their findings were that team identification is an important precursor to all three of the above facets of fan engagement. Basking in reflected glory (BIRGing) is a predictor of management cooperation and prosocial behaviour. Positive affect

(pleasurable feeling state of emotions) is not a meaningful precursor to management cooperation and performance tolerance (Yoshida et al., 2014).

Very recent research in six major cricket clubs in the Indian Premier League and their Facebook posts, identified how different types of content in a social media marketing strategy could drive fan engagement (Annamalai et al., 2021). They identified that such a strategy needs to vary during the peak playing season and the off-season and adapt to the performance of the team, good or bad. In contrast to Baker et al. (2016), who found that the type of social media brand community post did not affect fan engagement, Annamalai et al. (2021) identified that photos would generate higher numbers of likes, comments and positive sentiment, whilst videos would generate higher shares. However, a limitation of the Baker et al. (2016) study was that it consisted of ten Australian Football League (AFL) teams based in the state of Victoria, rather than teams across the AFL. It would be akin to restricting EPL research to clubs based in London. In a content analysis of all 30 National Basketball Association (NBA) teams on Facebook and Twitter, Meng et al. (2015) discovered that four types of communication were being used to engage fans: informing; marketing; personalising; and activating. Informing was approached as a one-way communication and featured such communications as organisation news of the team and sport. Marketing was also considered a one-way communication and featured promotional and sales communications, such as competitions, tickets, and merchandise. Personalising was used as a two-way communication, such as direct responses to a question or comment. Activating was the other two-way communication and encouraged group involvement in discussions, in addition to gathering fan feedback (Meng et al., 2015). Examples are provided in Figure 2-10.

Interaction and engagement play a key role in social media in sport. This links very closely with another study of fans of NBA teams, that identified camaraderie, esteem, hope, and passion as the four key motives for fan social media interaction on Facebook (Stavros et al., 2014). Holistically, Meng et al. (2015) found the communications in the social media brand communities to be helpful in continuing fan relationships during the off-season.

Figure 2-10: Examples of team communication through social media

Personalizing

One-on-one conversations

Facilitating discussions

Answering queries

Activating

Trivia competitions

Team news

Informing

Ticket give-aways

Presale offers

Merchandise sales

Marketing
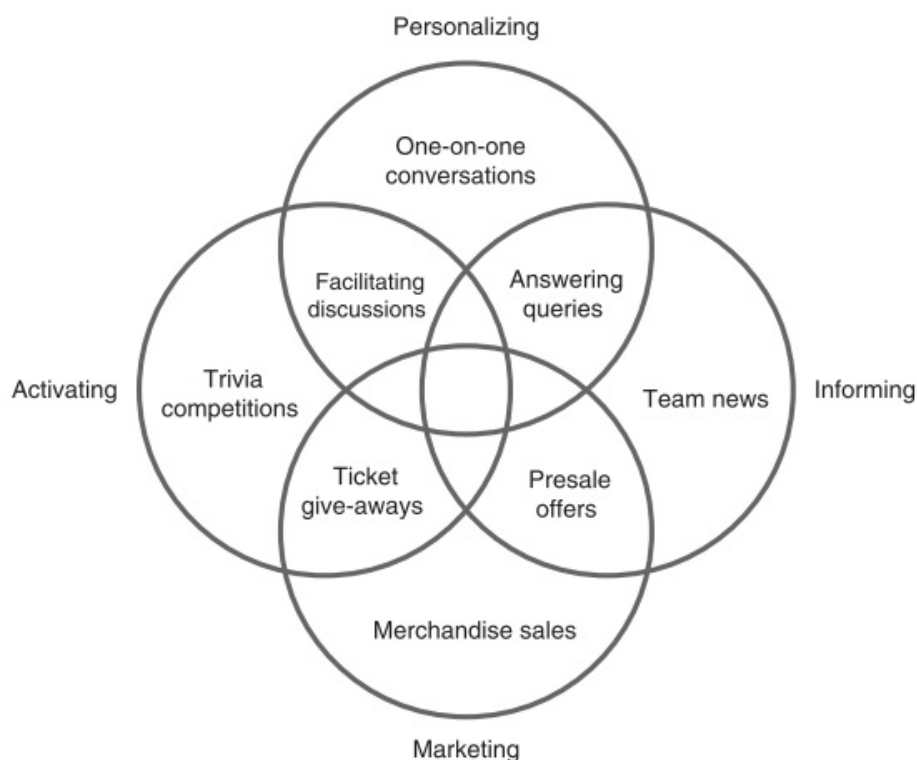
Source: Meng et al. (2015) Examples of team communication through social media, pp. 209.

Turning to football research, fan interaction and engagement are also prevalent. For example, FC Porto fans engage with the brand social media communities on Facebook and Instagram, motivated primarily by social influence, entertainment, information, and rewards (Machado et al., 2020). More interaction took place on Facebook due to the discursive focus of the platform, whereas Instagram is more image focused. Facebook was also the platform where fans tended to search for football information and brand-related products. Instagram was considered more informal, so fans engaged more with entertainment posts. Interestingly, these findings differ a little from an extensive study into the use of social media by 78 European football clubs and user engagement with over 20,000 posts across a mix of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube (Aichner, 2019). When evaluating fan engagement with brand content, the study found fans would engage with the content, regardless of the kind of post it was, for example emotional or factual. Posts could go viral for no apparent reason. Aichner (2019: 253) also claims the type of social media content posted by football clubs "does not have an impact on how SM [social media] users react to it in terms of likes, comments and shares". This is

similar to what was suggested in the wider sport literature (Baker et al., 2016). However, it contradicts research that claimed product related tweets, such as those about players and team success, were the most popular tweets whilst non-product content such as that related to executive management of the club were the least popular (Parganas et al., 2015).

Where the Aichner (2019) and Machado et al. (2020) studies are in agreement is in suggesting that social media marketing requires football clubs to keep actively engaging their audience, by investing time in constant posts, many of which may require action on the part of fans, such as responding to a poll. In summary, there are still knowledge gaps and contradictions regarding what kind of posts are required on individual social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, in order to stimulate fan engagement (Aichner, 2019; Machado et al., 2020). This thesis will endeavour to add to understanding of how brands may or may not adapt social media marketing content on platforms, or according to their audience, to encourage fan engagement.

Brand Community Building on Social Media

Research in wider literature has demonstrated how constant interaction between brands, organisations and customers co-creates brand value (Gong, 2018). This has important implications for brand management as discussed at the beginning of section 2.11.1.

The most recent football research to explore the potential of social media brand communities in developing a sense of community and place amongst sports fans is that of (Fenton et al., 2021b). Their work included a rare organisation perspective, by focusing on Salford City Football Club (SCFC), in addition to their fans. In total 25 football industry professionals and football fans were interviewed, to provide insights demonstrating that communications between the club and fans on social media brand communities were pivotal in creating a sense of community and place (Fenton et al., 2021b). This led to an increase in bridging and bonding social capital among the fanbase. For tribal social media brand communities such as football (Fenton et al., 2021b), there are natural customer-other-customer bonds (Fillis and Mackay, 2014), due to supporting the same club in addition to common rival clubs (Checchinato et al., 2015). Hence it was shown that social media brand communities

could develop a sense of community and place for football fans (Fenton et al., 2021b). One limitation of the Fenton et al. (2021b) study is that, SCFC could be considered an outlier due to the club not being promoted to the EFL until after the data gathering. However, it should be noted, the community findings do coincide with the user-focused research reviewed by Filo et al. (2015), which showed how fan communities and brand meaning can be influenced through social media marketing strategy to ultimately create benefit for brands. Sports fans can have a very strong relationship to their club brand, especially when that is tied to a place (Florea et al., 2018), such as a city or football ground. This is further evidence of how, having shifted from a position of uncertainty or hostility towards social media marketing, sports organisations have since embraced the opportunity and are interacting with fans (Dart, 2014). Involving stakeholders is very important to creating brand value in the world of social media marketing strategy (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016).

In analysing the tweets of Liverpool FC and their fan engagement, it was found that the most popular fan response was to retweet branded content and the least popular was to reply to it (Parganas et al., 2015). This is further evidence of how social media brand communities can be used for brand awareness, in addition to fan relationships. Involving the fans through engaging them and interacting with them helps add value to the social media brand community and therefore the brand itself (Salmi et al., 2019). Similar to Parganas et al. (2015) but in the wider sport context of four major professional sports leagues in North America, it was also recommended that product-related posts could help social media brand community activity to be effective (Abeza et al., 2020). The specific observation of a human brand voice enhancing the product experience and informing fans (Abeza et al., 2020) is important, as it has been suggested that a human tone of brand voice is helpful in increasing purchase intention of social media brand community users for sports and clubs due to the hedonic nature of their consumption (Barcelos et al., 2018). It should be said that the benefits of using social media brand communities do not necessarily extend to football club sponsors as more fanatical fans are more cynical about sponsors being involved in this activity (Thomas, 2018). However, other research argues that increased fan interaction results in an audience that is attractive to sponsors who will therefore contribute to club revenues through partnerships (Nisar et al., 2018).

Football fans form very close and passionate emotional attachments to their club and brand (Machado et al., 2020), to the extent it could be considered 'brand love' (Vale and Fernandes, 2018). Brand love has been shown to be very similar to interpersonal love (Baena, 2018), as it relates to a strong and passionate emotional attachment towards a brand (Baena, 2016; Vale and Fernandes, 2018). As a higher order construct than brand loyalty it features emotions, behaviours and cognitions (Baena, 2016), such as: passion; brand connection; intrinsic rewards; emotional attachment; and thinking and frequent use (Velicia Martín et al., 2020).

An extensive study of Portuguese football fans found that information, entertainment and brand love were key motivators in driving fan engagement with social media brand communities on Facebook (Vale and Fernandes, 2018). These findings concur with research of Real Madrid fans (Baena, 2018), that identified social media marketing platforms such as Facebook and Twitter play an important role in increasing the bond between a football club and its fans. Examples of the brand love benefits for football clubs include: fan loyalty; a willingness to invest time, money and effort; and word-of-mouth communication (Velicia Martín et al., 2020). For football clubs using social media brand communities, brand love has been shown to increase fan engagement and purchase behaviours (Baena, 2016), such as buying club merchandise (Velicia Martín et al., 2020). In the context of the increasingly commercial and globalised football sector (Baena, 2019b), this is highly relevant as the football club brand is considered one of its most important assets (Baena, 2016).

Even in the wider literature, content affinity, involvement with the brand, and allowing friends to have fun was found to stimulate customers sharing a brand's Facebook profile or content (Pereira, et al., 2014). With the hedonic and self-expressive nature of football, often involving a high level of emotional fan involvement (Vale and Fernandes, 2018) this can be very powerful for fans expressing their self-identity in social media brand communities (Tafesse and Wien, 2017). Hence it is argued that social media brand communities are so powerful for football club brand building and for getting closer to fans they are seeking to target (Baena, 2019a). It is one of the ways football clubs have continued to create such valuable brands over time (Holzmayer and Schmidt, 2020).

Brand attributes, typically in the form of product posts, can influence fan engagement over time (Maderer et al., 2018). Football clubs could use Facebook to share content before, during and after a match to keep fans who are not attending in stadium up to date, and to foster discussion that engages fans and nurtures a sense of community (Machado et al., 2020). However, this is not without conflict and reveals the dark side of social media brand communities (Dwivedi et al., 2020). The potential for tensions with local fans was identified due to the club seeking to use social media brand communities to diversify by attracting a more global fanbase (Fenton et al., 2021b). Equally, that conflict between local fans can arise from bonding social capital as fans identify with Salford rather than Manchester.

Based on negative tweets to and about Sau Paulo FC in Brazil, Zanini et al. (2019) suggested a new practice called *Complaining*. This is reflective of the concerns football clubs had regarding the risks of social media brand communities (Dart, 2014; Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014) yet appears to be outweighed by the benefits offered (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Aichner, 2019; Baena, 2019b). Negative discourse in social media brand communities can be more of a cause for concern, however. Within their own supporter group, arguments, exclusion and trolling were evident behaviours in the Salford City FC social media brand communities (Fenton et al., 2021b). A Popp et al. (2016) study of football fans has revealed that anti-brand social media communities, set up by rival fans, will exhibit behaviours that harm the opposing club brand and even its sponsors. Popp et al. (2016) found that rival fans of FC Bayern, post Facebook content in the form of imagery and comments, loaded with emotional meaning, mocking the brand. Of some concern was their discovery of a "lack of restraint" (Popp et al., 2016: 364) when voicing controversial or provocative views.

The more worrying aspects of social media brand communities is how they have added another dimension to racist discourse that can directly affect football players, fans and the wider community (Cleland, 2014; Cleland and Cashmore, 2016), It is a feature of social media discourse that often goes unchallenged (Cleland and Cashmore, 2016). The call for more understanding of the negative impact of social media on a brand is an area this thesis will address (Christodoulides et al., 2021).

Finally and more generally, very recent research has suggested that brand managers, who are always looking to improve how customers talk about their brand online, can ask customers to moderate their speech (Christodoulides et al., 2021). However it has been shown that in football this can be a way of alienating passionate supporters (McLean and Wainwright, 2009). It is still a balancing act for football clubs who can use social media brand communities to increase the value of the club by transforming followers (in the form of fan engagement) into customers (in the form of customer engagement) (Lardo et al., 2017).

This section then focused more on social media marketing strategy in sport, identifying that very few studies explore this area from the perspective of the organisation. As outlined in Table 2-7, pp.85 from 2014 onwards there have been repeated calls for more research related to European football, across a wider number of leagues, and that explore how social media marketing strategy of football clubs has become more sophisticated over time. Lastly, how social media marketing strategy informs operational implementation.

The final part of this section reviewed social media brand communities in football. As summarised in Table 2-8, knowledge gaps were identified as to what brands do to encourage customer engagement with their social media presence, particularly sports and specifically football club brands.

Table 2-8 provides a summary of the knowledge gaps identified in this section that this thesis will address, together with a reminder of the comparative knowledge gaps at the time of the preliminary study.

2.12 Summary of Main Study Literature Review

The main study literature review has critically discussed the body of knowledge and theory that developed from 2014, the time the preliminary study was published. A brief discussion of marketing strategy and digital marketing strategy was provided, to set into context how social media marketing strategy is linked to those wider areas of marketing, and the growing importance social media marketing strategy has played since 2014.

Four conceptual frameworks for social media marketing strategy have been reviewed to demonstrate how theory has evolved (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Effing and Spil, 2016; Chung et al., 2017; Felix et al., 2017). While these frameworks and other articles are evidence that the body of knowledge has markedly increased since 2014, the literature review has demonstrated several knowledge gaps related to the scope of social media marketing strategy in this thesis. These were summarised in Table 2-5, pp.76, for example: development and management of social media marketing strategy; the need to explore differences in approach according to which social media marketing platforms are being used; and the role of trust in brand social media marketing strategy.

This section then focused more on social media marketing strategy in sport, identifying that very few studies explore this area from the perspective of the organisation. As outlined in Table 2-7, pp.85, from 2014 onwards there have been repeated calls for more research related to European football, across a wider number of leagues, and that explore how social media marketing strategy of football clubs has become more sophisticated over time. Lastly, how social media marketing strategy informs operational implementation.

The final part of this section reviewed social media brand communities in football. As summarised in Table 2-8, knowledge gaps were identified as to what brands do to encourage customer engagement with their social media presence, particularly sports and specifically football club brands.

Table 2-8: Knowledge Gaps in Social Media Brand Communities in Sport

Theme	Knowledge Gap No.	Knowledge Gap Identified (main study period 2014-2022)	Reminder of preliminary study theme as of late 2013	Reminder of preliminary study Knowledge Gap Identified as of late 2013
Social Media Brand Communities in Sport	1	Research of what brands do to encourage customer engagement in social media brand communities is limited (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Gong, 2018; Zanini et al., 2019).	Branding and Social Media	1.A gap exists in research tracing the dynamism of brand communities in the context of social media. Longitudinal studies enable more insight (Laroche et al., 2012).
	2	"Qualitative research with executives and marketing managers could provide insights into how different social media outlets form part of the club's overall social media strategy, the extent to which different tools fulfill different brand building functions." (Parganas et al., 2015: 565).		2.A rethink of brand theory in light of post-internet branding and social media (Christodoulides, 2009; Fisher and Smith, 2011; Hanna et al., 2011).
				3.A major gap in research related to brand building potential for global brands (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013).
			Community and Relationships in Football	1.A need to identify factors that firms could use to manage the uncertainty of web-based relationships (Veloutsou et al., 2002).
	3	The ever-evolving discipline of sport marketing research needs to take into account social media use (Manoli, 2018).		
	4	The extent to which social media for marketing and communication activities is used by football clubs is a significant gap in the literature (Aichner, 2019).		2.A lack of understanding of fan relationships in the sports industry (Adamson et al., 2006), especially since the advent of social media (McLean and Wainwright, 2009).

2.13 Summary of Literature Review

This chapter has provided a critical review of the academic literature up to the end of 2013 (preliminary study) and then from 2014 onwards (main study). To conclude, Table 2-9 provides a summary of the key knowledge gaps being addressed by this thesis, mapping them onto the research objectives. The table therefore demonstrates how the research objectives are anchored in the literature whilst highlighting the contribution this thesis will make.

Table 2-9: Knowledge Gaps Mapped to Research Objectives

Knowledge Gap & Theme		Preliminary Study		
		RO1	RO2	
SNS and Social Media	1. A need for deeper understanding of social media, to inform strategic decisions on employing social media to engage and influence customers (Hoffman and Novak, 2012)	X	X	
	2. Lack of research related to online fan interaction, which is an area that needs to be taken seriously by academics (Gibbons and Dixon, 2010).	X	X	
	3. One of the most under-researched and understood areas relates to the best ways in which companies should organize and manage social media (Aral et al., 2013).	X	X	
Branding and Social Media	1. A gap exists in research tracing the dynamism of brand communities in the context of social media. Longitudinal studies enable more insight (Laroche et al., 2012).	X	X	
	2. A rethink of brand theory in light of post-internet branding and social media (Christodoulides, 2009; Fisher and Smith, 2011; Hanna et al., 2011).	X	X	
	3. A major gap in research related to brand building potential for global brands (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013).	X	X	
Community and Relation-ships in Football	1. A need to identify factors that firms could manage the uncertainty of web-based relationships (Veloutsou et al., 2002).	X	X	
	2. A lack of understanding of fan relationships in the sports industry (Adamson, Jones and Tapp, 2006), especially since the advent of social media (McLean and Wainwright, 2009).	X	X	

Knowledge Gap & Theme		Main Study			
		RO1	RO2	RO3	RO4
Social Media Marketing Strategy	1. Social media marketing strategy is under-researched in individual industry contexts (Felix et al., 2017; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a; Dwivedi et al., 2020).	X			
	2. Research using insights from experienced social media marketing practitioners will help to address the disconnect between academia and practice that has been identified (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016).	X	X	X	X
	3. Factors influencing the development and management of social media marketing strategy are under-researched (Alalwan et al., 2017; Li et al., 2020).	X	X		
	4. There is limited understanding of social media marketing strategy that incorporates a wider range of platforms (Dwivedi et al., 2020) and explores differences in approach according to the social media platforms being used in practice (Alves et al., 2016; Valos et al., 2017).	X	X		
	5. The role of trust in social media marketing strategy of brands is limited (Alalwan et al., 2017).	X	X	X	X
	6. How marketing insights, arising from social media marketing activity, inform social media marketing strategy is in need of further research (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016; Keegan and Rowley, 2017).	X	X		

Category	Gap				
Social Media Marketing Strategy in Sport	1. There is a lack of European based studies of social media marketing in sport (Eagleman, 2013; Filo et al., 2015). Even less examining social media marketing based on empirical insights from football clubs (Fenton et al., 2021b).	X	X		X
	2. Comparatively very few studies have explored social media marketing in sports from the perspective of the organisation. The vast majority are fan/consumer-based studies. (Filo et al., 2015; De Beer and Stander, 2016; Vale and Fernandes, 2018).	X	X		X
	3. The range of sports being researched needs to be widened (Hambrick, 2012; Stavros et al., 2014; Meng et al., 2015), particularly a wider range of football leagues and clubs (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015).	X	X		X
	4. A gap exists in how football clubs adapt their social media marketing strategy as they become more sophisticated in their use of social media platforms (De Beer and Stander, 2016), and there is a gap in sport research incorporating a wider range of social media marketing platforms (Filo et al., 2015).	X	X		X
	5. The question of whether social media marketing strategy informs operational use is under-researched (Filo et al., 2015).	X	X		X
Social Media Brand Communities in Sport	1. Research of what brands do to encourage customer engagement in social media brand communities is limited (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Gong, 2018; Zanini et al., 2019).	X	X	X	
	2. "Qualitative research with executives and marketing managers could provide insights into how different social media outlets form part of the club's overall social media strategy, the extent to which different tools fulfill different brand building functions." (Parganas et al., 2015: 565).	X	X	X	
	3. The ever-evolving discipline of sport marketing research needs to take into account social media use (Manoli, 2018).			X	
	4. The extent to which social media for marketing and communication activities is used by football clubs is a significant gap in the literature (Aichner, 2019).	X	X	X	X

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Having considered constructs relating to social media marketing strategy and sport, this chapter presents the methodological approach to conducting this study. It begins by justifying the constructionist ontology, social constructionist epistemology, axiology, and interpretivist research paradigm that underpinned this study. The chapter continues by detailing the overall qualitative case research strategy. Then methods used for semi-structured interview data collection, including the sampling strategy, and data analysis procedures are addressed. Ethical issues and limitations of the study are then discussed, concluding the chapter.

3.2 Philosophical Underpinning

Research is defined as "a process that is undertaken in a systematic way with a clear purpose, to find things out." (Saunders et al., 2019: 5). This section explores the philosophical foundation of this study, beginning with ontology, epistemology, and axiology.

3.2.1 *Ontology, Epistemology and Axiology*

Ontology, epistemology and axiology encompass the underpinning theoretical perspective that provides a means of observing the world and making sense of it (Saunders et al., 2019). Together they form the philosophical perspective taken by the business researcher (Bell et al., 2019). It is essential the researcher understands their own philosophical world view, in order to be aware of their own subjectivity when conducting research (Saunders et al., 2019). That subjectivity is shaped by assumptions on the part of the researcher (Crotty, 1998) which ultimately form the research paradigm, defined as "a basic set of beliefs that guide action" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018: 97). Creswell and Poth (2018: 326) are specific in including axiological assumptions in the research paradigm. To understand the research paradigm for this study, it is first necessary to discuss the underpinnings of philosophy, thereby avoiding some of the confusion created by terminology differing or being used interchangeably (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2008).

Ontology is the "the science or study of being" (Blaikie, 1993: 6), concerned with "what is" (Crotty, 1998). It refers to the nature of reality and how the world works from the perspective of the researcher (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). In business research, social ontology refers to how actors within organisations provide evidence of phenomena, as they occur from their perspective (Bell et al., 2019). Crucially, Saunders et al. (2019) argue that social ontology is divided into two key areas: constructionism and objectivism. Constructionism suggests social phenomena (behaviour) are socially constructed through the iterative observation and perceptions of social actors (Saunders et al., 2019). Objectivism, by contrast, seeks to make sense through social entities that exist in reality, independent of social actors (Bell et al., 2019). For example, an objectivist would believe the phenomenon would remain the same regardless of the people involved, whereas a constructionist would believe people do in fact influence the phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2019). This thesis adopts the ontological position of constructionism, as the reality of the phenomena being explored is constructed through the actions of social actors, i.e., practitioners responsible for the social media marketing of football clubs, in addition to how they implement their strategy to nurture club-fan relationships.

Epistemology relates to a "way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know" (Crotty, 1998:3). It is the theory of knowledge and the view of the researcher as to what represents acceptable knowledge and how it can be created (Saunders et al., 2019). Crotty (1998) suggests knowledge is created at the point where beliefs of the researcher meet the actual truth of the phenomena. The epistemological position taken in this thesis is social constructionist. It is exploring and seeking to understand the evolving social media marketing strategy of football clubs, from the perspective of football clubs and the practitioners responsible at each club, hence the reality is socially constructed. Social constructivism was also considered as a perspective for this study, however that has more of an individual focus and tends to be associated with the use of grounded theory (Saunders et al., 2019). With the research objectives being from the perspective of the football clubs, rather than individuals, social constructivism was not considered an appropriate perspective for this thesis.

Ontology and epistemology are often discussed in conjunction with each other to justify a researcher's construction of meaning (Crotty, 1998). This brings the

discussion to the third element of the theoretical perspective that provides a means of observing the world and making sense of it.

Axiology is the nature of what we, as humans, value (Biddle and Schafft, 2015; Kelly et al., 2018), and therefore considers the notion of values within research philosophy (Saunders et al., 2019). The researcher is in agreement with the view that in business research enquiry is not value-free (Bell et al., 2019), hence judgement about values within ethics, aesthetics and social enquiry as value-laden or value-free should be considered by the researcher (Saunders et al., 2019). It was important for the researcher to evaluate his own role as objective or subjective and how this may shape the knowledge being generated (Bell et al., 2019). The researcher was therefore guided by his philosophical perspective formed by his own ontology, epistemology and axiology (Saunders et al., 2019). To ensure the research aim and objectives were met, it was important to be aware of the methodological approaches related to each of the research paradigms (Bell et al., 2019), and which was compatible with the ontological position that reality is constructed by people and acceptable knowledge can be socially constructed. For example interpretivist research is more likely to use qualitative methods while positivist research has a tendency to use quantitative methods (Saunders et al., 2019). Discussing the role of axiology in the philosophical perspective of research, Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that all researchers bring values to a study and encourages qualitative researchers to make their values known. The values of the researcher of this thesis as a digital marketer with an industry background in digital marketing in sport was highlighted in the Introduction chapter of this study. The personal values of the author have had some influence on the choice of research area. For example, academic debate and a previous career in digital and sport marketing helped identify the need for greater understanding of social media marketing strategy, in the context of football clubs, as a valid area of research. It is not the view of this author that research can be totally value-free, because decisions are being made by the researcher constantly during the process of his research (Bell et al., 2019).

3.2.2 Philosophical Perspective and Paradigm

Interpretivism

While positivist research seeks to *explain* human behaviour, interpretivist research seeks to *understand* it, within the context those behaviours are witnessed and enacted (Bell et al., 2019). It is linked to the argument that the social worlds of humans should be researched in a different way to the natural sciences, rather than trying to emulate them (Crotty, 1998). The benefit of interpretivist research in business, and specifically marketing research, is therefore that it is "characterized by efforts to understand the complexity of the business world and… add meaning to strategies, actions and events" (Gummesson, 2003: 482). It is why many social science researchers believe interpretivism is the preferable paradigm (Bell et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2019). Interpretivism takes the perspective that humans create meanings that are therefore different to physical phenomena (Saunders et al., 2019). Based on the premise that human behaviour does not follow universal 'laws', a benefit of interpretivist social science is that it can reveal unexpected phenomena through the study of those meanings (Bell et al., 2019). In essence, interpretivist research argues the world is socially constructed and it is given multiple meanings through social actors (Saunders et al., 2019), allowing research to provide contextual understandings of the data gathered in a study through different social realities are experienced and created (Bell et al., 2019). Interpretivists believe that rich insights into human behaviour are diluted or lost through rule-based generalisations as different people in different environments, times and circumstances make different meanings (Saunders et al., 2019).

A criticism of interpretivist research is that it does not lend itself to large datasets, generating generalisable results (Saunders et al., 2019). However, because this thesis is contextual, representativeness to much wider populations of all football clubs is not the intention. Another criticism is that interpretivist research is not value-free (Bell et al., 2019). This is why the axiological implication is so important, recognising that the value system of the researcher is integral to the process of understanding and interpreting the phenomena (Saunders et al., 2019). Interpretivist research will therefore often seek to discover a subjective reality via an inductive approach, using in-depth investigation, to develop theory, or further theoretical understanding (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). Very often, this kind of

research will use inductive qualitative methods to understand the dynamic nature of social behaviours and socially constructed reality (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

3.2.3 Research Philosophy Confirmation and Justification

The position of this thesis in relation to ontology, epistemology and axiology is that an interpretivist study is most appropriate. This research reflects a particular set of circumstances and interactions involving football clubs and individuals at a specific time (Saunders et al., 2019), namely those responsible for the social media marketing presence of football clubs. Social constructionism is a philosophical perspective which has emerged from the interpretivist school, and specifically considers human and social interaction (Bell et al., 2019). It challenges the existence of an objective reality, emphasising realities are "socially-constructed entities – entities which are made real by the actions and understandings of humans." (Bell et al., 2019: 27).

Business and management research that adopts a social constructionist perspective is required to facilitate contextual understanding and interpretation (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). The focus of social constructionism is more societal (Saunders et al., 2019), and is more closely aligned with this thesis which explores social media marketing strategy from the perspective of the football club, gathering data from practitioners that occupy such positions as: Social Media Executive; Head of Digital and Marketing: and Head of Communications. Social media marketing strategy research, particularly in relation to football clubs, is at a nascent stage of development which indicates it would not benefit from a positivist approach (Crotty, 1998; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Fenton et al., 2021b). The extant literature knowledge gaps identified there was a need for more research from the perspective of practitioners, at a wider range of football clubs and leagues. That contextual requirement is more aligned with an interpretivist study. Due to the complexity and uniqueness of business situations, interpretivist studies require that "the researcher has to adopt an empathetic stance" with research participants (Saunders et al., 2019: 149), to help elicit rich data from their viewpoint (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Silverman, 2022). The research is therefore consistent with a social constructionist perspective in business and management research (Bell et al., 2019).

The social phenomenon of social media marketing strategy is continually being developed by social actors, be they social media companies, football clubs, or football fans. It is the intention of this study to produce a conceptual framework that attempts to make sense of the social media marketing strategy development of football clubs. In this sense the research will be sensitive to context (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). It seeks to be part of the body of knowledge that addresses the concern of Piercy (2002: 352), that academic marketing research has done little in over 25 years to "meet the strategic needs of major organisations".

In summary, for the aim of this thesis, agreement is found with the many social scientists who share the view that natural science methods are not necessarily appropriate for study of the social world and business (Bell et al., 2019). The study therefore adopts the position of the social constructionist, within the interpretivist perspective. It builds on calls for a wider range of positions and methodological approaches in social media marketing strategy in sport research (Filo et al., 2015). Insights will be generated through analysis of the viewpoint of social media marketing strategy in sport practitioners as representatives of their football clubs. By drawing upon their interpretations, the study can explore the socially constructed realities of the individuals and organisations involved (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Figure 3-1 summarises the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of this thesis, providing the research structure required for "stability and direction" (Crotty, 1998:2). This process and integrated approach is consistent with social constructionist research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Bell et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2019). The chapter will now examine the research methodology for this study in more detail.

Figure 3-1: Philosophical and Methodological Basis of this Thesis

Ontology
The study of being and assumptions about the nature of reality; whether reality is external to social actors or created by people.
(Bell et al., 2019)

→ Reality is constructed by people

Epistemology
The understanding of what is acceptable knowledge and how it can be created.
(Saunders et al., 2019)

→ Social constructionist

Axiology
Whether the research is value-free or value-laden.
(Saunders et al., 2019)

→ Research is value-bound

Methodology
The combination of research techniques, strategy/approach/design behind the choice of methods linked to desired outcomes.
(Bell et al., 2019; Crotty, 1998)

→ Qualitative case research; purposive and snowball sampling

Method
Techniques for data collection and analysis.
(Bell et al., 2019; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008)

→ Semi-structured participant interviews; thematic analysis

3.3 Research Methodology and Qualitative Case Justification

Methodology is "the theory of how research should be undertaken" (Saunders et al., 2019: 4) and is therefore a combination of research approach, strategy, and methodological choices that influence the methods used to achieve the desired outcomes (Crotty, 1998; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008; Bell et al., 2019). The term methodology is sometimes confused with method as the two are often used interchangeably. However, they are different, because methods are techniques and procedures for obtaining and analysing data (Bell et al., 2019). Similar to

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philosophical perspectives, methodologies cannot be true or false, only more or less suitable to the nature of the research (Silverman, 2014).

3.3.1 Qualitative Enquiry

The research aim of exploring the evolving social media marketing strategy of football clubs is for *understanding* rather than *explaining*, therefore a qualitative approach to enquiry is appropriate (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Silverman, 2022). Extensive acceptance of qualitative enquiry as a suitable business research approach exists (Symon and Cassell, 2004; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; Bell et al., 2019). Relevant to this thesis, qualitative enquiry is very closely linked to interpretivism and social construction (Creswell and Poth, 2018), using data gathering techniques such as interviews with representatives of case study organisations, as shown in Figure 3-1. As this thesis seeks to address the disconnect between academia and practice (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016), it is also appropriate that qualitative research outputs are of more interest and relevance to practitioners of management (Symon and Cassell, 2004). This interpretivist thesis seeks to understand the dynamic phenomena of social media marketing strategy, through the experiences of participants (Creswell and Poth, 2018). It is typical of an environment of rapid social change in which researchers are encouraged to use inductive strategies (Flick, 2009), rather than potentially missing key themes through a deductive strategy (Thomas, 2003).

Qualitative research is not without its criticisms. For example the more common are that it is: (a) too subjective; (b) difficult to replicate; (c) problematic for generalising; (d) sometimes lacking in transparency (Bell et al., 2019). Being aware of any criticisms and limitations is important for this thesis (Silverman, 2022), and is why this chapter is transparent about each aspect of the research, including the philosophical perspective and how it was informed, the context of the research, social media marketing strategy theoretical generalisations (in qualitative research), and the process of data gathering and analysis (Bell et al., 2019). The axiological assumption of the interpretivist position acknowledges that the values and interpretations of this researcher are key to the knowledge contribution generated (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Acknowledging the socially constructed phenomena of social media marketing strategy and football, together with the values and experience of the researcher, will facilitate effective and appropriate data collection

and analysis whilst ensuring distortion or misrepresentation of data does not occur (Bell et al., 2019).

In its enquiry of social media marketing strategy, this study is reliant on the expert interpretations of key informants who manage the social media marketing presence of football clubs. That in-depth knowledge constitutes the rich qualitative data this study is based on (Silverman, 2022).

Qualitative Methodology in Social Media Marketing Strategy

Social media marketing strategy research is very varied and encompasses a range of disciplines. In business and management specifically, there are a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Examples of quantitative studies include Tafesse and Wien (2018a; 2018b), Boerman et al. (2017), and studies of social media marketing strategy specifically include Chung et al. (2017), and McCann and Barlow (2015). A growing body of work in the field of social media marketing strategy has used qualitative enquiry, such as Keegan and Rowley (2017), Felix et al. (2017), and Effing and Spil (2016).

In the field of social media marketing strategy in sport, Chapter 2 identified a call for more varied research methodologies, to include more qualitative enquiry (Filo et al., 2015). Since the preliminary study was published in 2014, a growing body of knowledge has been generated using qualitative approaches. Examples are Parganas and Anagnostopoulos (2015), Baena (2019a; 2019b), and Fenton et al. (2021b). The field of social media marketing strategy and brand communications is ever-evolving (Manoli, 2018), and knowledge gaps identified included how football clubs use it for communications (Aichner, 2019), in addition to how they adapt social media marketing strategy as they become more sophisticated in using different social media platforms (De Beer and Stander, 2016). The fact that much of the literature continues to be dominated by quantitative studies (e.g. Lardo et al., 2017; Vale and Fernandes, 2018; Holzmayer and Schmidt, 2020; Machado et al., 2020), highlights the ongoing need to continue to generate knowledge using a variety of research approaches (Alarcón et al., 2018).

3.4 Case Research Strategy

The case study is a widely used research strategy in business research (Bell et al., 2019) that focuses on understanding phenomena present in specific settings (Yin, 2018). It is a comprehensive research strategy (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018) used extensively in qualitative studies, that typically use in-depth data collection across single or multiple cases (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Case study research involves exploration of a case or cases in a real-life, contemporary context or setting (Yin, 2018). Cases can be explored at the level of an organisation, an industry, a location, or an event (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Bell et al., 2019). In keeping with the social constructionist position of this thesis, case study research is "well suited to capturing knowledge of practitioners and developing theories from it" (Cepeda and Martin, 2005: 852).

Cepeda and Martin (2005) argue that case study research is a viable management research strategy for three reasons: (i) the researcher can study management in a natural setting, learn about state-of-the-art and generate theories from practice; (ii) it allows the researcher to answer 'how' and 'why' issues in order to understand the nature and complexity of phenomena; and (iii) it is an appropriate strategy to explore areas where research is scarce.

To further knowledge, researchers have called for studies that explore: (i) a wider range of industries, to demonstrate how companies use social media (Alalwan et al., 2017; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a; Canovi and Pucciarelli, 2019); (ii) the role of social media in those industries (Dwivedi et al., 2020); and (iii) more case study research in relation to social media marketing strategy (e.g. Effing and Spil, 2016), and its use in football (Baena, 2019a; 2019b). In the context of social media marketing strategy in sport, case study research has become increasingly popular in football-related studies (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Maderer et al., 2018; Baena, 2019b; 2019a). These studies are evidence of research becoming more inclusive, by publishing studies using a more diverse range of research approaches and strategies, research methods, geographies, sectors, and organisations, as was called for by such authors as (Eagleman, 2013; Filo et al., 2015; Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015). However, with the exception of Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018), most studies tend to focus on a single case.

In football, other social media marketing strategy studies cover multiple football clubs, however they are not case study research. For example, they are studies of social media posts and responses across different European teams (Aichner, 2019). In wider sport, there are studies covering a range of organisations but, again, they are not case study research. For example, the social media posts of 30 NBA teams (Meng et al., 2015). Furthermore, there is very little research indeed from the perspective of organisation (e.g. Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Baena, 2019b). This means there is a scarcity of social media marketing strategy insights, across football leagues which means there is still a lack of theoretical depth applied to the football sector (Vale and Fernandes, 2018) and to sports (Filo, Lock and Karg, 2015), such as rugby, cricket, and basketball.

This thesis will contribute to reducing this lack of theoretical depth by studying social media marketing strategy of several football clubs, from the perspective of experienced practitioners at those clubs. This will be achieved through Research Objective 4, which specifically focuses on proposing a theoretical framework for social media marketing strategy in football clubs.

What constitutes a case depends on the research aim and context of the study and is distinguished by the focus of the analysis (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The research aim of this thesis is to understand evolving social media marketing strategy of football clubs and the focus of analysis is English football clubs. Therefore, the nature of this case study research should enhance understanding of contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts (Meyer, 2001), which is evolving approaches to managing social media marketing presence, by English football clubs. Table 3-1 summarises the five types of case. Much single case research tends to be based on larger clubs which could be argued to be unique because they are at the top echelons of European football (e.g. Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Baena, 2019b). For this reason, they are not necessarily representative of most football clubs. This thesis therefore seeks to generate knowledge from a wider range of clubs, to be more typical of a larger number of clubs at various levels of the professional football pyramid. Using multiple-case research allowed the researcher to compare and contrast the findings, examining what is unique and what is common across cases (Yin, 2018). Representative cases were therefore selected for inclusion (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Table 3-1: Types of Case

Types of Case	Description
Critical	A case is selected because it is most likely or least likely to confirm hypotheses.
Unique/Extreme	A case is selected based on the likelihood of generating knowledge based on extremities and a dramatic perspective.
Revelatory	A case is selected based on previously unstudied phenomena.
Representative/Typical	A case is selected on the basis that it exemplifies a more everyday form of organisation or situation.
Longitudinal	A case is selected based on how a situation changes over time.

Source: Adapted from Yin (2018), Saunders et al. (2019), Creswell and Poth (2018)

The study was completed in two phases to help achieve the research aim of exploring how use of social media marketing strategy had evolved in the case of English football clubs. Qualitative case study research over a longer time period is an established strategy (Torregrosa et al., 2015), but not as commonly used due to difficulties accessing organisations (Bell et al., 2019). A longer term view (Torregrosa et al., 2015) was facilitated by the preliminary study taking place eight years prior to the main study. Such temporal studies have been very recently published in social media (Drummond et al., 2022) and in the football sector (Cruz et al., 2021). The use of point mapping (Halinen et al., 2012), which collects data at two points in time (preliminary study and main study), allowed for a temporal comparison of the evolving phenomena of social media marketing strategy. This form of long-term examination of social media marketing strategy practices "is needed, in order to observe how firms adjust their strategies over time" (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014: 339).

3.5 Research Design

Research design is the "framework or structure within which the collection and analysis of data takes place" (Bell et al., 2019: 596) which best help the study achieve the research aim (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). The research aim of this thesis is exploratory and was therefore suited to being conducted by interviewing experts in the field of social media marketing strategy (Yin, 2018; Saunders et al., 2019). By using data gathered from English football clubs, it offers a perspective that is very rare in social media marketing strategy research (Filo et al., 2015; Fenton et al., 2021b). On the philosophical basis that reality is socially constructed, the research used a qualitative approach and multiple-case strategy, utilising key

informant (native speaker) in-depth interviews (face-to-face and Skype) and deploys thematic analysis to understand the evolving social media marketing strategies of English football clubs, in a constantly changing digital and sporting landscape.

Figure 3-2 offers a visualisation of the activities involved in the qualitative data collection of this thesis. The circles with a dashed outline and shaded orange relate to sampling. Those with a solid outline in blue relate to data collection. As section 3.5.1. explains, the process began by iteratively finding appropriate cases, locating suitable individuals associated with those cases, and gaining access and developing rapport, while always being mindful of ethical considerations at all points in the process (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

3.5.1 *Participants and Sampling Strategy*

A sample is a "segment of the population that is selected for research" (Bell et al., 2019: 596). It is therefore a subgroup or part of that larger population (Saunders et al., 2019). In the context of this thesis, calls for research to reflect a wider range of leagues, clubs and countries have been made (Filo et al., 2015), but no studies published to date have covered a range of clubs in different leagues in English football (EPL, EFL [Championship, FL1, FL2]). In addition, there are ongoing research agenda calls to further knowledge through studies that incorporate a wider range of social media platforms, rather than just one platform in isolation (Algharabat et al., 2018; Tafesse and Wien, 2018b; Gaber et al., 2019; Dwivedi et al., 2020).

Figure 3-2: Data Collection Activities
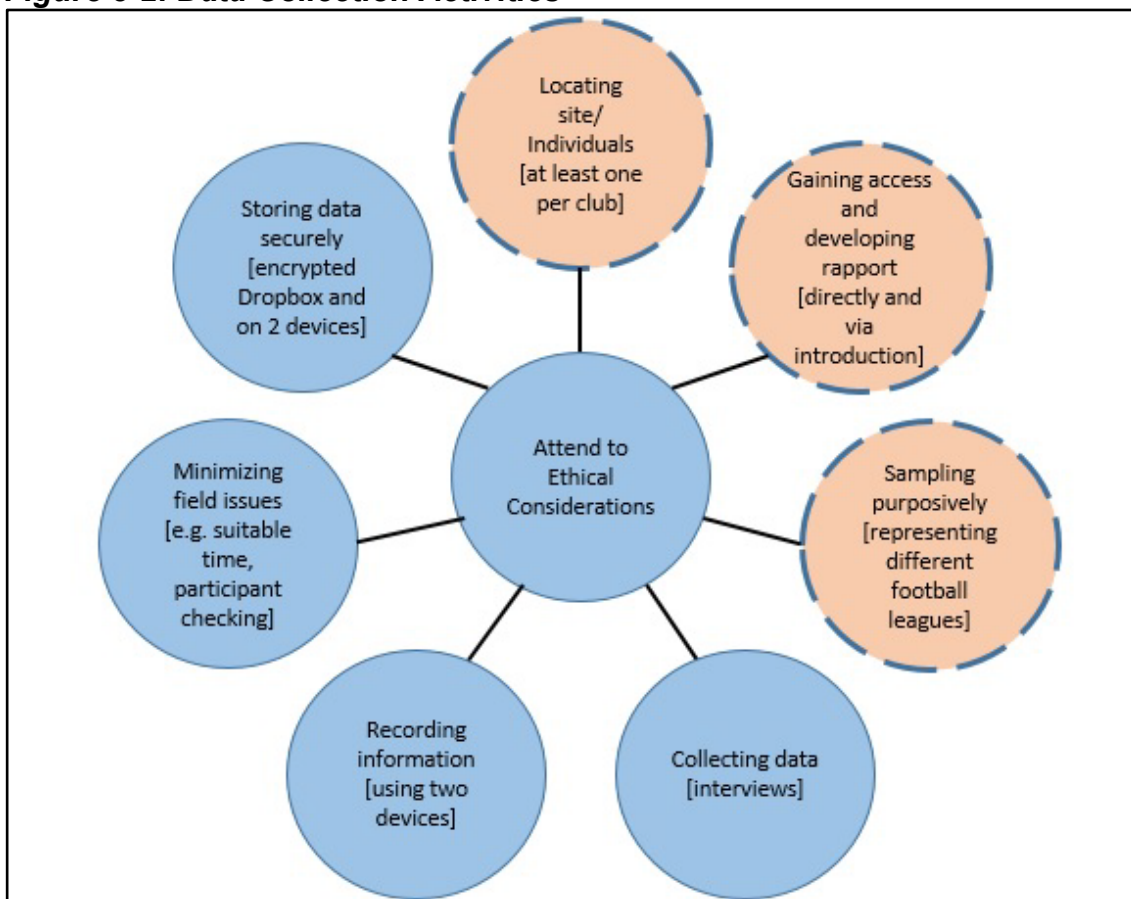
Source: Adapted from Creswell and Poth (2018: 149)

Rather than a probability sample that would require a statistically representative sample of a population (Saunders et al., 2019), this qualitative study uses purposive sampling in order to intentionally sample those who can best inform the phenomena under investigation (Creswell and Poth, 2018). From the 92 clubs in the top four tiers of English football, it was important to ensure responses from clubs in different English football leagues, for this thesis to be more typical of a range of football clubs.

In purposively sampling clubs from more than one league, the study was able to generate knowledge typical of a broader range of clubs, compared to a study restricted to EPL or the Championship. The purposive qualitative inquiry sampling strategies used were therefore to select typical cases, highlighting what is normal or average (Creswell and Poth, 2018) at that level of football. The sampling process and the case presentation for the preliminary study is explained below, followed by the main study sampling process and case presentation.

Preliminary Study Two Step Sampling Process

The sampling process for the preliminary study followed two phases, based on the selection criteria of: a range of English football clubs; in different leagues; access to the club; and a willingness to participate in the research.

Step One

The official EPL and EFL websites were accessed to identify clubs in each of the four tiers. Then club websites were reviewed to identify an individual responsible for digital and social media marketing, at each club. Only 21 clubs met the criteria.

Step Two

For the 21 clubs, each person was contacted for access and suitability. To help gain access and rapport (Creswell and Poth, 2018), the purpose and context of the research was stated, and a reassurance was given that any interview would typically be no more than one hour. To demonstrate researcher credibility (Saunders et al., 2019), the introductory message highlighted the professional background of the researcher (working with over 35 clubs previously). With social media marketing strategy being in its relative infancy, very few clubs were willing to discuss their work for the purposes of academic research. For those that agreed to participate, when discussing ethics and confidentiality with participants, each agreed their club and job title could be identified but not their individual name (Bell et al., 2019). Access to four clubs was granted.

Preliminary Study Case Presentation and Sample of Interviewees

Table 3-2 outlines the role of each participant at each of the cases, confirming the preliminary research covered football clubs of different sizes, in different leagues, and with differing views and levels of experience in social media marketing strategy.

Table 3-2: Cases and Interviewees of Preliminary Study

Case (letter)	Title	Club	League	Facebook	Twitter
A	Head of Customer Operations	Newcastle United	EPL	Y	Y
B	Marketing Manager	Leeds United	Championship	N	N
C	Marketing Manager	Bolton Wanderers	EPL	N	N
D	Marketing Manager	Nottingham Forest	Championship	Y	Y

Main Study Four Step Sampling Process

The sampling process for the main study iteratively followed four phases, based on the selection criteria of: a range of English football clubs; in different leagues; using more than one social media marketing platform.

Step One

The official EPL and EFL websites were accessed to identify clubs in each of the four tiers of English football. Then club websites were reviewed to identify those using more than one social media platform, such as Twitter and Facebook, or Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. In total, 68 clubs met the criteria.

Step Two

For the 68 clubs, the official websites and LinkedIn were searched to locate and confirm an individual responsible for social media marketing strategy. Where this information was not publicly available, the researcher telephoned each remaining club, thereby engaging with the receptionist as the initial gatekeeper of each organisation (Saunders et al., 2019). The information was kindly provided where possible due to the purpose and context of the research being briefly explained to the gatekeeper, to gain their confidence (Creswell and Poth, 2018). In total, this information was obtained for 28 clubs. In every instance, email was recommended as the best means of communication.

Step Three

For the 28 clubs, each person was emailed for access and suitability. They were viewed as an 'initial participant', meaning they would be instrumental in encouraging other colleagues within their club to participate in the research (Bell et al., 2019). The purpose of the research was stated, together with a reassurance that the interview would probably last one hour, helping to gain access and rapport with the practitioner (Rashid et al., 2019). The researcher mentioned his professional background of working with over 35 clubs previously, plus the success of the preliminary study, to demonstrate researcher credibility (Saunders et al., 2019). After a series of follow up email communications where more details of the research were discussed, it was very clear that assurances of anonymity were going to be key to access being granted (Bell et al., 2019). Participants were happy for the researcher to share their club involvement with other potential cases but not for their

details to be revealed in any published work such as a thesis, conferences, or journal papers. Hence access to only four clubs was granted.

Step Four

Sampling was extended to snowball, assisted by professional networks, to identify "cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich" (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 159). The director of a company (Contact X) working with several football clubs was contacted, to help recommend additional clubs and contacts that might be willing to offer suitably rich insights (Yin, 2018). A short introductory email was sent to Contact X to help him contact a range of client clubs, stating the purpose and context of the research. This approach resulted in seven further clubs expressing some interest, giving Contact X permission to share their details, for the purposes of the researcher contacting them. The researcher then worked through the third step explained above, adding in details of clubs that had already agreed to participate. This confirmation of other clubs being involved influenced the decision-making of the additional seven clubs, as it added credibility and reassurance as to the nature of the research (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This fourth step resulted in access to a further four clubs being granted, bringing the total to eight football clubs as cases in this study. Contact X's role as a supportive gatekeeper had been key to gaining that access and establishing credibility (Saunders et al., 2019). Again, ethical assurances regarding anonymity in published works were crucial in gaining final agreement (Bell et al., 2019).

In addition to Contact X helping with snowball sampling, the initial participant within each case was able to act as a 'sponsor' of the researcher, providing a referral to their colleagues and vouching for the researcher (Adler and Adler, 2001). Therefore in all but Cases B and F (Table 3-3), other colleagues were recommended as they were identified as participants able to offer a wider variety of perspectives on the case research (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). In each instance, after details were provided by the initial participant, access was negotiated directly between the researcher and their colleague participants in the same manner as explained in the third step above. The time between the initial researcher email and a confirmed interview date with each colleague participant was relatively short, due to the role of their 'initial participant' colleague as a positive gatekeeper (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

This process meant that one of the major barriers facing researchers of sporting organisations, that of gaining access to practitioners responsible for social media marketing had been overcome (Filo et al., 2015). Therefore, a key contribution of this main study is to generate rich insights from 18 representatives from eight purposively sampled clubs (Bell et al., 2019), with extensive experience of social media marketing strategy in football.

Finally, two expert social media marketing strategy practitioners (EXP1 and EXP2), who acted as consultants to football clubs and other sporting brands and organisations were recruited. They offered a perspective independent of any one particular case and added further credibility and validity to the findings (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Main Study Case Presentation and Sample of Interviewees

Table 3-3 outlines the role of each participant and demonstrates that the research covers football clubs of different sizes, from different leagues, and with different views and experiences of social media marketing strategy.

Table 3-3: Cases and Interviewees of Main Study

Case (letter) Participant (number)	Title	League	Facebook*	Twitter*	Instagram*	Snapchat*
A1 (initial participant)	Head of Marketing and Communications	Championship, previously promoted to and relegated from EPL, plus one recent year in League Two	Y	Y	Y	Y
A2	Digital Content Editor	Championship, previously promoted to and relegated from EPL, plus one recent year in League Two				
B1 (initial participant)	Head of Marketing	Championship, previously promoted to and relegated from EPL	Y	Y	Y	N
C1 (initial participant)	Head of Marketing	League One, promoted from League Two	Y	Y	Y	N
C2	Head of Commercial Affairs	League One, promoted from League Two				
D1	Editor in Chief	EPL (never relegated from EPL)	Y	Y	Y	Y
D2 (initial participant)	Social Media Exec	EPL (never relegated from EPL)				
E1 (initial participant)	Head of Digital and Marketing	Championship, relegated from EPL (EPL 15 years)	Y	Y	Y	Y
E2	Head of Communications	Championship, relegated from EPL (EPL 15 years)				
E3	Head of Retail and Ticketing Operations	Championship, relegated from EPL (EPL 15 years)				
E4	Head of Supporter Services	Championship, relegated from EPL (EPL 15 years)				
E5	Sales Manager, Conference and Events	Championship, relegated from EPL (EPL 15 years)				
F1 (initial participant)	Head of Communications	League One, promoted from League Two	Y	Y	Y	N
G1 (initial participant)	Supporter Growth and Services Officer	Championship, relegated from EPL (EPL 10 years)	Y	Y	Y	N
G2	Head of Media and Communications	Championship, relegated from EPL (EPL 10 years)				
H1	Media and Digital Content Manager	EPL return, promoted from Championship	Y	Y	Y	Y
H2	Head of Media	EPL return, promoted from Championship				
H3 (initial participant)	Head of Marketing	EPL return, promoted from Championship				
EXP1	Social Media Consultant	11 years social media in sport expertise	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
EXP2	Marketing, Communications and Media Consultant	17 years marketing, communications, social media marketing in sport expertise	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

* Social media figures not shown to protect anonymity

Native Practitioner Perspective

The exploratory nature of this research and its qualitative design make it more appropriate for selected cases to inform theoretically useful findings to meet the research objectives (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018), related to social media marketing strategy, how it is operationalised, and the role of the brand in social media marketing communications. The use of in-depth interviews within the case method facilitates "understanding" of a "way of life" (Fontana and Frey, 2000: 668), from the perspective of native practitioners who are "well informed" (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 320) regarding the social media marketing strategy of football clubs. The number of representatives per club ranged from one to five, depending on their specific areas of responsibility and size of the team responsible for social media marketing strategy at each club.

While the number of participants is consistent or larger than previous qualitative studies that interview social media marketing practitioners (e.g. Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Felix et al., 2017; Fenton et al., 2021b), it is not representative of every football club in England or internationally. However, being a qualitative study, the intention is to best inform social media marketing strategy at English football clubs to which the researcher could gain access. In total, the 18 participants in eight cases, plus two industry experts in the main study, which followed the four cases and four participants in the preliminary study, is consistent with recommendations in the literature. Although there is no precise right number of cases or participants, the consensus for qualitative case study research appears to be between two and four cases as a minimum and between ten and fifteen as a maximum (Perry, 1998; Bell et al., 2019). A PhD ideally features participants from different hierarchical levels within each case study organisation (Perry, 1998) and the number of participants in this thesis are in line with Creswell and Poth's (2018) suggestions. Therefore, by researching social media marketing strategy with English football clubs of different sizes, from different leagues, this thesis addresses the key knowledge gaps identified in the previous chapter and summarised in Table 2-9, pp.102.

3.5.2 Data Collection Method

This section highlights the data collection method employed in this thesis. Ethical considerations are also emphasised in relation to the blue circles with solid outlines in Figure 3-2, pp.117.

In their seminal paper, Filo et al. (2015) called for further qualitative research using interviews to be used for the social media marketing strategy in sport literature. Interviews are one of the most widely used methods in social science research (Saunders et al., 2019) and are extensively used in qualitative case study research (Creswell and Poth, 2018) because they are an efficient means of collecting empirical data (Perry, 1998; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). As the interview is considered a social interaction based on conversation (Warren, 2002; Creswell and Poth, 2018) it can lead to accusations of bias. The measures taken by the researcher to avoid bias in this thesis were: (i) approaching the interview with an open mind, to allow for emergence of themes not yet apparent in the literature (Saunders et al., 2019); (ii) discarding any previously held notions regarding social media marketing strategy of football clubs (Flyvbjerg, 2011); and (iii) participant checking of interview transcripts and meaning (Saunders et al., 2019). The process is consistent with the social constructionist position of knowledge being generated through human interactions (Saunders et al., 2019).

Qualitative interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured (Bell et al., 2019). Semi-structured interviews have a structure that facilitates cross-case comparison because the questions are based on predetermined themes (Saunders et al., 2019) but allow the flexibility and adaptability so important to qualitative interviewing (King, 2004; Yin, 2018). Such flexibility may include the order of questions to accommodate the flow of the conversation and the data shared by the interviewee, omission or modification of a question related to a theme such as social media marketing strategy, or the exploration of new themes, such as the dark side of social media marketing strategy, emerging during the process (Saunders et al., 2019). That flexibility was deemed crucial to yielding rich insights, experiences, opinions, attitudes, and feelings of each interviewee (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Bell et al., 2019). Each interviewee offered a slightly different perspective depending on their job role and the context of the football club by whom they were employed. The researcher had anticipated that this would be the case based on his previous

use of semi-structured interviews during the preliminary study. In the context of the main study and overall thesis, semi-structured qualitative interviews were considered to be the most appropriate in order to "understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experience, [and] to uncover their lived world" (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015: 3) and achieving the aims of this study.

Interview Protocol

An interview protocol was developed and tested for each study (Bell et al., 2019), through extensive review of the social media marketing and sporting landscape, extant literature review and detailed discussion of interview protocol iterations with doctoral supervisors (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; Bell et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2019). Questions were designed to afford scope for interviewees to express their experiences and expert views (Rowley, 2012). As can be seen in Appendix 1 Interview Protocol Main Study and Appendix 2 Interview Protocol Preliminary Study, the interview protocol changed between the preliminary study and the main study, to reflect the aim of each study and how practice had evolved over time. The protocols provided some structure using a mix of specific probes and questions to prevent the interview becoming too conversational (Warren, 2002). The interview began by using easy questions, such as explaining their role, in order to relax each participant (King, 2004) and give them confidence they could "open up and talk" (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 164). Each question was asked singly to help with clarity of enquiry (Saunders et al., 2019) while care was taken to avoid jargon and any leading questions (Bell et al., 2019). In any instances when the interviewee asked how they should respond to a question, the researcher verbally reiterated that the data should reflect *their* lived experience in their role at the football club (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

The protocol demonstrates how questions were a mix of open, probing and closed questions in order to elicit appropriate responses (Silverman, 2022). An example of an open question in the main study was 'What influences your use of social media?'. An example of a probing question was 'What is the role of social media for [club]?'. Closed questions were used to obtain a fact (Saunders et al., 2019), for example 'Do you have a social media strategy?'. The responses to probing and closed questions were often explored further through use of short follow-up questions such

as 'Could you please tell me a little more?' and the use of other techniques such as silence or expressions such as 'Okay', 'Right' (Saunders et al., 2019). Throughout this, non-verbal communication was used to continue building rapport during the interview (Creswell and Poth, 2018). For instance, eye contact was maintained as much as possible. Such techniques actively demonstrated to the interviewee that the researcher was attentive and empathetic to the rich insights being shared (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Yin, 2018).

Face-to-face, Telephone, and Online Interviewing

Careful consideration was given to the location and manner of each interview, and the cumulative interviewing process collectively, based on two main factors. First, the practicalities of access to each participant were considered. If two representatives from the same club could be interviewed on the same day, or if the site was within a one-hour drive of the researcher, the interview was conducted face to face. In addition, if the interviewee preferred to arrange a telephone interview as this offered them more flexibility regarding date and timings. Second, the researcher's disability required repeated travel around several UK sites be minimised. Hence, either telephone or Skype was used for synchronous online interviewing. The flexible approach to interviews enabled them to be arranged in a manner that reduced effort on the part of each interviewee, which, in turn created further rapport and trust (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Bell et al., 2019). Telephone interviews are increasingly accepted in qualitative research, especially where there is trust between the parties involved (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). Telephone and Skype interviews mean participants agree to be interviewed when they may otherwise have declined (Bell et al., 2019). It was also possible to adjust the timings and/or length of interviews at very short notice (Bell et al., 2019). Face-to-face, telephone, and synchronous online interviewing are all acceptable forms of data collection in qualitative research, generating positive results (Silverman, 2022).

Minimising Field Issues and Recording During Interviews

The following procedures were followed, to facilitate successful completion of interviews for all involved (Creswell and Poth, 2018). First, a participant information sheet and participant consent form were emailed in advance or on the day of interview, providing the interviewee with more information related to such elements as the purpose of the study, assurances regarding process, and that their

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participation was voluntary. These are shown in Appendix 3   Participant Information Sheet, Appendix 4   Participant Consent Form Main Study, and Appendix 5   Participant Consent Form Preliminary Study. During each interview, the introduction by the researcher reiterated the purpose and context of research, and that the interviewee had the choice of opting out at any point or not answering any particular questions (Warren, 2002). The researcher also asked for permission to record (Creswell and Poth, 2018). He also explained that he would use two devices for recording (iPhone and digital dictaphone) and that this would reduce any risk of data being lost due to technical issues (Saunders et al., 2019). Additionally, the researcher stated that some notes would be taken during the interview, to ensure that nothing important was missed (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). The researcher reiterated at various points through each interview that the interest was focused on the interviewee's perspective in relation to social media marketing strategy at their club. For face-to-face interviews, the researcher preferred the interviewee to select a location in which they felt comfortable (Bell 2019). Finally, for telephone and skype interviews, the use of verbal follow ups such as 'Okay', 'Yes', 'Ah' were particularly important in demonstrating active listening (Creswell and Poth, 2018). In every instance, participants expressed how they had enjoyed the interview and found it a useful opportunity to reflect.

Storing Data Securely

Each interview resulted in two digital files being generated, one each from the iPhone and dictaphone. These were immediately copied across to a bespoke case folder within an 'interviews directory' on the researcher's password protected and encrypted laptop (Lambert, 2015). This systematic process of storing recordings and transcripts enabled efficient management of the qualitative data being generated (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The data was instantly and automatically backed up using Dropbox Premium, a secure data cloud storage platform using multiple layers of protection, and encrypted block storage in accordance with international compliance standards (Dropbox.com, 2021). Although the files were securely backed up on Dropbox, the researcher kept the original digital files on the iPhone and Dictaphone until each interview had been transcribed. Only then did the researcher delete the files from each physical device in order to maximise security and minimise risk to participants (Lambert, 2015). This prudent approach ensured

that the interviews could be listened to on many occasions, thereby supporting the researcher in mining the dataset (Saunders et al., 2019).

Interview Transcription

Based on previous experience of the very time consuming nature of personally transcribing interviews (Bell et al., 2019), it was decided to outsource interview transcription. Appendix 6   Interview Transcript Template shows the transcription template used to help with accuracy and analysis of data (Saunders et al., 2019). This incurred significant personal cost for the researcher but was deemed a benefit overall due to time saving and efficiency (Bell et al., 2019). Not transcribing personally can raise concerns that the researcher is not sufficiently close to the data (Suddaby, 2006). To minimise this risk, the interviews were listened to repeatedly (Saunders et al., 2019), prior to and after transcription, each more than five times.

Each completed transcript was very carefully checked for errors such as typos, accents, or unclear jargon (Saunders et al., 2019). When checking each transcript, the recording was listened to simultaneously in order that the researcher could correct any errors or oversights (Bell et al., 2019). The transcripts were then returned to each interviewee for participant checking (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Those versions included any final missing words or phrases shown as '[???]' in the transcript (Bell et al., 2019). The interviewee then returned the checked transcript, detailing any errors, or parts to be redacted. There were only two instances of participants requesting amends and they were both redactions to help protect their own anonymity and that of their club. On making the amends, the researcher returned the updated transcript for a second participant checking (Rowley, 2012; Saunders et al., 2019), together with the transcript approval form. The interviewee then returned their signed approval form for the updated transcript to be used for the purposes of this research (Rowley, 2012; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Bell et al., 2019). This process gave interviewees further confidence that their data was being managed ethically and with due care and attention (Creswell and Poth, 2018). It also facilitated ongoing contact with participants to maintain relationships for any follow up clarifications, further data requirements, and access to findings, thereby rewarding the participants for their part in the research (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.5.3 Data Analysis

There is no single correct approach to analysing qualitative data (Huberman and Miles, 1994) as there may not be one single truth to be discovered (Creswell and Poth, 2018). For this thesis, the aim is therefore to reflect on meanings and perceptions, generating insights from participant data (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003; Charmaz, 2010). Data analysis in qualitative research seeks to prepare and organise the data for analysis, use a process of coding to reduce the data to themes, and presents the data in any mix of discussion, tables and figures (Creswell and Poth, 2018). To achieve this, there tend to be three main approaches documented in the literature: content analysis; grounded analysis; and thematic analysis (Saunders et al., 2019). The latter two tend to be the more widely used in business research (Bell et al., 2019). Thematic analysis uses a coding system to identify themes or patterns, relevant to the research questions and focus (Bell et al., 2019). Such use of thematic analysis falls within the social constructionist position and was therefore considered most suitable for this study (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

By identifying social media marketing strategy themes within the data, this thesis focuses on developing a holistic conceptual analysis of empirical data from cumulative cases, rather than presenting individual participant stories. From an ethical perspective, great care was taken to quote directly from transcripts, rather than paraphrasing, in order to maintain richness of data and accuracy of meaning (Silverman, 2022). In such quotations used as evidence, only identifiable mentions of a club or player have been anonymised in order to avoid potential harm to participants (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Qualitative research is flexible by nature and may evolve throughout the study (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Two key factors used in this thesis were: (i) to make field notes immediately to summarise general impressions and main points from each interview (Riege, 2003); and (ii) to transcribe interviews on an ongoing basis as soon as possible after each case was completed (Gummesson, 2000; Bazeley, 2013). Such an approach allowed the researcher to reflect on each interview and evaluate whether or not any emergent phenomena needed to be probed in subsequent interviews (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). No changes to the interview protocol were required, beyond mention of the specific

club and advance preparation, such as an awareness of the role of the interviewee and existing social media platform presence of their club.

Analysis Framework

Thematic analysis provides a flexible and accessible approach to qualitative data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018), analysis involved an ongoing and iterative process of becoming immersed in the details, through repeated listening to interviews and reading and re-reading of transcripts. Thus, a deeper understanding of the data, the themes within each case, and the patterns across cases was gained (Huberman and Miles, 1994; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; Yin, 2018). The researcher became more practised in coding, reading, reflecting, linking and noting (Bazeley, 2013), evidence of the claim that qualitative researchers "learn by doing" (Dey, 1993: 6). In addition to the work of Huberman and Miles (1994), the process itself was informed by two frameworks which are shown in Table 3-4 and Table 3-5, in accordance with the inductive approach of this thesis.

Data was manually analysed because, while computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) can facilitate research, "interpretation cannot be taken over by computers" (Gummesson, 2003: 485) and "the real analytical work takes place in your head" (Patton, 2002: 530-531). Interpretation requires the ability to continuously fine-tune as the research iteratively progresses (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The hallmark of a good qualitative study is that it presents an in-depth understanding of the case and phenomena being researched (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The process involved listening to interview recordings multiple times, whilst analysing transcripts and while looking at the field notes taken during interview. This helped embed the data in the researcher's mind (Eisenhardt, 1991).

Table 3-4: A 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis

Process	No.	Criteria
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against tapes for 'accuracy'.
Coding	2	Each data item is given equal attention in the coding process.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach) but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive, and comprehensive.
	4	All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated.
	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
Analysis	7	Data have been analysed – interpreted, made sense of – rather than just paraphrased or described.
	8	Analysis and data match each other – the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organized story about the data and topic.
	10	A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
Overall	11	Enough time has been allocated to compete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it once-over-lightly.
Written Report	12	The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated.
	13	There is good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done – i.e., described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
	15	The researcher is positioned as *active* in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'.

Source: Braun and Clarke (2006: 96)

Table 3-5: Steps of Thematic Analysis

Stages of Thematic analysis	Inductive approach
1. Gather primary data	Organise around themes emerging
2. Code data	Code data to emergent themes
3. Identify initial themes	Identify possible themes from the coded extracts
4. Refine themes	Ascertain if themes work in conjunction to coded extracts
5. Justify final themes	Relate back to coded extracts in way that builds new theory

Source: Adapted from Bambrick and Hines (2011: 17)

Analysis Protocol

Data analysis followed the protocol shown in Table 3-6, adapted from the thematic analysis frameworks above. The 'Task' column described the process in relation to the protocol. The 'Additional Notes' column provides added detail where appropriate in order to offer transparency of qualitative data analysis (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This analysis was linked to the research objectives and informed the order of analysis and discussion presented in Chapters 4 and 5. To address the research aim and objective of evolving social media marketing strategy, Chapter 5 uses point mapping (Halinen, Medlin and Törnroos, 2012), to make comparisons back to the preliminary study where appropriate. That enables a temporal insight of how the social media marketing strategy of English football clubs, and how they operationalise it, has changed over time (Torregrosa et al., 2015; Drummond et al.,

2022). Chapter 6 then draws on those comparisons to visualise that evolution and the forces that influence it.

The main study sample of 18 interviewees from eight clubs, plus two expert practitioners, "offers ample opportunity to identify themes of the cases as well as conduct cross-theme analysis" (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 160). Within-case analysis preceded across-case analysis (Perry, 1998; Yin, 2018), in order to identify emergent themes related to the research aim (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Themes were later refined with cases as a whole in order to "allow commonalities to emerge" (Stavros and Westberg, 2009: 312). At each stage of the analytical process, themes and sub-themes were evaluated to identify those arising: from the data; from interviewee responses; and linked to existing literature (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). As the coding was being conducted, noteworthy quotes were highlighted and later assigned to one of the codebooks shown in Table 3-7 (note the literature in this table is not exhaustive). This was informed by a recommended strategy for exploring and developing themes that would then aide efficient retrieval for the Findings chapter (Bazeley, 2013). Throughout the thematic data analysis process, data was continually being explored for patterns or phenomena which may not have been considered by previous published work (Patton, 2015), meaning the researcher was constantly making judgements about what was meaningful in relation to the research aim and objectives (Patton, 2015). It was an iterative process of "moving in analytical circles" (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 185), revising and adapting codes whilst being informed by extant literature (Saunders et al., 2019). When data analysis offered no new themes, the researcher was confident of reaching theoretical saturation (Bell et al., 2019) and this was when the process of developing and writing the findings was shaped. For the post-it mapping see Appendix 7 Post-it Mapping Example SMMS Trust. For an example extract of noteworthy quotes for a codebook, see Appendix 8 Codebook Example SMMS T.

Table 3-6: Thematic Analysis Protocol

Action	No.	Task	Additional Notes
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against recordings for accuracy.	n/a
Coding	2	Annotate each transcript to clarify where data relates to interview protocol areas of: remit, context, operational, and strategy.	n/a
	3	Read transcript and highlight data and making notes of relevance to research objectives.	Initial highlighting and margin note-making done by hand on printed interview transcripts
	4	Initial codes	n/a
		* Steps 2, 3, 4 ALWAYS to be done in one sitting to maximise focus.	n/a
	5	Read back through highlights and initial codes.	n/a
Identify initial themes	6	Initial mapping of codes to develop provisional themes – making sense of very early coding and analysis.	Writing provisional codes on post-its. Initial mapping of codes, applying post-its on separate A3 flipchart paper, in accordance with interview protocol, to develop provisional themes.
		* This was done after the first 2 cases in order to check initial codes made sense and researcher was satisfied this systematic process could be applied to all other cases (Saunders et al., 2019)	n/a
	6a	* Return to Coding and work through No.2-4 for ALL transcripts	n/a
	7	Mapping of codes onto initial themes (No.6) – further sense making of early coding and analysis.	Ongoing mapping of codes using post-its to ensure each linked back to original data. Began identifying themes and codes relevant to each theme through this physical mapping. Iteratively refined mapping to make sense of each theme and code, evaluating if/how each theme may link to another – to help structure writing up of Findings. Verbally articulating this to peers and family to help clarify and identify any area in need of more work. Photographing each thematic A3 paper.
Refine themes	8	Ascertain if themes work in conjunction with coded extracts.	Refining of themes on A3 sheets, helping to visually map how findings may be structured. Digitally applying themes and codes to each transcript to create codebook to quickly extract quotations to use in findings. Discussion of both with supervisors.
Justify final themes	9	Relate back to coded extract, selecting themes in a way that builds new theory.	Creation of figures in Word to visualise themes and factors related to each one. Developed Findings chapter, structured using themes and related to research objectives and literature. Used codebook quotes to populate evidence in Findings chapter. Discussion of draft Findings with supervisors to discuss any final refinements Minor changes to codebook to reduce number of themes being presented: Result is themes related to SMMS, SMMO, SMMB.

Table 3-7: Codebook

Theme	Sub-theme	Code	Code Description	Literature/Emerged
Social Media Marketing Strategy (SMMS)	Trust	SMMS-T	Trust in social media marketing, from stakeholders and audience	Emerged inductively from data and linked to (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Dwivedi et al., 2020; Heinze et al., 2020)
	The Collective	SMMS-C	Collective community of passionate fans	Emerged inductively from data and linked to (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Vale and Fernandes, 2018; Baena, 2019b; Fenton et al., 2021b)
	Bandwagon	SMMS-B	Fast-moving social media landscape	Emerged inductively from data and linked to (Dwivedi et al., 2020; Fenton et al., 2021b)
	Content Marketing Strategy	SMMS-CM	Content marketing delivered via SMMS	(McCann and Barlow, 2015; Kharouf et al., 2020)
	Strategic Development	SMMS-SD	Planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of SMMS	(McCann and Barlow, 2015; Effing and Spil, 2016; Felix et al., 2017; Keegan and Rowley, 2017; Tafesse and Wien, 2017)
Social Media Marketing Operations (SMMO)	Communication	SMMO-C	The role of communication in effective SMMO	Emerged inductively from data and linked to (Filo et al., 2015; Kharouf et al., 2020)
	Power and Impact of Social Media Marketing	SMMO-P	The role of power in effective SMMO	Emerged inductively from data and linked to (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015; Dwivedi et al., 2020; Weimar et al., 2020)
The Role of the Brand (SMMB)	Values	SMMB-V	Club values	Emerged inductively from data and linked to (Bee and Kahle, 2006)
	Meaning	SMMB-M	Club meaning to fans	Emerged inductively from data and linked to (Filo et al., 2015; Florea et al., 2018)
	Community	SMMB-C	Club representing place and its people	Emerged inductively from data and linked to (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016; Fenton et al., 2021b)
	Identity	SMMB-I	How fans identify with each other and the club	Emerged inductively from data and linked to (Yoshida et al., 2014; Fenton et al., 2021a)
	Heritage	SMMB-H	History, traditions, background	Emerged inductively from data and linked to (Habibi et al., 2014; Meng et al., 2015; Vale and Fernandes, 2018; Velicia Martín et al., 2020)
	Emotion	SMMB-E	Emotional attachment to club	Emerged inductively from data and linked to (Vale and Fernandes, 2018; Machado et al., 2020; Weimar et al., 2020)
	Social Media Brand Communities	SMBC	Fan community being assembled and connected around shared interest	Emerged inductively from data and linked to (Fillis and Mackay, 2014; Florea et al., 2018; Salmi et al., 2019; Fenton et al., 2021b)

3.6 Writing and Presenting the Data

The penultimate task of the study was to report the findings of the research, prior to developing the discussion and conclusions. When articulating the themes of inductive qualitative research, the role is one of a story-teller (Huberman and Miles, 1994; Creswell and Poth, 2018). To offer a clear account of the most important concepts of this research, each theme is therefore reported in order of the research objective it relates to. For the preliminary study these are: (i) issues perceived for developing a social media marketing strategy; and (ii) perceptions of potential benefits of developing effective social media marketing strategies. For the main study they are: (i) social media marketing strategy; (ii) social media marketing operations; (iii) the role of the brand in social media marketing communications; and (iv) a proposed framework for social media marketing strategy in football clubs.

3.7 Ethics and Limitations

As illustrated in Figure 3-2, pp.117, ethical considerations were central to the research design (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Accordingly, ethical considerations have been discussed throughout previous sections in this chapter. Hence this section briefly focuses on the importance of ethics in access to each case being granted, a key barrier to research with football club practitioners (Filo et al., 2015). As well as engaging with the University ethical framework (Appendix 9 University Ethical Framework), the ethical principles were based on the following: (i) voluntary participation; (ii) no harm to the participants; (iii) informed consent; (iv) anonymity and confidentiality; (v) transparency; and (vi) not deceiving subjects (McGivern, 2013). With the expert opinions and lived experiences of social media marketing practitioners at football clubs being shared candidly, anonymity was the basis on which access was granted with all participants (Saunders et al., 2019). That assurance created a mutual trust whereby rich data was achieved through an open and honest interview process (Rowley, 2012; Creswell and Poth, 2018). The identity of interviewees and the clubs they represent were protected in order to reduce any potential harm to participants (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Opportunities for interviewees to speak off the record towards the end of interviews were facilitated when asked (Bell et al., 2019). A participant information sheet and interview consent form were given to each participant to review and sign, in

accordance with Manchester Metropolitan University regulations and ethical approvals processes.

3.7.1 Limitations

Qualitative research can be criticised for not producing generalisable findings (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Silverman, 2022). For example, this research sample is drawn from clubs in the main English leagues so does not cover Scotland or other major European Leagues such as La Liga, Serie A. As has been articulated in this chapter, the purpose is to explore for theoretical development, rather than generalise for the entire football club population (Bell et al., 2019). Although, the insights generated by this research are potentially of interest to other football clubs and other fan-based sports.

3.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter has discussed the ontological, epistemological, and axiological viewpoint of the researcher for this study. It is based in a social constructionist philosophical perspective to explore an under-researched aspect of social media marketing strategy. To complement this philosophy, a qualitative research approach using a case study strategy utilises purposive sampling to gain access to hard-to-reach practitioners at football clubs. In-depth semi-structured interviews were the data collection method deployed to gain rich insights from a native practitioner perspective. Face-to-face, telephone and skype interviews were used to gather that data. Thematic analysis was employed as the most effective technique for achieving the research aim. Throughout the entire process, ethical considerations have been paramount and demonstrated empathetic research that has helped build trust and rapport with respondents who have been open and honest as a result. The limitations of the study have also been stated.

In describing the methodology, this chapter has demonstrated how the research addresses key methodological gaps in the extant literature. For example: very limited body of work using empirical football club practitioner data, using qualitative interviews to collect rich data, more clubs in more leagues in a particular country, and case study research of more than one club. In the following chapter, the results

of the study are presented, having been generated from the thematic analysis protocol described.

4 Findings and Discussion: Preliminary Study

4.1 Introduction

This chapter reports the findings of the preliminary study, examining the issues faced in relation to social media marketing strategy development, in the context of English football clubs. That early research (McCarthy et al., 2014) was published in Internet Research and is shown in Appendix 10Internet   Research   Paper (Preliminary Study). The qualitative findings and discussion are integrated, to provide interpretation of the evidence without significant repetition or overlap when presenting qualitative data (Holliday, 2016). Discussion of the preliminary study findings cites literature published up to and including 2013 as analysis is relative to the extant literature at that point in time. The chapter after this cites literature from 2014 to 2022 due to the timing of the main study. This approach to presenting phased research enables a comparison of how approaches to managing a social media marketing strategy presence have evolved between 2014 and 2022. It also demonstrates how the body of knowledge evolved during the period of the phased study. For example, how companies organise and manage their social media marketing strategy has moved from being one of the most under-researched and understood areas (Aral et al., 2013), to a much larger corpus of understanding (Dwivedi et al., 2020) that still contains many knowledge gaps (Li et al., 2020).

Moreover, as the findings and discussion of chapters 4 and 5 will demonstrate, in the period up to 2014, football clubs were similar to many companies not ready for the challenges and opportunities posed by the rise of social media in football (McLean and Wainwright, 2009; Heidemann et al., 2012). By comparison, in the period 2014 to 2022, extant literature was demonstrating how football club management of their social media marketing presence was evolving. For example Fenton et al. (2021b) is one such study that responded to calls for a wider range of football clubs and leagues to be included in social media marketing strategy research (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015; De Beer and Stander, 2016)

This chapter is presented in order of the research objectives of the preliminary study:

RO1: To gather insights into the issues that football club management perceives in relation to developing a social media marketing strategy; and

RO2: To develop an understanding of football club management's perceptions of the potential benefits to be realised through developing effective social media marketing strategies.

As discussed in the Methodology chapter, thematic analysis was performed on interview transcripts, to identify emergent themes related to the cases (Stavros and Westberg, 2009). In relation to research objective one, themes revealed that, from the brand perspective, football clubs had three main issues with social media marketing strategy: control of conversation; fan engagement; and commercialisation. They are presented and discussed first. The chapter then switches attention to research objective two, for which emergent themes found that football clubs perceived the following benefits of social media marketing strategy to be: content; interaction; community; and revenue generation.

4.2 Social Media Marketing Strategy Issues (RO1)

From the brand management perspective of football clubs, issues the interviewees associated with social media marketing strategy were: control of conversation (related to the club brand); fan engagement (communicating and interacting with fans); and commercialisation (being too intent on using social media as a commercial space). These are now presented and discussed.

4.2.1 Control of Conversation

All four clubs had some concern as to the nature of the conversation around their club and brand, due to the democratisation of the conversation that was now publicly involving their fans and rival fans. All interviewees admitted that their clubs were wary of the impact of social media on their brand, in particular the reputation and brand equity. This stemmed from their historic aversion to fan involvement and their resultant fear of releasing control of brand-related discussion. Of genuine concern was the use of any offensive language and comments on social media. Interviewees were particularly concerned about critical or hostile comments regarding the club,

which often resulted from 'banter' between fans escalating and becoming confrontational. Interviewees were uncertain about how they might manage such brand-related conversations, if indeed they could.

> "Clubs have shied away from any level of interaction and engagement with our supporters, to the point that our website is a pretty sterile place." (Head of Customer Operation, Case A)

> "You don't want to see somebody saying that the Chairman and the Players are rubbish, but they're doing it anyway. A lot of it is not constructive. (Marketing Manager, Case B)

This reveals some concern regarding the lack of brand interaction from Case A, on its official Facebook and Twitter presence. The club was only duplicating the website content by posting the same headlines across its Facebook and Twitter pages with little thought as to how it could use social media marketing strategy for interacting with fans. Case B was highlighting reservations the club had used to date as justification for not establishing a social media marketing strategy presence, despite knowing fans had brand-related conversations online. Echoing this point, the responses below reveal a degree of frustration at the lack of any social media marketing strategy presence of Case C at that time.

> "Supporters are expressing their views in the pubs, or on the terraces, or in the shops, wherever they meet. Denying them space on the website doesn't mean those views will go away." (Marketing Manager, Case C)

Such a statement suggests an appreciation of the myth that companies can completely control their message (Hanna et al., 2011). As clubs with no existing branded social media marketing strategy presence, interviewees in Cases B and C were aware this had to change, yet they were mindful of the need to reassure other stakeholders that their concerns were being listened to.

All four clubs claimed that football clubs benefit from very high brand loyalty compared to other sectors. As with earlier research (Giulianotti, 2002; Tapp and Clowes, 2002; Theodorakis et al., 2012), this was linked to what the club brand

meant to fans, in addition to the history and heritage of the club and its associated values. In this context, clubs recognised that to begin to truly benefit from passionate fans, they needed to accept that they would have to live with fans expressing opinions the club may not always want to hear. Hence interviewees suggested clubs needed to release some control and to be active in facilitating fan debate and displays of support. This view is consistent with research stating that fans exhibit tribal behaviour through their link to the club (Moutinho et al., 2007; Dionísio et al., 2008). Also, that football clubs were slowly changing their culture and becoming a little more accepting of some reputational risk and loss of control (Christodoulides, 2009; Heidemann et al., 2012).

> "What you generally find is a supporter will support a certain team and not anybody else. They're a lifelong fan, borne through tradition, family, loyalty." (Marketing Manager, Case D)

> "One of the things about football that make it unique, that makes fans enjoy football and the occasion is the level of debate and discussion and banter that goes on after a game: 'What did you think about so-and-so's performance? I thought he was brilliant' or 'I thought he was rubbish'." (Head of Customer Operation, Case A)

Accepting this to be the case, interviewees gave examples of scenarios in which they may need to exercise a degree of control of the social media conversation. For example, during times of negativity (such as a poor run of results, or lack of transfer market activity), there were very likely to be disparaging comments regarding the first team manager, players, club chairman, or staff in general. Case B suggested this could deter potential sponsors who would not wish to be associated with such activity around the club brand, in turn affecting commercial opportunities for the club. Another example was that of rival fans hijacking social media conversation. Again, this links with tribal football support (Dionísio et al., 2008), especially that of more fanatical fans for whom the club is part of their self-identity (Tapp and Clowes, 2002).

> "It was all doom and gloom last season, getting relegated - this year it's the division below [the EPL], team's winning, fans are feeling good. Despite what

they think of the owners and the ground name fiasco and that sort of thing."
(Marketing Manager, Case D)

"Clubs sometimes have message boards but if there is any criticism of the
team or the manager it's 'No you can't say that!'." (Marketing Manager, Case
C)

"Potential sponsors and other businesses saying, 'Hang on a minute. Why
should I do business with you when your Facebook page is crap?' That's
probably the negative side of it. But I think it can be managed and that's
where you need to develop a bit of a strategy." (Marketing Manager, Case B)

Interviewees were articulating how they took a pragmatic view of the issues of their
club managing any social media marketing strategy presence. As the designated
employees responsible for social media marketing strategy, it was their job to
identify opportunities of social media marketing whilst minimising the risks of any
fan negativity towards the club. It is also further evidence of managers' awareness
of how football clubs need to be careful in how fans may view any perceived
unwelcome commercial interference in online fan discussion as to how a club is
being run its owners (McLean and Wainwright, 2009). Nevertheless, clubs held the
view there was a necessity to manage consistency of brand message, to help fan
engagement and shape the fan experience.

All four clubs also revealed concerns about practicalities of managing any brand-
related social media marketing strategy presence. At the time, any monitoring of
conversations connected to the club on social media platforms, in addition to any
fan engagement, was ad hoc. All clubs were aware of the potential costs associated
with resourcing labour-intensive activity, such as engaging fans on Facebook and
Twitter, through regular posting of content, plus the monitoring of fans responses.

"From a Facebook perspective, in reality we don't put enough resource on
managing it and we get left behind some of the other fan groups." (Head of
Customer Operation, Case A)

"[Social media] is done all the time and it's a constant thing. That's what

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scared a lot of football clubs initially. It's resources at the end of the day." (Marketing Manager, Case B)

"I don't know how you measure success on it [social media]. It's important that we use it because of the number of people that are going to use it. Facebook, Twitter, but – I don't know." (Marketing Manager, Case D)

For Case A, this was some explanation as to why the club was not yet using Facebook very effectively, resulting in fans continuing to migrate to unofficial Facebook groups and websites. Case B demonstrated how, as a club, they were similar to many others who had not yet established an official social media marketing strategy presence. Moreover, additional resources for social media marketing strategy were difficult to justify when clubs like Case D did not fully understand how they could measure success of their activity. These findings were consistent with literature evidencing the immersive nature of interaction and community involvement on leading platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Keenan and Shiri, 2009), in addition to that of fans having a strong sense of community (Underwood, et al., 2001) and very high product involvement (Mullin et al., 2007).

In accepting they had to move with the times, all four clubs were slowly opening up in their dealings with fans and becoming more transparent. Case A described this as moving away from the historic approach of "building gangways" to one of more collaboration and being more proactive in engaging fans in social media conversation. Their difficulty was clubs not knowing how much they could trust fans not to comment in an abusive or offensive manner towards the club or each other on the official social media marketing strategy presence of the club. This mindset appears to justify criticisms that clubs should have a greater appreciation of their impact on stakeholders and the communities from which they originated (Sir Norman Chester Centre for Football Research, 2002; Sweeney, 2010).

"It's about openness and consideration and what's best for the Football Club and definitely not closed for business. It really comes from the top in terms of cultural changes." (Head of Customer Operation, Case A)

In relation to RO1 and issues football club management perceived in relation to social media marketing strategy, it was evident that clubs were apprehensive about their increasing lack of control of brand-related conversations, and that they needed their social media marketing strategy to factor in how they may resolve such concerns. This demonstrates an awareness of the balance of power shifting from brand to consumer (Fisher and Smith, 2011), in addition to a lack of experience in managing an open brand structure (Li and Bernoff, 2008), possibly due to clubs still seeing themselves as owners or guardians of the brand. It was therefore argued that, at this point in time (up to 2014), clubs needed to embrace the concept of co-ownership of their brand, and the part fans could play in developing a strong brand presence, that would offer mutual benefits for club and the fan community.

4.2.2 Fan Engagement

Interviewees of each club repeatedly stated that a major concern to them was the lack of provision for engagement and interaction with fans, via their official club website. Furthermore, how the mindset behind this was reflected in club reticence to fully embrace social media at that time. They worried that fans were already migrating to unofficial sites (e.g. www.skysports.com or a fan site specific for their club) as a result, meaning clubs risked losing the 'next generation' of fans to other forms of entertainment.

> Our web presence is still basically back in the '90's, rather than in this decade. It's still very presentation led, in terms of presenting information, news stories etc. Very little engagement or interactivity." (Head of Customer Operation, Case A)

> "A lot of the unofficial ones [websites] have the option to chat and that kind of interaction which, I know club sites don't." (Marketing Manager, Case B)

Website data for Case D revealed that on leaving the official site, 11 per cent visited Facebook, 9 per cent visited the unofficial club forum, 2.3 per cent visit Twitter. Moreover, 6.4 per cent of official club site users had arrived via the unofficial club forum. This anxiety around football being a form of entertainment (Giulianotti, 2002),

competing with other sports links with the 'Carefree casuals' classification of football supporters, 88 per cent of whom view football as one of several entertainment options (Tapp and Clowes, 2002). This was further evidence of potentially disenfranchised fans migrating to other sites, in line with earlier research stating clubs needed to do more to engage their fans (Chadwick et al., 2008). Furthermore, it was potentially impacting on their relationship with the team or club (Bee and Kahle, 2006).

The evolving online behaviour of fans further limited the opportunities for clubs to effectively manage their online customer relationships. Clubs revealed they had limited success with understanding and engaging their fans, due to an inadequate perspective of customer behaviour. Such shortcomings were often due to complications around data warehousing and a lack of systems integration, causing a disjointed attempt at relationship marketing communications.

> "We have a single customer view of some sort which is still very much in its embryonic stage…our email providers aren't plugged into that yet. 'Did they click through on email? Did they shop off-site? Did they browse around the site? How much did they spend online?' We don't capture any of that information at the moment and that isn't plugged into that central database." (Head of Customer Operations, Case A).

> "It is difficult to measure click throughs and everything on Facebook. Google analytics would be one way. On the CRM side of things, it's in development and it is a little frustrating but that will enable us to look closely at campaigns and how well they worked. With Facebook and Twitter, I don't know if you can put a value on the success of a certain way of using it. I don't know if there is any way of doing that or any way that justifies it." (Marketing Manager, Case D)

The existing lack of a single customer view on already established digital and offline channels, was evidently being compounded by the addition of the relatively new channel of social media for Cases A and D. The consequences were a lack of meaningful insight into the digital behaviours of their fans. Clubs admitted they had not made sufficient effort in understanding their customer base (Beech et al., 2000b;

Stavros and Westberg, 2009). This concurs with research claiming that club websites and electronic communications were not meeting demands for more customised products and services (Kriemadis et al., 2010).

Case C used a surprising justification for their lack of success in responding to fans' social media behaviour, by using social media marketing strategy to tackle migration of traffic to other websites. Despite clubs admitting website traffic is money due to it being linked to levels of advertising revenue they can attract.

> "We've never been in a position to have that traffic. So I don't think you can miss what you've never had." (Marketing Manager, Case C)

This demonstrated a dismissive attitude towards the opportunities associated with global football (Madeiro, 2007), possibly stemming from a very reticent mindset on the part of football clubs. when it came to using social media marketing strategy to engage with their fans.

Those responsible for social media marketing strategy expressed some frustration with how their clubs had approached this to date. Respondents revealed that at a senior executive level in football, there was an historic and existing belief that social media was a 'fad' or 'bandwagon'. Notably there was scepticism as to the longevity of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Yet, as the quotes below demonstrate, interviewees were admitting their clubs were already missing out.

> "We're on Twitter and Facebook. But in reality it feels like we're playing at it.…in the rest of the football industry I'm not convinced anybody is doing it particularly well. When you look at other industries and other users of Twitter, we're miles behind." (Head of Customer Operations, Case A)

> "It's a bit of a 'fad' the whole social network thing. I think Twitter is - the figures don't quite stack up. Football clubs would see it as a fad. Football clubs work in fads though, don't they? If one team does anything, everyone else starts to do it." (Marketing Manager, Case B)

> "They're [fans] utilising a different [unofficial social media] platform when they

could just go to the official one and do the same thing there. And that's where I think football clubs are missing a trick." (Marketing Manager, Case C)

"We're a little bit tentative, not sceptical. We're appreciative of the way it [social media] works but I don't think there's necessarily anywhere for it to go next. We'll see, it could evolve into something completely different and we'll jump on that bandwagon." (Marketing Manager, Case D)

The lack of any official social media presence for Cases B and C confirmed they were indeed missing a trick. As did Cases A and D who did have an official presence but simply duplicated existing website news, rather than focusing on any fan engagement. However, on the part of those responsible for brand management and wider marketing of the football club, there was acceptance that to continue doing very little was no longer an option. In keeping with other research, clubs were aware that fans would continue to engage in more interactive communications such as social media or forums (Fisher and Smith, 2011; Romero and Huberman, 2011; Bury et al., 2013). In relation to RO1, interviewees acknowledged their lack of fan engagement was an issue their clubs needed to address through social media marketing strategy.

4.2.3 Commercialisation

All four clubs were monetising their official website, primarily through advertising revenue. This was due to the nature of the commercial deal with Football League interactive (FLi). That deal meant digital services such as websites, and premium audio and video content, were provided free to clubs and revenues distributed to them after central costs to partners had been paid. At the time of interviews, Cases A, C, D were still part of FLi, whilst Case B had opted out in 2002, but maintained the same revenue generation approach to its website.

Moreover, each club used its official site to sell products such as ticketing, merchandise, and subscription internet tv. Clubs were therefore motivated to direct more traffic to the official website and social media was seen as a key driver to achieving this on a global scale (Nash, 2000).

> "[Facebook and Twitter] enable us, cynically speaking, to drive traffic to our website. That's primarily what we use them for…People come onto the website, adverts here and there flashing away and the only bit people actually use is the top box with latest news." (Marketing Manager, Case D)

> "Essentially it [social media] is going to be to just drive additional traffic back to the website to make it as easy as possible for the user." (Marketing Manager, Case B)

Having accepted that they needed to catch up with using social media marketing strategy to engage fans, clubs now worried there would be pressure from senior executives to roll out the existing model of monetising their official website into their official social media presence. Interviewees were therefore concerned that their social media presence would be excessively commercialised, in the form of advertisements and product promotion.

> "... the danger is that you make it overtly commercial. That's the big, big issue." (Marketing Manager, Case C)

> "And that's probably the main difficulty - the corporatisation of these personal spaces." (Head of Customer Operations, Case A)

> "We have to be a little bit careful that we don't push them [fans] into finding information elsewhere." (Marketing Manager, Case D)

The FLi deal was in place until July 2016 and was renamed to EFL Digital when a new deal with new partners until 2022/23 was announced (EFL, 2016), based on the same commercial model of a free platform to clubs, in return for revenue generation being distributed after central costs (EFL, 2022). This explains the concern on the part of interviewees, that there would be pressure from others in their club to maximise advertising revenue on any branded social media marketing strategy presence. There is consensus in the extant literature that football has been heavily commercialised (Nash, 2000; Chadwick et al., 2008; Harris and Ogbonna, 2008; Gibbons and Dixon, 2010). The findings suggested clubs have an awareness that their customers or fans may see social media as their space (boyd and Ellison,

2008), yet this would need to be balanced with the commercial pressure (Beer, 2008; Mangold and Faulds, 2009) to justify dedicating resource to this activity. As organisations run on a commercial basis, clubs will focus on revenue generation. However, as they are increasingly global brands, the findings demonstrate that they need to shift their approach to become more open and engaging in order for their branded social media to help rather than harm their online presence (Christodoulides, 2009; Okazaki and Taylor, 2013). In summary, the final issue football club management perceived with social media marketing strategy, was that there would be pressure to commercialise their official branded social media presence which could result in fans continuing to migrate to unofficial sites.

4.3 Social Media Strategy Perceived Benefits (RO2)

The findings and discussion now turn to RO2. Those responsible for implementing and managing any social media marketing strategy on behalf of football clubs perceived the benefits to be: content (bespoke, using exclusive footage and imagery); interaction (opportunity to interact with fans and recognise their loyalty); community (having a ready-made community through mutual support of the club); and revenue generation (opportunities to directly or indirectly influence club revenues).

4.3.1 Content

Due to the commercial agreement at the time with Football League interactive (FLi), and its reliance on advertising revenue on club websites, driving traffic was the key goal for each club, such that the 'quality' of the content posted was important. More specifically, Twitter was already proving highly effective for companies (Kwak et al., 2010), hence Cases A and D had activated official Twitter and Facebook profiles. However, it was admitted this had been done more to secure the Twitter handle and establish a presence and, as highlighted in section 4.2.1, social media was not being sufficiently resourced. The result was that, rather than creating bespoke social media content, clubs were simply using it to direct traffic to their official website, by taking headline content from their website, duplicating it on Facebook and Twitter and linking back to the website news feeds. A brief check of the branded Twitter and Facebook pages for Cases A and D confirmed the lack of any unique content being

posted. Every club acknowledged that at best they were still exploring and playing with social media.

> "We've kind of played at it. We've got a Twitter page which is not much more than a theme of news which is on our website You can tick the boxes [of Facebook, Twitter] but we're not really doing anything with it." (Head of Customer Operations, Case A)

> "We just duplicate what's on the website, with a link." (Marketing Manager, Case D)

> "We've looked at the benefit to us as a business, to develop a relationship with your end users. Obviously, we've got content that they like. They want to read about their football team, giving regular updates from the training ground and things they can't find out anywhere else" (Marketing Manager, Case B)

All interviewees were aware their clubs were able to create bespoke content for branded social media. For example, behind the scenes footage, player interview highlights, encouraging fans to reply to away match content by sharing their own photographs of their away matchday experience. However, Cases A, C, D were restricted from releasing any matchday footage due to this being considered 'premium content' under the terms of the FLi agreement, and the agreement having no provision for social media. It was evident these restrictions were presenting difficulties for Case A and D to create the range of exclusive social media content they had the potential to. For Case B, who had the legacy of this agreement, and Case C who were still part of it, those constraints were further reason for them not launching and managing any branded social media presence at that time.

This resulted in clubs failing to utilise social media content opportunities, which meant they were not benefitting from, for example, extensive retweeting by their fans (Kwak et al., 2010). Lacking a proactive social media marketing strategy, clubs were also limiting their use of valuable content to achieve positive brand sentiment (Smith et al., 2012) and to build their brand (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013). Lastly, by not producing and posting original content on their branded social media, clubs were running the very real risk of further migration of official website traffic to unofficial

sites, impacting brand loyalty (Laroche et al., 2012) and resulting in more disconnect from their fan base (Adamson et al., 2006).

Case D offered an example of the tone of voice used for their social media content. The approach of using a social media marketing strategy presence as a person, rather than a club or corporation, had not been identified in literature at that point in time.

> "On Facebook we're a person, not a club. We wanted it as a bit of a bridge between official and unofficial. Fans will look at [unofficial] forums and go on there and call the club blind if they want. The [official] website, is the first place all fans go to and find the information. So Facebook and Twitter are a bit in between. It's not the club, or an official word from the club, although it is, but it's a half-way house for the fans to relate to. We're a person, we're not an application or website page." (Marketing Manager, Case D)

Interviewees admitted they would look at how other clubs, who were not part of the FLi agreement, used social media marketing strategy, to see what they could learn.

> "Liverpool are using it pretty good. Everton are reasonably good. I think Manchester City have spent an awful lot of money recently so they'll probably improve, They're pushing their Facebook and Twitter sites hard. The likes of Man United and Arsenal are doing almost nothing." (Head of Customer Operations, Case A)

> "Liverpool have got a great set up. They've got something like 280k friends on Facebook and apparently a Twitter page as well." (Marketing Manager, Case B)

It could be suggested that clubs considered to be leaders in their use of a branded social media presence, were outliers due to their management of social media marketing strategy not being typical of most clubs. Liverpool and Manchester City were in the top ten revenue earners in global football, whilst Everton were in the top thirty (Deloitte, 2013). They were also clubs with a global presence thanks to historical and/or current success and being in the EPL (Gibbons and Dixon, 2010).

The findings demonstrated how interviewees were looking at clubs who they regarded as being proactive with social media marketing strategy, and learning from the quality content they deemed those clubs to post on their branded social media presence (Fisher and Smith, 2011). Hence, they identified content as a perceived benefit of developing a social media marketing strategy and presence.

4.3.2 Interaction

Linking to tribal literature (Cova and Cova, 2002; Moutinho et al., 2007; Dionísio et al., 2008), all interviewees recognised that, although they were not currently interacting with fans, they had the opportunity to use social media marketing strategy to engage fans through their shared passion for their club. In doing so, they would expect to drive more traffic to their official website, whilst potentially boosting fan brand loyalty. All clubs claimed football to be unique in its ability to harness fan interest around the team brand, due to the tribal nature of football (Tapp and Clowes, 2002) and the degree of product involvement sports benefit from (Mullin et al., 2007; Raney, 2009; Wann, 2009), as evidenced in football and social media (McLean and Wainwright, 2009).

> "An officially run social media presence would aid engagement with supporters...Every fan thinks they're the best and most loyal supporter of their club. That's your badge of honour. And every supporter wants to be recognised by their club because of that." (Marketing Manager, Case C)

> The modern football fan is a very sophisticated consumer. And yes, their brand loyalty is almost certainly stronger than other relationships they've got with other providers [like retailers] but their level of expectation is also far higher than it ever has been." (Head of Customer Operations, Case A)

> "The idea of the social network site in the long run would be to provide a platform for interaction which we can monetise through advertising and other opportunities and conversions for ourselves but to let them [fans] speak to each other." (Marketing Manager, Case B)

In this instance, Case B is revealing that, despite being concerned about any official social media marketing strategy presence being too commercial (as discussed in section 4.2.3), they were still planning to continue to replicate the advertising revenue model on social media and use it as a space for fans to talk to each other rather than the club itself. Such an approach suggests Case B was a club that still needed to do more to engage their fans (Chadwick et al., 2008), or run the risk of adversely affecting relationships with their supporters (Bee and Kahle, 2006).

All four clubs claimed that the difference would be to enabling fan interaction and engagement in a proactive manner, rather than duplicating existing website content or responding to fan queries or debate. They hoped this would offset the limitations of their existing generic "push" (Case C) communications despite a lack of targeting (Beech et al., 2000b; Stavros and Westberg, 2009).

> "There isn't that interaction on the official website which there is on Facebook. And it does allow us to stick bits up there as well, like tickets. The other thing is it's so accessible on phones with Facebook and Twitter apps." (Marketing Manager, Case D)

Interviewees suggested they could benefit from real-time customer insights through social media marketing strategy (Lipsman et al., 2012) which, in turn, would help their relationship marketing activity (Adamson et al., 2006). This was in keeping with potential commercial impact of social media (Beer, 2008; Aral, et al., 2013).

> "We need to find a more sophisticated measure in terms of understanding what impact our activity is having on their brand loyalty." (Head of Customer Operations, Case A)

Moreover, respondents conveyed an appreciation of the benefits of engaging and interacting with unofficial social media brand communities associated with their club, through a more active social media strategy.

> "A lot of the unofficial ones [communities] have the option to chat and have that kind of interaction which club sites don't. A lot of it is content, a lot of

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history and stats. We're looking at coming up with some kind of affiliated scheme with the unofficial ones." (Marketing Manager, Case B)

"Some of the unofficial groups we've been in touch with and we're trying to provide them with, for example video players they can run on applications on their Facebook pages. So rather than trying to have a sort of policy where we get rid of all the unofficial groups and only have the official group, it's more a case of working with them." (Head of Customer Operations, Case A)

These findings concur with the notion of capturing and maintaining attention through interaction and engagement (Hanna et al., 2011) and the role this plays in creating value in brand communities (Schau et al., 2009). The finding adds to understanding of how clubs may manage their social media marketing strategy presence, in this case seeking to address any shortcomings by benefitting from working in partnership with unofficial groups or communities already established by fans. In respect of RO2, providing a space for fans to interact, either with each other or potentially with the club, was perceived as a benefit of social media marketing strategy for football clubs.

4.3.3 Community

Interviewees suggested their social media marketing strategy could be utilised to facilitate fans showing their "badge of honour" to demonstrate club support. It could be argued this is a football equivalent of "community engagement practices" categorised in brand communities research (Schau et al., 2009: 34). Similarly, clubs seemed to suggest 'impression management practices' (:34) in terms of using social media strategy to encourage fans to share product experiences and their credibility as supporters. Finally, by indicating that an official social media marketing presence could facilitate fans connecting with each other, clubs were echoing what Schau et al., (2009: 34) termed "social media practices". This demonstrates an understanding that, in allowing conversations to happen, they are more likely to benefit from the potential of social media marketing strategy (Smith, et al., 2012). Case B volunteered that the Chairperson of a local fan club branch could act as a facilitator / moderator of the fan community, its growth and fan sense of belonging.

"We've got fifty Members Club Branches. Why can't each Chairman representing the club, be responsible for what's being posted on certain pages? That's how it can be managed. It's resources and you want somebody to manage the social media without more resource. Fans can become moderators and people you trust, who you work with. They'll feel they're part of the club." (Marketing Manager, Case B)

That perspective demonstrates how clubs were considering the use of external resources to address the potential demands of managing their social media marketing strategy. This concurs with research claiming the possible demands of a large fan-base means Twitter requires a lot of human resources for social media marketing strategy to work effectively (Price et al., 2013). The approach being considered by Case B would embrace decentralized brand communications (Fisher and Smith, 2011) by tapping into the strong sense of community fans have with their club (Underwood et al., 2001). In doing so, they were actively seeking to avoid being seen as exerting excessive commercial pressure on their social media community of fans (McLean and Wainwright, 2009).

Interviewees gave examples of how they had listened to unofficial social media sites run by fans, to inform the match day experience product they deliver. Firstly, Case C had learned of some issues fans had with the match day experience and introduced new stadia initiatives to improve it. This was an instance of the club playing the role of passive reader of information (Romero and Huberman, 2011; Bury et al., 2013), in addition to using fans to help co-create the experience (Healy and McDonagh, 2012). By contrast, Case B used an unofficial fan community to ask for suggestions for how the club could use social media to improve the match day experience. They were promptly admonished by fans for being too commercial in how they interpreted the suggestions made by the community. This demonstrates the difficulties associated with reputational risk (Heidemann et al., 2012) and brands being seen to commercialise social media (Christodoulides, 2009). These findings underline club issues with social media brand-related conversation, fan engagement and interaction, and commercialisation.

Nevertheless, all four clubs perceived that generating a sense of community was a benefit of social media marketing strategy and one they could start to take advantage of, due to the natural link fans had with their club (Dionísio et al., 2008).

> "They [fans] share that common interest of supporting their team. That is the unique strength of football and the development of social media. That interest is already built in and I don't think many football clubs have actually tapped into that interest to its full potential. They're only scratching the surface at the moment." (Marketing Manager, Case C)

4.3.4   Revenue Generation

For clubs, the opportunity was in using social media marketing strategy to direct higher levels of website traffic, on a more frequent visitor basis.

> "As you get used to people's user habits and their profile, you can get even more sophisticated. That's how you commercialise the [social media marketing strategy] element. It's the club shop window and if people are only passing once a week, then you've got a 1 in 7 chance of making a sale. If they're coming on 5 of 6 times a week, that has surely got to uplift your opportunity." (Marketing Manager, Case C).

Such an approach is more evidence of commercial benefits of social media (Beer, 2008). Interviewees also divulged an expectation that the current FLi commercial deal structure could be updated to include social media advertising revenue. However, this indicates a contradiction with earlier findings which highlighted clubs being wary of over commercialising their social media presence and alienating their fan community.

Furthermore, due to the lack of a social media marketing presence being included in the existing FLi agreement, two clubs admitted to having to take matters into their own hands: Cases A and D had established their official social media presence despite their FLi agreement, in response to increasing demand of a more sophisticated fan base now actively seeking club information on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. This is consistent with research showing

the wider demographics of football fans (Sportswise, 2008; SportsWise, 2010) and an audience with rapidly evolving expectations of the online presence of brands (de Vries et al., 2012; Okazaki and Taylor, 2013). In total contrast, Case C cited lack of resources as the main barrier to establishing a Facebook or Twitter presence. Case B claimed Twitter was a "fad" to justify the lack of any official social media presence. Arguably this was evidence of a brand not yet fully ready to change mindset at that point in time (Quinton, 2013). In summary, interviewees felt revenue generation was a benefit that could be achieved through social media marketing strategy, but it was too early to know precisely how that would happen.

> "The likes of Chelsea and Everton have gone quite a way down the way to introduce social media marketing strategy. But I don't feel that they allocate enough resources to look at it - and I can understand why because it's very difficult to commercialise the activity." (Marketing Manager, Case C)

> "It's a long-term investment and in reality the money we would look to spend now on social media marketing strategy would be based on engagement and then creating clubs of fans and creating different communities that the club could benefit from in the future. But I don't think you could put too many assumptions or a business case as to how much value you're getting back off it because I think (a) our understanding is probably not good enough and (b) social media is still very broad and tricky to monetise it." (Head of Customer Operations, Case A)

4.4 Summary of Preliminary Study

The preliminary study highlighted the potential impact of social media marketing strategy on brand management. Whilst clubs had been slow to develop social media marketing strategies, there was a collective acceptance that "this 'mind cuckoo' approach to branding that regards customers as passive recipients to brand value has no place in Web 2.0." (Christodoulides, 2009: 142). Clubs were still clearly wrestling with issues related to risks around controlling the conversation and providing exclusive content that would stimulate fan interaction. Indeed, it was recommended brands needed to "let go" if they were to hold on to their customers (Fisher and Smith, 2011: 345) which demonstrates that football clubs had, at this

point in time, some way to go to begin fully realising the benefits of social media strategy.

4.4.1 Conceptualising Perceived Issues and Benefits of Social Media Marketing Strategy

The preliminary study research objectives led to findings that identified the issues football clubs perceived in relation to developing a social media marketing strategy, in addition to the potential benefits they anticipated. At the time of the study, all Cases were in the very early stages of understanding social media marketing strategy and the potential of having an official presence. Figure 4-1 provides a visual representation of the key emergent themes for social media marketing strategy in the football industry, from the brand management perspective. Three issues identified by football club management are shown on the left and the four benefits they perceived for social media marketing strategy are shown on the right. Whilst football clubs were wary of being able to control the conversation, they knew they could generate content that would be of real interest to their fans. In acknowledging an ingrained reluctance to engage with fans, interviewees were aware that if clubs were to take advantage of social media marketing strategy, they would need to be more open to facilitating interaction with or between fans, thereby further nurturing and recognising the sense of belonging in their ready-made community of fans. Finally, clubs were conscious that if they were to adopt the same advertising driven commercial approach to their social media marketing strategy, as they did on their official websites, this could result in fans continuing to migrate to unofficial sources. In turn, they were aware that social media marketing strategy could help them achieve further revenue generation directly or indirectly. They just did not fully understand, at that early point in time, how they may achieve it.

Figure 4-1: Key Emergent Themes: social media marketing strategy in the football industry - brand management perspective

Source: McCarthy et al. (2014) Figure 1: Key emergent themes: social media in the football industry – brand management perspective, pp.187

4.4.2   Impact of Preliminary Study

The preliminary study was some of the very earliest work in the field of social media in sport, exploring the phenomenon in the context of English Football Clubs, and from a brand perspective (McCarthy et al., 2011; 2014). The 2014 paper has been widely cited (n=185) in academic work in social media, social media marketing strategy, and both of those in relation to sport (e.g. Filo et al., 2015; Parganas et al., 2015; Cawsey and Rowley, 2016; Alalwan et al., 2017; Valos et al., 2017; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Vale and Fernandes, 2018; Fenton et al., 2021b).

Notably, the study was cited by two papers in the top one per cent of cited papers in the academic field of 'Social Sciences, general' (Filo et al., 2015; Alalwan et al., 2017). According to Web of Science, the Filo et al. paper has 228 citations, over 200 of which are articles (*Web of Science*, 2022). Filo et al. (2015) was a crucial literature review paper of 70 journal articles, which categorised the social media in sport research and was instrumental in setting the research agenda that followed. The preliminary study was classed as a social media strategy paper, thereby locating it in the dominant research category. They called for more social media in sport research to cover brands and more social media platforms. Furthermore, they

advocated using interviews in case based qualitative methods, and more longitudinal research. The Alalwan et al. (2017) study has 293 citations, 249 are which are articles (*Web of Science*, 2022). This paper was a literature review of the wider field of social media in marketing, consisting of 144 articles broken down into categories including social media and brand and social media and customer relationship management. Like Filo et al. (2015), the work of Alalwan et al. (2017) was critical in shaping the future research agenda. For example, they called for research involving more social media platforms, a wider variety of contexts (including sports) and countries, and case study methods. The impact of both papers is evident in the Chapter 2: Literature Review, main study of this thesis.

4.4.3 Shaping the Main Study

It should be noted there were two key limitations in the preliminary study presented above, which are addressed in the main study. Firstly, the preliminary study involved four English clubs as cases to represent diversity of scale and status across EPL and the EFL. It was established that further research incorporating more football clubs would enhance the social media marketing strategy insights gained. Secondly, being conducted in a specific sector at a specific point in time, the other limitation of this research was that the social media marketing strategy experience of the senior managers interviewed was in its infancy. The plan therefore involved phased research to explore how social media marketing strategy would evolve over the coming years. The findings and discussion for the main study are presented in the following chapter.

5 Findings and Discussion: Main Study

5.1 Introduction

The findings of the main study are reported in this chapter. They explore the use of social media marketing strategy and will demonstrate how the approaches of English football clubs have evolved since 2014. As the Methodology chapter discussed, this main study used a sample of eighteen interviewees from eight football clubs across three tiers of English football, and two independent expert practitioners. Moreover, the football club practitioners had significantly more social media marketing strategy experience than at the time of the preliminary study, primarily due to operating in an increasingly mature social media marketing strategy landscape (Dwivedi et al., 2020). This main study formed the basis of the Soccer & Society (McCarthy et al., 2022) and is shown in Appendix 11 Soccer & Society Paper (Main Study). This chapter offers a wider scope and more depth than the article for the following reasons: (i) the article featured fifteen representatives from six clubs who were or had been in the EPL, whereas this chapter is based on evidence of a wider sample that includes two clubs who had never been in the EPL; (ii) the article focused on social media marketing strategy, whereas this chapter also focuses on the operationalisation of that strategy (RO2), and the role of the brand in social media marketing communications (RO3); (iii) there were very few comparisons between the preliminary study and this main study in the article, whereas in this chapter there are many to help demonstrate how social media marketing strategy has evolved (RO1); and (iv) there is more depth of discussion, evidence and conceptual frameworks presented in this chapter.

The findings and discussion are again integrated as this approach can help contextualise the claims and evidence in comparison to the extant literature (Holliday, 2016). Discussion of the main study's findings primarily cites literature from 2014 to 2022, reflecting the evolving body of knowledge during the period between the preliminary and main studies.

Since the preliminary study and the highly influential Filo et al. (2015) paper, social media marketing strategy research developed significantly. Yet there are many knowledge gaps related to how companies organise and manage their social media

marketing strategy (Li et al., 2020). Indeed, despite the increase in the amount of research on football clubs, and increasing research into social media marketing strategy (e.g. Baena, 2019b; Fenton et al., 2021b), it remains the case that research based on a larger and more diverse collection of clubs and leagues has the potential to offer more in-depth insights into the social media marketing strategies adopted by football clubs.

This chapter is reported in the order of the research objectives of the main study:

- RO1: To explore the evolving organisational approaches of football clubs to **social media marketing strategy**.
- RO2: To examine the **operationalisation of** social media marketing strategy by football clubs.
- RO3: To explore the role of the **brand** in social media marketing communications of football clubs.
- RO4: To propose a framework for **social media marketing strategy** in football clubs.

Thematic analysis led to the emergence of themes with commonality across cases (Stavros and Westberg, 2009; Creswell and Poth, 2018). Table 5-1 provides a summary of the themes related to each research objective of the main study, which shape the structure of this chapter. The descriptors of these themes are presented in more detail in the respective sections of this chapter. The chapter concludes with a presentation of the proposed conceptual framework of social media marketing strategy, as informed by the findings and discussion.

Table 5-1: Emergent Themes of Social Media Marketing Strategy of English Football Clubs

RO1	Social Media Marketing Strategy (the What)
Themes	(i) Trust (ii) The Collective (iii) Bandwagon (iv) Content Marketing Strategy (v) Strategic Development
RO2	Operationalisation of Social Media Marketing Strategy (the How)
Themes	(i) Communication (ii) Power and Impact of Social Media
RO3	The Role of the Brand in Social Media Communications
Theme	(i) Badge of Honour

5.2 Social Media Marketing Strategy (RO1)

From the brand management perspective of English football clubs, the evolving organisational approaches to social media marketing strategy revealed the following five themes, summarised in Figure 5-1: (i)Trust; (ii) The Collective; (iii) Bandwagon; (iv) Content Marketing Strategy; and (v) Strategic Development.

The circles showing the left-sided themes relate to the factors influencing the evolving approaches of clubs to social media marketing strategy. For example, the importance of trust in a more open, fan-centric social media marketing strategy. 'Trust' and 'The Collective' are linked because, as the findings will demonstrate, there is a very close connection between clubs appreciating the importance of a trust-based approach and the nature of 'the collective' of parties with mutual interest in the success of the club. 'Bandwagon' relates to emergent trends, such as new social media platforms being launched, which findings identified as a major influence on the social media marketing strategy of clubs.

The circles showing the right-sided themes relate to strategy and planning factors for the club social media marketing strategy. 'Content Marketing Strategy' is informed by Trust and the nature of The Collective, especially fan community. 'Strategic Development' (capabilities and execution) is informed by The Collective and Bandwagon.

Figure 5-1: Social Media Marketing Strategy Themes
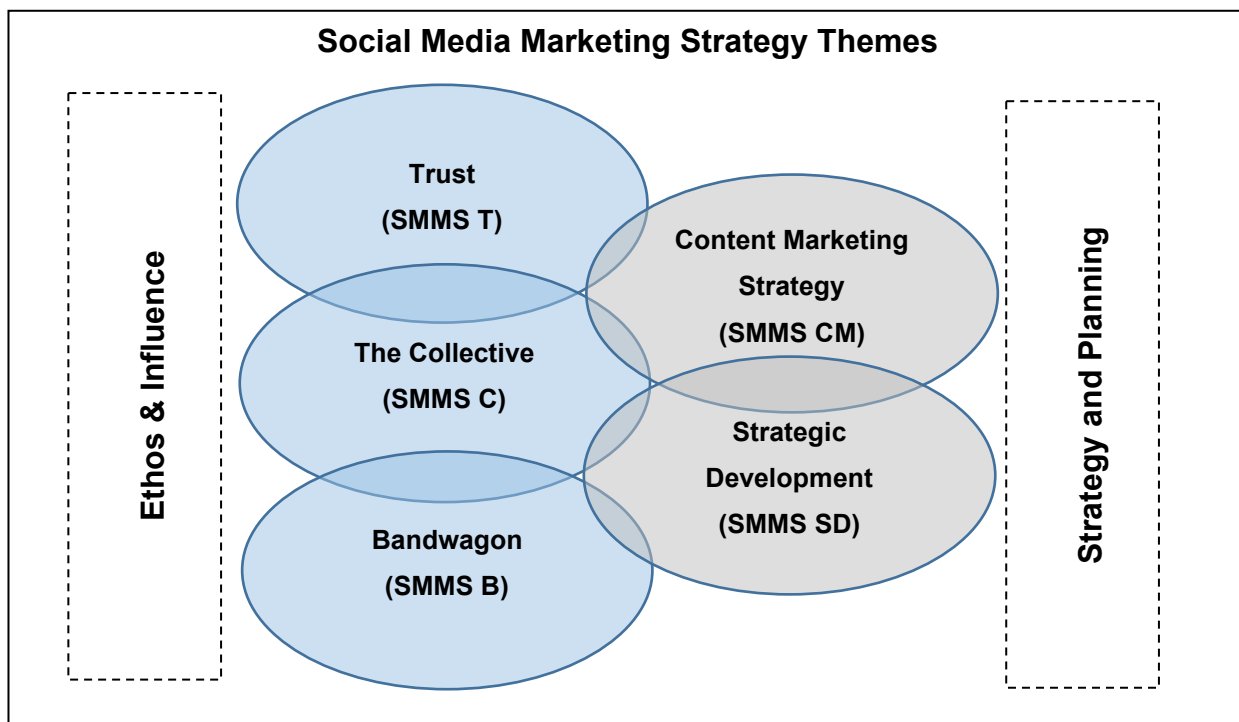
This chapter now presents the findings for the left-sided three themes of social media marketing strategy. The themes of Trust, The Collective, and Bandwagon and their respective sub-themes are summarised in Figure 5-2.

Figure 5-2: Ethos and Influence of Social Media Marketing Strategy
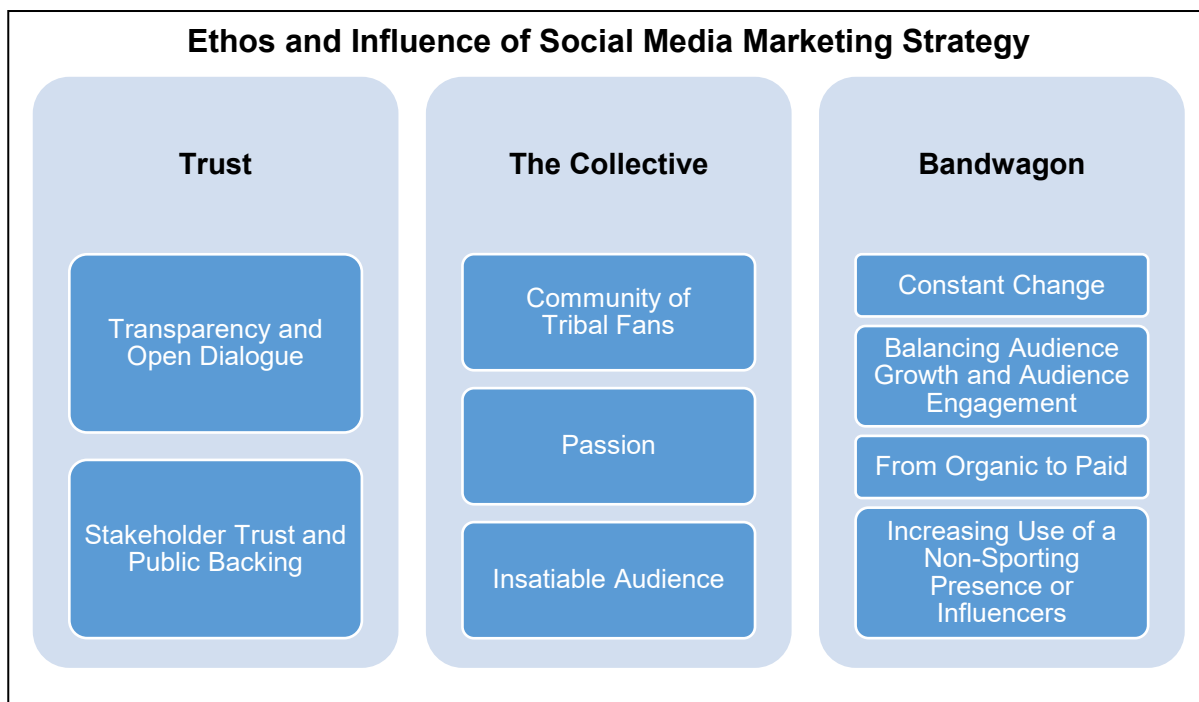
5.2.1 Theme 1: Trust

Academic literature has rarely shed light on trust in relation to social media marketing strategy in sport (Faria et al., 2022). There is very brief mention of it linked to American sports (Stavros et al., 2014; Meng et al., 2015). In wider social media marketing strategy literature, trust has been shown to be an important element in brand connections and mutual benefit (Abeza et al., 2013; Christou, 2015; Alalwan et al., 2017; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a). Trust is a complex, multidimensional concept that develops under certain conditions and consists of cognitive and affective elements (Rompf, 2015; Mingo and Faggiano, 2020). Putting trust in another party requires an element of risk because it exposes the trusting party to vulnerability, through them transferring some control to, for example the organisation they trust (Rompf, 2015). That vulnerability in the relationship demonstrates the structure of trust and is based on a more rational, cognitive-based judgement of reasons to trust another party (Wang et al., 2016). By contrast, affective trust is more explicitly linked to an emotional bond between the trusting party and the trustee, based on feeling and a sense of confidence in the trustee (Wang et al., 2016). Sekhon et al. (2014) suggest that trust consists of five dimensions: (i) expertise and competence (the necessary information, capability and skills to fulfil certain tasks); (ii) integrity and consistency (keeping the promises made on a sustainable basis); (iii) communication (healthy and open communication); (iv) shared values (the same values and concerns of customers and company behaviours); and (v) concern and benevolence (providing customer satisfaction, and the protection of mutual interests based on care, sensitivity and a willingness to solve problems). By failing to ensure all of these dimensions are delivered, a company risks undermining the level of trust being placed in it by its customers (Sekhon et al., 2014). In the context of social media platforms, trust is crucial for successful consumer-brand interactions and relationships (Gretry et al., 2017). Brand trust is a reflection of the customer's confidence in the brand acting as expected (Gretry et al., 2017), and performing as expected (Ebrahim, 2020), hence the importance of consistency.

This section begins by presenting the findings related to club transparency and open dialogue and how these have evolved since the preliminary study. Then follow findings related to how clubs work with stakeholders to nurture trust and get them on board with the social media marketing strategy. Clubs are therefore able to gain

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internal and external stakeholder support which they can use to benefit from public backing, via social media, of what the club is trying to achieve.

Trust sub-theme: *Club Transparency and Open Dialogue*

Evidence suggests that clubs have developed social media marketing strategies to be more transparent in their communications, to build trust in their relationships with fans, and to represent fans and club values appropriately. From the club perspective, the notion of trust includes internal and external stakeholders such as senior management, Directors, club owners, or partners such as sponsors. The evidence suggests open dialogue and transparency was an outcome of clubs ultimately embracing the phenomena of social media, rather than clubs deciding to be more open and using a social media marketing strategy to achieve greater openness and inclusion.

> "As a club we've got a good relationship digitally. Our MD is quite good at being open to the supporters and their demands. Trust is probably the biggest aspect. Over the years I think it's [social media] done a lot of good. We've got a lot of trust. They can: a) trust our account to deliver information they want; and b) trust we'll do it the right way so they don't feel embarrassed or let down by it." (Case H1)

> "The club are being very open. Social does enable the club to communicate regularly. That's certainly helped us." (Case H3)

> "It's [social media] a centrepiece for the club so the club can give and receive information. It's improved relationships a hell of a lot. We're a lot more open and honest in our comms with the fans. Perhaps in the past people would think it's just a big brick wall." (Case A1)

> "You've not only got the passion of your own supporters, you've got the passion of your biggest opposition. Social is not a diamond bullet. You've got to build up trust, build up a personality of what you're doing on each account. The trust element is huge." (Case E1)

"We don't always achieve it, but we set out to have an open and clear dialogue with fans on social media with the intention of trying to make fans feel very much a part of the club and what we're trying to achieve. It is all about trying to build up a relationship between the club and fans." (Case G2)

"We are all really conscious of the fact that our social media is like a window into the football club so we make sure that the posts we put out uphold our values. For example, some clubs choose to take the mickey out of other clubs and that's just not the way we would operate. We operate in a way that is respectful to the rest of the football industry." (Case B1)

Findings suggest Cases H, A, E, G, B have gained the trust of fans through being more open and honest with fans about what is happening at the club, via their social media marketing communications (Heinze et al., 2020). There is a clear indication that clubs seek to use social media marketing strategy to demonstrate to fans that they listen to what their fans say and represent fans and the club in a manner that does not embarrass or antagonise them. In being a key window to what happens at football clubs, interviewees articulated how social media marketing strategy has helped them improve relationships with their fan base, thus agreeing with extant research (De Beer and Stander, 2016). Compared to the findings of the preliminary study, it shows how clubs have become more open to dialogue with their fans and are engaged in more transparent discussion. It is proof they have become more outward-looking in their social media marketing strategy (Felix et al., 2017). The main study provides evidence to support the claim that the role of trust, credibility and reliability all play an important part in successful social media marketing strategies of brands (Alalwan et al., 2017).

As the preliminary study showed, when football clubs first began to use social media marketing strategy, their communications were predominantly one-way 'broadcast' type notifications with little regard or time for any responses or interaction from fans. As their approaches to social media marketing strategy have evolved, there is more appreciation of the value of dialogue, by multiple levels of seniority within clubs. This builds on research claiming social media engagement can facilitate higher brand trust (Dessart, 2017) and, in turn, that trust can positively impact on customer social media engagement (Liu et al., 2018). The findings also build on research that trust

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is important in shaping customer behaviours, such as continued use of a brand's social media presence and recommendation of it to others (Ebrahim, 2020). Moreover, it builds on literature highlighting the role of senior stakeholders in a successful social media marketing strategy and in decision-making (Felix et al., 2017).

> "Staff are engaged and involved and that stretches all the way up to the MD who is actively on Twitter. He'll be talking and engaging with fans, sharing messages. That's how social media is used here. Very openly to share ideas. To communicate and take feedback." (Case H3)

> "The Chairman helps with putting the Chairman's notes out. Frequency probably lessens the impact but the fact that he will communicate with fans is appreciated because the previous regime didn't." (Case A2)

It is important to remember that commercial outcomes are an important factor in justifying the decisions for any club to invest in social media marketing strategy. If supporters trust social media communications from the club, there are clear commercial benefits than can be realised.

> "If supporters trust you...it's a great commercial revenue ability because you sponsor certain posts or features. You can take that to your commercial partners '10,000 people see this every week and see your logo'. It's almost more relevant than stadium signage and advertisements. It's in people's hands on their phones. It's brand recognition. And as we go up the league even more people are looking at it." (Case H1)

This is evidence of clubs learning to identify the commercial benefits of social media marketing strategy and how good league performance helps. During the preliminary study, clubs were aware that this may happen in the future but were unsure how it could be achieved. More football club brand exposure and a trusting fan audience is attractive to potential sponsors in the social media era.

Findings suggest clubs attempt to control of the level of transparency and open dialogue they choose to pursue in building trust. In addition to openness levels varying club-to-club, clubs may iteratively vary how open they are.

> "The club controls what information goes out and comes in. Social media is like a portcullis - let it down and people can come in and we can close it back up if needs be. It's still important to maintain that element of control. Whether it's good for democracy is open to debate. In 20 years' time, apart from Sky Sports who pump a lot of money into the club, the media will almost be insignificant. It's the way football and sport are evolving. Football clubs want to control their own messaging. They wouldn't want to be questioned - which is what journalists do - but it is moving in that direction which is sad. Certain messages you might not want to get out. If we were giving people free reign, it could jeopardise our plans." (Case A1)

> "[Social media marketing strategy] bypasses traditional media and that's the appeal of it. The strategy is to speak to the fans over the heads of traditional media and being in control of your own messages." (Case F1)

The preliminary study identified control of the conversation as a concern to clubs. This main study shows that clubs still wish to exert some control over brand related conversation, despite now being more open. This suggests clubs move in either direction of the continuums of 'explorer-defender' and 'anarchy-autocratic' (Felix et al., 2017). Despite very recent research concluding that Facebook is a complementary way to promote trust with football fans (Faria et al., 2022), this main study shows trust is not given unconditionally from clubs. They appear to still be influenced by the belief that companies use marketing communications to control their message (Hanna et al., 2011). Clubs are increasingly able to stifle potentially difficult debate if they wish, by becoming more powerful and confident media outlets in their own right. Such concerns feed into issues of trust between stakeholders and public backing of the club.

Trust sub-theme: Stakeholder Trust and Public Backing

Successful onboarding of **influential fan groups** can facilitate less negative feedback from fans. Clubs highlighted how this can even lead to fans using social

media to publicly back what the club is trying to achieve. It is therefore important to actively engage with fans via social media marketing strategy and in face-to-face situations, to nurture the club-fan relationship.

> "Relationship with influencers within the fan group is incredibly important. It's even more important when things are not good. When you can pull people in and say 'Look, this is what's going on. This is what we're trying to do.'. And those people will back you. They will be ambassadorial and supportive of the club. As a club, you're the central point. You can bring all those people in and get them to work together and build relationships and that's powerful." (Case H3)

> "We have a supporters' council regarded as best in class. They set the agenda and invite the club to come along and answer the questions. We meet five times a year on a matchday. The Chief Executive attends. The minutes are very quickly put online and shared [via club social marketing accounts]. I used to work at [club] and when they fell out the Premier League there was a period of supporters saying there was a lack of engagement. No transparency or communication. Here it's fan led." (Case G1)

These findings show clubs are actively involving fans by working with them, to shape their fan experience, building trust in the process. Case H also stated social media marketing strategy is 'the best' way to build trust with external media, be it individual journalists or news outlets. This main study builds on research showing how NBA teams have used two-way communication with fans to increase engagement, generate ideas, and enhance team identification (Meng et al., 2015).

Findings suggest that the trust of **internal stakeholders** is key to senior executives appreciating the importance of social media in building relationships with fans and to understanding fan mood towards the club. For team buy-in to be achieved, and for social media marketing strategy to be successful, it is important the club management team understand how it can be used to communicate the vision of the club. For Case E this shift in mindset had happened over the previous three years, once the club hierarchy started to appreciate how social media could contribute. It

was evident how that buy-in is an enabler to collaboration between different managerial teams within a football club.

> "Our COO is very good at responding to fans which gives us confidence. It's no good if we try and do something and we're heavily criticised for it and then we don't get the back up from the gaffer." (Case E3)

> "We have a really close management team throughout the club so we make sure everybody is aligned to the vision and the strategy." (Case B1)

> "Clubs have got a lot better at having buy-in. You want everyone on the same page otherwise you try and do something on social and the PR team don't know why you're trying to do something, you're going to get shut down pretty quickly." (Case EXP1)

Conversely, it was evident that those responsible for social media marketing strategy do still face some resistance from colleagues who are primarily focused on disseminating content on the main social media accounts of the club. Such opposition tended to arise through competing views of whether the club social media marketing platforms be used for more than purely football related content. For example, if hospitality and events wish to use the club's social media marketing presence to promote their offering to fans or the wider community.

> "We're trying to get more adoption. There's education pieces and bits of internal politics. It's part of my social media marketing strategy. [Posting venue content] is a bit of a conflict. Sometimes there is resistance because the Content team see it very much as a football only channel." (Case E1)

> "There's been a natural push from other club areas for our media team to produce more rounded and holistic reporting on what their matchday looks like or what happens at the stadium." (Case G1)

Such internal stakeholder resistance to a wider range of social media marketing content is an example of the work those responsible for social media marketing strategy continue to do, in educating colleagues on the value of information that

does not just feature football news. Clubs are constantly learning from their social media marketing strategy and evolving their approach as a result, be it setting up a separate profile for their venue, or persuading colleagues that they need to talk about more than just football. This is further evidence of the importance of internal and external stakeholders to social media marketing strategy (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2016; Chung et al., 2017).

Social media companies are important stakeholders who can and do help football clubs improve their use of social media marketing strategy. This may be through partnering with clubs to trial new products and platform iterations, occasionally on an exclusive basis or a specific timeframe. Facebook and Twitter also host their own sport-themed conferences and events, imparting knowledge and enabling sports organisations to share best practice.

> "Try new products out. They [social media companies] often come to the people that have had the most engagement with their brands and have the most following because they want the people with the most following to test it. They hold conferences all the time and invite all the other football clubs. All the European leagues network and swap ideas. Facebook are definitely best. At the Facebook Football Conference they give us ideas to help us to be more engaging with their platform because they will give us six months [exclusive testing] if we give them content that's more engaging. They make more money through their own sponsorship deals and stuff. They want to help us be brilliant because it's benefitting them in the long term." (Case D2)

> "We're very lucky that the Head of Sport in Europe for Facebook is a fan. So has always been really proactive with helping us." (Case B1)

The finding that Facebook will give a club exclusive testing of a new feature is a new empirical insight not yet seen in published work. It demonstrates the importance of professional relationships with employees of social media companies to football club social media marketing strategy success. Arguably, in testing innovations exclusively with clubs that have the largest following, Facebook are enabling those clubs to cement their position as leaders in this area. Both parties benefit commercially from such arrangements. Compared to the preliminary study, when

clubs were acting alone, collaboration is encouraged between clubs, in addition to clubs viewing Facebook and Twitter as value added partners. Industry practitioners are therefore helping each other improve and evolve their approaches to social media marketing strategy. Clubs generally view their fans as loyal supporters who will not switch allegiance because of social media, as highlighted in section 5.2.2. It would seem clubs are happy to exchange ideas, even though they may be competing for an audience when using social media marketing strategy to reach and acquire new fans in global markets.

Broadcasters and commercial partners are also important to clubs wanting to grow their global audience and seek content they can share via their own broadcasting platforms, including social media. In doing so, they are helping each club to raise its social media profile.

> "You've got to have relationships with broadcasters. If you can identify what you consider to be a prime market and broadcasters, you drop them a note every so often - send them a shirt with their name on. When they're thinking about activating where their broadcast rights are and getting exclusive content, the first club they call on is us." (Case H3)

Trust and effective collaboration between the club and key commercial partners and stakeholders is key to successfully applying a social media marketing strategy that delivers mutual benefit, through content appropriate for the audience. The key concern being that the branded social media presence does not become too heavily populated by advertising messages. Interviewees spoke of how they need to educate partners due to occasionally conflicting ideas and tensions between commercial and marketing teams. It also emerged that sometimes, to get a sponsorship deal, the commercial team may over promise.

> "Only our very top tier sponsors have access to our social media because we don't want it to be an advertising stream. I work very hard with our Head of Partnerships to ensure only the right content is contracted. We've seen triple the amount of engagement and they're [sponsor] thrilled with how we approached that with them." (Case B1)

"I wouldn't say there's a particular close relationship between Commercial and Content. When you're trying to get a deal you'll almost promise anything. And that will happen and then suddenly when it all gets shoved over to Content [team] there's 15 tweets and 45 emails. How does that offer a good proposition with the partner because if you're really trying to engage fans and think strategically, what is the message going to say? If it's not relevant, doesn't add value and doesn't feel [club] branded, it will hurt us not the partner. There's a way to work with the partner but there's also a really bad way not to and unfortunately, I've been there." (Case H3)

These findings demonstrate how, during the preliminary study, clubs were right to voice concern regarding the issue of social media marketing strategy being over commercialised. This main study demonstrates that clubs have taken an approach of educating stakeholders such as sponsors and internal colleagues as to the benefits of ensuring any partner association with the club is aligned to the social media marketing strategy of the club (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2018). In doing so, they are looking after the interests of the club and their commercial partners.

"If they want their shoes shining, we've got to shine them. But you've got to do it in a certain way. People want long term relationships. Provided you've got good dialogue with your partners and they understand and respect what you're doing, you can work together." (Case E2)

For smaller clubs the reality is that revenues from commercial partners will sometimes override the 'less commercial content' ideal of the social media marketing strategy.

"A commercial reason tends to outweigh our [social media marketing strategy] approach. We are not in a position to turn that down. Unless it be ethically or morally wrong. We set a limit at 80 club partners. That helps us focus on what we need to deliver and focus on the customer as well. We use social media marketing strategy as part of how we engage with our partners and engage with our followers." (Case C2)

The findings highlight how clubs balance their need to attract revenue from commercial partners wanting to reach their fans on social media, with delivering their social media marketing strategy in a manner their fans see as relevant. The evolving collaborative process requires sufficient confidence and mutual respect to educate partners. This study therefore demonstrates ways in which clubs achieve congruence with their sponsor partners so that the audience is more receptive to the message and sponsoring brand (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2018; Weimar et al., 2020). Failure to achieve fit or congruence is likely to lead to negative sponsorship-related interaction from the football fan community (Popp et al., 2018).

In summary, this theme has addressed the knowledge gap that the role of trust in social media marketing strategy of brands is limited (Alalwan et al., 2017)**.** The role of club transparency and more open dialogue with fans, plus the buy-in of internal and external stakeholders are key to nurturing trust.

5.2.2 Theme 2: The Collective

This section theme starts by presenting findings related to the community of tribal, passionate fans and how clubs therefore see sport as a unique environment. The preliminary study identified that clubs perceived their ready-made fan community to be a benefit of social media marketing strategy. Findings in this main study demonstrate how the collective football fan community shares a mutual passion for their club that it is often based on emotion. That mutual passion manifests itself in an insatiable appetite for club information and news. Through this section, evidence demonstrates how social media marketing strategy is influenced by those factors.

The Collective sub-theme: Community of Tribal Fans

Main study findings are that football, and sport more generally are considered by respondents to be a unique environment. This was evident when articulating the nature of the tribal fan communities who form the primary audience for football club social media marketing strategy. It is important there is an authenticity to the club-fan relationship. Football clubs are then better placed to stimulate the collective by involving fans, resulting in social media discussion that is more favourable towards the club. This research also identified that clubs wrestle with their social media marketing strategy balancing the needs of a local and a global audience.

"Sport is very unique. If you like Vauxhall cars you're not going to be checking the Vauxhall website or Twitter feed every day to see what's happening are you, whereas with a football club, or sports club in general, you've got that excitement. So sport is extremely unique." (Case A1)

"You're not a soap brand where you go out and try and woo somebody from somebody else. That's not what football clubs are about. It's reinforcing what you want them to think of you and what they think of you already. It's all about symbiosis." (Case F1)

Such evidence supports academic arguments that sport is unique (Vale and Fernandes, 2018; Andrew et al., 2021). Being more specific about why football is unique, interviewees indicated strongly that understanding the **tribal** nature of football is key to their relationship with fans. Tribalism forms the basis of that collective community of passionate fans and therefore influences the social media marketing strategy of all eight clubs. Football tribalism helps clubs achieve one of their aims of social media marketing strategy: to build relationships with their fans.

"Football's built on tribal lines where everybody's got a rival. It doesn't matter whether it's Sheffield United and Sheffield Wednesday, [Nottingham] Forest and [Derby] County, Doncaster and Rotherham, they've always got rivals." (Case D1)

"It's being part of the same tribe. They call themselves the [redacted] so they have their own identity as well." (Case F1)

"Social media has grown so much because supporters see that ability to connect to the club in a new way. Feel closer. Our main drive is to maintain that relationship with our supporters." (Case H1)

Compared to the preliminary study, clubs are being more explicit in stating how the uniqueness of sport relates to existing tribal fans. The main study findings add to research showing that using social media marketing strategy to build relationships with a tribal fan community is a key aim of clubs (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos,

2015). The thematic findings revealed clubs have identified ways of stimulating the collective to engage with their tribal fan community on social media.

The tribal fan base with a shared passion can be a powerful force and has allowed the clubs to feel a little more confident about releasing control of the conversation, as they feared at the time of the preliminary study. For example, clubs have learned how they can take a lower profile role, due to the fan collective self-regulating social media conversations related to the club. They have also learned more about their fans through their social media behaviour, for example different social media marketing personas.

> "There's a lot of keyboard warriors venting their spleen. It's quite good though because they become self-regulating where people defend the club. There's three distinct personas: (i) we just want to absorb stuff and not comment but have taken it in – that's great but it's really hard to quantify what you are getting from those people; (ii) the ones who feel they're special because they've shared it – bragging rights; (iii) the ones who want to have an argument with someone." (Case E1)

> "You've got to work with supporter groups. Experience tells me that's a really good thing." (Case H3)

Clubs are arguably evolving to see their role as facilitators rather than regulators of the conversation. They are observing the self-regulatory behaviour of their tribal community in defending the club (Sierra and Taute, 2019) and the collective tribal fan community (Knijnik and Newson, 2020). It suggests clubs are beginning to shift from the control-centric mindset criticised in research (Wider et al., 2018), in part because fans can display regulating social media engagement practices (Hollebeek, et al., 2017). In trusting fans more than during the preliminary study, clubs are gaining valuable insights of their fan community due to the natural discourse of the conversation. There are also considerable downsides too, as is evidenced in section 5.3.2 when discussing the power of operationalising social media marketing strategy.

For social media marketing strategy to be successful with the fan community, this study suggests an authenticity to the club-fan relationship is needed. Respondents indicated authenticity can be influenced by fans knowing that the relevant club contact may also be a fan. This fits with the argument that being considered an authentic fan increases the chances of being accepted into the tribal fan community (Knijnik and Newson, 2020). It can also be due to the origins of the club, and local fans perceiving the club is still true to these origins, despite current success and a heightening global profile. Local versus global is a constant tension Cases A, B, D, E, H referred to.

> "I used to be Supporter Liaison Officer so have a really good relationship with our supporters. I know the vast majority. I have close relationships with all supporters groups and attend every meeting. I am also a fan myself so that really helps." (Case B1)

> "We're very community based but most of our social media followers are not based in [redacted city]. Probably less than 5% but because we're sitting here a lot of our stuff has to be local community. We do stuff for fans all over the world. How do you engage fans globally but also put on content that's specifically [redacted city]? There's always conflict of interest within our own team, within the department as a whole." (Case D2)

> "Something like 30% of ticket holders have come to the game and live within a 20-mile radius of the stadium. Your hard core of fans unified by [club] being in their blood. It's your tribal nature. Your routine. They're part of the [club]. But with social we've got to reach outside of that. The global nation of football especially if we manage to get back into Premier League." (Case E1)

Finding ways to appeal to a local and global fan community is therefore an important element of social media marketing strategy (Agha and Dixon, 2021). This was an issue also identified in recent football and social media marketing research as it is important to fan sense of belonging (Fenton et al., 2021b). The more global reach clubs have via their official social media presence, the more important this balance becomes. Clubs therefore continue to try new ways of evolving their social media marketing strategy through providing opportunities to work with their fans.

Interviewees also highlighted how their drive to build relationships with fans through social media marketing strategy is made easier when the team is doing well on the pitch. It means fans are more receptive and positive towards club communications and it is the job of clubs to capitalise by, for example, increasing follower numbers or fans sharing club content.

> "It depends on the success of the club. It's a very privileged time because fans are very onside. For many years they were discontent and weren't afraid to voice that. Now every decision is perceived with more positivity. It makes our lives much easier. It also means you really have to capitalise on that because it won't be that way forever. That's just the nature of football. (Case H2)

Such sentiment was typical of all clubs interviewed. When the club is doing well, the job of social media marketing strategy practitioners becomes easier as fans feel more positive and want to hear from the club. Similarly, the job becomes harder when the club is unsuccessful as fans are often very negative and don't want to hear from the club. This is further evidence of the range of responses clubs face from fans (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). As section 5.3 will evidence, it highlights how clubs need to be attuned to how their fans feel when operationalising their social media marketing strategy.

The Collective sub-theme: Passion

When discussing why fans use social media, clubs claimed that a key trait of the collective is their **passion** for the club. Through passionate support, fans share a connection with the club and each other (Cova et al., 2007; Baker et al., 2016; Sierra and Taute, 2019). This is often based on emotion and can therefore lead to extremes in sentiment expressed by fans on social media platforms. For clubs, this means their social media marketing strategy needs to be flexible, in allowing sensitivity to team results and any triggers that may result in a fan-club backlash through negative social media sentiment and dialogue. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter make it very easy for fans to express their club-related passion publicly and instantly.

"It's the passion that you're feeling at the time. It's a place where you can vent or celebrate together. It's definitely to either incite others to get involved because they have a feeling, or for celebration. It's easy. Probably lazy too." (Case E3)

"Fans are very emotive and vocal. They react to everything. Football is an emotional sport." (Case A2)

"All fans have got an emotional attachment to the club first and foremost and with emotion comes strong feelings and they often manifest themselves on social media which is fine and we'll continue to reach out to them." (Case G2)

Such an approach is further evidence of clubs learning to be less wary of releasing control of the conversation. There is some acceptance that the passion of their fan community needs to be expressed (Lamberti et al., 2022), and that to seek to control that conversation is not a realistic approach to their social media marketing strategy. It suggests they are learning since the early days of actively controlling fan sentiment (McLean and Wainwright, 2009).

Clubs are aware of their duty to act responsibly. They are conscious of the fact that whilst passionate support can be such an asset to their social media marketing strategy, they should not encourage this passion to overspill into more ill feeling than may already exist between rival sets of fans (Knijnik and Newson, 2020). Reflecting on this, Case B expressed that the club understand how their role in harnessing collective passion of the fan community reflects on their brand. It shows awareness of the very close and passionate emotional attachment fans form with their club as well as aspects of brand love (Vale and Fernandes, 2018; Machado et al., 2020; Velicia Martín et al., 2020)

"To feel that connection with the club and be accepted by the rest of the club faithful. Fans enjoy that banter element. There are some negative elements to it, however that also shows you have a passion for the football club. It's about leading that charge and trying to galvanise the supporter base together. There is enough ill feeling between supporters than we need to jump on that bandwagon. There will be times when it's appropriate to do so

and it would be two clubs joining forces to create some comedy. But we're not a disrespectful football club and it's not the way we want our brand to be perceived so we wouldn't operate in that way." (Case B1)

One Case E interviewee gave an example of how clubs can use social media marketing strategy to understand key triggers for negative fan sentiment, or issues among the fan community, and to do something about it.

"Social media, that's where I will get a lot of negativity about away tickets. We actually listened to social media feedback and changed our process for selling away tickets." (Case E3)

This main study finds passion is a very powerful element that can be positively harnessed in an effective social media marketing strategy, certainly when applied to what literature agrees are tribal social media brand communities in football (Sierra and Taute, 2019; Fenton et al., 2021b) where there are strong support bonds (Fillis and Mackay, 2014; Checchinato et al., 2015). However, section 5.3.2 (pp.225) evidence that passion can also work against clubs, and become part of the worrying aspects of social media highlighted in recent literature (Dwivedi et al., 2020) which, in turn, impact negatively on social media marketing strategy practitioners.

With such passionate support, it is paramount that clubs understand their audience and how they may be feeling towards the club and team (Lamberti et al., 2022). For example, sentiment regarding recent results and how the collective fan community on social media can influence this. This study suggests that when feelings are negative, it is often better for clubs to take a relatively lower profile by communicating less on social media and toning down what they say when they do communicate.

"You've got to understand your audience. Where we've had a damaging defeat we keep what we do on social media to a minimum. They don't want to see you sticking your head over your parapet." (Case E2)

When compared to the preliminary study, this new evidence demonstrates that clubs were correct in being nervous of fan engagement and the negative tone of the

conversation. This main study also demonstrates clubs are learning what does trigger passionate fans to voice their approval and disapproval, and to what extent. Passion is evidently a key aspect of fan support that can be a positive and negative for clubs and they need to continue to evolve their social media marketing strategy.

The Collective sub-theme: Insatiable Audience

For some fans, football and social media can be all-consuming. The third element of the sub-theme of The Collective is **insatiable audience**. From the club perspective, the research found fans have a real thirst for club information and will actively consume and share such social media content. In doing so they boost their social capital amongst the fan base and their sense of connection with the club, further feeding their hunger for club information. Clubs can therefore use social media marketing strategy for rapid dissemination of information amongst the tribal fan community.

> "It's the hunger and thirst for the club they support. All sense goes out of the window. On Twitter you've got that hunger and thirst for what's happening. You've got it at your fingertips. Literally." (Case A1)

> "People wanting and craving information about what's happening. Social plays an important part." (Case C2)

Clubs revealed how fans will actively consume and share club information via social media. Interviewees at Cases H and C offered the analogy of the resultant social media conversation being akin to moving the pub online, in that it is a place where fans can voice and exchange opinion and reflect on shared experience.

> "It's taking the pub and moving it online. Follow your favourite people, see banter. Interact with your mates and people who share similar hobby or passion. Yes there's not so good parts to it but it's incredibly addictive." (Case H3)

> "It gives them a connection to the club. Football is a very opinionated game. It gives a place where people can share their opinions and thoughts of like-minded individuals they might not be able to reach on a day-to-day basis.

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Why go to the pub every night when you can speak to your mates on social media?" (Case C1)

These insights demonstrate how the ways football fans share opinions have moved from the pub (Dixon, 2014; Cleland et al., 2018), to now including social media. The evidence of the collective fan community having an insatiable appetite for club news and information, plus the desire to publicly share their passion for the club, further demonstrates the uniqueness of sport as argued earlier in this section. Building on this, interviewees revealed how fans can boost their standing within the club fan base, by instantly sharing latest club information. This is evidence of fans following and interacting with the club to boost their social capital within their tribal fan base, as is having the club interact by replying to them or even sharing a fan post.

"Find out things first. Keep abreast of the situations that are going on. It's bragging rights." (Case E1)

These findings suggest clubs are using their social media marketing strategy to provide constant information to their fan community (Aichner, 2019; Machado et al., 2020), enabling their tribe to feel connected (Cleland et al., 2018) and boost their social capital (Fenton et al., 2021b). Effective social media marketing strategy means that club information is often produced around key moments of interest in real time, further garnering the consumption, passion and share of voice amongst the fan community. Clubs will capitalise on this when the results of their first team are positive.

"It's the one moment in the week where you are all on the same side so it's not 'I'm trying to sell you something, buy this'. It's 'I'm covering this game and you see me tweet "GOAL" or "Greatest goal ever"'. You'll just wait for that moment. Luckily they've been a bit more frequent in the past six weeks!" (Case A2)

To conclude, the theme of The Collective addresses the knowledge gap of what factors influence the development and management of social media marketing strategy (Alalwan et al., 2017; Li et al., 2020)**.** The collective tribal fan

community, plus their passion for the club they support, and their insatiable appetite for club information are all key factors.

5.2.3 Theme 3: Bandwagon

The third theme of social media marketing strategy is that of **bandwagon**. Reflecting the momentum and emergent nature of new and current trends that influence club social media marketing strategy, this includes concepts such as the constant change at a strategic level. For example, deciding on which (often new) social media platforms to establish a presence, clubs will often follow each other. This use of the term bandwagon has similarities with how the 'bandwagon effect' is used in fan literature. The emphasis in that literature is linked with 'momentum' which, in a fan context, shapes how fans may jump on a bandwagon of supporting a sports team (Brown and Link, 2008; Boyle et al., 2019). Findings are then broken down into three further sections, indicating a shift in emphasis of social media marketing strategy: (i) from audience growth to audience engagement; (ii) from organic to paid social media marketing; and (iii) increasing use of a non-sporting presence or influencers. This study identified that keeping up with the sheer pace of change and new platforms being launched is a significant challenge for football clubs. For example, at the time of the interviews, Snapchat was a relatively new platform.

Bandwagon sub-theme: Constant Change

All clubs are constantly scanning the landscape to decide which social media platforms to continue with, which to launch and test a presence on, which to perhaps cease having a presence on. Such decisions are influenced by those platforms being a space where fans spend their time and any benefits the club gains, plus how other clubs manage their social media marketing presence. Resources also play a part in what they can do. This requires an approach to social media marketing strategy that is open to perpetual change and a willingness to adapt. The speed of constant change was not one foreseen by clubs during the preliminary study.

> "We have to be a bit more patient to see what top level teams do before we can replicate that. We were late to the Snapchat party. Fans had been asking for it and it took a bit of persuasion for me to get my boss to let us go with it but once it was out there it was fine." (Case A2)

"Social media platforms, things rise, things fall and it's knowing which ones and where to put the resource because we don't have infinite resource. Look at what the target audience is. Instagram is going to be where we can get the most in terms of growth. Then Snapchat for the younger generations, to try and keep them interested in football in general." (Case E1)

"Platforms are expanding and evolving themselves. I've got a department of me and one other person. [Snapchat] is very much a toe in the water. A work experience girl said 'Why don't you do Snapchat?' I said 'I'm far too old to contemplate what that looks like.'. I gave her the reigns to do that." (Case F1)

"We turned off Snapchat because we were finding we were having more success on InstaStory." (Case B1)

Since the preliminary study, it is evident that those with more senior management responsibility for social media marketing strategy at football clubs are reliant on younger members of their team for understanding newly emerging social media platforms. Even if understanding of a new platform such as Snapchat is low, there is pressure to establish and manage a presence due to rival clubs using it and the constantly changing digital behaviour of their audience. Referring to newer social media platforms, Case H also highlighted that until they become more mature, less data insights are provided, when compared to more established platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram. In essence, when comparing to the social strategy cone (Effing and Spil, 2016), these main study findings demonstrate that organisations do not necessarily locate at one specific stage of social media marketing strategy. They show instead that club social media marketing strategy can contain a mix of the 'maturity' stage for established platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and 'initiation' stage for new platforms such as Snapchat.

More innovative clubs can benefit from that constant change. By being ahead of others, they can build relationships with new social media platforms or media companies. These sentiments demonstrate a link with the findings in section 5.2.1 (pp.165) and the importance of stakeholder relationships based on trust.

"Platforms we work closely with. Snapchat is one. I think that's because the other club down the road doesn't have a Snapchat account. With being [place] we have dominated that audience because [local rival club] aren't on Snapchat. I don't know what their social media strategy is over there but we talk to Snapchat a lot because we realise we actually dominate that market in [place]." (Case D2)

"Collaborations have grown in the last 12 months so how can we collaborate with people like S2, sporf, Ladbible? It's a continual learning experience." (Case H3)

Another consideration for which social media platforms are worthy of a brand presence may be based on the potential of the international market and the global ambitions of the individual football club, as discussed in the previous theme 0.

"We want to engage with a wider audience so our focus is very much global now. We have a Weibo account so we're active in the Chinese marketplace. We've used a provider called Hotstar to feed content into India. We haven't got that barrier of entry whereas in China it's obviously more difficult because a lot of people just speak Mandarin." (Case B1)

In contrast to the preliminary study, this main study discovered that all clubs also look to what is happening in other sports and sectors, as use of social media marketing strategy across industries has evolved. Case A summarises ways in which this is done.

"You are constantly looking at what F1 teams are doing and what American teams are doing. It's a lot more engaging. More vibrant. I don't think you can get away with that to the same extent here because English football fans are very angry. F1 teams are tweeting each other [during the race]. I can't really tweet a rival saying hope you win today or hope you lose today because fans would kick off." (Case A2)

This demonstrates how clubs can learn what can be adapted to work in football and what would not work with their fan community. If also reinforces the argument that

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clubs can learn from other sports or sectors (Baker et al., 2016). Another consideration is the wider broadcasting terrain which continues to be shaped by the emergence of new entrants from the world of digital. Case E2 referred to Facebook involvement in EPL coverage as more evidence of how quickly the landscape can change getting a handle on that. Such deals as Facebook winning the rights to stream all 380 EPL matches per season from 2019/20 to 2021/22 in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam (Tran, 2018) and Amazon acquiring rights to show 60 EPL matches over the same period (Ahmed et al., 2018), represented further shifts in the broadcasting landscape. They increase the potential for EPL clubs to reach a wider global audience, thereby influencing the social media marketing strategy of EPL clubs. The constant change is evidence of marketing capabilities frequently changing in the field of social media marketing strategy (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016).

Bandwagon sub-theme: Balancing Audience Growth and Audience Engagement

Another emerging 'bandwagon' theme was some clubs shifting their social media strategy from a focus on growing their audience reach, to engaging them more actively. This can depend on the relative size of the social media following of each individual club. For example, Case D is well established in the EPL, and among the top ten EPL clubs in follower numbers. Their focus was on audience engagement as much as growth. Cases E and H were more representative of all other clubs in the research, in that Case H was recently promoted to the EPL so was going to focus on growth due to increased global exposure, whilst Case E1 was going to continue to grow but focus a little more on audience engagement or interaction to help achieve that.

> "If we want to attract higher revenue from commercial partners we need to make sure our accounts start to grow and so we need to start pushing it. I think obviously being in the Premier League is going to help." (Case H1)

> "We do very little of that [interaction] at this moment in time. That's something I want do more. But it's got to be anchored in a wider strategy so it gets buy in from above and gets filtered down to the relevant departments such as the content team." (Case E1)

At the very beginning, when the preliminary study was conducted, clubs were interested solely in establishing their branded social media marketing presence and growing the number of followers. This growth-focused approach sustained for almost eight years. The main study clearly demonstrates that clubs are much more aware of the need to engage with their audience, even if they are still very focused on growth due to successes such as promotion. The shift to more awareness of engagement is evidence of how smaller clubs are following much larger clubs such as Liverpool FC (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015), FC Bayern (Baena, 2019b) and Real Madrid (Baena, 2019a) and Case D.

Bandwagon sub-theme: From Organic to Paid Social Media

In the current social media landscape, the need to achieve growth using paid media is required, whereas in the past organic social media would have been sufficient. Everchanging algorithms by social media platforms, focused more on driving their own commercial revenue, are influencing how clubs manage their social media marketing strategy. All clubs said they were gradually being forced to shift from organic to paid social media marketing, to ensure that their audience is exposed to their content, otherwise they would miss out on that potential visibility and engagement.

> "Everyone who can afford to will put money behind their content now because it's the only way to cut through. It is like advertising. The platforms like charging, they turn the algorithms up and down but they will never say to us we're squeezing your algorithms so you're only reaching 2% of your audience but we know when they've done it because we're tracking it so then we have a conversation. They want us to spend money." (Case D1)

> "At the moment we don't use any paid for yet and we know that is restricting us massively. Manchester City have got a specialist paid for media guy. He was talking about how organic growth is so challenging. If you want to grow the only way is through clever paid for strategy. Was it £500,000 budget for paid for at Manchester City? Yes it was." (Case H3)

During the preliminary study, paid social media marketing was not a consideration at all for clubs. In contrast, it is now a key consideration for a successful social media marketing strategy. Clubs with very large financial resources are more established in paid social media marketing, however for all clubs, especially those with much less resources, it is important to demonstrate the return on spend, be it ticket sales or by showing increases in follower numbers, visibility of posts and fan engagement levels. These findings offer new insights, building on scant published research into paid social media marketing (Mattke et al., 2019).

Bandwagon sub-theme: Increasing Use of a Non-Sporting Presence or Influencers

Two new aspects of club social media marketing strategy were: (i) establishing a presence on non-sporting social media platforms; and (ii) the use of influencers. Non-sporting platforms were those specifically for other interest areas, such as music and photography. Cases B, C, D were all explicit about football clubs having identified the potential of reaching new audiences through collaboration with music artists or actual roll out of a presence on music specific platforms. Cases B, D and H were typical of other clubs who used influencers outside of football, be they sport or not. Other clubs confirmed, off the record, that they used influencers and are experimenting with other platforms related to photography and video but did not want this to be specified or transcribed due to confidentiality.

> "Our audience are digitally savvy and a lot are youngsters. We're looking into new platforms every day. If we at least have a presence it's showing our audience that we care about them because we want to essentially create content for them to engage." (Case D2)

> "We did quite a few activities with [singer] from [male group]. A [local] lad and fan of the club and signed up for charity purposes so he could play in the reserve and development games. He tagged us on Twitter when announcing his signing and our Twitter following went from about 20,000 people to 30,000/40,000 in the space of a week. Mainly teenage girls obviously [group] fans etc. But at the same time he got a squad number – [number xx surname] - and we were selling shirts to girls in Singapore who were using Twitter as

the method to follow us and find the link to order shirts. A League One club with an average crowd of around 7,000 – 10,000 people." (Case C1)

"We've worked with a local singer, a couple of boxers, some cerebral palsy footballers, a local freestyle dancer ranked 27th in the world, elite sports stars. We've been using influencers quite regularly really. We're looking at other platforms and ways we can extend our reach through providing different video content that's not just football content. We might be doing more lifestyle features or we might look at working with influencers to capture their audience." (Case B1)

"I've seen it work at [current club] really powerfully and I've seen it work at [former club 1] really powerfully in terms of galvanising. Influencers are huge." (Case H3)

Reaching new audiences and being able to demonstrate the positive commercial impact of that activity are evidently effective ways cases B, C, D, H have evolved their social media marketing strategy. Three of the four other cases were doing similar or about to trial it. This is testimony to how club approaches to social media marketing strategy have evolved since the preliminary study, when clubs perceived revenue generation to be a potential benefit, primarily through additional advertising revenue. The above examples of using techniques to reach new audiences, in addition to collaborating with external influencers, demonstrates how clubs are now much more informed as to how social media can contribute to revenue generation. In using local associated influencers, Cases B and D were demonstrating strategic use of influencers (Hudders et al., 2021) through the use of influencer authenticity (Pöyry et al., 2019). This kind of approach can help build credibility which helps audience trust with branded content (Lou and Yuan, 2019). Such micro influencers as used by Case B are argued to have a positive impact on purchase intention (Kay et al., 2020). By contrast Case D has also used macro influencers who are argued to have less impact on purchase intention but achieve reach to their global audience (Pöyry et al., 2019). The use of influencers, particularly macro or celebrity fans, suggests clubs are now embracing the concept of 'sportainment' (Richelieu and Webb, 2021) and are using it as part of their social media marketing strategy (Fenton and Helleu, 2018).

In summary, the theme of Bandwagon has identified sub-themes of: constant change; balancing audience growth and audience engagement; from organic to paid social media; and increasing use of a non-sporting presence or influencers. **It therefore addresses the knowledge gap of factors influencing the development and management of social media marketing strategy** (Alalwan et al., 2017; Li et al., 2020)**, in addition to that of understanding of social media marketing strategy that incorporates a wider range of platforms** (Dwivedi et al., 2020).

5.2.4 *Theme 4: Content Marketing Strategy*

Thematic analysis found that content marketing strategy and strategic development emerged in relation to strategy and planning of the social media marketing strategy for English football clubs. Figure 5-3 provides a summary of the sub-themes for each. This section focuses on content marketing strategy before findings and discussion switch to strategic development; the fifth and final theme of social media marketing strategy. It should be noted that the terms 'content marketing strategy', 'content strategy', 'content marketing' were often used interchangeably during interviews. The thematic analysis identified the emerging themes in relation to interviewee responses when discussing social media marketing strategy, rather than the more operational elements which follow in section 5.3.1 Communication.

The scope of content marketing strategy is specified as: "Why you are creating content, who you are helping, and how you will help them in a way no one else can. Organisations typically use content marketing to build an audience and to achieve at least one of these profitable results: increased revenue, lower costs, or better customers." (Content Marketing Institute, 2022).

Figure 5-3: Strategy and Planning Factors of Social Media Marketing Strategy

Strategy and Planning Factors of Social Media Marketing Strategy

Content Marketing Strategy

- Quality vs. Quantity
- Planning: Content Calendar
- Differentiation
- Diversity, Relevance and Insights
- Meaningful Interaction

Strategic Development

- Levels of Sophistication
- Fluid and Adaptable
- Tone of Voice
- Innovate or Follow
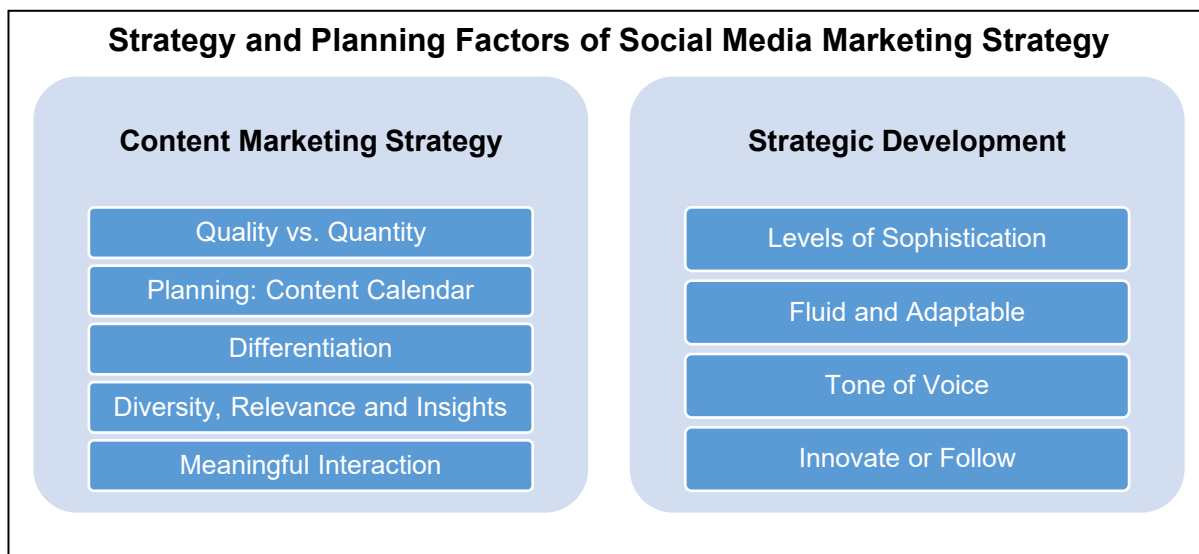
The sub-themes related to content marketing strategy are all linked, as is evident in interviewee evidence obtained.

Content Marketing Strategy sub-theme: Quality vs. Quantity

All clubs were increasingly aware of the need to shift the focus of their content marketing strategy to more quality of content, as opposed to the historic focus on quantity of posts within each platform and across all platforms. For all clubs except Case D, limited resources had some impact on their ability to deliver more quality content.

> "We've got a bit too much commercial, a bit too much marketing and a bit too few on actual quality content." (Case A2)

> "Some clubs will be challenged to do so many posts a day. It's a nonsense. It's not about what you're doing it's about what you are delivering. The quality, engaging with people and having a bit of mutual respect." (Case E2)

> "The pressures we as a department find are being able to devote enough time to produce really engaging, top quality content." (Case G2)

The statements show clubs were correct during the preliminary study to perceive the issue of too much focus on commercial messaging. The main study findings enhance knowledge in the football sector of balancing team content with commercial and promotion messages (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015). It also builds on research suggesting there is a need for more rich content that stimulates sensory activation to engage fans (Annamalai et al., 2021).

Content Marketing Strategy sub-theme: Planning: Content Calendar

For all clubs, a content calendar is key to successful planning of content marketing strategy. In the time elapsed since the preliminary study, clubs have increasingly started to use a more extensive content calendar, to be more strategic in their planning. They will plan their posts over a season and the close season. Such planning helps clubs ensure they are delivering content consistently over a twelve-month timeline, across social media platforms they can resource, and which fit with content on other digital channels such as the website. Initially clubs usually build their content calendar up from the fixture list, then adding in key events such as kit launches. They then plan additional content around that, based on a monthly or fortnightly rolling cycle, with detailed weekly or fortnightly reviews, to adapt to fixture changes, league form, cup runs, player signings, players on international duty.

> "We have a calendar that has key dates. Also things like player birthdays, significant anniversaries. The Media Department and Commercial Department can tap into it. It is regularly updated and reviewed." (Case G2)

> "When we've had an international break we looked at every single [club] player that had played in the European Championships in the past twenty years. I planned all that out. Every day in the tournament, every single fixture, to try and get that link and make it as interesting as I could. So our content is all over the place and fans can say 'that's our player'." (Case A2)

Linked to the previous sub-theme of passion, the content calendar should also be agile due to results affecting fan mood, hence shifting away from previously planned social media posts.

> "If we've won a game, fans are more likely to be in the shop and go and buy stuff. You can get more content out then because they are not going to say 'I don't care what the Manager says.'." (Case A2)

As Case A demonstrates with planning around international breaks, clubs are increasingly proactive and prepared with adaptable content marketing strategies. During the preliminary study they were reactive in their use of social media marketing strategy, due to not having a content marketing strategy or content calendar. The main study shows how clubs are using the content calendar to be more strategic in their content marketing (Annamalai et al., 2021). For example in offsetting the impact of seasonality (Meng et al., 2015) and team performance (Jang et al., 2018).

Content Marketing Strategy sub-theme: Differentiation

Differentiation of content, according to the individual social media platform and the audience on each of those platforms, was an emergent theme showing variation between clubs. Each club stated the same fans may follow them across multiple platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, yet will often expect a different experience due to the nature of that platform. Other fans may just follow the club on one or two platforms, according to their own social media behaviour. For example, some younger fans may follow on Instagram only rather than Facebook and Twitter. What differed was the extent to which clubs were able to tailor content to those different platforms and audiences. Some, such as Case D, were advanced in this respect thanks to extensive resources. Cases B, E, F adapted content but not to the same extent. Others such as Case H were planning to differentiate content more by allocating more resource to social media marketing strategy. First, the evidence for differentiation by platform.

> "We make different content for different platforms, different lengths. Short clips on Facebook, making sure you use sub-titles because no-one sits on a train with the sound on. Make sure people can read it rather than listen. That's something we've learned over the years." (Case D1)

> "IGTV is used more for video content. Twitter and Facebook, we have very similar audience profile in age and gender split. However, we post longer

videos on Facebook than Twitter. We'll use Twitter to direct people to our website, whereas Facebook we try and keep people in the native platform because the algorithm likes it that way." (Case B1)

"Long form content is still appreciated. Twitter can be brief in attention span. Consumers have thirty seconds or certainly less than a minute otherwise you lose people. People on Facebook and dedicated to the club are more likely to read a three/four-minute piece of content. We do create bespoke content for each. Not enough, in my opinion." (Case H2)

"We're not really thinking about how we are creating content for these three channels separately. Purely down to bandwidth. We've got one guy and one video guy. It works with Facebook. It works with Instagram. We produce one piece of content and just slap it out everywhere which is certainly not the approach you want to take moving forward but we're simply restricted on bandwidth currently." (Case H3)

There appear to be slightly differing views within Case H, as to how much the club differentiates content. Where both agree is the need to improve. It is evident that, as social media platforms have matured, so too has the approach to social media marketing strategy evolved, according to platform algorithms and changes to what those platforms offer by way of experience and the audience they attract. The evidence demonstrates clubs are aware of the benefits to be gained by adapting their content to the experience offered by platform type (Voorveld et al., 2018) and how content and engagement may therefore differ (Alves et al., 2016; Valos et al., 2017).

Second, the evidence for differentiation by audience and platform audience. Most clubs use a translation service and are trying to differentiate for audiences. Case D was again the most advanced.

"You might talk to someone on Facebook different to the way you talk on Twitter or Instagram because it is a different audience. On Snapchat you definitely talk to your audience in a different way. We have content creators and content producers. We have about 13 different languages and 14

different countries. English is twice because we have English here and in the United States. We want to create content specific to that audience. There was a time we were guilty of creating content here [city] and just translate it to other languages. But we need to be thinking about the culture and had people physically on location there that know that audience and culture and create [club] content for them. They are big opportunities we take to help grow our fan base. The difference between the English and the American culture is quite big. That's why we approach things the way we do and try and look to recruit, engage them, then monetise." (Case D2)

"Translators are becoming a bit more active in our weekly content plans, in terms of being able to localise content." (Case H3)

"Get some user personas of your classic user of these platforms and make sure the content is done in a tone and it's right for the audiences on these platforms. It's very common just to bang everything out on every platform. Most of the time we're no different but it's trying to look at 'That's best for this platform' or if we're trying to get in touch with generation Z, then look at doing more Snapchat." (Case E1)

Case A was unusual in suggesting their level of content differentiation for Facebook and Twitter audiences had regressed as the audience had grown on both platforms. Their resource being focused on quality content on newer platforms due to the audience expectations.

"Probably not as much as we should do. Before there was more thought went into it when less people were on Facebook and there was less variety on Twitter. Now you've got more people on there and you can throw more at them and it still sticks. Twitter and Facebook are most important because you've got the biggest audiences and a wider range of consumers. Instagram and Snapchat have to be quality content they are going to enjoy especially when you can just flick through and your attention span is less for the younger audience. Facebook is more written word and wider age group" (Case A2)

These forms of differentiation, by platform and audience, have emerged during the main study and demonstrate another way social media marketing strategy of football clubs have evolved since the preliminary study. Their ability to do so appears to be dependent on their level of resource dedicated to social media marketing strategy. In response to the ongoing globalisation of football (Beek et al., 2018; Manoli and Kenyon, 2018), clubs have made more progress on differentiation by audience language and location, compared to by platform or audience persona. Such an approach clearly helps to overcome local-global tensions (Fenton et al., 2021b). **The way clubs increasingly look to do this using local people rather than translators is a new contribution to knowledge**, as it appears there is no published work in this area of social media marketing strategy at the time of writing.

Content Marketing Strategy sub-theme: Diversity, Relevance and Insights

The sub-theme of diversity, relevance and insights emerged through interviewees articulating how their content marketing strategy was continuing to develop. The more clubs understand their audience, through insights, the more they can adapt the topics featured in their content marketing strategy to appeal to difference segments of their fan base, hence increasing the relevance of their posts.

First, diversity of topics, as opposed to the sub-theme of differentiation, which is how content is presented to each audience on each platform. Content of all clubs in the main study is now more diverse than when they first started using social media, however this is heavily influenced by the career backgrounds of who generates the content, often leading to a narrow focus on first team football news.

> "Our social media team are from a journalistic background - sports journalism - so their natural inclination is to report on the players and their sporting performance. We convinced them to move away from just talking about the first team all the time." (Case G1)

> "Currently our social media is driven by the football side of things. When I do an event that's football related which is targeting our fans, it's great. But we are struggling when I've got an event that is non-football related. We're looking at do we need a social platform presence as a stadium, a venue

facility, to advertise all aspects of non-match day business and reach to that wider audience?" (Case E5)

"You've got to showcase all elements of the club. We do it in a fan friendly way. The conflict does exist between departments that want to do things." (Case E1)

The first (senior) team is the major driver of commercial revenue for clubs, so it is no surprise it still dominates the focus of content marketing strategy. Nevertheless, all clubs had identified the opportunities of diversifying the range of topics covered by their social media marketing strategy, in addition to the necessity of educating colleagues of the benefits of doing so. The ability of clubs to deliver more topic diversity in their content marketing strategy is therefore linked to the Trust sub-theme: Stakeholder Trust and Public Backing. The evidence that content is currently dominated by product related posts, builds on the finding they are the most popular with football fans (Parganas et al., 2015).

Second, all clubs are striving to deliver relevance for their fans. What the content marketing strategy delivers was crucial to ongoing improvement of social media marketing strategy.

"[E1] has been really good helping us to understand 'Is the content that's going out relevant?'. We were wasting a lot of time. It made me think 'How many sets of communications do we send out? How do we measure was it relevant to them?'. We're starting to get a lot better." (Case E3)

"We're building it [content marketing strategy]. Football is a slightly different business. If you come out with a regular statement that doesn't have a lot of interest, people will switch off. Then you can't get your good news out. Content marketing is useful but you have to be careful how you use it and it's player news first and foremost. Then what's the youth team doing and more specific news related to the club. Beyond that our wider club news may be a concert that week. You may be interested in it, you may not but we're not going to bombard you with it because we know you're more interested in who's playing. You want to drive traffic to the website but we don't want to

tweet click bait. But sometimes you have to drive traffic to the website and that's advertising sold and hits the bottom line" (Case C1)

For a smaller club like Case C, the findings show that commercial imperatives of revenue generation, such as website advertising, will sometimes override the less commercial focus of the overall content marketing strategy. Although they state they do not wish to drive fans from Twitter to the site for no valid reason (click bait), sometimes they have little choice as it can mean increased advertising revenue. For any sponsor related content, it is important to ensure relevance to fans (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2018; Velicia Martín et al., 2020; Weimar et al., 2020). Overall, in relation to content marketing strategy, the evidence suggests that clubs are gradually shifting towards a "social content strategy" (Li et al., 2020: 58), that they are more driven by creating and delivering timely and valuable content, as opposed to what the club wants to promote. This does vary by case however because, as explicitly stated, for some there is often still too much focus on commercial messaging. All clubs stated how relevance is also determined by timing and platform algorithms, the impact of which are informed by insights gained through social media platform metrics.

Third, social media marketing insights, which varied enormously between clubs and was related to available budget, time and the relative size of the team, and their expertise. As with differentiation, Case D was by far the most advanced, being the largest club, though even they stated the risks of content being informed by data only. The evidence is provided with the intention of demonstrating this variation between clubs, from the most advanced to the least.

> "We hounded them [social media companies] to give us more analytics tools. They offer us great analytics service. Being able to log what we're doing right and what we're doing wrong, how we can improve." (Case D2)

This point is backed up by the interviewee's colleague who also points out the risks of being led purely by data whilst having to balance the needs of the Board and the wider fan community.

"We know exactly what our audience looks like on each platform and we track the changes. In the early days it was 'we'll make stuff, they'll watch it'. But now it's not enough. You've got to make stuff work for whoever's watching which channel. We rely a lot on our data teams. Data's the bedrock but the road to madness if you just do what the data tells us. We do the popular data driven stuff but we've got to make the other stuff we think's great. What differentiates you is your gut, your head, your heart, your creativity. But when you're sat in front of the Board saying 'Well it only got 20,000 views, not 10 million like someone tripping over a paper bag in training'. You've got to do both because our fans want to see us in the community." (Case D1)

The above evidence highlights how interviewees use their content marketing strategy to balance the needs of their internal stakeholders, such as the club hierarchy, and those of their wider fan community. There is therefore a link between content marketing strategy and the Trust sub-theme of Trust sub-theme: Stakeholder Trust and Public Backing, and The Collective sub-theme of The Collective sub-theme: Community of Tribal Fans. Case B also gave specific examples of insights tracking supporters' behaviour and sentiment, to reflect on campaigns, in addition to measuring return on investment of paid social media advertising ticket sales campaigns to justify requests for more budget. Other clubs described the range of metrics they track to generate useful insights, informing them of what is relevant to their audience. Cases C, E, H were all similar, in that they gather data and insights but need to do much more segmentation of their audience. Cases A, F and G were less advanced.

"It's good to reach people but if we take away the vanity metric like how many followers you have - how we get engagement, then after engagement, how are we actually getting something that's meaningful which is a return on an objective. We do very little of that [level of insights]. That's one of the next challenges. Commercially, there's huge opportunities with using segmentation and targeting. We have dabbled in it but it's something that again goes back to if we have the budget." (Case E1)

"When we get a free moment we'd have a look at insights. That's something else we are limited by because we don't have the budget and fancy analytics

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that some of the top clubs might. I know videos are more successful with men aged between 20 and 34 through Facebook. I can see what the percentage split is between males and females, what reach and age range. If I put any message on Facebook, I can see how many people that's reached, how many have watched the video, how many have clicked on a post and gone through to the website." (Case A2)

This main study concurs with research stating the importance of data insights to facilitate successful social media marketing strategy (Keegan and Rowley, 2017; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a). It also suggests Case D is firmly in the 'maturity' stage of the social strategy cone in relation to monitoring and evaluation combined with content activities (Effing and Spil, 2016). There are elements of the 'social monitoring strategy' (Li et al., 2020: 58) being used through listening, learning and reacting to customers, however there is considerable variation between clubs and they do not neatly fit into one of the strategies in the Li et al. (2020) research.

To conclude this sub-theme: based on the evidence, Figure 5-4 visualises the cyclical links between diversity of topics featured, to be relevant to audience segments, as informed by data insights using social media platform analytics and other digital channels, such as the website.

Figure 5-4: Diversity, Relevance, and Insights of Content Marketing Strategy
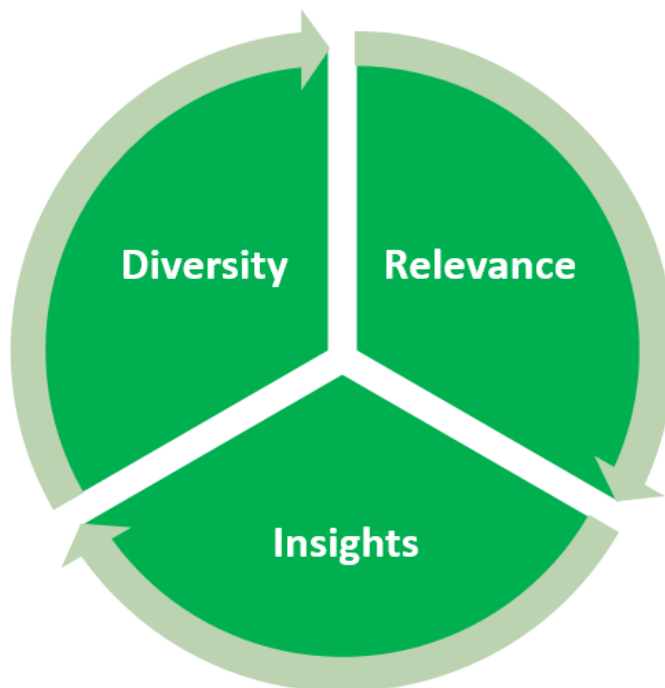
Content Marketing Strategy sub-theme: Meaningful Interaction

The final sub-theme was that of meaningful interaction. For clubs, this meant developing a content marketing strategy focused on being more personal in their interactions with fans and new audiences they were trying to engage. Cases H, B, D were using new platforms to connect with new audiences in a more personal manner. Cases E and G articulated the need to move beyond top line metrics and focus more on fan interaction, with Case G stating how their strategy of interacting with fans to increase fan-club engagement, had actually led to growth in their following. Case C offered a perspective representing how clubs balance fan interaction with commercial demands.

> "It's [Snapchat] quite popular especially amongst young generations so you try and connect. So they start a relationship with the club earlier. We've already got one lot of players that are talking on Snapchat so they [younger generation] get to learn who people are as they as fans are rising through." (Case H1)

"One guy in my department is largely tasked with interacting with fans on social media, using content for engaging with supporters. We have worked hard in recent years to grow our interaction between the club and fans via Twitter in particular. Our numbers have probably grown by 400,000/450,000 in the last three years. So almost doubled and that's simply because we've concentrated more on interaction." (Case G2)

"It's a constant battle between making sure you have good fan dialogue and maximising revenue opportunities but not Manchester United, to the point where fans feel everything is monetised, American way of doing things." Case C1)

In finding a content marketing strategy with a focus on fan interaction can also help audience growth and is linked with quality of content, this main study concurs with research stating content is crucial for continuous engagement and adding value (Annamalai et al., 2021). The findings of this section contradict earlier research that football club social media content does not have an impact on fan engagement (Aichner, 2019). The main study findings also appear to demonstrate a lack of clarity between what clubs identify as 'interaction' and 'engagement'. The terms tended to be used interchangeably. From the club perspective, a more personal interaction with fans through dialogue was to be encouraged through content marketing strategy. As other research has highlighted, interactive behaviours such as liking, commenting and sharing, do not necessarily mean the audience have engaged with the content, for example by watching the video (Syrdal and Briggs, 2018). However, it is evident from the previous sub-theme and clubs' insights via social media platforms, that fans do engage in content such as video. This main study demonstrates clubs are therefore focusing more on gaining both fan interaction and fan engagement through improving their content marketing strategy.

In summary, this content marketing strategy theme has helped address the knowledge gaps as follows: exploring differences in approach according to social media platforms being used in practice (Alves et al., 2016; Valos et al., 2017)**; how marketing insights arising from social media marketing activity inform social media marketing strategy** (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016; Keegan

and Rowley, 2017)**; and research incorporating a wider range of social media marketing platforms** (Filo et al., 2015)**.**

5.2.5   Strategic Development

Strategic development is the final theme of the evolving organisational approaches of football clubs to social media marketing strategy. From thematic analysis, four sub-themes emerged: (i) levels of sophistication (how advanced social media marketing strategy is regarding formal documents, aligning with departments, goal setting and guidelines); (ii) fluid and adaptable (responsiveness to change); (iii) tone of voice (as used across their social media marketing platforms); and (iv) innovate or follow (being a club at the forefront of social media marketing trends or following what other clubs do).

Strategic Development sub-theme: Levels of Sophistication

All clubs articulated a clear view of what they wanted to achieve with their evolving approach to social media marketing strategy and ensured all departments in their club were aligned to this. Or they were working towards departments being aligned. There was, however, some variation between whether clubs had formalised their strategy. At the time of the main study, only three clubs (one EPL, one former EPL, one League One) had a formal written social media marketing strategy (coded FW). Three had an informal unwritten strategy (one EPL, two former EPL), usually in the form of a broad framework (coded IU). Finally, two clubs (one former EPL, one League One) did not have a strategy but did use a content calendar as their planning document (coded NC). The findings suggest it is still the case that many practitioners do not have a clear social media marketing strategy (Van Dam and Van De Velden, 2015). Table 5-2 summarises the status of each case, using one quote from each as corresponding evidence.

Table 5-2: Social Media Marketing Strategy Status

Case	Strategy Status code	Evidence
A	NC	"It fits into the wider content strategy that we have." (A1)
B	FW	"Strategy, that is done between myself and a digital marketing expert and we deploy the strategy throughout the marketing comms and rest of the football club. We [departments] all align together to fulfil that strategy. It's a fully functioning document." (B1)
C	FW	"We do and we don't. My successor developed a different one and I am currently in the process of reviewing that." (C1)
D	FW	"Yes. Social media strategy documents." (D2)
E	IU	"We have a rough outline strategy but I wouldn't say it's highly detailed. A basic outline of what platforms we are going to use and why." (E1)
F	NC	"Maybe should…Not strategic." (F1)
G	IU	"Not really. I would be lying if I said that we have a clear social media strategy." (G2).
H	IU	"Right now no. We need one frankly. We're on a big recruitment drive and we'll have to sit down and go through that digital strategy in terms of in our growth plan. (H3)

It should be noted the table consists of isolated quotes that do not necessarily reflect the full context of responses during interviews with each club representative. For example, Case H did have an informal unwritten strategy despite the quotation in the table being from the perspective of whether they had a written social media marketing strategy. They were also in the process of writing a formal plan.

"I work with the Content Team from a marketing perspective to make sure all the commercial elements and fan engagement are there. How we build up a global fan base as opposed to the day-to-day production and distribution of content. I guess I'm the strategic piece, for example 'Given our playing squad what do I need to do as a marketeer to grow the football club?' Not necessarily just in Portugal and Spain but opening up a language to the whole of South America." (Case H3)

This evidence demonstrates how the strategic development of the social media marketing strategy is linked to content marketing strategy and the sub-theme of differentiation, as discussed in the previous section. In many ways, clubs are still playing catch up from the time of the preliminary study, when they were starting to develop a branded presence on social media without any strategy and planning in advance.

"Facebook and Twitter I set up but it wasn't used as effectively as it is now. It was just a case of 'everybody else is doing it so we've got to'. But with no clear strategy. In hindsight what I would do if the next Twitter came out, I'd obviously register the official handle for it, and then I would come up with a strategy rather than doing it for the sake of it. And resource." (Case A1)

This again points to the importance of resources for clubs to be as effective as they may like to be in their social media marketing strategy. Some clubs such as Case A simply have not had the extensive resource needed to develop and take advantage of the many opportunities they are aware of. Moreover, the need for a coherent strategy is further evidence of the importance of having the backing of internal stakeholders, as discussed in section 5.2.1 (pp.165). Ultimately, all clubs were looking to improve the commercial impact of their social media marketing strategy, whether they had a formal or informal strategy, or used their content calendar instead.

"There's a saying in football, certainly at Premier League level, one dollar a fan. If I've got 30 million Facebook followers, I get $1 or £1 or €1 off each of those, that's massive. That's £30million a year! But no one's cracked it and I'm not even sure it's crackable. (D1)

Half of clubs studied (Cases A, E, F, G) did not have specific objectives for their social media marketing strategy. Cases B, C, D, H, all had quantifiable objectives for their social media marketing strategy. Case D would use those objectives to benchmark against competing clubs. In all cases, there was an increasing focus on ensuring alignment with other departments, club goals and overall corporate strategy.

"There's no objectives in terms of 'let's increase….' Perhaps that will come further down the line when we have got a bigger resource in the department but because we are so under resourced really, I wouldn't want to increase the pressure. So it's just about maintaining that steady growth." (Case A1)

> "We have objectives in terms of follower growth and engagement. We use Objectives and Key Results. The results are reviewed and tracked against objectives weekly. And reviewed more thoroughly by the Executive Team on a quarterly basis. We use a platform called [redacted] and at any point I can look at any of the other departments' OKRs and where they're at in terms of their key results and how my objectives align with theirs." (Case B1)

This main study suggests that the evolving organisational approaches to social media marketing strategy of football clubs do not neatly fit with the stages of the social strategy cone (Effing and Spil, 2016). For example, Cases B, C, D, H could be argued to have progressed, or are in the process of progressing, from 'diffusion' to 'maturity' stage (Effing and Spil, 2016) as each club has social media marketing strategy goals and is increasingly using monitoring to inform content activities. Cases B and D are very developed in their content activities as the previous theme demonstrated. However, in comparison to that stage model (Effing and Spil, 2016), no club claimed to have clear social media policy or guidelines. All preferred an approach of using common sense and intuition to decide how they communicated on behalf of the club. However, when pressed, Case F did have written policies.

> "We don't really have a set guideline. It's more of just common sense. A lot of it is informal. (D2)

> "It's very much left down to the individual so you need to be aware of what the club's stance is. We do have internal club policies which are called netiquettes. It basically tells us and our players what the club's position on social media is." (Case F1)

This did suggest there was more of a need for formal training for any employees of the club, regarding how to use social media as representatives of that organisation. Particularly for any employees who work for the club and may have personal social media accounts they use for sharing their own views.

The main study suggests that clubs are still not following the more formalised approach to social media marketing strategy frameworks. For example, guidelines and policies are very informal and have been created after any social media strategy

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development by football clubs. By comparison, in frameworks it is recommended that social media policies or guidelines be in place as part of strategy development (Chung et al., 2017; Felix et al., 2017; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a). Such guidelines help shape governance regarding what social media content is posted and whose responsibility that is (Felix et al., 2017).

Strategic Development sub-theme: Fluid and Adaptable

Regarding planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of their social media marketing strategy, rather than create a yearly strategy that is then rolled out, clubs take a far more responsive approach by regularly reviewing and adapting it over the course of the year. Case D update their strategy every six months and each club expressed similarly adaptable approaches.

> "[Strategy is] presented to the team that work across social on a quarterly basis. Quarterly because the landscape is forever changing so we do have to adapt and amend and change rather than have a set strategy that is rigid." (Case B1)

> "Trends move really quickly. It's monitoring them and keeping in touch in the best way possible. They change weekly, monthly so you've got to be prepared to make little amendments in a short space of time. Being adaptive. That's the best way." (Case H1)

The research proves how organisational approaches to social media marketing strategy are constantly evolving. It is a response to the 'constant change' sub-theme articulated in the Bandwagon section. The established social media marketing strategy frameworks discussed in the Literature Review (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Effing and Spil, 2016; Chung et al., 2017; Felix et al., 2017; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a) do not appear to make any recommendations for how often the strategy should be developed, nor the frequency of updating it. Based on clubs articulating the need to be adaptive and how they review their strategies, this main study therefore suggests an overarching social media marketing strategy should be developed at least annually, with updates being made a minimum of every six months, or preferably every quarter. More tactical adaptations can be made more frequently in response to operationalising the strategy. A social media marketing

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and industry practitioner summed up the approach of having to be fluid whilst still working within the overall strategic approach.

> "You have to be fluid especially with football. You might pick up on something another Club's done and then utilise it. It might not be in the strategy. It's more overarching as a strategy. Your strategy is more about your tone of voice. How frequently you post and shouldn't post." (Case EXP2)

Strategic Development sub-theme: Tone of Voice

Every club stated they have a tone of voice for their social media marketing strategy. This was described in specific terms related to the style, or how the tone of voice allowed the club to communicate in a more light-hearted tone whilst still being representative of their club and their fans.

> "What you need is everyone at the very top level to agree on what the voice of the club sounds like and what the voice will be talking about. What do we sound like? What's our tone of voice? What's our messaging?" (Case G1)

> "Humble. Polite. Don't brag about things before you've done them. Be open. Honest. Authentic - that's the key word." (D1)

> "[Social media] allows us to communicate in a different way. Snapchat and Instagram allow you to be a bit different, more exciting and engaging. It allows you to poke fun at yourself. People realise you don't take yourselves too seriously which is often the thing levelled at football clubs." (E1)

For all clubs, though they have an overall tone of voice, or style of communication, for their social media marketing strategy, they are all aware of how this needs to show empathy with their fan base. Tone of voice is more than just the words clubs use to communicate. It is the communication style (Barcelos et al., 2018), i.e. how they communicate their club personality to their audience. Tone of voice is therefore informed by their understanding of the collective of tribal and passionate supporters, as discussed in 5.2.2 (pp. 175). Football is an example of sports of a hedonic nature due to high levels of emotional involvement (Vale and Fernandes, 2018) and, in keeping with recent research (Barcelos et al., 2018), would suggest clubs are using

a human voice on social media, to influence purchase behaviour. The findings provide empirical and industry specific support for the claim that a human brand voice enhances the product experience (Abeza et al., 2020). Interestingly, while clubs have stated how they adapt content to suit different audiences, Case D specifically raised the issue of not yet being successful in engaging their female audience with club social media.

> "Women are a big demographic target for us. They say 'We just want the same content as a fan. We're just fans like anyone else.' No one's cracked it. A lot more women come to games now but there's still an imbalance on social media. Why only 15% of women [as part of social media audience]? What puts them off is the question I want to know." (Case D1)

Just as clubs have adapted their content to suit different local and international audiences, the evidence from Case D suggests tone of voice is more nuanced when trying to appeal to different genders. This links with research highlighting the opportunity to develop strategies to target women using social media marketing strategy (Morgulev et al., 2018). This main study supports research that fan discussion on social media is not appealing to women, due to the dominance of men as fans (Sveinson and Hoeber, 2015) and the sexism and subordination aimed at female fans (Cleland et al., 2020), resulting in the male hegemony of football fans being reinforced (Fenton et al., 2021a). On the other hand, research by Babac and Podobnik (2016) has shown men and women have similarities as a club social media audience. For example: (i) similar length of comments posted in response on the branded club social media; and (ii) hard emotions such as anger, disgust, fear, surprise being equally likely to be expressed by both sexes. Differences identified included: (i) women finding it harder to get likes from other club fans; (ii) women being more tolerant about a defeat or draw; and (iii) soft emotions, such as joy and sadness, being more commonly expressed by women. Other research also found women to be more tolerant football fans who do not like negative fan behaviour (Sveinson and Hoeber, 2015). Male fans tend to be more results driven (Gencer, 2015) and are more likely to express stronger emotions in response to a loss or draw (Sveinson and Hoeber, 2015). This may also influence female fans level of interaction and engagement with football-based social media.

Strategic Development sub-theme: Innovate or Follow

As has been implicit in many of the interviewee responses, most clubs have tended to follow the trends of what is happening across social media in football and have therefore been reactive in their approach to social media marketing strategy. All clubs and one of the social media marketing practitioners cited Case D as being a leading innovator in social media marketing strategy. Two other clubs self-identified as being innovative:

> "We're early adopters. It's seeing an opportunity and getting a hunch, which is not very scientific I know, but we all discuss it internally. Is this a good opportunity to try this? Let's see the reasons why it's positive." (Case A1)

> "I'd like to think that we are quite innovative in our approach and just the very fact that we will adapt and change as the marketplace changes." (Case B1)

Both clubs, as well as Case D, are willing to try new techniques before many of their fellow clubs, as part of their evolving social media marketing strategy. Rather than looking to what other clubs do first, they are willing to take a risk and test out a new capability out. In the instances of Cases B and D, this is no doubt linked to their relationship with social media marketing platforms, as discussed in section 5.2.1 and the sub-theme of 'Stakeholder Trust and Public Backing' (pp.169). Added value through companies like Facebook and Twitter reinforces the importance of external stakeholders (Chung et al., 2017; Felix et al., 2017), in this instance facilitating innovation.

In conclusion, Table 5-3 provides an evidence-based summary of the strategic development of social media marketing strategy, for each English football club interviewed in this main study. A scoring system was used to help rank each club, based on the sub-themes identified in the research, contributing to the overall score.

Overall, the level of sophistication was often very closely linked with resources, as evident by comparing Cases C and G to Case D. The former two being reactive and the latter being very proactive and innovative as exemplified by their approach to international markets.

"We're reviewing a lot of that [strategy] and it links to costs and resource." (Case C1)

"Because of the size of the department, and I'm not using this as an excuse, we can be reactive rather than proactive, although we are becoming more and more proactive as we've grown our numbers." (Case G2)

Table 5-3: Strategic Development of Social Media Marketing Strategy by Case

Case	Strategic Development of Social Media Marketing Strategy							Overall Score
	Level of Sophistication				Fluid and Adaptable	Tone of Voice	Innovate or Follow	
	Overarching approach	Aligned	Quantifiable Goals	Guidelines				
A	NC	Y	N	N	Y	Y	I	6
B	FW	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	I	8
C	FW	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	F	7
D	FW	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	I	8
E	IU	Y	N	N	Y	Y	F	4
F	NC	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	F	6
G	IU	Y	N	N	Y	Y	F	4
H	IU	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	F	5

Key:				
Overarching Approach				
FW	Formal, written	3 points	Y = 1 point	I = 1 point
NC	Content calendar	2 points	N = 0 points	F = 0 points
IU	Informal, unwritten	1 point		

"Seven or eight years ago we had no social media in foreign languages but what we had was ten or twelve translators who translated the English website. Then we set up some Facebook pages and opened Twitter accounts and an Instagram account. We'll set up offices in the territories that are key to us. The Board will say to us these are our key markets and then we'll go there and try and crack them. The best way is having young people on social media who are indigenous but like [club] or want to work for [club], led by someone [in England] who knows our values. Particularly China and Japan, who love animation and cartoons so the dangers are that: We could do a cartoon that could be offensive; on the other hand they don't know what our

tone is so they could offend us. You've got to have a mix of people from here and from the indigenous countries to make it work." (Case D1)

One industry expert confirmed the purpose of a social media marketing strategy for the majority of football clubs, i.e. those that cannot rely on matchday capacity attendance.

"The purpose is solely about getting your club name out there and getting that fan base back and ultimately getting engagement. Every club needs to fill its seats." (EXP2)

Evidently, this shows the importance of clubs becoming increasingly sophisticated with social media marketing strategy, as doing so is linked to overall business performance (Effing and Spil, 2016; Chung et al., 2017; Felix et al., 2017). In showing steady growth, or performance against more tightly defined objectives, and using data to demonstrate success, clubs can align departments to their social media marketing strategy to realise commercial opportunities. Interviewees also stated that they would use successes as part of the business case for more resource to be allocated to social media marketing strategy.

Table 5-3 suggests that the evolution of social media marketing strategies in football clubs differ from those described in academic frameworks that have been proposed in other social media marketing contexts. For example, planning prior to implementation is recommended (McCann and Barlow, 2015) whilst an organisation like Case H could be argued to be in 'Consolidation and Integration' stage of the Chung et al. (2017) model, due to advertising specialist vacancies, yet there is no formal written strategy (stage 3). Cases A, E, F, G are not yet setting quantifiable goals as suggested at the 'Diffusion' stage of social media marketing strategy (Effing and Spil, 2016), however they are more mature in their content activities. Equally, the social strategy cone (Effing and Spil, 2016) did not take into account relatively new social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat. Therefore, the model tends to classify the stages in a holistic sense and does not account for stage variations of individual platforms. For example, all clubs were at 'Diffusion' stage at least on Facebook and Twitter, whereas with Snapchat they were all at 'Initiation' stage. This main study shows how clubs may be relatively expert at managing

established platforms but are at the more experimental initiator stage (Effing and Spil, 2016) when rolling out a presence on a new platform.

To summarise, the theme of strategic development and the sub-themes that emerged from the research, Figure 5-5 provides a visual representation of the overarching approach to the strategic development of social media marketing strategy, in the case of English football clubs. All clubs are fluid and adaptable in their approach whilst using a more human tone of voice to communicate on a more personal level with their audience. Although all four sub-themes apply to each club, the differences are much more evident in whether clubs tend to innovate or follow other clubs, in addition to the levels of sophistication evident in their social media marketing strategy.

Figure 5-5: Overarching Strategic Development Approach to Social Media Marketing Strategy

5.2.6 Summary

In relation to RO1, this theme has provided rich, empirical practitioner insights exploring the evolving organisational approaches of football clubs to social media marketing strategy. Since the preliminary study, football clubs have evidently evolved from a passive approach to a more active approach focusing on

engagement (Constantinides, 2014). In doing so they are moving from a degree of discomfort with social media marketing strategy for brand purposes (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014), to a more open approach that is integral to how they communicate. The themes of Trust, The Collective, Bandwagon, Content Marketing Strategy, Strategic Development prove the inter-disciplinary nature of social media marketing strategy (Felix et al., 2017; Rowley and Keegan, 2019). For example, the inter-disciplinary links between parties in different departments and external stakeholders.

The findings therefore address the knowledge gaps summarised in Chapter 2, Table 2-9, pp.102, related to social media marketing strategy (1-6), social media marketing strategy in sport (1-5), and social media brand communities in sport (1, 2, 4).

5.3 Operationalising Social Media Marketing Strategy (RO2)

Research objective two focused on examining the operationalisation of social media marketing strategy by football clubs. Thematic analysis produced two emergent themes: Communication; and Power and Impact of Social Media.

The classification of operational for the main study was the tactical aspects of how the football clubs use their branded social media marketing presence, in keeping with "the day-to-day social media actions of brands, and implementation of strategy" (Filo et al., 2015: 169). The theme of communication relates to how football clubs fulfil their day-to-day content for their audience, in addition to how they seek to engage with attending and non-attending fans. The theme of power and impact of social media relates to the impact of implementing their social media marketing strategy and its importance to the club.

5.3.1 Communication

As demonstrated in the social media marketing strategy themes, for football clubs, social media is an essential channel for communicating with their fans and for reaching new audiences. How football clubs operationalise this is via provision of content that delivers on that strategy and is responsive to the social media and sporting landscape.

Attention therefore turns to how clubs build around the key dates or events they scheduled into their content calendar. Adapting a more tactical focus to identify key topic areas to be included, what content will be created, how it will be shared and what if any calls to action are included in the social media marketing communications. This is in keeping with industry recommendations for content planning (Content Marketing Institute, 2022) and is typically one or two weeks in advance for all clubs, allowing clubs to be more responsive.

One of the ways the tactical focus is achieved is through slight changes to the scheduling or adapting their tone of voice, such that it still fits with the overall strategic tone of voice but reflects current feeling of the fans. The same content will receive different kinds of fan response depending on how the fan community feels.

> "The key is understanding your audience. When things aren't going well, on the back of a run of defeats, if you say 'UEFA cup run, this memorable night', the fans are going to say 'Stop f***ing going back in history and let's worry about the present day'. If you've won five in a row, fans will come back and go 'Ah I was there that night. What a great night that was for the football club.' You've got to gauge the mood and that results in good business. (Case E2)

> "When things are bad, it's getting the right messaging in the right tone. 'Get behind the team, we need you'." (Case A1)

Previous literature suggested that future research could explore if a change in tone of voice also changed existing perceptions about the brand (Barcelos et al., 2018). The evidence above and to follow for this main study demonstrates that adapting the tone of voice to fit fan sentiment shows how it can facilitate favourable perceptions. To not adapt tone of voice with unhappy fans would risk negative sentiment being heightened. The findings therefore build on the argument that tone of voice is "largely contextual" (Barcelos et al., 2018: 62).

In another finding not yet covered in academic literature, new social media platforms will also give clubs an opportunity to test a slightly different tone of voice to attract

and engage new audiences. For example, reflecting a younger personality within the overarching informal tone of voice.

> "It gave [club] a chance to really test that tone of the Club. Engage with the younger fans. All of a sudden you're pushing your message to an up-and-coming support base. They're going to be your fans for the next 10, 20, 30, 40 years. It's a way of humanising the club." (Case EXP2)

Showing how the strategic aspect of tone of voice is implemented on a tactical level, Case F expressed how important it is that anyone operating the social media account on behalf of the club, understands the tone of voice and ensures there is consistency across the team.

> "The Twitter account is run by two people. We have access to it all the time. We know how to operate it. The more people you have running the account, the worse that message could get. People going off message.You need people who are trustworthy and speak with the same voice. Our Twitter voice is irreverent but we will never ever get into slanging matches. Yeah we'll have banter with people but we wouldn't wind them up too much. It's just communication and fan engagement. It's not a complicated thing." (Case F1)

Based on this statement, communication between those responsible for posting on behalf of the football club is critical to a consistent voice of the club. However, even for those with written policies like Case F, it still relies on the judgement of the individual. For example two different practitioners may have differing views of what would constitute 'wind them up too much'. The use of the word 'irreverent' is interesting as it means "not showing the expected respect for official, important, or holy things" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022b). When considering the use of irreverent banter in a sport with tribal rivalries and passionate support like football (Gibbons and Dixon, 2010; Rivers and Ross, 2021), employees would therefore need to understand what is considered cheeky versus what is considered offensive, and how this may differ between audiences and according to the sentiment of fans at a given point in time. Continuing with the example of Case F, the following quote contains contradictions that suggest that some fans like the banter, but that others do not understand its purpose.

"Twitter we saw very heavily as quite irreverent. Quite biased. Quite bantery. That's why our fans like it and other fans don't like it because we stick up for the club. We have great fun annoying fans of other clubs. It's our Twitter channel so we don't really care about fans of other clubs, we're not speaking to them. We're speaking to our own fans. Sometimes our own fans even can't quite grasp that. They think that an official football club Twitter should be like a news channel. It should be all serious and only focus on things that are going on." (Case F1)

It is argued that Case F are very much pursuing what would be classed as an "us" versus "them" rivalry-based approach to their fan tribe (Sierra and Taute, 2019). However, the contradiction in their statement reinforces the difficulty in deciding what irreverent and banter means in practice on Twitter. The possible issue with this operational execution of tone of voice and resonating with fans was articulated by one EPL club.

"You think of voice at other clubs and the way they talk. Quite often people can look to build their channels at the expense of their relationship with their supporters. My intentions are to make our channels more relaxed and to loosen up a little. But it will be done with care and we will work with the Social Media Manager to try and not go over the top when we do that." (Case H2)

Indeed a softer approach to humour within tone of voice was already being taken by Case D.

"We don't want to be smart-arse like some. We try to be witty when we can be but we're gentle. We don't argue with people. We don't swear. We don't take the mickey. Gentle humour but welcoming, open. Congratulate other teams when they win stuff. Just being a nice person through your social media. It's my job to make sure we portray that." (Case D2)

Such examples demonstrate the link between operational use of banter or more gentle humour with the theme of The Collective in social media marketing strategy. Case F use a tone of voice that is deliberately provocative, whilst all other clubs use

a milder, more respectful tone. The findings reveal the difficulties for clubs in appealing to different groups of their own fans and the wider football community (Cleland et al., 2021), including such external stakeholders as sponsors. It is also important that their day-to-day social media marketing communications are justifying the trust that fans place in the club to speak in the right manner, as Cases B and H articulated in section 5.2 (pp.163) and the social media marketing strategy theme of trust.

To meet the needs of the insatiable audience that form the collective community of tribal and passionate fans, clubs must keep feeding them information on a day-to-day basis, using their branded social media presence. One way this was expressed operationally was how it can help prevent rumours that are inaccurate and therefore potentially detrimental to the club. It also helps maintain the proposition that the branded social media marketing presence is the main source of up-to-date club information and wider club-related content.

> "Where there is a void of information people start creating their own stories and they're not always positive stories. We always like to give fans, and people who are interested in the club, information." (Case G1)

> "We hold the key to the main voice of the club. We are the first, we operate channels that keep everyone up to date, informed, entertained." (H2)

Simultaneously, clubs are wary of feeding too much information to their fan base as it could dilute key messages. Or risk fans perceiving some club content to be irrelevant. Case F was the only club apparently not too concerned with posting too much content.

> "We try not to bombard people with too many messages on any one given day. Yesterday when it became clear that we were announcing [signing], we put a major commercial announcement on the backburner until today simply to allow the football news to breathe." (Case G2)

"Sometimes we'll just post random things and make random comments because it's all about talking isn't it? It's about communication and engaging with them." (Case F1)

Therefore in an operational sense, clubs are tasked with their social media marketing strategy delivering a sufficient volume of content to satisfy the insatiable appetite of their audience (Aichner, 2019; Machado et al., 2020), whilst increasingly shifting their strategic focus to quality over quantity. To manage this cost-effectively, whilst being responsive to constant change in social media marketing trends and platform capabilities, clubs with fewer resources have learned to repurpose content for other platforms or digital media.

"We've developed in recent years more and more video content for social media because there is a real appetite for that. Because we are a small team we don't devote too much resource to a 30 second video that's just going to go on Twitter or Facebook and not be seen again and not used elsewhere. We have to recycle stuff quite a lot. We always have that in mind." (Case G2)

All clubs have learned that the matchday timeline is a highly tactical way of operationalising their social media marketing strategy and satisfying fans' insatiable appetite for information, in a manner that enhances the shared matchday experience of all fans, particularly those who are attending home or away fixtures. The club social media presence is used to enhance that experience pre, during and post-match.

"Matchday is a huge part of fan engagement and starts weeks before the fixture, with that first engagement that person has with you. Whether that's commercial website and buying tickets for the game or people going to the ticket office. To map out that entire journey from that moment all the way through to being at the game and post-match. It's incredibly important to engage with people and improving your product." (Case H3)

"We look at how a person's day is made up in terms of what they're thinking at every stage of the day and we feed information at those appropriate times. 9am you're worrying about the weather. 11am you're worrying about the

travel and how you make your way there and prohibited items. As it gets to 1pm food. 2pm it's team news. 3pm it's regular updates. Post-match it's a thank you and then it's feedback and then highlights and where you get your next tickets." (Case G1)

A review of the social media marketing timelines of all clubs confirmed they will all show highlights of previous fixtures against a specific team, in the days and hours building up to the matchday with that opposition. It is a cost-effective and relevant way of engaging fans, with regular content that is appealing to them, stimulating fan-club engagement in the form of comments, and fan-fan engagement through community conversation and sharing of those memories. In doing so, clubs are fuelling the passion of their fan community and utilising the resultant excitement in the build up to the match. This is evidence of clubs effectively creating engagement with social media content, defined in research as a "psychological state of mind experienced when consuming social media content in which an individual is highly absorbed in the content and experiences a sense of excitement." (Syrdal and Briggs, 2018: 18).

Post-match is also a relevant part of sharing the matchday experience with fans. Such content results in interactive behaviours such as liking and retweeting posts (Syrdal and Briggs, 2018). Depending on the result, the tone of voice used will be adapted. That tactical approach maintains the regular sharing of product information and offers an opportunity for clubs to intersperse their social media timelines with commercial messages.

"If we've won on the Saturday you can be a bit more engaging with fans afterwards. More posts would go out that night. More next morning 'Good morning [club] fans! How great was that?'. It's when you can really focus on football content. Over the next day or two, you can put the post-match stuff out again. You can put out your marketing messages in the middle of it all. You know when fans are going to be looking for stuff so our highlights will be there until midday the next day. But if you've lost, fans are more subdued so we'd put out what the Manager says and then be a bit quieter." (Case A2)

This evidence demonstrates how clubs are able to use predominantly product-related posts as the most engaging with their fans (Parganas et al., 2015) which they can then intersperse with commercial messages. In showing how clubs use emotional appeals in their content marketing to highly involved fans, the findings contradicts the research of Coursaris et al. (2016).

The use of the matchday timeline is a key tactical approach that has evolved since the preliminary study. It is a unique way in which clubs can reinforce the passionate, emotional attachment of fans (Machado et al., 2020) in a manner that informs and entertains them (Vale and Fernandes, 2018). These constant, timely posts help engage fans (Aichner, 2019).

Matchday is another ideal opportunity to engage fans in open dialogue. The findings revealed there was no clear definition of fan engagement from the club perspective. They all tended to offer rather general classifications which arguably fitted the notion of 'interactive behaviours' such as liking, commenting, and sharing of posts that fans might find engaging (Syrdal and Briggs, 2018). Indicative examples are quoted below.

> "Any interaction with a post - so a like on Facebook or Instagram or a comment and then a like, or a retweet on Twitter." (Case B1)

> "People commenting on Facebook. What likes you're getting. Retweets. How many people are interacting with you and you work out what posts people like, what isn't getting engagement - and the posts they are engaging with." (Case E2)

> "I don't think anyone's cracked a proper measurement for engagement. We have a formula and don't ask me what it is because I can't remember." (Case D1)

Recent literature suggests engagement in social media content would be considered actual reading of the post or article, or watching the video (Syrdal and Briggs, 2018). Just as that research found consumers are more likely to engage with content others have commented on or that their friends have interacted with (e.g.

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shared), the main study findings above suggest all clubs are stimulating interactions by the fan community which heightens the likely level of engagement by the collective tribe of fans. All clubs were increasingly monitoring insights of their posts to inform content marketing strategy. For example what content should be created, how it will be shared and how their personal tone of voice can be used to stimulate dialogue or make any calls to action. Ultimately each club has commercial reasons for this activity as evidenced in section 5.2 Social Media Marketing Strategy (RO1) (pp.163).

> "Dialogical communication. 'Give us your man of the match'. A poll prompts a lot of debate and conjecture. 'What are your thoughts on this [club] fans?' We positively encourage that because the more people that do that it helps spread the word. If you get retweets it brings it to different audiences and an opportunity to grow the audience even further. The more you do that, the more you build your audience and building your audience means more money spent ultimately. That's the goal." (Case A1)

> "Fan engagement may be a little video of a goal from the weekend, 'Have a look at this again from a different angle'. And 'On this day'. They're what get people engaged. And then the third aspect is driving website content. And they're the three main prongs of our social media attack on a day-to-day basis. Instagram is the most engaging platform of the lot." (Case E2)

Findings revealed that clubs do not engage with all fan interactions, such as comments. For all clubs, this was not sustainable in terms of resource, regardless of the size of the social media marketing team and budgets allocated.

> "We're certainly not perfect. We're working on that. We're not the best at responding. It's a bit of a skill and 'another job'. We don't have huge bandwidth here so we've been quite guilty of one-way communication on social." (Case H3)

> "It's social. Instead of just pushing things out and going 'Right there you go, that's gone out', it's using more to engage with people and make them feel special. How you go about doing that in a way that's sustainable within a

football club environment, I'm not quite sure. We need to change that. Shifting to more of a dialogue." (Case E3)

Operationally, all clubs are trying to deliver their social media marketing strategy in a fashion that strikes the balance of appealing to attending and non-attending fans. This was best articulated by Case D.

"Anything we do on social media is to engage our fans and I know we have reputation for being very innovative. Not just the ones that are based in [city] but ones based in Indonesia, India, the United States. We want to make everyone feel at home if they don't get to come here week in week out and have a season ticket and get to see the players on the pitch. We want to deliver that in a different way. (Case D2)

In relation to RO2, clubs have initially operationalised social media marketing before developing any social media marketing strategy, if at all. Comparing the preliminary study findings and those of the main study, specifically thematic 5.2.5 Strategic Development (pp.204), it is evident clubs have not formally followed guidance that **"**you need a content marketing strategy BEFORE you build your content plan" (Content Marketing Institute, 2022). Instead, the evidence shows their approaches have evolved from starting with the operations only and learning to be more strategic over time. The tendency has been to: (i) roll out content that is reactive and not planned; (ii) start using a content calendar to plan and be more responsive; and (iii) use that experience to inform a content marketing strategy, in some cases. The evolving approach linking operational and strategic is shown in Figure 5-6. It is only as clubs are or have evolved their approaches over time, they are now increasingly developing social media marketing strategies which are then operationalised.

Figure 5-6: Evolving Approach from Operational to more Strategic Social Media Marketing
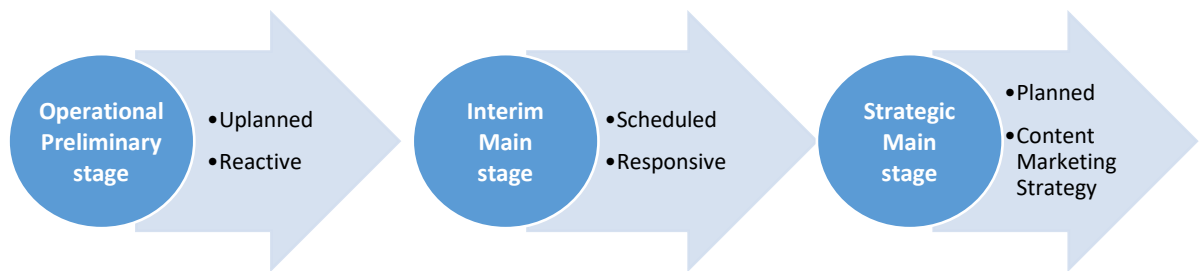
5.3.2 Power and Impact of Social Media

Whereas the theme of communication related to how clubs operationalise the fulfilment of their day-to-day content, the theme of power relates to the impact of implementing their social media marketing strategy and its importance to the club. The impacts are both *for* the club and *on* the club. To answer RO2, this theme first presents and discusses the power of social media marketing working for the club regarding how they communicate. It then presents and discusses the power of social media marketing impact on the club and fan community, before impact on the people at the club. This leads into a summary section highlighting how clubs balance the benefits against potential drawbacks.

> "It's really important. It's the way 90% or 80% of supporters consume content about their club. More pertinently social media could toxify a relationship if it was done badly. Equally, help breed that confidence and positivity if it's done well." (Case H2)

The notion of power has been explored in relation to brand tribalism in sport, finding that a consumer need for power has a positive effect on defence of a tribal brand (Sierra and Taute, 2019). In relation to this main study, power emerged as a key factor in clubs operationalising their social media marketing strategy to the benefit of the club. It is central to club communications. For example, their day-to-day activity leads to them gaining new fans through increased brand exposure to audiences.

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"There's thousands of opportunities. More important to our department is that we need to find those opportunities to gain fans. It's literally at the heart of everything we stand for and do." (Case D2)

"Social media is important to supporters. If you didn't use social media your brand wouldn't be known as far and as wide. Your brand would really be diluted." (Case E4)

In using social media marketing regularly, it helps clubs to positively amplify their messages to their fans and the wider social media community to whom those fans are connected. Evidence highlighted how this is due to trends with how people consume news, in addition to any benefits being strongly influenced by first team performance.

"When team performance is good, social media is fantastic and it's easy because actually your supporters will help you amplify your message. They'll be positive about everything." (Case H3)

"It can be a great marketing tool. It reaches a lot of people very, very quickly. More and more people are digesting their news via social media." (Case G2)

Clubs are harnessing the power of social media marketing operationally, to help achieve their social media marketing strategy aim of growing their audience, as discussed in section 5.2.3 and the Bandwagon theme (pp.184). This extends knowledge that social media marketing success can be dependent on team performance (Jang et al., 2018) and amplification of content to a wider audience (Hazari, 2018).

All clubs were honest about the commercial imperatives of allocating time and resource to operationalising social media marketing strategy. Each mentioned the part social media marketing operations play in the sales funnel. For Case D this is part of their 'recruit, engage, monetise' process, as discussed in section 5.2.4 (pp.191). Case C is representative of clubs who are part of EFL Digital.

"Our job is to get them in the funnel. Watching content. It's other people's job to move them along. At the bottom end of the funnel is buying shirts, buying tickets." (Case D1)

"All football clubs - reaching out to new supporters and how you do that. Football isn't now limited to matchdays on Tuesday and Saturday. It's 24/7. You're constantly in tune and communicate with your supporters in as many ways as possible. We have a balancing act because we generate revenue through the website through third party Football League advertising. At the same time we don't want to just use social media as click bait. You are constantly trying to balance having good conversations with supporters with also looking at revenue opportunities and making sure you can maximise as much as you possibly can because, ultimately, revenue keeps the light on. You can use it to direct people to paid subscription." (Case C1)

Comparing this evidence to the preliminary study, clubs have learned to realise the perceived revenue generation benefits identified while trying to balance this against the issue of too much commercialisation of their branded social media presence. It enhances knowledge balancing monetising of fans with engaging and getting closer to them (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015)**.**

One benefit not perceived or identified during the preliminary study was social listening. The main study discovered social listening plays an important role in operational aspects of social media marketing strategy for football clubs. Cases A and F were explicit in stating this, however all football clubs suggested they use social media in this manner.

"On a day-to-day basis the whole team will be constantly looking all over social and if there's anything that might affect the football club. If we put something out and people are kicking off about the prices, then we'll go back to the powers that be and say: 'Here's the reaction, here's some suggestions on how we can remedy that'." (Case A1)

"Any club will say whatever shirt it designs is done well and it's the best it can be. They all instantly look on social media to see the reactions underneath.

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No football club will deny that. What are the fans saying? A main way to get quick feedback is on your social media channels." (Case G1)

The evidence shows how operational listening and monitoring activity can be used to inform internal stakeholders and to gain their trust through offering potential solutions to address the issues identified. It is therefore linked with the social media marketing strategy theme of trust. Though all clubs are listening to their fans, they are not able to provide one-to-one customer service, principally due to resources. However, all clubs did recognise the potential of improving customer service using social media.

"One of the challenges is supporters expect a response 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It never stops. That's difficult in terms of resource." (Case B1)

Case B also mentioned "sheer number of requests" being impossible to answer, showing how the power of social media marketing is a reason clubs find it so difficult to deliver the two-way interaction they acknowledged needs to improve, in the previous theme of Communication. Power also links with the social media marketing strategy themes of transparency and open dialogue, and the content marketing strategy sub-theme of meaningful interaction. For clubs to scale resource to achieve on those elements of strategy is very difficult due to sheer numbers involved, and is evidence of the resource-intensive nature of social media marketing strategy (Aichner, 2019; Machado et al., 2020). The volume of fan messages in relation to club resources, and ability to respond, means clubs have to be selective in their interactions with fans which has implications for who in the fan community is rewarded with a boost in their social capital (Fenton et al., 2021b). The main study also adds weight to the argument that internal stakeholders are important to social media marketing strategy (Felix et al., 2017).

Case D summed up the importance of social media to the club, however this tends to overlook the negatives that unquestionably come with this form of communications.

"There's only benefits. It grows the audience, that's the main benefit. Increases revenue. A place for partners to be. Information. Entertainment." (Case D1)

Aside from D1, every interviewee at every club confirmed that, while the power of social media marketing can work for the club, there are inherent risks. Though they can sometimes be turned into a positive, there are often potentially very damaging consequences, as evidence will show. Case B highlighted how football clubs can be forced to reverse a decision due to negative reactions on social media.

If fans aren't happy they take to social media to stamp their feet and rant and rage. Take Leeds, for example. When they tried to change their logo and the social media world went crazy, they are now not going to change their logo. Supporters feel they have a voice through social media." (Case B1)

This is an example of how clubs can lose control of the conversation, an issue they expressed during the preliminary study. Case H provided further such evidence and the impact it can have regarding brand-related discourse, both at a previous club of one interviewee and at Case H itself.

"When performance is not so good, that becomes incredibly challenging in my experience of working at a club that's struggled. There's almost a shut down at the training ground so players and management don't want to do content, therefore there's no content that leaves the football club and what leaves will always get received negatively. I don't think there is necessarily an answer for that one." (Case H3)

"It's so immediate. The smallest mistake, it's magnified a thousand times by people on social media. There's no room for error. There's an insatiable appetite for content which is almost unmatchable. The big teams have that space probably and do things a bit more cleverly than we are at the moment. It all comes down to resource. Social media has created quite a lot of dangers. For example, we had a kit launch leak, then reported by a local paper - some pictures had surfaced online which may or may not have been our kit. In an ideal world you have somebody dedicated to sitting on social

media, monitoring it, making sure nothing too bad is happening or if anything good is happening. Answering fans' queries. That's the biggest struggle because it is an all-encompassing role." (Case H2)

Previous discussion of social media marketing strategy in section 5.2 emphasised the difficulties for clubs in meeting the needs of a diverse tribal fan community. While this can be harnessed by clubs to have a very positive effect, it can also develop a community momentum that is very difficult to contain.

"I've seen just how powerful it can be in building - not for PR reasons - supporter relationships. If someone is having a bad time, as a club you can see that on social media and use it to help them out. You wouldn't have even known in previous years. So you can see how strong a tool it is. Clubs are now beginning to realise this and invest in it." (Case H1)

"Once that negative vibe starts, you get everybody jumping on that. It gathers pace and it just has a negative impact on the staff as well, the sales, and it makes the job a lot more difficult. If it's a positive then of course it turns it completely on its head and everything's easy, everything's great." (Case E3)

The above are main study examples of precisely the perceived issues and benefits of social media marketing strategy anticipated by clubs during the preliminary study. What they did not anticipate was precisely where this may tend to happen, and the extent to which it could affect members of staff involved in any social media marketing strategy activity on behalf of the club. It is stark proof of the dark side of social media, as suggested in recent literature (Baccarella et al., 2018; Dwivedi et al., 2020), in addition to highlighting the potential perils of clubs placing trust in their collective fan community as was evidenced in section 5.2 (pp.175). There was consensus among all clubs that Twitter was the social media marketing platform where negativity tended to be stronger.

"On Twitter you've got this young generation of fans that will criticise anything and everything. Because they're looking for hits, so 'Everyone is listening and I want everyone to hear what I've got to say'. Facebook is a bit more considered and while you might have a few more muppets on it, you've got

that wider variety. There's a bit more level headedness to it. You don't have that anger." (Case A2)

"It can be abusive messages. But it can be extremely positive and uplifting as well. Often the negative outweighs the positive. There's a vociferous minority with any football club. For some fans it gives them an opportunity to vent their spleen. To broadcast an opinion about something that is probably the biggest emotional attachment they have in their lives apart from their loved ones and families. They can voice opinions 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. And someone, somewhere will consume that opinion, react to it." (Case G2)

"You've got be thick skinned. You're a football club so you're going to get a load of abuse whatever you do. When I first started working in football, the very first reply I got on Twitter started with c and ended with t and it was four letters long. I thought 'this is going to be a good roller coaster'." (Case E1)

Clubs referred to 'thick skin' on multiple occasions during the main study. The severity of comments directed at the club or those responsible for social media marketing strategy was alarming. How this affected interviewees was expressed in very blunt terms by several interviewees, often repeatedly. Below are two examples that best portray the impact on physical or mental health are included.

"We had a couple that were quite serious and I had to contact the Police which is crazy. That gives you an idea of how passionate people are. I was getting direct messages on social media as well as my personal Facebook account. These are very specific events, relegation or a new kit launch and things like that. I was getting actual death threats." (Case E3)

"I read how people who run social media pages suffer some serious mental health problems. I can fully see how people who might not have quite thick skin, it really can get somebody down. Especially if they're getting that every day. Fortunately ours just comes at the weekend and then probably support us over the week. That's a big challenge. Working with it." (Case H1)

Such extremes reveal the negative aspects of social media marketing strategy and the impact it can have on those doing the posting on behalf of clubs on a day-to-day basis. Interviewees connected this with football being an emotional sport involving passionate tribal support (Lamberti et al., 2022), and comments amplified by social media, all developing a momentum that results in negative sentiment being reinforced. Particularly when on-pitch results are not going well. They also connected the social media negativity with how a significant number of fans or rival fans can feel emboldened to subject others to abusive comments due to their anonymity on Twitter in particular. Clubs indicated this can be overwhelming. Furthermore, clubs questioned the role of wider media and journalists in deliberately using tribalism to increase their own website metrics and following, in addition to the immediacy and instant reactions often provoked within the fan community, discussed in the Bandwagon and The Collective themes (pp.184 and pp.175 respectively). This thesis builds on research into the dark side of social media functionality (Baccarella et al., 2018), with clear evidence of abuse, threats and intimidation in relationships through fans' aggressive engagement in social media conversations. In their tribal support of their club, fans are displaying the negative aspects of a community centred around a shared interest (Baccarella et al., 2018).

Findings underpin the reason why all clubs apart from Case F made a conscious effort not to antagonise the fan community through their social media marketing activity, as discussed in section 5.3.1 (pp.215).

It is suggested here that Case F is reinforcing the boyish banter and masculine framework of tribal football (Cleland et al., 2020), thereby further fuelling argumentative behaviours (Fenton et al., 2021b) and abuse (Baccarella et al., 2018) which can be very unpleasant. Indeed, the findings further highlight the significant challenges and opportunities for organisations and practitioners where direct communication with a diverse audience is easier than ever. In such contexts, negativity and threats can magnify and have significant consequences for marketers and the organisation (Dwivedi et al., 2020).

When analysing the above findings in conjunction with the evidence Case D offered, regarding struggling to attract more female fans to engage on social media (section 5.2.5, pp.204), it would not be unreasonable to suggest the two issues are

connected. Poor on-pitch results lead to relentless negative fan behaviour in the form of comments, expressing strong emotions, all of which previous research has shown female fans have a tendency to dislike and be discouraged by (Gencer, 2015; Sveinson and Hoeber, 2015).

It was clear that practitioners try not to take the social media abuse personally. The main study did identify some techniques that club practitioners use to manage the impact of social media abuse directed at the club. One way is accepting the negative that comes with the positive in a sport that is often emotionally charged (Aichner, 2019), expressed via social media platforms which are very powerful in amplifying messages of any kind (Hazari, 2018). For Case H, another technique used was to turn their applications off after posting on behalf of the club. Case F, despite engaging in banter and being irreverent, stated how they have tried to deal with bad fan behaviour on their branded social media presence.

> "We weren't doing too well in the League and you'd just finish a game and be getting abusive tweet after abusive tweet. You know it's coming, it's just how personally you take it. Because you are the club. You see your colleagues, friends getting absolute dogs abuse. There's nothing you can say because it's social media and you know people do it on a whim. 'Just send something because I'm annoyed and frustrated at the result.' But they're not the only person that's doing it. You've got 100s ticking over. Sometimes you have to send the full-time result, shut your content app and just not look. It can get a bit much and weigh quite heavy on you." (Case H1)

> "We have had internal conflict over how to treat people who come on your timeline and abuse other people. If people use inappropriate language, or making inappropriate comments, we generally come down quite heavy, quite quickly. That's the policy which is being questioned by some of the club saying 'Well you should be more tolerant. You should be allowed to have an off moment.'. But we're talking about having standards and values from the Chairman down to somebody coming to their first game. We had a Board of people who used to meet every week and decide whether we should ban people or give them more warning from various social media but that fell into

disrepair because it was a bit laborious. So now they tend to use their individual judgement." (Case F1)

Regarding the theme of power and clubs operationalising their social media marketing strategy, this main study argues it is best considered a risk:reward ratio. Figure 5-7 provides a perceptual map that allows practitioners to evaluate the potential level of risk against the potential level of reward in content they post. It is intended that the map encourages clubs to be aware of the general feeling their fans have of the club at any given point in time. In their day-to-day operationalisation of the social media marketing strategy, the perceptual map encourages clubs to consider the relative risks and rewards of the social media content they post at the time. The map is not related to social media metrics, (Misirlis and Vlachopoulou, 2018) or any potentially inaccurate sentiment analysis. Each axis is a continuum allowing the nature of social media marketing communication to be located on the perceptual map. For example, a new transfer signing fans have been keen to see announced would likely be placed in the low risk, high reward area. Posting on a new IGTV channel with no prior knowledge or preparation could be placed towards the high risk, high reward area. Depending on which group of fans see a message denouncing homophobia, the club could locate such content in the low risk; high reward area, or the high risk: low reward area. Case A2 is a clear example of a club responding to polarised group discussion from a fan belittling those who do not fit his "ingroup identity" (Baccarella et al., 2018: 434).

> "We've got to be prepared to fail. And that's fine we'll move on fast. Some things have been really successful. And a few are going to be awful. But that's the world we're in. We're all going to be part of this, engage with it, try it. The opportunities far outweigh [negatives] and if they didn't then football clubs wouldn't all be doing it. The opportunity to engage with huge audiences incredibly quickly is a game changer." (Case H3)

> "United did a partnership with Stonewall and this homophobic fan tweeted that he'd rather support [club] than a club that endorses immorality. So I quoted it and said 'We'd rather you didn't' and it's our most successful tweet ever. My boss is a fan of that one. That got national coverage. Respond to

the here and now. When you get stuff out like that people are like 'That's really good', the fans are really proud of what you've done." (Case A2)

"It's absolutely one of the most difficult things because you're always being challenged to stay abreast of current trends and the developing landscape of social. We launched the training wear or away kit. But on the day of launch, we had no idea that Instagram was going to launch IGTV. We quickly scrambled around for our own IGTV channel so that we could be one of the first football clubs that had an IGTV channel. I think we were third behind Man City and Liverpool which isn't too bad right?" (Case B1)

Figure 5-7: Operationalising Power of Social Media Marketing Strategy - Risk:Reward Perceptual Map

Operationalising Power of Social Media Marketing Strategy
Risk:Reward Perceptual Map

High Reward

High Risk

Low Risk

Low Reward

5.3.3 Summary

In conclusion, the themes of Communication, and Power and Impact of Social Media have answered RO2 and examining the operationalisation of social media marketing strategy by football clubs. The findings have shown the iterative, synchronous multi-dimensional nature of developing and implementing social media marketing strategy (Tafesse and Wien, 2018a).

In demonstrating the positive and negative aspects of social media marketing strategy and how this transpires on a day-to-day basis, this main study has made significant contribution to the dark side of social media in the context of football (Baccarella et al., 2018; Fenton et al., 2021a; Fenton et al., 2021b). By providing detailed evidence of how the social media marketing strategy of football clubs is operationalised, this section has addressed the knowledge gap of whether social media marketing strategy informs operational use (Filo et al., 2015). Collectively, the findings in this section have addressed the knowledge gaps summarised in Chapter 2, Table 2-9, pp.102, related to social media marketing strategy (2-6), social media marketing strategy in sport (1-5), and social media brand communities in sport (1, 2, 4).

5.4 The Role of the Brand in Social Media Marketing Communications (RO3)

Research objective three focused on exploring the role of the brand in social media marketing communications of football clubs. It is in the context of social media brand communities and the theme to emerge from the thematic analysis was Badge of Honour.

5.4.1 Badge of Honour

Clubs did not consider the word 'brand' to be an appropriate term, in the context of their club and what it represents to fans. Rather, they considered the club identity as a 'Badge of Honour' that fans are proud to identify with and often display, through their support or visibly, for example in the form of wearing the club shirt.

"We believe it's a badge not a crest. Not a logo. It's a badge, a badge of honour." (Case H3)

"Supporters don't look at the club as a brand." (Case H2)

"Our fans buy into it [quirks of the club] and they wear it as a badge of honour." (Case F1)

"You're walking down the street and you've got your kit on because you're on tour, not the full kit but the tour kit which has the badge on." (Case D1)

The Badge of Honour consisted of the following seven building blocks: values; meaning; community; identity; heritage; emotion; and social media brand communities (SMBC).

Values

In discussing how social media marketing strategy is operationalised, clubs highlighted how their club and brand values are a golden thread running through all social media marketing communications. Values represent standards of behaviour that the club claims to embody and live by. They may change or adapt over time as a club changes ownership or first team manager, however they seek to stay true to the heritage of the club and the grounding nature of those values.

"We have a set of company values that we try to adhere to in everything that we practice so whether that's written comms or visual comms or video, we always try to ensure that it's aligned with a strand or two of our values because that's the outward image that we want to portray to the rest of the world." (Case B1)

"More of an evolution, how the club has developed over time. It's very rare a football supporter will switch off so you almost don't have to worry about losing supporters in that regard." (Case A1)

This Case A1 response could be considered a little vague and somewhat complacent in its attitude towards supporters. It appeared to be out of character to

the rest of the interview, though does still reveal a risk of taking fan support for granted, particularly that of the more casual fans (Fillis and Mackay, 2014), based in seeing sport as being unique (see Case A1 quote in section 5.2 The Collective, pp.176) which is not necessarily the case with less committed fans (Baker et al., 2016).

For all clubs, the values were very closely associated with the community from which they originated and in which they are still central. As Table 5-4 shows, it is evident how the community, and often specifically place, are mentioned in the values stated by six of the eight clubs. Case B had updated their club values and confirmed what they had changed from and to.

Table 5-4: Football Club Values

Case	Values described	
A	Central to town, unifier, family	
B	**From**	**To**
	Community, relationship, progressive, innovative, strong, punchy, powerful	Innovative, benevolent, inspirational, passionate, industrious
C	Community, embedded, positive, strong, professional	
D	Humble, community, global, open, authentic, [name] spirit	
E	Hardworking, community, heritage, history, [region], heartbeat, local, honest, accessible, humble, passionate, personable, respectful	
F	Badge of honour, excellence, unique	
G	Community, honest, humble, hard-working, transparent, family, proud, unique, committed	
H	Badge of honour, strong, history, heritage, humble, community, place, progressive, bright, bold, vivid, unique, family, hard-working	

All eight clubs interviewed had a very clear sense of values that underpin who they are, what they represent, and how they communicate with their fans. All were informed by their Fans Charter, which is required under governing body regulations. Cases B and H were more proactive. Case H produced a "Brand Book" which creatively communicated what their brand and values represent. Case B produced a "Brand Guidelines" which explicitly clarified the tone of voice and the club values. This is evidence of how club values are linked to the 'tone of voice' sub-theme of

Strategic Development, pp.209. (The bold and capitals are in the original document whilst the typeface is changed to anonymise the case.)

> **"The words we write and the things we say are a reflection of our commitment to the Club we serve. The language we use is an important component in building better relationships with our stakeholders and the wider community. So, how does this affect the way we talk to our stakeholders?**
> We know that our stakeholders are straight talking: not unsophisticated, simply not prone to long-windedness. So we need to talk to them clearly and positively, in an approachable, easy-to-understand manner.
> It is important that this tone of voice is adopted and adhered to throughout all communications – one consistent voice must always be projected."

Those values inform the social media marketing strategy of each club and are descriptive of the tone of voice and words used in club social media marketing communications. Hence their prospects of their fans identifying with the content are heightened.

Meaning

Clubs were asked to use words to describe what the club or crest meant to fans. Whilst this main study was from the club perspective, at least one interviewee at every club was able to answer this question from the fan perspective because they were a supporter. Table 5-5 contains the words used in the responses. Those in bold were also used in the table of club values above. This underlines how all clubs perceive their values to match what the club means to their fans and is linked to the notion of shared values in generating trust (Sekhon et al., 2014; Özen, 2019). Again, a link between the strategic development sub-theme of 'tone of voice' is evident, for example Case F. There is also some overlap with the themes of (i)Trust, and The Collective.

Table 5-5: Club Meaning to Fans

Case	Club meaning [to fans]
A	The **town**, **family**, identity, community
B	**Passion**, pride, integrity, determination, excellence, respect, integrity, discipline
C	**Community**, heart of **community**
D	**Community**, **humble**, family, spirited, polite, trendsetters, invested (in community)
E	**Community**, **heartbeat**, **humble**, **local**, lifeblood, focal point, integral, paramount, flag-bearers, identity, welcoming, tradition, true to roots
F	**Badge of honour**, **unique**, quirky, their world, love, passion, remote (geography)
G	**Hard-working**, local, passion, loud and proud, everything
H	**Community**, embodies **place**, **badge of honour**, **heritage**, people, representative, passion, trust, tone of voice, anticipation, means a lot

As with club values, the words used to describe what the club or crest means to fans are used to inform the tone of voice and social media marketing content that is developed. For tone of voice to have a positive impact on brand trust, customers need to be familiar with a brand (Gretry et al., 2017). In using club meaning to fans to inform their tone of voice used in their social media communications, clubs are reinforcing this familiarity. This is further evidence of the importance of brand meaning to fan communities (Filo et al., 2015) which helps each club develop their social media marketing strategy and how to operationalise it.

Community

This building block refers to the club representing place and its people. That each club originated in its community is reflected in every club stating that sense of place and the importance to or of its people.

"The club represents the community and the community represents the football club." (Case G1)

"We see ourselves as a community club that is close to its people. The bulk of our fan base comes from the immediate areas around the stadium. To a lot of people [it] does mean everything. We're proud of where we come from. We're proud of the area. We're proud of the people." (Case E2)

"They see their club as more than their club. It's a representative of their area, their city and they want the club to do well because that means people are talking about us and talking about something they love." (Case F1)

The role of the brand in social media marketing communications is evidently linked to the community it represents and how that community thinks about the club. Such emphasis lies at the heart of the relationship with the local fan community (Cleland et al., 2020; Rivers and Ross, 2021). Such a community fit is illustrative of the difficulties clubs face when balancing their social media marketing strategy to appeal to a local and global audience, in a manner those fans can identify with, as discussed in relation to RO1 and RO2. Equally, the community can help clubs to plan where their social media marketing strategy opportunities for growth are.

> "There's a whole market out there where we have to set our stall out accordingly. Right now we're doing a bit of work to look into the international place. The commonality that might run through something like that is this kind of industrial, hardworking, grafting, community that has many synergies with different places around the world." (Case E1)

The main study is therefore in agreement with recent research demonstrating a strong sense of place is important for fans (Florea et al., 2018) and their social media brand communities (Fenton et al., 2021b).

Identity

This aspect of Badge of Honour is related to how fans identify with each other and the club. It is therefore linked with the social media marketing strategy 'The Collective' theme and operational themes of Communication, and Power and Impact of Social Media. The identity is inextricably linked to the community due to fans identifying with how the club represents them as a group and individuals.

> "[Place] itself is a hardworking, working-class city and that's reflected in the club. Fans expect to see players who are committed and hardworking. It's those traits that supporters really want to see and identify with." (Case G2)

> "We're at the heart of the community. In this sense it linked with how they identify with the badge and thus their chosen football club." (Case E2)

"It's a club that a lot of people have an affiliation to. It's an important club to a lot of people." (Case H1)

This evidence builds on the notion of brand tribalism in sport, based on strong collective identity (Sierra and Taute, 2019). In fans collectively identifying with the club as a Badge of Honour, in addition to each other, the main study argues they underpin the notion of their tribe as supporters. In turn, the tribe reinforces their collective identity and club affiliation. What that tribal identity is founded on is the club heritage and community they represent. This study is further evidence of bonding social capital between fans in social media brand communities (Fenton et al., 2021b), and tribal fan identities (Knijnik and Newson, 2020), through the role of the brand.

Heritage

This building block is cemented in the foundations of club history, the associated brand narrative. It encapsulates the history and traditions of the club. Heritage is specific and representative of the town/city/region the club represents, for example the football ground, the culture of their supporters and wider area/community. As clubs go through the inevitable ups and downs of football success and failure, they may adapt the brand narrative. Case H was one such example thanks to promotion to the EPL. Clubs then decide how to communicate that story operationally and through their social media marketing strategy.

"It does have heritage. It has the history of adversity but overcoming adversity." (Case E1)

"We felt it was very important to actually take that story back and understand what [Club] has to have in terms of its narrative, history, heritage and where it's come from, but what it needs to look like." (Case H3)

"These things have been growing for a century so it's really about harnessing that. Take that brand and not change it but just help elevate it and make it appealing globally. There is a deliberate attempt now to try and change the way that our players, staff and fans think about the club and approach the

game which hopefully means that our brand will even strengthen in the future with success." (Case H2)

All clubs use their heritage in social media marketing communications with fans, just as in many other sports (Meng et al., 2015). For example in section 5.3.1 Case E had given the example of 'On this day' posts being used to successfully engage fans. They were typical of the sentiment of all clubs in saying "We see ourselves as a club that values its roots" (Case E2) and will evoke heritage through their social media marketing content. A brief review of social media marketing timelines of each case confirmed they will feature artefacts such as old footage, imagery, banners, flags and chants and club anthems supporters collectively perform during the match. Fans will often feature in those artefacts, for example being recognised as 'the twelfth man', thereby enhancing fan identity. As other research has demonstrated, club imagery is an effective means of engaging fans through social media marketing (Vale and Fernandes, 2018). The use of such imagery and footage in social media marketing strategy content furthers knowledge that tone of voice includes other elements of communication style, such as graphic elements, and musicality of language (Gretry et al., 2017).

Emotion

Expressions of support, positive and negative are evident in this building block. Clubs frequently articulated how this is based in supporter passion for the club. Fans emotionally connect with the badge and are keen to show their strength of feeling towards the team and club.

"They enjoy showing that they have a passion and love for the Football Club and it's almost like wearing the shirt by showing that you are supportive of the Football Club." (Case B1)

"They see themselves being as loud and as vocal and passionate as anyone." (Case G1)

"It is all emotion. Football is an emotional sport." (Case A2)

As discussed in sections 5.2 (pp.163) and 5.3 (pp.215), clubs use their social media marketing strategy to harness the passion of their supporters, both on a collective and individual supporter basis. The role of the brand in social media communications is therefore to arouse strong positive feeling towards the club. That sense of positive emotional attachment is illustrative of how clubs use Brand Love to engage their fans with social media content (Baena, 2016; Vale and Fernandes, 2018). It also adds to knowledge associated with marketing to passionate football supporters (Lamberti et al., 2022). This main study has therefore shown both the risks and rewards of clubs arousing strong feelings in their social media brand community due to the power of social media.

Social Media Brand Community (SMBC)

This building block refers to the fan community being assembled and connected around shared interest. In the context of this main study, that is the club. This block connects all the others as it brings together each aspect of the role of the brand in social media marketing communications. Throughout this main study, all clubs have emphasised the critical importance of social media marketing strategy to them. As previously quoted one club stated it is "at the heart of everything we stand for and do." (Case D2).

In summary, in accordance with RO3, this main study finds that it is the role of the brand to utilise each of the other blocks in the 'Brand as Badge of Honour' honeycomb, to ensure fans continue to be assembled and feel connected around their shared interest of the club. This is how clubs can "cultivate the brand community upon which customers [their fans] rely on as an importance source of information" (Ebrahim, 2020: 304). Based on the above evidence, Figure 5-8 illustrates the different features of Brand as Badge of Honour. This purpose of this honeycomb is to help social media brand community practitioners readily identify the range of factors that they can use to inform their social media marketing communications. For example, some communications may place community and heritage to the fore. At other times, a club could feature fans as a means of showcasing the emotion and passion they feel for the club and how they identify with it. All six outer blocks are directly linked to the social media brand community which sits at the centre of the honeycomb. It is argued that this approach is likely to

lead to more engaged and successful social media brand communities for football clubs.

5.4.2 Summary

To conclude in relation to RO3, the role of the brand in social media marketing communications of football clubs has been explored. It has resulted in the 'Brand as Badge of Honour' honeycomb to provide a series of building blocks to help with embedding brand into social media marketing strategy and how it is operationalised, principally through social media brand communities. The evidence of the main study and resulting framework provides a contribution to knowledge of branding in the context of social media (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014; Florea et al., 2018; Christodoulides et al., 2021)

The findings in this section have addressed the knowledge gaps summarised in Chapter 2, Table 2-9 (pp.102) related to social media marketing strategy (2, 5), and social media brand communities in sport (1-4).

Figure 5-8: Brand as Badge of Honour

5.5 Proposing a Framework for Social Media Marketing Strategy (RO4)

The framework encapsulates the findings of all aspects of this main study, namely social media marketing strategy, operationalising social media marketing strategy, and the role of the brand in social media marketing communications. The Social Media Marketing Strategy Value Proposition Planner is presented in Figure 5-9 and described below. Rather than a model based on linear stages of strategy development, this framework encourages an iterative process.

It is the first social media marketing strategy framework based on sport and specifically the football sector. The fans' circle is the result of findings contained within The Collective and Theme 3: Bandwagon. The circle is based on: (i) why football clubs believe fans use social media; and (ii) factors that clubs review to explore what fans need from club social media. It relates why and how football clubs believe their fans use social media to follow and engage with the club and each other. By understanding the four areas of passion, community, esteem, and information and entertainment, football clubs will have a much clearer idea of what needs and expectations their fans have of the club social media marketing strategy.

To use the planner, it is recommended those responsible for developing the strategy first focus on the fan circle. Information should be gathered to answer each of the questions posed in each segment. Those answers are then used to populate each respective segment of the planner (Figure 5-9). or example, in the 'Community' segment, clubs would research 'Which platforms are fans present on?' and then populate the detail in the planner. As the 'Bandwagon' theme highlighted, this led clubs to explore Snapchat and consider whether it was a platform they should establish a presence on.

External factors that influence fans and the club alike should also be examined. They include: governing body and league; broadcasting rights; digital and social media landscape; and sporting landscape. Such insights help in recognising how fan behaviour may change and how clubs need to evolve their social media marketing strategy.

The organisation square is the club response to the detail contained in the fan circle. Thematic analysis in this main study helped to identify how to develop the social media marketing strategy in each of these iterative stages: scoping and planning (strategy); implementation (operationalising); and monitoring and evaluation. To use the planner, decisions should be made on each aspect detailed inside segment of the square. In doing so, external factors above the square should be factored in, such as goals of the organisation and resources. For example, if, through their completion of the Fans circle, clubs have identified there is an opportunity with Snapchat. In the 'Scoping & Planning' area, they would examine if it fits into 'Platforms we can resource'. They may then need achieve 'Stakeholder buy-in' by

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convincing colleagues it is worth trialling Snapchat. Cases A and F were examples of clubs where a younger member of the team needed to gain approval of an older, more senior colleague to do so. Regarding the 'Implementation' area, they may adapt their tone of voice due to 'Platform differentiation' as illustrated by Case D.

Other factors that impact on the club should also be examined. They include club: values; vision; goals; culture; ownership; and resources. Clubs are then better placed to ascertain how they ensure their evolving social media marketing strategy is aligned to the club, in addition to what is feasible at that point in time.

The central circle of trust is integral to the mutually beneficial relationship between club and fans, with the club supported being the unifier of both parties. This is crucial to successful social media marketing strategy of football clubs and is where they should consider the role of the brand as a 'Brand as Badge of Honour' in their social media communications (Figure 5-8).

Overall, in seeking to achieve a match between the organisation square and fans circle, the social media marketing strategy builds trust between fans and the unifying club.

Endorsements from Cases

"The model is excellent and reflects the ever-growing importance of trust sports clubs should integrate into their dialogical communications and social media mix. With clubs embodying the DNA of the communities they represent, trust is expected by supporters which will enhance the loyalty they show in the team they follow." (Case A1)

"I like the model; it makes sense to me. Very comprehensive." (Case D2)

5.6 Chapter Summary

In achieving the four research objectives of the main study, this chapter has provided evidence and discussion that addresses all of the knowledge gaps shown in Table 2-9, pp.102, of Chapter 2, the Literature Review. By discussing the findings in relation to the extant literature, the chapter has also established how the findings

have generated new insights and have extended prior knowledge. This chapter has provided three conceptual frameworks which address the research objectives of the main study: (i) the Social Media Marketing Strategy Value Proposition Planner (RO4, and based on RO1, RO2, RO3); (ii) the Risk:Reward Perceptual Map (RO2); and (iii) the Brand as Badge of Honour honeycomb (RO3).

The next chapter provides further conceptual frameworks related to the overall aim of evolving use of social media marketing strategy, in the context of English football clubs.

Figure 5-9: Social Media Marketing Strategy Value Proposition Planner
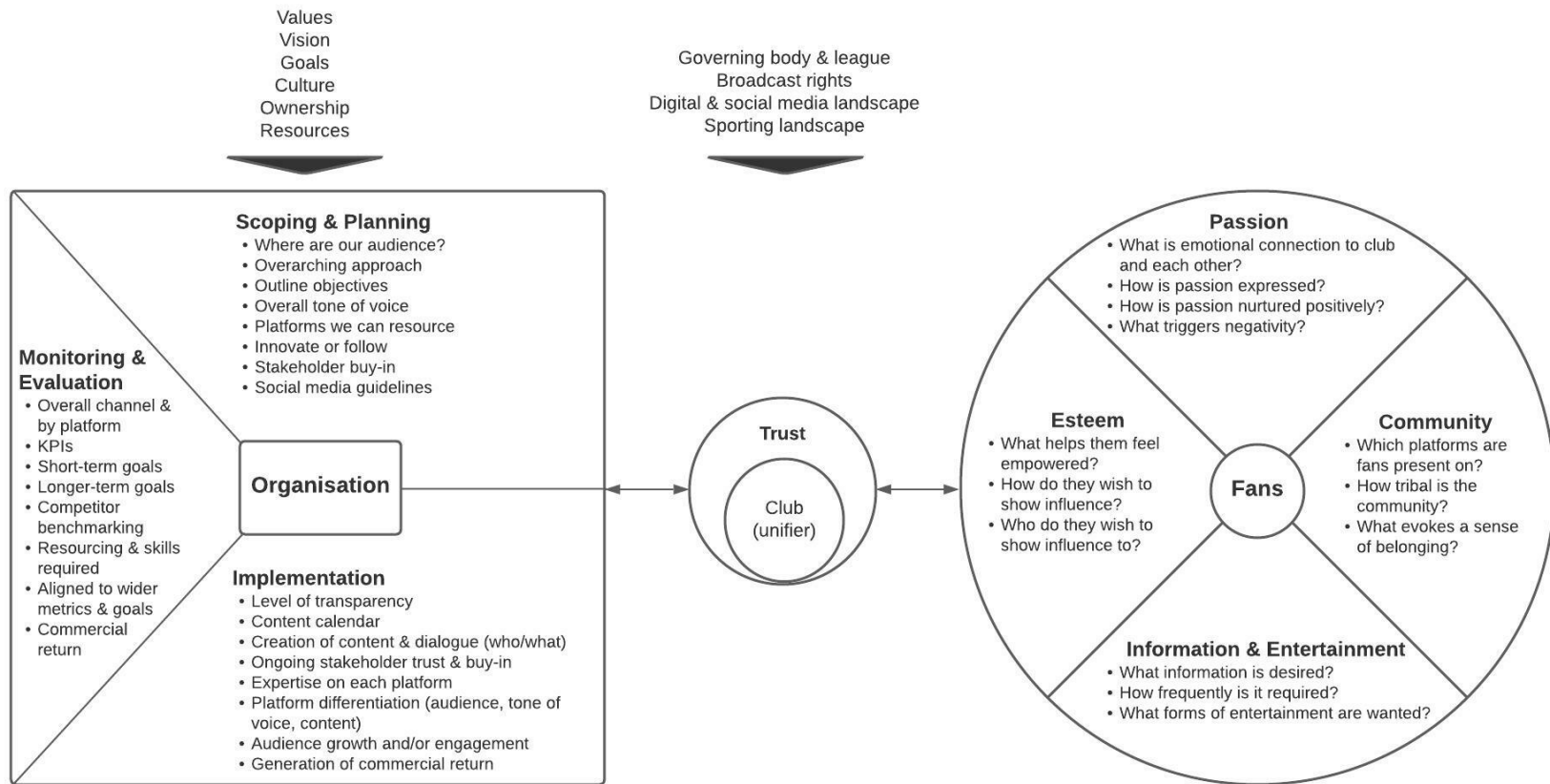
Source: McCarthy et al. (2022) Figure 1. Social media marketing strategy value proposition planner, pp. 523

6 Abstracting From This Study

6.1 Introduction

This study has explored the evolving organisational approaches to social media marketing strategy and examined how this is operationalised. It has also explored the role of the brand in social media marketing communications. Findings and discussion of the main study have made comparisons to those of the preliminary study, to demonstrate how understanding and practice of social media marketing strategy has evolved and become more sophisticated over the eight-year period. This chapter provides a temporal comparison (Halinen et al., 2012), to demonstrate how levels of sophistication of social media marketing strategy have evolved over time, and the forces that shape this. The chapter also visualises where each club is in relation to the different stages of social media marketing strategy development of their social media marketing strategy, together with the forces that shape it. Relative to other clubs in this study, Case D is positioned as the most sophisticated, whilst Case G is the least.

6.2 Evolving Sophistication Levels

The levels of sophistication of social media marketing strategy have evolved consistently over the eight-year period of this study. The unit of observation is the practitioners interviewed. The unit of analysis is the industry, which in this context is social media marketing and football.

Based on insights from practitioners with extensive experience, this research helps address the social media marketing strategy research gaps (Li et al., 2020) by building on previous frameworks (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Chung et al., 2017; Felix et al., 2017). The findings have shown that progress for social media marketing strategy is not a smooth, linear process of constant improvement. Rather, it is akin to a sine wave with uneven oscillations. Figure 6-1 shows an overall trajectory of improvement over time, shaped by incremental ups and downs as industry forces impact on social media marketing strategy. The T1 circle represents the preliminary study and T2 circle represents the main study. Each force can be upwards (enabling) or downwards (constraining) as organisations, in this case football clubs,

adapt to those industry forces. The oscillations therefore reflect the risk:reward ratio discussed and conceptualised in section 5.3.2. The oscillations also signify the need for clubs to try new approaches and tactics in their social media marketing strategy: being prepared to fail, to learn by doing so, and improve overall in the process.

Figure 6-1: Social Media Marketing Strategy: Evolving Sophistication Levels
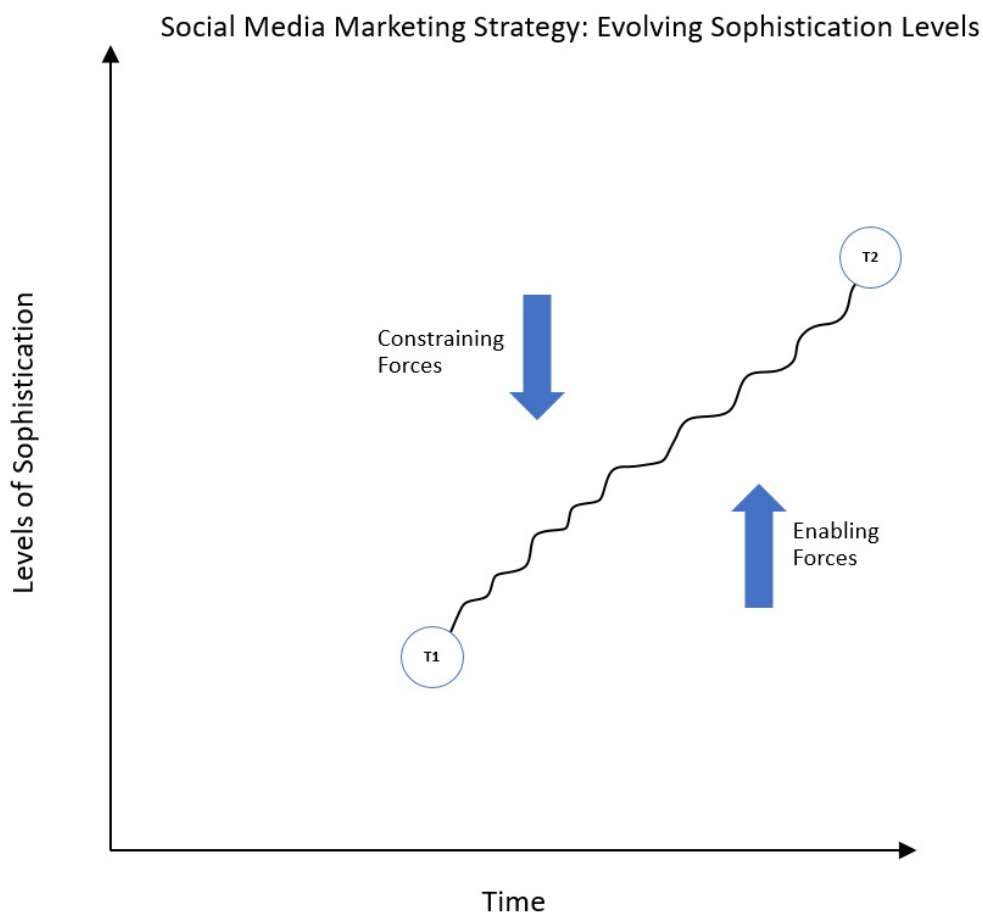
Based on the evidence of this study, the industry forces that impact on evolving sophistication levels of social media marketing strategy are visualised in Figure 6-2. The vertical 'Social Media Marketing' forces could be applicable to any organisation and industry engaged in social media marketing strategy. The horizontal 'Sport (Football)' forces are applicable to sports organisations and social media marketing strategy.

The digital and social media marketing landscape constantly changes as technology evolves and social media companies continue to grow or emerge. Included in the landscape are such factors as access to 4G and 5G, wifi, larger smartphone screens and tablets. Other perpetual developments include new social media platforms

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launching, with organisations having to examine if they should establish a presence on them, depending on who is using it and why. Football clubs may have become increasingly sophisticated in their use of established platforms like Twitter and Facebook, then find their level of sophistication may plateau temporarily as they launch a brand presence on a relatively newer platform such as Snapchat. By its very nature, a new presence on a new platform is exploratory. Football clubs have tended not to develop a strategy before establishing a brand social media marketing presence. Instead, clubs have often explored and experimented on each platform that is new to them and learned by doing, in a more tactical sense. As they learn and experience the oscillations, they gradually become more sophisticated and begin to develop a more strategic approach.

The shift from organic to paid social media is another factor. Through changing social media algorithms, designed to generate or increase profits of social media companies, clubs are gradually being pushed to invest in paid social media marketing. They are therefore forced to learn what paid activity works and how to measure their effectiveness, using any return on investment in their business case for further budget for paid social media marketing. Analytics provided by each social media platform, also facilitate organisations being able to derive more insights to inform their social media marketing strategy. The level of insight can vary, with more established platforms providing more comprehensive data.

Football clubs developing a brand presence in a new language, often use a translator service initially, before transitioning to using more local native speakers who work in collaboration with the main social media marketing strategy team of the organisation. In keeping with expansion of a global audience, a club may establish a presence on a platform more specific to a country, such as the Weibo platform to target a Chinese audience. Such evolving approaches require learning new social media marketing practices on platforms in cultures less familiar to the organisation, such as an English football club.

All the above insights link to the Bandwagon sub-theme of constant change (section 5.2.3, pp.184) which demonstrated how clubs are continually learning from the ever-changing social media landscape. Practitioners in organisations such as football clubs must learn and re-learn what may prove effective and what may not. What works can also differ according to platform. For example, how to appeal to an

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audience who have different expectations of the experience they will enjoy on Instagram compared to Twitter. Similarly, experimenting with using influencers or a non-sporting presence. Clubs continue to learn whether a micro or macro influencer is more appropriate for helping them to reach new audiences and who that may be. The need for a social media marketing strategy to be fluid and adaptable is key to success, as is reviewing the strategy itself more than once per year.

The evidence also demonstrates how football clubs, like other organisations, can benefit from responding appropriately to societal issues. The example of Case A benefitting from a response to a homophobic tweet from a fan of another club, is evidence of clubs promoting inclusivity through their social media marketing strategy, gaining overwhelmingly positive engagement and reach in the process.

The other forces that impact on social media marketing strategy are more specific to the industrial sector of the organisation. In the case of this research this is the sporting landscape and more specifically football. For example, how, where and when fans are consuming sports content. What is permitted by governing body rules and regulations, in addition to agreements with football clubs in this instance. Success and failure linked to results in league or cup competitions have a significant impact on enabling or constraining social media marketing strategy.

This research has clearly evidenced how positive results for a football club make the chances of successful social media marketing strategy easier for clubs. For example, promotion to EPL enables clubs to benefit from a much wider global presence, thanks mainly to global broadcast rights, leading to clubs identifying new opportunities to grow their social media marketing audience. Engagement of fans is easier when results are positive, and this study has shown that social media marketing engagement can in fact also lead to growth of an audience. Linked to the tribal nature of football and the passion of fans for the club they support, clubs have benefitted from being responsive to the insatiable appetite their audience has for club information. Clubs have been clear about such information boosting fan esteem by empowering them to share information to their own networks in the fan community. These insights build on research of how tribalism in sport is used by brands (Sierra and Taute, 2019).

Regarding constraining forces, the study has also revealed how the power and impact of social media can amplify the dark side of social media, thereby contributing to calls to understand this negative aspect of social media (Baccarella et al., 2018; Dwivedi et al., 2020). In a tribal and emotional sport such as football, first team results or boyish banter can fuel argumentative or abusive behaviours, to the point they can become overwhelming for practitioners. Similarly, such behaviours can lead to the alienation of fans in a relative minority due to, for example, gender, race, or sexuality. This dark side of social media marketing strategy is an opportunity for building on the growing body of research in this area (e.g. Baccarella et al., 2018; Hansen et al., 2022).

Figure 6-2 therefore highlights how industry forces associated with social media marketing and sport, in this case football, influence the social media marketing strategy of an organisation. Each of the forces present an opportunity and a threat for organisations. Social media marketing strategy levels of sophistication do not decrease over time, rather they slow down or accelerate, based on the extent to which organisations are enabled or constrained by the forces shown in the model.

Figure 6-2: Enabling and Constraining Industry Forces of Social Media Marketing Strategy

Enabling and Constraining Industry Forces of Social Media Marketing Strategy

Social Media Marketing
Digital & social media landscape
New social media platforms
Social media platform algorithms
Social media platform analytics

Sport (Football)
Sporting landscape
Governing body and league/competition
Broadcasting rights

Social Media Marketing Strategy:
Enabling & Constraining Industry Forces

Sport (Football)
Audience growth and engagement
Insatiable audience appetite for information
Passion (of tribal community of fans)
Esteem of fans

Social Media Marketing
New language or country platform presence
Audience expectations of each social media platform experience
Societal issues (e.g. DEI)
Influencers

6.3 Stages of Social Media Marketing Strategy Development

As Table 5-3 (pp.212) in Chapter 5 showed, clubs involved in this study were scored in terms of the strategic development of their social media marketing strategy. Coupled with the findings and discussion in section 5.3 (pp.215). regarding the operational implementation of their strategies, it is evident that clubs are at different stages of their social media marketing strategy journey. The unit of observation is again the practitioners interviewed whilst the unit of analysis is the eight organisations at the time of the main study.

The findings have demonstrated that each club is at a different stage in the development and implementation of its social media marketing strategy. Figure 6-3 locates each football club according to their stages of social media marketing strategy stages of development, as at the time of the main study. Each club placement is based on the score attributed to each club in Chapter 5 Table 5-3 (pp.212) in addition to the qualitative insights from the thematic analysis. Each club is labelled according to its Case letter, Table 3-3 (pp.122) Chapter 3. Regardless of position, as the evidence in Chapter 5 has demonstrated, clubs' social media marketing strategies have evolved through learning-by-doing and observing other clubs and organisations. From their initial exploratory introduction to social media marketing strategy and establishing their branded presence, all clubs have transitioned through a rapid growth stage, focused on audience numbers. There then comes a level of plateau, classified here as maturity, as clubs continue to roll out established practice. This is followed by repeated cycles of ongoing growth and maturity, with clubs varying in the extent to which they can adapt to the changing social media marketing landscape and audience expectations.

Whilst every club stated the importance of authenticity in their relationship with the collective of their football fans, there was considerable variation in stages of development. As was evident in Chapter 5, Case D was the most advanced in its strategic development and implementation of social media marketing strategy. It was often cited by other clubs as being an exemplar. The evidence demonstrated how important wider forces such as human and financial resources were to facilitating such progress. The starkest examples of the difference in resources and expertise was in their having a team dedicated to social media marketing analytics, in addition to having by far the largest budget for paid social media marketing. Similarly, the club vision had been to fully embrace digital communication, including innovative use of social media, as a key element in their vision and goals as a club. Case B was another innovator, with quantifiable goals, a formal written strategy aligned with other departments and a tone of voice in keeping with club and brand values. However, it was not as sophisticated as Case D in such areas as monitoring and evaluation using social media marketing insights. Case B also had to demonstrate return on investment of paid social media to gain further budgetary approval from internal stakeholders and avoid having to rely on organic social media marketing activity.

Like Case B, all other cases at a less advanced stage of development than Case D frequently mentioned lack of or limited resources as a club factor influencing their social media marketing strategy. One impact of this was that all other cases did not benefit from the same opportunities as Case D, for beta testing new techniques in partnership with social media platforms and their platform iterations, such as IGTV. Such benefits are only likely to increase the chances of the stages of development gap between very wealthy clubs and those with less resources growing.

Figure 6-3: Social Media Marketing Strategy: Stages of Development at Main Study
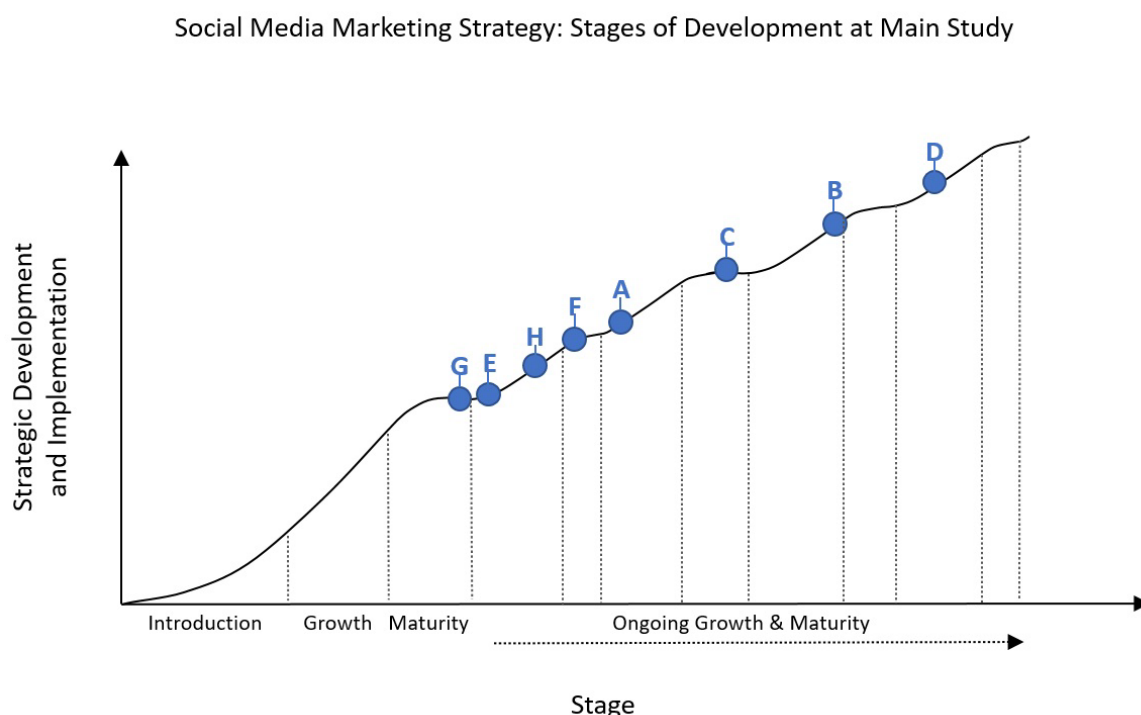
Club placement based on score attributed to each club in Chapter 5, Table 5-3, plus qualitative insights from the thematic analysis.

Case C, despite being one of the smaller clubs, also had a formal written strategy with quantifiable goals, that was aligned with other departments. However, this club was a follower rather than innovator and not as developed as Cases B or D. Cases at the next level down were A and F, both on another stage of growth but with not the same potential as other clubs above or below due to size and their current league positions. Cases H and E were both embarking on further periods of growth, with Case H in particular, rapidly growing its audience and levels of investment due to ownership and promotion to the EPL. Case G was the least developed overall, though it still had a clear view of what it wanted to achieve with its social media marketing strategy.

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Figure 6-4 visualises the forces within each club, that influence the stages of social media marketing strategy development. They are informed by what is unique to each club, plus the Social Media Marketing Strategy Value Proposition Planner, shown in Figure 5-9 (pp. 250) at the end of Chapter 5, notably the 'Organisation' square and the central unifying circle of the framework. The club forces therefore include: Scoping and Planning; Implementation; Monitoring & Evaluation; Content Marketing Strategy and/or Calendar; The Collective; and Club values, vision, goals, culture, ownership, and resources.

Scoping and Planning includes such aspects as which social media platforms the audience are using, the overarching approach of the club to social media marketing strategy, overall tone of voice, stakeholder buy-in. Content Marketing Strategy and/or Calendar relates to how clubs plan the content they use to appeal to their audience and to represent the club, fans, and community. Implementation includes such aspects as level of transparency, ongoing stakeholder trust and buy-in, audience growth and/or engagement. Monitoring and evaluation includes use of metrics and data insights to evaluate social media marketing strategy performance. Then there are the specific club values, vision, goals, culture, ownership, and resources. Finally, the nature of The Collective community of tribal fans is specific to each individual club, hence an important club force related to social media marketing strategy development. They all surround the central forces of Trust and Brand as Badge of Honour. As explained in Chapter 5, the club is the unifier, hence 'Brand as Badge of Honour' around which clubs use social media marketing strategy to build a sense of trust in their relationships with fans.

By being conducted in a football and social media context, this thesis builds on recent articles on social media brand communities in football (Fenton et al., 2021b), the importance of emotional attachment football supporters have to their club (Vale and Fernandes, 2018; Lamberti et al., 2022). More generally it provides further empirical evidence of the role of the brand in a post-social media era (Christodoulides et al., 2021) by conceptualising an example of contemporary brand relationships (Dessart, 2017).

Forces Influencing Stages of Social Media Marketing Strategy Development

6.4 Chapter Summary

In summary, Figure 6-2 visualises the industry forces this study has identified as enabling and constraining social media marketing strategy. The social media marketing industry forces are applicable to any organisation involved in social media marketing strategy activity. Those in the horizontal forces are more specific to sporting and football organisations. Figure 6-1 illustrates how these forces cause oscillations in the evolving levels of sophistication of social media marketing strategy, over time.

Figure 6-3 offers a visualisation of the ongoing lifecycle stages clubs advance, with each located based on the evidence of the main study. The organisation-level forces influencing stages of social media marketing strategy development of each of the

eight clubs featured in the main study are conceptualised in Figure 6-4. It links with the Social Media Marketing Strategy Value Proposition Planner (Figure 5-9, pp. 250) which features a club-fan relationship based on trust around the unifying club 'Brand as Badge of Honour'. The next chapter now provides a conclusion of the entire thesis.

7 Conclusions and Future Research Agendas

7.1 Introduction

The overall aim of this research was to explore the evolving use of social media marketing strategy in the context of English football clubs. The main study built on the preliminary study where the aim was to examine the issues and benefits English football clubs faced in relation to social media marketing strategy development. This chapter reflects on the whole study to provide a conclusion to the thesis. Table 7-1 summarises the knowledge gaps and associated contributions to knowledge, definitions, and frameworks. Key contributions to knowledge and theory are then explained, prior to each research objective of the main study being reviewed in turn, demonstrating that all objectives have been met. Comparison to the preliminary study is made to demonstrate how social media marketing strategy has evolved during the period of this phased research. The chapter then summarises the contributions to practice before proposing a future research agenda.

Table 7-1: Knowledge Gaps and Associated Contributions to Knowledge, Definitions, and Frameworks

Preliminary Study			
Thematic Area	**Knowledge Gap**	**Contributions Addressing Knowledge Gap**	**Associated Framework or Definition**
SNS and Social Media	1. A need for deeper understanding of social media, to inform strategic decisions on employing social media to engage and influence customers (Hoffman and Novak, 2012) 2. Lack of research related to online fan interaction, which is an area that needs to be taken seriously by academics (Gibbons and Dixon, 2010). 3. One of the most under-researched and understood areas relates to the best ways in which companies should organize and manage social media (Aral et al., 2013).	Perceived issues from the brand perspective are: • Control of Conversation (wary of lack of control and impact of negative brand-related conversations involving fans and rival fans). • Fan Engagement (clubs historically reticent to engage directly with fans). • Commercialisation (a fear there would be too much focus on advertisements and product promotion). Perceived benefits from the brand perspective are: • Content (a chance to create new and exclusive content for their fans, that is different to existing website content). • Interaction (an opportunity to encourage interaction between fans as well as with the club) • Community (generating a sense of community among the fan base, giving them a chance to show their support of the club). • Revenue Generation (through directing higher levels of website traffic, plus longer-term gains of influencing fan purchases).	Conceptualised framework of Key Emergent Themes: Social Media Marketing Strategy in the Football Industry – Brand Management Perspective (Figure 4-1, pp.159).
Branding and Social Media	1. A gap exists in research tracing the dynamism of brand communities in the context of social media. Longitudinal studies enable more insight (Laroche et al., 2012). 2. A rethink of brand theory in light of post-internet branding and social media (Christodoulides, 2009; Fisher and Smith, 2011; Hanna et al., 2011). 3. A major gap in research related to brand building potential for global brands (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013).		
Community and Relationships in Football	1. A need to identify factors that firms could manage the uncertainty of web-based relationships (Veloutsou et al., 2002). 2. A lack of understanding of fan relationships in the sports industry (Adamson et al., 2006), especially since the advent of social media (McLean and Wainwright, 2009).		

Main Study			
Thematic Area	**Knowledge Gap**	**Contributions to Thematic Area Addressing Knowledge Gap**	**Associated Framework or Definition**
Social Media Marketing Strategy	1.Social media marketing strategy is under-researched in individual industry contexts (Felix et al., 2017; Tafesse and Wien, 2018a; Dwivedi et al., 2020).	• Social media marketing strategy researched in a football industry context.	Conceptualised framework of Social Media Marketing Strategy Value Proposition Planner (Figure 5-9, pp.250).
	2.Research using insights from experienced social media marketing practitioners will help to address the disconnect between academia and practice that has been identified (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016).	• Social media marketing strategy researched in a football industry context. • Insights and understandings generated from 18 experienced practitioners at eight clubs, plus two independent expert practitioners.	
	3.Factors influencing the development and management of social media marketing strategy are under-researched (Alalwan et al., 2017; Li et al., 2020).	• Factors influencing the development and management of social media marketing strategy across a range of platforms are: (i) Trust; (ii) The Collective; (iii) Bandwagon; (iv) Content Marketing Strategy; and (v) Strategic Development. • External stakeholders, such as influential fan groups, social media companies, broadcasters, and commercial partners, are all important to a successful social media marketing strategy. • Over the duration of this study, social media marketing strategy has evolved significantly. For example, the change in communication from broadcasting to their audience, to now interacting and engaging with them. • There is a shift from focusing on audience growth, to a focus on audience engagement and interaction, which in turn, are shown to increase growth. • Fan engagement itself is not fully understood by clubs. The concept of 'engagement' is often confused with 'interaction', therefore the terms are used interchangeably by clubs. They often class interactive behaviours as engagement, quantifiably measuring and reporting them as the latter. • Clubs are therefore focusing more on gaining both fan interaction and fan engagement through evolving their content marketing strategy. • For a global social media marketing strategy to reach and engage new audiences, employing people local to the countries being targeted is a more effective approach than using translator services.	Definition of social media marketing strategy (pp.57).

4. There is limited understanding of social media marketing strategy that incorporates a wider range of platforms (Dwivedi et al., 2020) and explores differences in approach according to the social media platforms being used in practice (Alves et al., 2016; Valos et al., 2017).	• Social media marketing strategy is subject to ongoing change and a willingness to adapt to existing platform iterations and new platforms emerging. Strategy is reviewed at least twice per year.	

5. The role of trust in social media marketing strategy of brands is limited (Alalwan et al., 2017).	• Trust plays a central role in effective social media marketing strategy of football clubs, unifying the club and fans around the club brand.
	  • Trust is gained by clubs using their social media marketing strategy to facilitates more open and transparent dialogue from the club, including senior internal stakeholders .
	  • Public backing of external stakeholders, such as influential fan groups, facilitates trust with the wider tribal fan base. Collaborating with influential fan groups, and educating internal stakeholders (colleagues), empowers them to offer such public backing.
	  • Football clubs will vary how open they are, depending on circumstances. Trust is not given unequivocally by clubs as they still want to retain an element of control over brand-related discussion.	

6. How marketing insights, arising from social media marketing activity, inform social media marketing strategy is in need of further research (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016; Keegan and Rowley, 2017).	• Data insights are playing an increasingly important role in informing social media marketing strategy, however the extent to which it is used is very dependent on resources.	Conceptualisation of Diversity, Relevance, and Insights of Content Marketing Strategy (Figure 5-4, pp.202).

Thematic Area	Knowledge Gap	Contributions to Thematic Area Addressing Knowledge Gap	Associated Framework or Definition

Social Media Marketing Strategy in Sport	1. There is a lack of European based studies of social media marketing in sport (Eagleman, 2013; Filo et al. 2015). Even less examining social media marketing based on empirical insights from football clubs (Fenton et al., 2021b).
	
	2. Comparatively very few studies have explored social media marketing in sports from the perspective of the organisation. The vast majority are fan/consumer-based studies. (Filo et al., 2015; De Beer and Stander, 2016; Vale and Fernandes, 2018).
	
	3. The range of sports being researched needs to be widened (Hambrick, 2012; Stavros et al., 2014; Meng et al., 2015), particularly a wider range of football leagues and clubs (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015).
		• Insights have been generated from experienced practitioners at English football clubs, in different levels of the football league pyramid, providing a rare club/brand perspective. This offers a contrast to the fan-based literature.
		• Clubs have found their fans have an insatiable appetite for club information, fuelled by their passionate support of the club, and their social capital.
		  • The special features of sport inform social media marketing strategy of clubs. For example, in their content marketing strategy, in how they encourage tribal fan interaction and engagement.
		  • The use of influencers and a non-sporting presence for football clubs demonstrates the importance of a social media marketing strategy that embraces the concept of 'sportainment'.
		• The evolving culture of football clubs is evident in their reliance on younger members of their team to use social media marketing strategy to effectively communicate with their fans. Certainly when concerned with newer social media platforms that older colleagues are less likely to use.
		  • The more intuitive understanding of those platforms by younger staff members means clubs are increasingly less reliant on older, typically male senior executives to communicate with their audience.
		  • The input of social media companies, themselves consisting of more diverse workforces than football clubs, suggests the culture of football clubs is slowly changing.
		  • Football club recognition that the need to more sensitive to, and inclusive for, a wider range of audiences suggests that, while the prevailing male hegemony and masculine culture of football still dominates, it is being questioned.
			Conceptualisation of Social Media Marketing Strategy: Evolving Sophistication Levels (Figure 6-1, pp.252).
			
			Conceptualised framework of Enabling and Constraining Industry Forces of Social Media Marketing Strategy (Figure 6-2, pp.256).
			
			Conceptualisation of Social Media Marketing Strategy: Stages of Development at Main Study (Figure 6-3, pp.258).
			
			Conceptualisation of Evolving Approach from Operational to more Strategic Social Media Marketing (Figure 5-6, pp.225).
			
			Conceptualisation of Operationalising Power of Social Media Marketing Strategy Risk:Reward Perceptual Map (Figure 5-7, pp.235).

	4. A gap exists in how football clubs adapt their social media marketing strategy as they become more sophisticated in their use of social media platforms (De Beer and Stander, 2016), and there is a gap in sport research incorporating a wider range of social media marketing platforms (Filo et al., 2015).	• This phased study has enabled a temporal analysis of how football clubs have adapted their social media marketing strategy as they have become more sophisticated in using a wider range of social media marketing platforms. • Point mapping is a useful data analysis technique for a research methodology exploring changes in practice over time. • Football clubs began with operational use of social media marketing. As they have become more sophisticated over time, they have increasingly developed social media marketing strategies that are then operationalised.	

	5. The question of whether social media marketing strategy informs operational use is under-researched (Filo et al., 2015).	• Operationalising of social media marketing strategy is based around two themes: Communication; and Power and Impact of Social Media. • Operationally, there are constant balances to be struck with: (i) engaging different groups of fans; (ii) testing and adapting tone of voice; (iii) balancing the volume and quality of social media posts; and (iv) commercial pressures and the need to appeal to fans. • Tone of voice is contextual. Adapting the tone of voice to fit fan sentiment shows how it can facilitate favourable perceptions. • New social media platforms give clubs an opportunity to test a slightly different tone of voice to attract and engage new audiences.	

Thematic Area	Knowledge Gap	Contributions to Thematic Area Addressing Knowledge Gap	Associated Framework or Definition

Social Media Brand Communities in Sport	1. Research of what brands do to encourage customer engagement in social media brand communities is limited (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Gong, 2018; Zanini et al., 2019).
	
	2. "Qualitative research with executives and marketing managers could provide insights into how different social media outlets form part of the club's overall social media strategy, the extent to which different tools fulfil different brand building functions." (Parganas et al., 2015: 565).
	
	3. The ever-evolving discipline of sport marketing research needs to take into account social media use (Manoli, 2018).
	
	4. The extent to which social media for marketing and communication activities is used by football clubs is a significant gap in the literature (Aichner, 2019).
		• 'Badge of Honour' is considered a more appropriate term than 'Brand', for football clubs.
		• The role of the brand is therefore as 'Badge of Honour'.
		  • Badge of Honour consists of seven building blocks which can help encourage fan engagement: values; meaning; community; identity; heritage; emotion; and social media brand communities.
		  • Tone of voice for the brand is closely linked to club values, and to what the club means to fans. Club heritage is used in brand communications to show that tone of voice in context.
		  • The role of the brand in social media marketing communications is linked to the community it represents and how the community feel about the club.
		  • Social media marketing platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat fulfil brand awareness, brand trust, supporter loyalty, and brand love.
			Conceptualised framework of the Brand as Badge of Honour honeycomb (Figure 5-8, pp.246).

7.2 Contributions to Knowledge and Theory

Five clear contributions to knowledge and theory can be taken from the findings of the main study. **The first contribution** is to social media marketing strategy theory and is that of the 'Social Media Marketing Strategy Value Proposition Planner' (Figure 5-9, pp.250). The research extends the theoretical understanding provided by other frameworks (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Chung et al., 2017; Felix et al., 2017). Figure 5-9 is the first social media marketing strategy framework based solely on sport, specifically football, and was published in Soccer & Society (Appendix 11

Soccer & Society Paper (Main Study), and achieves Research Objective 4. That paper is a direct contribution to knowledge of social media marketing strategy in sport (Fenton et al., 2021b; Filo et al., 2015). Endorsed by the practitioners who were participants in the main study, the framework offers a highly usable approach to developing and evolving a social media marketing strategy that considers the ever-changing landscapes of digital and social media, and sport. It is also a framework that is both outward and inward looking. In developing a social media marketing strategy that meets fan needs, and is in accordance with what the club is able and willing to do, clubs are able to develop a mutually beneficial relationship with fans, based on trust around the unifying club brand (as a Badge of Honour). It is envisaged this framework will be applicable to other team sports, such as Rugby League and Rugby Union, Cricket, Basketball. It would also be relevant for team-based competitions of other sports. For example, the Ryder Cup (golf) and the Davis Cup (tennis). In teaching, it has already proven useful for in consumer and business marketing by replacing the word 'fans' with 'audience' or 'customer', and by replacing the word 'club' with 'organisation'.

The second contribution is to knowledge and is the identification of five themes relating to the evolving organisational approaches of football clubs to social media marketing strategy. Those themes are: Trust; The Collective; Bandwagon; Content Marketing Strategy; and Strategic Development. Each theme emerged from thematic analysis related to achieving Research Objective 1. Every theme has been shown to strongly feature in how social media marketing strategy has evolved and reflects the dynamic social media and sporting landscape. The themes also signify how football clubs have learned to adapt as much as their resources will allow. This thesis therefore extends knowledge by helping to address the research gap

associated with social media marketing strategies (Li et al., 2020; Varela-Neira et al., 2022).

The third contribution is to knowledge and relates to how football clubs operationalise their social media marketing strategy on a day-to-day basis. By being located in the football industry, this thesis contributes to knowledge of social media marketing strategy in individual industry contexts (Dwivedi et al., 2020), and how that strategy informs operational use (Filo et al., 2015). Only this thesis and the Soccer & Society paper (Appendix 11   Soccer & Society Paper (Main Study) have examined how several football clubs in different leagues operationalise across multiple platforms. On a tactical level, it is evident that there are constant balances to be struck when implementing social media marketing strategy: (i) how to engage different groups of fans, for example based on location; (ii) testing and adapting tone of voice on newer platforms, in accordance with the audience expectations and the experience offered by each platform; (iii) balancing the volume and quality of social media posts; and (iv) commercial imperatives and the need to inform and entertain the fan base. The power and impact of social media communication means clubs can enjoy the positives of social media marketing and will struggle with the negatives. Based on these findings, the Risk:Reward Perceptual Map for operationalising the power and impact of social media marketing strategy (Figure 5-7, pp.235) is a direct contribution to social media marketing strategy theory (e.g. Felix et al., 2017).

The fourth contribution is to theory and concerns the role of the brand in social media marketing communications. Football clubs considered their brand to be a 'Badge of Honour'. This resulted in the 'Brand as Badge of Honour' honeycomb (Figure 5-8, pp.246) which contributes to brand theory in the context of social media marketing strategy (Manoli, 2018; Aichner, 2019; Zanini et al., 2019). Each block represents an aspect of the Brand as Badge of Honour, to inform how they are used and reinforced in a social media brand community. It is proposed that the honeycomb will be useful to practitioners responsible for other tribal social media brand communities, such as Basketball and other team-based sports.

The fifth contribution is to knowledge and it relates to Chapter 6 and the two abstractions from this study: (i) the enabling and constraining industry forces of

social media marketing strategy and how these cause oscillations in the increasing levels of sophistication over time; and (ii) the forces influencing stages of social media marketing strategy development and how this results in a lifecycle of ongoing growth and maturity. The forces models themselves (Figure 6-2, pp.256, and Figure 6-4, pp.260) are contributions to social media marketing strategy theory as they offer forces impacting on levels of sophistication, and influencing stages of strategy development respectively (Effing and Spil, 2016; Chung et al., 2017). This thesis demonstrates the reality of progress with social media marketing strategy over time. Based on those forces, Figure 6-1 (pp.252) shows that social media marketing strategy is not a linear process of improvement. Instead, it is one of constant learning when successes are achieved, and mistakes can be used as learning opportunities. The pace of development will vary according to factors associated more with each individual club, such as resources and levels of data insights. Figure 6-2 (pp.256) illustrates how the forces shape a lifecycle of ongoing growth and maturity for social media marketing strategy. It is important to note that this contribution to knowledge was achieved through the phased research approach, which very few social media marketing strategy studies appear to have used. The temporal comparison enhanced the understanding of the evolution of social media marketing strategy practices and a comparison to research that had also evolved during the same timeframe.

Overall, the themes of Trust, The Collective, Bandwagon, Content Marketing Strategy, and Strategic Development, and their respective sub-themes, contribute to understanding of evolving approaches to social media marketing strategy. Specifically, it builds on the social media marketing strategy frameworks that have helped shape the research agenda (McCann and Barlow, 2015; Chung et al., 2017; Felix et al., 2017). The five themes identified add weight to the argument that social media marketing strategy is interdisciplinary (Felix et al., 2017; Rowley and Keegan, 2019). In football specifically, the main study builds on the work of many authors, including Maderer et al. (2018), Baena (2019b), Fenton et al. (2021b), and Vale and Fernandes (2018).

More detail of each contribution to knowledge is now provided by taking each Research Objective of the main study in turn. Comparisons to the preliminary study are made where appropriate.

RO1: To explore the evolving organisational approaches of football clubs to social media marketing strategy

The key finding is that clubs have significantly evolved how they are using social media marketing strategy. They now use a more open approach to social media marketing strategy, whereas in the preliminary study they were nervous and wary of using it for brand purposes. Today, the phenomenon of social media marketing strategy is being fully embraced by clubs and is integral to how they communicate with their fans and wider audiences. They now actively use it to interact and engage with their fans whereas in the past they would use it as another broadcast communication tool. It is also key to growing their audience, locally and especially globally. In the preliminary study, social media marketing strategy was viewed as a form of communication to be treated as something that had to be done, hence taking a passive, almost reluctant approach. Being in its infancy, clubs could foresee likely issues whilst not being totally confident of the benefits to be gained. Ironically, it was a form of communication they did not readily trust, yet 'Trust' emerged as one of the five themes of the evolving organisational approaches to social media marketing strategy. The other four were: The Collective; Bandwagon; Content Marketing Strategy; and Strategic Development. Each of these five contributions to knowledge was discussed in depth in section 5.2. Below is a summary of the key findings in relation to each theme.

Trust

Section 5.2.1 (pp.175) identified that trust underpins the relationship between the club and fans. Football clubs have learned how to use social media marketing strategy to build that trust, principally through more club **transparency and open dialogue**. The level of openness has increased over time as clubs have progressively realised the benefits of communicating regularly and built up the levels of trust fans have in their social media marketing strategy presence. Precisely how open clubs decide to be varied as they still try to retain a degree of control over their messaging. Hence, their power as media organisations in their own right means club continue to be influenced by the control and management aspects of branding, and do not therefore unconditionally trust their audience. The level of open dialogue extends to multiple levels of seniority within clubs, for example the Chairman communicates with fans as part of the social media marketing strategy, with a view

to helping to build trust and positively impact on fan social media engagement with the club. Clubs now use their social media marketing strategy to demonstrate that they listen to their fans, to build higher brand trust and engage in dialogue. During the preliminary study the focus was much more on one-way broadcast notifications. The study therefore builds on research highlighting the importance of two-way dialogue using social media (Meng et al.,2015).

Trust is also essential to effectively working with internal and external stakeholders. This furthers knowledge related to stakeholders in social media marketing strategy (Felix et al., 2017), with the finding that gaining the **trust and public backing of stakeholders** is a very powerful ingredient of a successful social media marketing strategy. For example, influential fan groups have been shown to publicly back the club on social media, thanks to the club working in collaboration with them. Clubs are increasingly finding that involving and educating colleagues across various departments helps to reduce resistance to a wider use of social media marketing content. Additionally, by building trust with other important stakeholders, such as social media companies, broadcasters, and commercial partners, clubs are more capable of delivering a successful social media marketing strategy for the mutual benefit of all parties involved (Alalwan et al., 2017). That includes the commercial benefits which are so important in helping to justify investment in social media marketing strategy.

This study has identified that the club being supported is the unifier between the club and fans. To the fans, that club represents a 'Badge of Honour' around which the common interest of all parties is based. With trust being integral to the club-fan relationship, it assumes a central role in the 'Social Media Marketing Strategy Value Proposition Planner' framework. The research therefore furthers knowledge that trust plays a key mediating role in brand-related social media marketing strategy (Ebrahim, 2020).

The Collective
This theme was informed by factors that clubs pointed out as making sport, particularly football, unique (Smith and Stewart, 2013; Agha and Dixon, 2021; Rascher et al., 2021). During the preliminary study, clubs recognised they had the

potential to benefit from their ready-made community of fans. The main study has shown how clubs use social media marketing strategy to harness the passion their **community of tribal fans** share for the club, in part through providing content that attempts to satisfy the insatiable audience appetite for club information. Hence, the thesis builds on recent studies of tribalism in football (Knijnik and Newson, 2020; Lamberti et al., 2022).

Section 5.2.2 (pp.175) demonstrated how the aim of football clubs to build relationships with their fan community, through social media marketing strategy, is helped by football tribalism. In recognising they can take a lower profile, thanks to the community of tribal fans self-regulating brand-related social media conversations, football clubs have learned they can trust fans more than they did during the preliminary study. There is therefore a link between the theme of The Collective and the theme of Trust. Clubs' initial fear of losing control of the conversation, expressed during the preliminary study, has gradually turned to a degree of confidence that they can be facilitators instead of regulators of club-related conversation. This is much easier for clubs to do when the first team is performing well on the pitch, because fans are more positive, and keen to hear from and engage with the club. By contrast, the confidence of clubs in their role as facilitators rather than regulators reduces when football results are not going well, because fans are in a more negative mindset, are less receptive to hearing from the club, and are more likely to react with some hostility.

This main study identified that, with the collective fan base having an emotional attachment to the club, **passion** is a key trait of the collective. All clubs were aware of their need to act responsibly in harnessing the passion of the collective and not to encourage it to overspill into more ill feeling than may already exist between their own tribal fans and those of rival clubs. As section 5.3 (pp.215) detailed, some clubs take differing views on how they manage this operationally. The new evidence of the main study proves that clubs were right, during the preliminary study, in perceiving issues around fan engagement when related to any negative tone of conversation. In the main study, clubs were also open about the constant need to try and achieve the difficult balance of meeting the needs of local and global fans through their social media marketing strategy. Finding ways to connect and nurture the sense of fan belonging, through social media marketing strategy, is crucial for

football clubs. It was therefore argued that authenticity in the club-fan relationship is important.

The final sub-theme of The Collective was found to be **insatiable audience**, reflected by clubs highlighting a hunger and thirst for social media content from the club. Clubs were therefore found to use social media marketing strategy to rapidly disseminate information to their tribal fan community. Clubs were continuously learning how they can facilitate brand-related discussion by providing constant club information to their audience, using the analogy of the pub being moved online for fans voicing and exchanging opinion. Clubs had learned how their social media marketing strategy had evolved to help fans boost their social capital within their tribal fan base. In summary, The Collective theme contributes to the need to understand factors influencing the development and management of social media marketing strategy (Alalwan et al., 2017; Li et al., 2020).

Bandwagon

The Bandwagon theme emerged from evidence of the emergent and dynamic trends associated with social media marketing strategy. This theme contributes to understanding factors influencing the development and management of social media marketing strategy (Alalwan et al., 2017; Li et al., 2020). **Constant change** was cited as a major challenge as well as an opportunity for clubs. For example, clubs were aware of the need to constantly scan the social media landscape, to be aware of new platforms emerging and then evaluate whether to launch a club presence on them.

The evolving culture of football clubs is evident in their increased reliance on a younger and more diverse team, to effectively develop and roll out social media marketing strategy. The main study found that younger members of the social media marketing team were increasingly relied on by more senior team members, when it came to exploring and developing a presence on newer platforms. The reason being the younger members were social media natives and had a more intuitive understanding of new platforms. The input of social media companies, such as Facebook, who themselves consist of more diverse workforces than football clubs, further suggests the culture of clubs is slowly changing.

Clubs sometimes simply establish a platform presence because a rival club has done so, or to target key international markets, even if they have very limited knowledge of the social media platform. In this sense, the main study was able to show that clubs can be at differing stages of maturity with their social media marketing strategy (Effing and Spil, 2016) i.e. mature for established platforms like Facebook and Twitter, much more exploratory and initiation for new platforms like Snapchat. Other influential factors were: (i) what clubs learned from the social media marketing strategies adopted in other sports such as F1 and the NBA; and (ii) having to respond to the constantly shifting media landscape, such as when Facebook and Amazon acquired broadcasting rights for EPL matches.

A general trend of starting to focus social media marketing strategy more on audience engagement was evident in the main study. Over the eight-year period since the preliminary study, the dominant agenda for clubs was growing their social media audience. The main study found clubs to be increasingly aware of the need to focus on **audience engagement** which, thanks to more open dialogue, as evidenced in the theme of Trust, could also lead to **audience growth**. The emphasis was found to be transient though as it was related to circumstances surrounding the club. For example, promotion to the EPL or a successful cup run were opportunities for audience growth thanks to more media exposure on a national and global level. Fan engagement is not fully understood by clubs. The concept is often confused with 'interaction', hence interactive behaviours of fans are often classed as engagement, then measured and reported as such.

Another aspect of the Bandwagon theme was that of a shift **from organic to paid social media**. At the time of the preliminary study paid social media was not a consideration for any football clubs. However, the main study found that due to everchanging algorithms on the part of social media platforms needing to increase their own commercial revenues, clubs were gradually being put in a position where they needed to invest in paid social media. Their ability to do so was inextricably linked to available budgets and the main study found great variations between clubs able to achieve more audience exposure and commercial returns through paid social media (e.g. Case D), and those clubs who could afford to do very little if any paid social media (e.g. Case H). For smaller clubs with less budget it was essential

to demonstrate the return on spend of any paid social media marketing, as a means of gaining agreement for more budget.

Increasing use of a non-sporting presence or influencers was a new development during the main study. The use of influencers in particular suggests social media marketing strategy of clubs now embraces the concept of 'sportainment' (Richelieu and Webb, 2021). All clubs used influencers. Clubs with a larger global presence, or smaller clubs who had a famous fan, were found to have collaborated with macro influencers who could help them reach part of their own global social media following. Some clubs used micro influencers, such as champion dancers, boxers or musicians originating from the city or town of the club. The importance of a local micro influencer demonstrates a link with the need for authenticity in the relationship between clubs and their tribal fan community. Reflecting an increasing awareness of where their audiences may spend their time, or who they may be influenced by, three clubs were found to have developed a presence on platforms more dedicated to music or photography, or to have collaborated with music artists. Each club offered examples of commercial benefits achieved through their collaborations. Such findings were further proof of the potential benefits identified during the preliminary study, now transpiring for football clubs in the eight-year period since. The Bandwagon theme provides evidence of how football clubs adapt their social media marketing strategy as they become more sophisticated (De Beer and Stander, 2016).

Content Marketing Strategy

The main study revealed a key aspect in the strategy and planning of social media marketing strategy was content marketing strategy. In doing so, contributions to knowledge were to: research incorporating a wider range of social media marketing platforms (Dwivedi et al., 2020); research exploring differences in approaches according to social media platforms used in practice (Alves et al., 2016; Valos et al., 2017); and how social media marketing insights inform social media marketing strategy (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016; Keegan and Rowley, 2017). The **Quality vs Quantity** sub-theme emerged from every club being increasingly aware of the need to focus on quality of content, rather than their more established emphasis on quantity of posts. A key finding was that club resources impacted on their ability to deliver more quality content. The historic focus on quantity demonstrated that clubs

had been correct in perceiving too many commercial messages to be an issue, during the preliminary study.

A **content calendar** was key for clubs in their planning of social media marketing strategy. It was evidence of clubs being more strategic in their content marketing. Whilst able to populate an outline of content in the calendar up to twelve months ahead, all clubs used the content calendar on a monthly or fortnightly rolling cycle to plan in detail their content across social media platforms. They review this in detail, weekly or fortnightly, to be agile and adapt to such factors as league form, fixture changes, and player signings. That agility extended to adjusting the schedule, depending on fan mood being more positive or negative.

An area of real variation between cases was the extent of **differentiation** of content according to each social media platform and the audience on each of those platforms. All were gradually becoming more sophisticated in this respect, but one (Case D) was much more advanced due to more extensive resources and expertise. Differentiation was recognised as necessary by the clubs due to the different capabilities and algorithms on each social media platform, in addition to audiences expecting a different experience on each platform. A notable finding of the main study was how clubs were adapting content by audience and platform audience. Specifically, they talked to audiences in a different manner depending on the platform they were on. In addition, most clubs were using a translation service to be more successful in overcoming the tensions associated with appealing to both a local and global audience. Differentiation was a clear indication of how social media marketing strategy had evolved since the preliminary study.

Diversity, relevance, and insights were further ways in which clubs had evolved, specifically with their content marketing strategy. Topics were becoming more diverse, although the extent of diversity was heavily influenced by the career backgrounds of those generating the content. In addition, content was still dominated by first team football due to the senior team being the main commercial revenue driver for all clubs. Interviewees were clear about the need to educate internal stakeholder colleagues on the importance of more topic diversity, demonstrating a link with the Trust sub-theme of Stakeholder Trust and Public Backing. Clubs were learning to deliver what was relevant to their fans as well as

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educating sponsors on how to achieve relevance for sponsor related content. Although some acknowledged that there remained too much focus on commercial messaging, all clubs stated how important timing, platform algorithms, and data insights were to relevance. The level of insights achieved through social media platform metrics varied enormously between clubs, again, principally dictated by the financial and human resources available. The main study supplied evidence that clubs use data to balance the needs of internal stakeholders with those of the wider fan community. For example, showing senior executives the benefits of moving from metrics such as follower numbers, to focus on the commercial return with more targeted and relevant content. These findings shed further understanding of social media marketing strategy being informed by insights from that activity (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016; Keegan and Rowley, 2017). Figure 5-4 (pp.202) provided a visual representation of the cyclical links between topic diversity and relevance to audience segments, as informed by data insights.

In reflecting their awareness of the importance of being more personal in their dealings with fans, clubs emphasised a need for more **meaningful interaction** through their content marketing strategy. The main study showed how the social media marketing strategy of football clubs has evolved to use content marketing strategy to facilitate more fan interaction and fan engagement, thereby contradicting the argument that content type does not influence fan engagement (Aichner, 2019).

Strategic Development

Each club was scored according to the four sub-themes of strategic development of social media marketing strategy, as shown in Table 5-3 (pp.212). The sub-theme of **levels of sophistication** revealed a key finding of the main study, which was that, although all clubs had a clear idea of what their evolving social media marketing strategy was to achieve, not all had strategies in place. Three clubs had a formal written social media marketing strategy, three had an informal unwritten strategy, and two did not have a strategy but used the content calendar as their planning document. This study is the first to demonstrate that social media marketing strategy in football clubs have, over time, evolved their operational implementation of a branded social media presence. Similarly, any guidelines and policies have happened in retrospect for football clubs. Equally, only half (four) of clubs had specific social media marketing strategy objectives. These findings show how for

football clubs, and potentially sport in general, the more formalised and linear social media marketing strategy frameworks that involve planning and setting of objectives before implementation (e.g. McCann. and Barlow, 2015; Felix et al., 2017), do not apply.

Strategic development reflected the constantly evolving nature of social media marketing strategy, through the **fluid and adaptable** nature of planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. A link with the Bandwagon sub-theme of constant change was identified and based on the evidence, this study suggested that clubs needed and often devised an overarching social media marketing strategy, which was developed at least annually, with quarterly and/or six-monthly reviews as a minimum.

An empirical and industry specific contribution to knowledge was that a human **tone of voice** is regarded as a key element of strategic development for social media marketing strategy. Hence, the findings build on studies related to brand tone of voice on social media (Gretry et al., 2017; Barcelos et al., 2018). A presence on social media platforms enabled clubs to communicate in a more light-hearted and less corporate manner. It was important to clubs that their tone of voice demonstrated empathy with their community of tribal fans, hence a link with the themes 'The Collective' and 'Trust'. This study provided further contribution to knowledge that clubs are still not being successful in engaging their female audience (Fenton et al., 2021a). While they have had more success in appealing to different local and national audiences, the main study demonstrated that appealing to genders can be challenging. More in-depth evidence was provided in Section 5.3.2 (pp.225), which overall contributes to the fulfilment of Research Objective 2.

Clubs were categorised based on whether they **innovate or follow** in their social media marketing strategy. Case D was cited by all clubs as a leading innovator whilst two other clubs claimed they were leading innovators and provided the evidence to support this claim. The other five clubs were followers who are less likely to take a risk, preferring instead to learn from other clubs before committing to innovations in their strategy.

To summarise in relation to Research Objective 1, in addition to providing a link with Research Objectives 2 and 3, visual representations were provided in Chapter 6. All football clubs have evolved their social media marketing strategy to become more sophisticated over time. As the evidence has demonstrated, this is not a linear path to success, hence the uneven oscillations shown in Figure 6-1 (pp.252) in Chapter 6. There are successes and failures along the way, as impacted by the forces shown in Figure 6-2 (pp.256). Football clubs have learned by doing and are constantly learning and adapting. They have evolved to strategise in retrospect to implementing their branded social media marketing presence. Figure 6-3 (pp.258) in Chapter 6 has located each case according to their relative stage of social media marketing strategy development, based on organisational forces at the time of the main study, shown in Figure 6-4 (pp.260). The outcome of Research Objective 1 was vital to the next Research Objective seeking to examine the operationalisation of social media marketing strategy by football clubs.

RO2: To examine the operationalisation of social media marketing strategy by football clubs

Research Objective 2 focused on the more tactical aspects of how football clubs delivered their social media marketing strategy. A key contribution to knowledge is how eight football clubs, across different tiers of the league pyramid, do this across multiple platforms (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos, 2015). Research conducted from the organisation perspective is very limited (Lardo et al., 2017), hence this study complements knowledge generated from studies based on fan data (e.g. Florea et al., 2018; Machado et al., 2020; Velicia Martín et al., 2020). One of the main findings was that it was the operational deployment of social media marketing strategy that drove the initial branded social media marketing presence of all football clubs. The two themes of Communication, and Power and Impact of Social Media Marketing emerged from the evidence.

Communication

Use of social media marketing strategy has evolved to the extent that clubs now view their branded social media marketing presence as critical to their communications with their fans, as well as to reaching out to new audiences. Evidence showed how clubs adapt the timings of their social media marketing content, depending on whether fans are feeling more positive or negative towards

the club. Very often this is linked to the performances of the men's first team. Clubs also make what could be considered tweaks to their tone of voice, depending on fan sentiment at that time, such as following a result or some player transfer news. With more than one person often being responsible for posting social media content on behalf of the club, it is critical they communicate with each other regularly to achieve some consistency of tone of voice. Clubs have also learned that they can use new social media platforms such as Snapchat to test a tone of voice reflecting a younger personality, within their overarching more personal tone of voice across all social media marketing platforms on which they have a presence. The need for a respectful tone of voice was made clear by all clubs except for Case F who took a more irreverent approach to their human voice. This builds on the work of Barcelos et al. (2018) who investigated how a brand's tone of voice on social media could influence consumer responses, plus that of Rivers and Ross (2021) who explored banter between football fans. For all clubs, there is a constant need to balance the volume of information needed to satisfy the insatiable appetite of their audience, with the gradual shift of their strategy towards quality over quantity of content.

One of the key tactical ways clubs have learned to operationalise their social media marketing strategy is to base their content around the matchday timeline. The main study identified that the scope of that timeline for all clubs begins in the weeks and days prior to a fixture, matchday itself and post-match activity. Content is mainly product and information based with some but less frequent commercial messages. Clubs plan constant and timely content, tapping into fan passion for the club, to stimulate fan engagement and interaction with the club and wider collective tribal fan community. This tactical approach has emerged and evolved since the preliminary study and extends the knowledge of Aichner (2019) regarding timely posts to engage fans, and the work of Sierra and Taute (2019) who explored how brands use tribalism in sport. By providing football club examples of encouraging interactive and engaging behaviours by their fans, the thesis also builds on the work of Syrdal and Briggs (2018) who have researched social media engagement and interaction. The main study demonstrated there was no clear definition of fan engagement from football clubs. In fact what they often described were interactive behaviours as well, such as liking a post. Despite Research Objective 1 highlighting an increasing focus on more open dialogue and two-way communication with fans,

operationally it is not sustainable for clubs to respond to all fan interactions due to the sheer volume of comments from fans.

In summary, Figure 5-6 (pp.225) showed how football clubs have evolved their approaches since the preliminary study. From initially being operational only, hence reactive and unplanned, they have gradually become more strategic in how they plan and deliver their social media marketing strategy. The contribution to knowledge is achieved by building on the work of Tafesse and Wien (2018a) and their Structural Path Model, based on how firms implement social media marketing.

Power and Impact of Social Media Marketing

A direct contribution to operationally focused social media marketing strategy theory was the **Risk:Reward Perceptual Map** (Figure 5-7, pp.235), developed from evidence of the power and impact of social media marketing. This theme offered rich insights on how impacts are a positive and negative mix of, *for* football clubs and *on* them. On the positive side, all clubs are now at a point where they have learned to use the power of social media to gain new fans, amplify their club communications, generate commercial revenues such as ticket and merchandise sales, sponsorship. These are examples of commercial benefits anticipated during the preliminary study, now being realised. Clubs constantly question if they are getting the correct balance of commercial messaging in their overall content, to drive revenues without alienating their fans. For smaller clubs, revenue opportunities will occasionally be given priority in operational social media marketing delivery. Two clubs (Cases A and F) were explicit in stating the rewards of social listening. For example, using what fans are saying and how they are reacting to inform internal stakeholders and build internal trust. Social listening was not a benefit clubs anticipated during the preliminary study.

When clubs had expressed concern about around losing control of the conversation, during the preliminary study, they were looking at this from the perspective of brand-related discourse. The main study has provided empirical evidence of that lack of control transpiring. The impact can be very powerful for clubs when the fan community is positive. Conversely the impact on clubs can be very negative once adverse fan community responses develop their own collective momentum. These

are reflected in the oscillations illustrating the enabling and constraining industry forces of social media marketing strategy, as visualised in Figure 6-1 (pp.252) and Figure 6-2 (pp.256) in Chapter 6.

What clubs did not and could not anticipate during the preliminary study was the extent to which negativity would amplify, nor the impact on members of staff responsible for posting social media marketing content on behalf of the club. The main study provided rich empirical insights of fan criticism levelled at all football clubs via their branded social media marketing presence. Despite talk of football club social media marketing practitioners needing a thick skin, this does not adequately acknowledge the negative impact the power of social media marketing can have on individuals. The main study has provided stark evidence of practitioners being subject to high volumes of constant abusive messages when football results are not positive. Even more concerning was evidence of social media marketing strategy practitioners being subject to intimidation and grave threats from fans. Practitioners articulated how this can become overwhelming to the extent it can impact on their mental health. Clubs should be more proactive in the responsibility they have towards their own staff, in the form of their wellbeing and mental health.

Accordingly, seven of the eight clubs involved were clear about their responsibility to use their tone of voice and content appropriately. They were aware that fuelling the passion of their tribal fan community can be very powerful and positive but can overspill into unnecessary ill feeling. This study has demonstrated how boyish banter reinforces the masculine hegemony of football which can lead to groups such as female fans and those in minority groups feeling like they are not welcome and do not belong in that social media brand community. In turn, this also affects club following and fan interactions and engagement. The fact that clubs are actively questioning how they can better engage female fans suggests the masculine culture that dominates football is starting to be questioned (Fenton et al., 2021b). Clubs therefore need to find ways of discouraging toxic masculinity by using softer humour, that shows and encourages more mutual respect and inclusivity, and a healthier form of tribalism.

Overall, clubs were keen to emphasise that the positives of social media marketing strategy outweigh the negatives, yet on a day-to-day level, the job of those

responsible can be very difficult at times. This study has therefore advanced knowledge of the positive side of social media marketing strategy, and the dark side especially. These insights contribute to research gaps identified in recent research agenda papers related to social media marketing strategy and implementation (Dwivedi et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020). For example how team performance can affect social media marketing success (Jang et al., 2018). It builds on the Hazari (2018) study of how social media marketing can be used to amplify content to a wider audience. The study furthers knowledge of the dark side of social media (Baccarella et al., 2018). Examples of specific areas in which it does so are boyish banter (Cleland et al., 2020), argumentative behaviours (Fenton et al., 2021b), abuse (Baccarella et al., 2018), sexism (Fenton et al., 2021a).

RO3: To explore the role of the brand in social media marketing communications of football clubs

Research Objective 3 explored the role of the brand in social media marketing communications, in the context of football clubs. Answering this research objective furthers knowledge related to social media brand communities in sport, by providing insights from football clubs (Manoli, 2018; Aichner, 2019), and informing what brands can do to encourage customer engagement in social media brand communities (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Gong, 2018; Zanini et al., 2019). The contribution to knowledge in brand theory is that, in a football context, the role of the brand is as a 'Badge of Honour'. Applied to the context of social media marketing communications, this study has therefore created the **'Brand as Badge of Honour' honeycomb** (Figure 5-8, pp.246) to conceptualise the seven building blocks that enable effective use of brand in the era of social media. The seven blocks are:

1. Values
2. Meaning
3. Community
4. Identity
5. Heritage
6. Emotion
7. SMBC (Social Media Brand Communities)

Values

All clubs have values that attempt to stay true to the heritage of the club, using them to inform their behaviour and what the club represents. It was notable how often community and place were featured, in six of the eight clubs. Case B had removed community when updating its values but brought in 'industrious' as a reflection of both the club and place. Case F often used the word 'unique' to reflect the club and its location. The values translate into what the brand represents and the voice of the club, hence a clear link with the tone of voice sub-theme of Strategy Development. Values are also embodied in the day-to-day operationalisation of social media marketing strategy, for example Case H using it to showcase the matchday as a 'family' experience.

Meaning

When clubs were asked to describe what the club or crest meant to their fans, the words used demonstrated a relationship to the club values. Notably, the meaning adjectives used showed how there is again a link with sub-theme tone of voice, in addition to the themes of Trust and The Collective. An understanding of brand meaning to fans helps clubs to operationalise it in their social media marketing communications.

Community

Further knowledge of a sense of place being important to fans and clubs was generated through evidence of each club representing their community and vice versa. The community origins and heritage of the club form the basis of tribalism, hence a relationship with The Collective. The difficulty for clubs is appealing to both their local and global communities through social media marketing communications.

Identity

Fans collectively identify with the club and each other through the Badge of Honour the club represents to them. This underpins their collective identity as a tribe, with which clubs can encourage social bonding capital between fans in their social media brand communities. Identity is linked with how social media marketing strategy is operationalised, in addition to The Collective theme.

Heritage

The brand narrative reflects the heritage of the club and may adapt according to more recent history of success or failure. The study showed how clubs will use artefacts, often featuring fans, in their social media communications. They have learned how this successfully engages their fans, stimulates fan interaction, and connects with individual and tribal fan identity with the club.

Emotion

Through their emotional connection with the club, positive and negative expressions of support are how fans show their strength of feeling towards the club. On a positive note, it is the role of the brand to stir strong positive feelings towards the club. To minimise the impact of negative fan emotions, clubs seek to avoid provoking their fans by adapting their tone of voice, or by relying on the self-regulating fan community. There is therefore a link with each of the themes from Research Objectives 1 and 2.

Social Media Brand Communities (SMBC)

The central block of SMBC is to communicate how each of the other six building blocks connect to the shared interest that is the social media brand community. In the case of this study, that is the fan community assembling and connecting through their shared interest of the club. The role of the brand in social media marketing communications is therefore to utilise each of the 'Brand as Badge of Honour' honeycomb blocks to amass their tribal fan community around their club SMBC, and to make them feel connected to the club and each other.

This contribution to knowledge in the role of the brand in social media communications furthers understanding of the "next generation of brand relationships" (Dessart, 2017: 380) and branding in a social media context (Christodoulides et al., 2021). In relation to social media brand communities in football, it extends insights provided by Fenton et al. (2021b), plus the importance of community (Cleland et al., 2020) and a strong sense of place (Florea et al., 2018). Lastly, it builds on studies that highlight the emotional attachment of passionate football supporters (Vale and Fernandes, 2018; Lamberti et al., 2022).

RO4: To propose a framework for social media marketing strategy in football clubs

Research Objective 4 was to propose a framework for social media marketing strategy in football clubs. This was achieved by conceptualising the outcomes of Research Objectives 1, 2 and 3. The Social Media Marketing Strategy Value Proposition Planner (Figure 5-9, pp.250) in Chapter 5, extends knowledge of managing a social media marketing presence by being the first published social media marketing strategy framework to be based on empirical insights from football and sport. The research is unique in understanding how eight football clubs, at different levels of the English football pyramid, have evolved their approaches to social media marketing strategy, using a variety of social media marketing platforms. The extent to which that evolution has happened was enabled by the phased study. The contribution to social media marketing theory is made by building on social media marketing strategy frameworks (e.g. McCann and Barlow, 2015; Chung et al., 2017; Felix et al., 2017) whilst providing a deeper sports specific understanding of social media marketing strategy and operationalisation (Filo et al., 2015). Additionally, in locating trust as being the basis of the club-fan relationship, around the unifying club brand, this framework builds on the knowledge that brand relationships affect brand trust (Dessart, 2017).

The phased approach allowed the final contribution to knowledge arising from this research. As presented in Chapter 6, Figure 6-1 (pp.252) shows how evolving sophistication levels of social media marketing strategy oscillate over time, and Figure 6-2 (pp.256) shows the enabling and constraining industry forces of social media marketing strategy that cause those oscillations. Figure 6-3 (pp.258) then showed the lifecycle stages of development for each of the eight clubs involved in the main study had progressed through, in their social media marketing strategy development. Figure 6-4 (pp.260) showed the forces within each club that influence the stages of social media marketing strategy development. These models extend the work of Effing and Spil (2016) and their social strategy cone to assess what stage of social media marketing strategy an organisation is at.

7.3 Contributions to Practice

The practice of social media marketing strategy has evolved constantly over the time of this phased study. The provision of conceptual frameworks provides an evidence-based and pragmatic approach to managing a social media marketing brand presence.

The **Social Media Marketing Strategy Value Proposition Planner** (Figure 5-9, pp.250) is informed and endorsed by practitioners who participated in this study. It is therefore considered a useful model to practitioners, students, and academics. Published in peer reviewed Soccer & Society, it has already been successfully used in undergraduate teaching on a 'managing social media practice' unit.

In response to research agenda articles, it is the first social media marketing strategy framework based solely on sport, and specifically the football sector. It is the first to feature several clubs at different tiers of the football pyramid. It is also the first to include a range of social media platforms. The framework underlines the importance of starting by understanding the fan perspective, in addition to external forces that impact on the fans and the club. The framework then emphasises the importance of exploring the club perspective, in addition to other club factors that impact on social media marketing strategy. The club is the unifier, and it is the role of 'Brand as Badge of Honour' that should be focused on building trust in the club-fan relationship.

Figure 5-7 (pp.235) offers a framework for operationalising the power and impact of social media marketing strategy. Practitioners need to consider how their tactical communications are perceived by their audience, notably their tribal fan community. Informed by the positive and negative aspects of social media marketing, the **Risk:Reward Perceptual Map** was created to help social media marketing practitioners to decide what to communicate, when and how. It is envisaged this will help practitioners successfully deliver their social media marketing strategy. The framework may also be useful for practitioners, students and academics when conducting a social media marketing audit of a chosen brand or organisation.

The **'Brand as Badge of Honour' honeycomb** (Figure 5-8, pp.246) is formed of seven building blocks to conceptualise the role of the brand in social media

marketing communications. For practitioners responsible for social media brand communities, this framework offers a useful integrated approach to branding in the social media era. The honeycomb can also be used in conjunction with the social media marketing strategy value proposition planner by applying it to the central circle of the club as unifier. The social media brand community is where clubs can continue to build trust with their fans, around the Brand as Badge of Honour. In its present form in this thesis, the honeycomb is applicable to football and sport. By changing the words 'fans' and 'club' to 'customers' and 'brand/company' it could also be applicable to other sectors.

Collectively or individually, it is hoped these conceptual frameworks provide a useful series of tools to help anyone responsible for evolving approaches to social media marketing strategy, including those studying this subject area.

7.4 Future Research Agendas

This study has made a significant contribution to social media marketing strategy in the context of football clubs. The frameworks have deepened understanding in an area lacking theoretical underpinning. However, despite the wide-ranging findings and in-depth insights presented and discussed in this study, research gaps and opportunities remain. Three key areas for further research beyond the scope of this study were identified: (i) continued evolution of social media marketing strategy; (ii) dark side of social media marketing strategy and operationalisation; and (iii) growing importance of social media marketing data insights. These are briefly pondered in turn below.

7.4.1 Continued Evolution of Social Media Marketing Strategy

Since the research was conducted, new platforms such as TikTok and Sina Weibo continue to increase in popularity. Football clubs have responded by developing a presence on such platforms, in addition to evolving their use of existing platforms which continue to update the experience they offer their users. Future research could explore how clubs are using new platforms such as TikTok and the impact for reaching new and existing audiences.

An important finding of the main study in the global context of football and social media marketing strategy is that clubs try to balance the needs of local and international audiences, including the use of translation services or employing people in specific countries. With international broadcasting revenues reaching record levels and clubs looking to take advantage of this increased exposure, future studies could focus exclusively on how clubs adapt their social media marketing strategy to suit individual cultures and languages.

There are also research opportunities linked to the trend for clubs seeking to find ways of engaging with female football fans, in addition to the growing popularity and media coverage of women's football. Studies could therefore explore social media marketing strategy related to female fans of the men's game and of the women's game. Such studies could compare what enables and constrains their engagement with the branded social media marketing presence of clubs or international teams.

7.4.2 Dark Side of Social Media Marketing Strategy and Operationalisation

This study has gathered insights from specialist practitioners who have provided some troubling examples of the impact of the negative side of social media marketing strategy. Future studies could explore in greater detail the impact on the wellbeing of practitioners responsible for delivering social media marketing strategy, in a tribal football context, or other sports with tribal fan communities. Furthermore, any strategies clubs or practitioners may use to manage or cope with this.

This study has also provided club-based evidence of argumentative or abusive behaviours from fans on social media, directed towards the club and towards other fans. Future large scale qualitative research could explore the extent and nature of argumentative or abusive behaviours, related to football or other sports, on social media platforms. For example, at a club going through a difficult period. Future research could also explore how such behaviours can lead to the alienation of fans in a relative minority due to, for example, gender, race, or sexuality.

7.4.3 Growing Importance of Social Media Marketing Data Insights

At the time of this study, clubs were focusing more on social media marketing data insights and were at very different levels of capability in this respect, primarily due

to resources. More research into how clubs are using social media marketing analytics to inform their social media marketing strategy would extend the body of knowledge in sport and in social media marketing strategy data insights more generally. For example, how data insights help effective social media marketing strategy implementation, or the extent to which insights may vary by social media platform.

7.5 Chapter Summary

Social media marketing strategy research, literature and practice continue to evolve. Football clubs are an example of how organisations have increasingly used social media marketing to communicate with their audience in a more transparent manner. This chapter has provided a context for the two phases of this study and the contribution to knowledge already made through peer reviewed journal articles. The chapter then provided a reminder of the contributions to knowledge from this thesis, taking each Research Objective in turn to situate each of the insights that informed the conceptual frameworks from this study. The chapter then summarised how those frameworks contribute to practice, before offering a series of suggestions for further research.

It is hoped this research has provided a valuable contribution to furthering our understanding of social media marketing strategy and appreciating that trust is at the heart of the relationships it helps to develop between football clubs and fans.

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9 Appendices

9.1 Appendix 1   Interview Protocol Main Study

Introduction

Circa 60mins.   *Assured of confidentiality.*

This interview is to explore the football club marketer perspective of social media strategy and usage. This phase of research is focused on how clubs and fans engage in social media. The title is: "Social Media: Friend or Foe of the Football Club?"

Interviewing a selection of clubs, e.g. [names].

Just to confirm I'm recording the interview so nothing is missed.

Do not wish to answer a question, can decline. Can stop the interview at any time.

QUESTIONS (WHAT, WHY, HOW) – themes shown in bold:

REMIT

1. Can you just explain your role at the [club]?
   Job title & role, experience …

2. How does your role relate to fans?
   a. Level of involvement

3. How does social media relate to your role?

4. Who is responsible for your social media activity?
   a. Specify by levels of: seniority
      a. social (e.g. strategy)
      b. genre (e.g. ticketing, news)

CONTEXT (The Landscape)

1. How would you describe the brand identity of CLUB? (What makes the CLUB brand unique?)
    a. Identity: Heritage, values, meaning, authenticity
    b. Value: Experiential, symbolic, functional

2. How would you describe the image your fans have of the CLUB brand
    a. What does [club brand] mean to the fans?

3. In what way does social media contribute (to 1 & 2)?
    a. Is there any difference between online and offline community
        i. Perceptions
        ii. Attachment
        iii. Meaning
        iv. Engagement

4. What challenges do you face with social media landscape?
    a. Pace of change
    b. Skills
    c. Scope (breadth/range of platforms…)

5. What opportunities do you attach to social media for the club?
    a. Communications
        i. Relationship
        ii. Brand image
        iii. Insights
        iv. Digital (e.g. SEO, mobile optimising)
    b. Commercially
        i. Ad revenue
        ii. Conversion (Black Friday)
        iii. F-commerce

OPERATIONAL – can we explore what social media you use and why?

1. From club perspective, what influences your use of social media (mostly Eagleman, 2013)?
   a. Fan motives
   b. Competition
   c. Relationship
   d. Educate
   e. Brand image and awareness

2. Can you please list the social media platforms used by the club?
   i. When started
   ii. Use
   iii. Content type
   iv. Differentiation by platform
   v. Complementary nature across platforms?

3. Are any platforms more important to others and if so:
   a. Which?
   b. Why?
   c. Purpose?
      i. Why?
      ii. How (achieved/manifested)?
         1. Balance of content
         2. News (inform)
         3. Attract audience (also a strategic qtn?)
   d. Benefits & challenges?

4. What does each platform offer? (Looking at uniqueness and integration)

5. How do you encourage interaction with fans?
   a. Deciding when to engage/refrain
   b. Monitoring fan comments

STRATEGY – the overall approach

1. What is the role of social media for CLUB?
    - c. Importance, presence, responsibilities

2. Do you have a social media strategy?
    - a. How does this align with:
        - i. Commercial
        - ii. Fan relationship
        - iii. Marketing overall

3. What is your social media strategy?
    - a. Overall
    - b. By platform
    - c. How evolved?
    - d. Documented?
        - i. Always?
        - ii. Willing to share?

4. Do you have a content marketing strategy?
    - a. Who is responsible?
    - b. What form does this [CS strategy] take?

5. What lessons have you learned in the time Club has been using social media?

6. To what if any extent has [club] adapted to social media and content consumption trends?
    - a. Possibly break out by platform

7. What objectives do you have for club social media?
    - a. Links with commercialisation, relationship building/engagement, community
    - b. By platform as well as overall?

8. How do you see this evolving for [club] in future?
    - a. By platform
    - b. How
    - c. Why

9. How do you define success [of social media]?
    - a. Overall
    - b. By platform

10. How do you measure this?
    - a. By platform

11. What, if any, conflicting demands are there of club social media usage?
    - a. Freedom v monitoring
    - b. Volume of content
    - c. Balance of content (commercial v info/educating, humour…)
    - d. Does this vary across platforms?

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RELATIONSHIP / COMMUNITY BUILDING

1. How would you describe the relationship the club has with fans?
    a. How would you like to see this developing?

2. What are the key drivers in this relationship?
    a. What unifying interests do your fans have with each other?
    b. And you and your fans?
        i. Firm-customer & customer-firm relationships

3. How has social media contributed to this over time?

4. Why do you think fans use social media?
    a. Connection, motivations, interaction, social cap, control
    b. Four key motives (Stavros et al. 2014):
        1. Passion
        2. Hope
        3. Esteem
        4. Camaraderie

5. What does social media contribute to the relationship?
    a. By platform
    b. How
    c. Why

6. How does this manifest itself – what do they do?
    a. E.g. brand (meaning…)
    b. Attract more fans?
    c. Camaraderie
    d. Hope
    e. Esteem
    f. WOM
    g. connection strategies...

CONCLUSION:
Is there anything I have not covered that you expected me to?

Any suggestions re best / worst cases I should speak to?

Checking:
- Would you like a transcript of our interview?
- Can I check results with you to ensure understanding of meaning/interpretation?

Dissemination:
- Would you like a short report of the results?
- And overall (fuller) results with more clubs?

Consistency / Follow up:
- Can I contact you with any further questions (email, phone…)

Thank you...

9.2 Appendix 2   Interview Protocol Preliminary Study

Introduction

Assured of confidentiality.

The purpose of the research is to examine the issues and benefits faced in relation to social media marketing strategy development, in the context of UK football clubs.

Intention is to understand the football club marketer perspective.

Interviewing a number of clubs.

Reconfirm agreement to record interview.

QUESTIONS:

- Can you briefly explain your remit.

- What digital marketing activity do you use?

- Fans or customers?   (RO1)

- How loyal are [club] fans/customers?

- Are you aware of social media / Web 2.0 / SNS?   (RO1)

- How have clubs responded to the growth of social media technology?   (RO2)
    - and [club] specifically?

- What motives do you feel fans may have for engaging with unofficial sites?   (RO1)

- What factors are relevant to the [club] response?   (RO2)
    - e.g.   Perform deal...
        - club resource / ethos

- Has social media had any impact on RM activity? (RO1, RO2)

- Has there been any change in fan relationship regarding marketing activity?   (RO1, RO2)

- Do you monitor unofficial sites?   (RO1, RO2)
    - What do you monitor

- What business model could be applied to social media?   (RO1, RO2)

- Do [club] consider social media a commercial or private space? (RO1, RO2)

- Customer empowerment?   (RO2)

Some of the key questions the checklist will aim to uncover include:

- Customers or fans?
- The nature of their relationship marketing activity, in particular online marketing.
- If and why clubs are so concerned with unofficial sites and social media.
- The willingness or ability of clubs to adapt their approach and support empowered fans in the online context.
- Is a light touch realistic or do commercial pressures overtly influence the approach to social media?

CONCLUSION:

Would you like a transcript of our interview?

Thank you...

9.3 Appendix 3   Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Social Media: Friend or Foe of the Football Club?

Invitation

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this research study that seeks to understand social media approaches for UK football clubs. It is important that you read the following information so that you understand the study you are being asked to participate in. Please do not hesitate to ask any questions you may have.

Purpose of Study

To get the perspectives and insights of representatives of UK football clubs into their use of social media. This is for the researcher's PhD qualification, this being the final stage of data gathering.

Your Invitation

- There are intended to be 20 interviews that will take place across 7-10 different UK football clubs, including between 1-3 experts who do not work directly for a football club. Your position within your organisation and association with the topic, regardless of age, gender, background are the factors influencing the invitation choice.

- Decisions made in response to this invitation are completely self-directed and voluntary. A confirmation of the participation, if accepted, will be validated in the form of a consent sheet. This will not contract you into anything you deem inappropriate, and you are free to withdraw at any time, without reason or justification.

- Following consent being provided, the researcher will seek to conduct a one-off 30-60 minute interview.

- The interview will be audio recorded and most likely transcribed. However, no personal information is required, nor will any details be shared beyond the logging of your consent form.

- The audio recording will be permanently removed and deleted following the successful completion of the PhD, unless stated otherwise on the consent form. Prior to their destruction, the recording will be stored in a password-secured and paid form of Dropbox (secure cloud storage) making it inaccessible to anyone but the lead researcher, Jeff McCarthy. Data protection management will be in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulations 2018.

- The interview will require 30-60 minutes of your time, expressing your own thoughts in response to the questions posed. The interview will take place either face to face, or via Skype or phone. Subsequent follow up questions may be asked at a later date, in order to clarify and explore some of the issues arising from this interview. Those follow up questions would only be asked with your permission.

Benefits and Disadvantages

- It is important not to deceive you with false promises of exaggerated benefits. However whilst I cannot promise any personal benefits, this study is likely to help to develop collective understanding of social media strategy, tactics and issues within the football sector and potentially beyond. With

that in mind, results may provide useful segments of data that can directly influence of complement the efforts of digital marketers.

- An electronic copy of the findings and/or of the full thesis will be made available to you on request, by emailing the lead researcher at jeff.mccarthy@mmu.ac.uk.

Problems and Issues

Should any issues arise following your consent, or should you have any queries regarding any element of this research, please do not hesitate to contact the lead researcher Jeff McCarthy at the email address above*.

For any escalated queries that you do not wish to discuss with the lead researcher please:

a) Contact the Manchester Metropolitan University Complaints Office.

b) Contact the lead researcher's Director of Studies, Dr. Catherine Ashworth C.J.Ashworth@mmu.ac.uk.

* Disclaimer: No arrangements can be made in the form of compensation on behalf of the researcher should an issue arise.

Confidentiality

- Data will be appropriately safeguarded in line with the General Data Protection Regulations 2018. All your personal data and responses will be kept confidential and anonymous and they will all be destroyed following the completion of this research. Until that time, the information will be accessed only by the lead researcher.

- Any data discussed by the lead researcher, with his Director of Studies, will be anonymised before that discussion takes place.

Opting out

Should you wish to opt out at any point, you are free to do so without justification or explanation. Depending on whether the interview has been conducted, data derived from the interview will continue to be collected and used in the research. However any evidence of your involvement in the study will be destroyed on request following your withdrawal.

Further information and contact details This research is designed as part of my PhD at Manchester Metropolitan University. Should you wish to find out more about the university, please find the relevant details below:

Website: www.mmu.ac.uk

If there are any areas or details that you may wish to clarify or if you would like to get in contact with me, my details are:

Email: jeff.mccarthy@mmu.ac.uk; jeff@jefmccarthy.co.uk | Twitter: www.twitter.com/RunEatRepeatuk

Once again, thank you so much for your kind offer to help with this study. It is greatly appreciated.

9.4 Appendix 4   Participant Consent Form Main Study

Date:

Name: Jeff McCarthy

Course: PhD

Department: Marketing, Retail and Tourism

Building: Manchester Metropolitan University

Business School, M15 6BH

Tel: 0161 247 6751

Manchester Metropolitan University

CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Social Media: Friend or Foe of the Football Club?

Name of Researcher: Mr. Jeff McCarthy

Please tick all boxes

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my legal rights being affected.

3. I understand that my responses will be sound recorded and used for analysis of this study.

4. I understand that my responses will remain anonymous when used in the Thesis document.
    1.
5. I understand that if a transcript of my interview is written, it can be made available to me.

6. I agree to take part in the above study.

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Date   Signature

Jeff McCarthy   *J. McCarthy*
_____   _____   _____
Name of Person   Date   Signature
taking consent.

9.5 Appendix 5   Participant Consent Form Preliminary Study

Title of Project: 'Exploring the impact of Social Media Marketing Strategy Development in the Context of UK Football Clubs

Jeff McCarthy is undertaking research for submission as a MRes and PhD at the Manchester Metropolitan University. This involves new research into how clubs and fans engage with social media marketing strategy. One element of this work involves individual interviews asking club representatives to discuss their own experiences of, and opinions about perceived social media marketing strategy issues and challenges faced by football clubs.

The University understands that you are willing to be interviewed by Jeff. It is important to the University that only people who want to do so participate in this study. We make sure of this by asking you to sign this form to confirm that you have freely agreed to be interviewed. You should also be aware that you do not need to answer any particular question and that you may stop the interview at any time. The interview will be digitally-recorded and you will be given a chance to review and amend the transcript in due course.

Any personal details will be anonymised and Jeff will not intentionally reveal your identity to anyone outside the research/supervision team. Whilst interviewees' identities will be revealed within the supervision team, the data will be anonymised before they are discussed with the team.

The contents of the interviews – including yours – will be analysed and written up during the course of the research. The findings may be included in unpublished theses submitted for higher degrees, and later lodged in the University Library. They may also be used in published works, such as academic journal articles or scholarly texts. This written work may include quotations from some of the interviews, including yours. Neither your own name nor any of your other personal details that would identify you will ever be associated with these quotations. We would be grateful if you could confirm, by signing this form, that you are happy for us to use the recorded interview or extracts from it in this way.
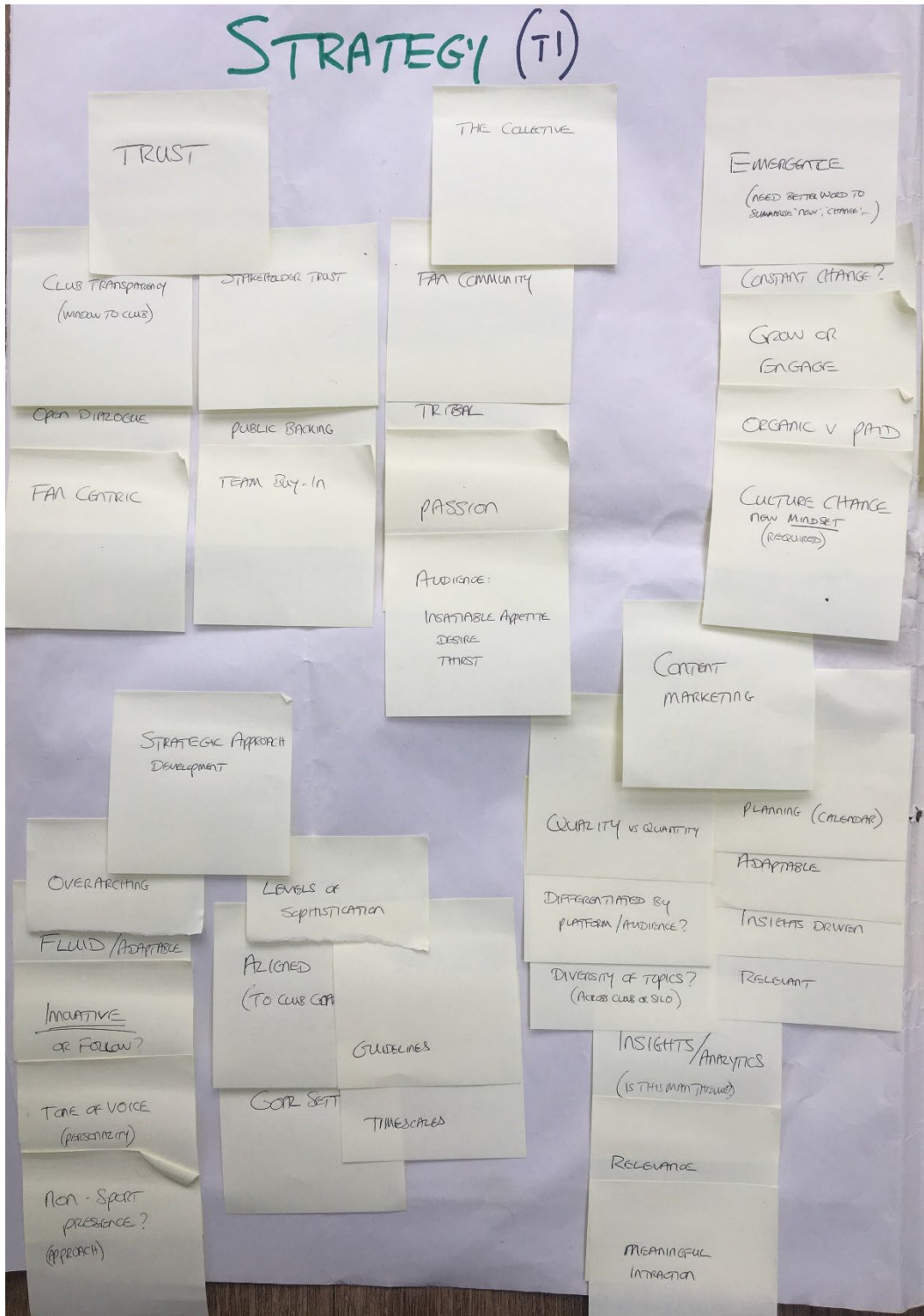
I confirm I have freely agreed to be interviewed for this project and that the recorded interview or extracts from it may be used as described above.

Signed: …………………………………………………………….

Print Name: …………………………………………………………..

Date: …………………………………………………………………

9.6 Appendix 6   Interview Transcript Template

Interview Transcript (name)   Date: Place:

JM	Coding/Notes
JM	
Okay, thank you very much for your time. This has been very helpful, thank you.	
END OF INTERVIEW: (00:00:00)	

Impression and Ideas:

9.8 Appendix 8   Codebook Example SMMS T

Codebook – with quotes

I think over the years I think it's [SOCIAL MEDIA] done a lot of good and has a very good relationship with our supporters on social media. We've got a lot of trust. They can a) trust our account to deliver information they want and b) we'll do it the right way so they don't feel embarrassed or let down by it.	*CASE H1 (name) SMMS T1*

We're very lucky that the Head of Sports for Facebook is a [club] fan. The Head of Sport in Europe anyway is a [club] fan, so we're very lucky at that. So he's always been really proactive with helping us and giving us any assistance or guidance.	*CASE B1 (name) SMMS T4*

Try new products out. They often come to the people that have had the most engagement with their brands and have the most following to test it because they want the people with the most following to test it… Facebook are the best at doing that definitely. They are the best and most forward thinking at doing those kinds of things.	*CASE D2 (name) SMMS T4*

I thought oh crikey you've not only got the passion of your own supporters who hate everything you do because you've taken all the money and the wife's left them because of you. You've also got the passion of your biggest opposition having a go at you all the time as well. It's a funny world. I think with social it's not a diamond bullet. I think a lot of people think that if you bang something on social the world and his dog are informed of what you do and they'll come running to you. I think it's all about over time, you've got to build up trust, you've got to build up a personality of what you're doing on each account. The trust element is huge.	*CASE E1 (name) SMMS T1 (TRUST) AND LINK TO SMMS C3 RE PASSION*
If we get something sent through or get asked to do something, and it can be for a huge partner, that I don't think fits in with what we're doing, I will stand up and say so. You've got to do for your own credibility sometimes. At the end of the day these people are putting a lot of money into our football club and if they want their shoes shining, we've got to shine them. But you've got to do it in a certain way. I think you stand up and say 'this doesn't work, this is why it doesn't work'. People do listen because people want long term relationships. We don't want to lose any sponsors by kicking off saying we can't do that. You've got to be able to say well, we can't do this because but we can do this. I think, provided you got a good dialogue with your partners and they understand and respect what you're doing as well, you can work together like that.	CASE E2 (name) SMMS T4

9.9 Appendix 9   University Ethical Framework

MANCHESTER METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY ETHICAL STATEMENT

1. Introduction

Manchester Metropolitan University is committed to the highest standards of ethical conduct and regulatory compliance in all of its activities. This statement sets out the University's stance on ethical considerations and provides a framework through which staff, students and Governors should consider the ethical implications associated with the activities with which they engage.

This statement is supported by more detailed policies referred to in this document, including detailed standards of ethical conduct in relation to research, as demonstrated by its engagement with the Concordat to support Research Integrity.

2. Guiding Principles

The University aims to provide high quality education and research outcomes that benefit individuals, society and the economy. As a public body, the University is committed to the highest standards of ethical conduct and integrity in all of its activities in the UK and overseas. Members of the University's Board of Governors and staff are committed to upholding 'The Principles of Public Life' (originally published by the Nolan Committee, the Committee on Standards in Public Life). These principles are 'Selflessness, Integrity, Objectivity, Accountability, Openness, Honesty and Leadership'. As Trustees of the University, the Board of Governors is committed to ensuring that all activities, including University fundraising, are conducted ethically, legally and honestly, and in accordance with changes in best practice and regulation.

3.   Ethical Statement

3.1   The University is committed, at all times, to acting with propriety and care for the welfare of its staff, students and the wider public.

3.2   The University's staff, students and Governors are required to consider the ethical implications of all activities, both home and internationally, and shall be made aware of their responsibilities and obligations to consider all ethical issues arising from their activities or study at, or on behalf of, the University.

3.3   The University is committed to upholding its ethical responsibility to assess all policies and services as part of the public sector equality duty to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations.

3.4   The University is committed to considering economic, social and environmental impacts and whole-life costs in ethical decisions and to taking appropriate action.

4. Scope

This statement applies to:

- All staff (full time, part time, temporary and casual) who work for the University.
- All students.
- Governors.
- Subsidiary companies, partnership and joint ventures that the University enters into.
- Persons or organisations that the University engages to undertake activities on its behalf.

5. Policies and Procedures

The University's approach is deliberately non-prescriptive in listing 'ethical' or 'non ethical' activities. However, mechanisms are in place to support informed decision-making on matters relating to ethics, and associated risks, on a case by case basis, within the appropriate policy or procedural context.

5.1 Governance

The University is committed to good governance and conducts is affairs in a responsible and transparent way, taking into account the requirements of the Higher Education Code of Governance: https://www.universitychairs.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Code-Final.pdf and the Seven Principles identified by the Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life.

5.2 Education and Research and Knowledge Exchange

The University is committed to considering ethical matters relating to education, including admissions, teaching partnerships and awards. The University's approach to education is underpinned by a suite of academic policies and procedures: http://www.mmu.ac.uk/academic/casqe/regulations/icp.php

The University's Academic Ethical Framework sets out a framework that requires 'all staff and students engaged in scholarly and other activities to be aware of the ethical implications of such activities and to commit to discharging their responsibilities to the University with integrity, and in an open, honest and ethical manner.' The University is supported in its commitment to the highest possible ethical standards for research through the Research and Knowledge Exchange Directorate and through the oversight of the Research Ethics and Governance Committee (REGC) and its sub-committees.

The University is committed to ensuring that its research activities minimise risk to participants, researchers, third parties, and to the University itself. In doing so, it balances risk against the benefits of pushing the boundaries of knowledge in the interests of innovation and creativity. All research taking place within the University is required to undertake an appropriate ethical review via the University's electronic approval system, EthOS:
https://www2.mmu.ac.uk/research/staff/ethics-and-governance/

5.3 Finance and Procurement

The University's Modern Slavery Statement sets out its commitment to ensuring that its operations and supply chains are trafficking and slavery free, consistent with the Modern Slavery Act 2015:

The University sets out to ensure that all of its financial transactions are carried out with due consideration for legal, ethical, environmental, corporate governance and social issues. The anti-fraud suite of policies can be found at: https://www2.finance.mmu.ac.uk/documents/, for example:

- Anti-Money Laundering Policy.
- Anti-Fraud and Corruption Policy.
- Bribery Act Compliance Statement.
- Criminal Finances Act Statement
- Conflict of Interests Policy.
- Ethical Investment Policy
- Fraud and Corruption Response Plan.
- Fundraising
- Public Interest Disclosure Policy.

6. Advice and Guidance on Ethical Issues

6.1 The University recognises that ethical queries can arise in a variety of circumstances and requires all members of the University to act ethically, referring to line managers for guidance when support for decision-making is required.

6.2 Advice and guidance is also available through other channels, including from:

- The University Executive Group.
- Human Resources.
- Personal Tutors.
- Staff and student representatives including the recognised Trade Unions and Students' Union Officers.
- Academic supervisors.
- Faculty Research Ethics and Governance Committees.
- The University Research Ethics and Governance Committee.
- The RKE Research Ethics and Governance Team.

7. Legislation and Professional Body Codes of Conduct

7.1 United Kingdom Legislation

This statement does not attempt to define or alter the obligations of staff or students under English law.

7.2. Professional Bodies' Codes of Conduct, Ethics Principles and Guidelines

Staff and students should also be aware of, and abide by, the published codes of conduct, ethics principles and guidelines of those professional bodies associated with their discipline.

8. Monitoring and Reporting

The University's Public Interest Disclosure Policy seeks to ensure that staff and students feel able to raise concerns about a potential breach of the University's Ethical Statement:
https://www2.finance.mmu.ac.uk/documents/public/MMU_Public_Interest%20Disclosure_Policy.pdf

9. Roles and Responsibilities

Role	Responsibility
Board of Governors	Responsible for approving this statement and for oversight of implementation.
University Executive Group	Strategic responsibility for the University's ethical approach and framework.
Chief Operating Officer	Owner of this statement. Responsible for maintaining the statement.
Pro-Vice-Chancellor Education	Oversight of education-related ethical matters.
Pro-Vice-Chancellor Research and Knowledge Exchange and Chair of Research Ethics and Governance Committee	Oversight of research-related ethical matters.
Director of External Relations	Oversight of ethical approach to fundraising.
Director of Finance	Oversight of finance-related ethical matters.

Version	1.0	Author Name & Job Title	Marie Morrissey, Head of Governance and Secretariat
Approved Date	23.11.18	Approved by: (Board/Committee)	Board of Governors
Date for Review	November 2021		

APPENDIX

MANCHESTER METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY ETHICAL STATEMENT

UNIVERSITY ETHICS POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

The following University policies and procedures underpin this statement (NB this is not an exhaustive list). For specific guidance and advice in decision-making, staff should refer to their line manager or to the appropriate area of the University. Students should refer to their Programme Leader, Personal Tutor or Head of School for guidance.

1. **Education**
   Academic policies and procedures:
   http://www.mmu.ac.uk/academic/casqe/regulations/icp.php

2. **Research**
   EthOS – the University's online system for ethical approval of academic research activity:
   https://www2.mmu.ac.uk/research/staff/ethics-and-governance/

   University statements on Research Ethics and Governance and their importance:
   http://www2.mmu.ac.uk/research/our-research/ethics-and-governance/

   Manchester Metropolitan University Ethics Procedure:
   http://www2.mmu.ac.uk/media/mmuacuk/content/documents/research/MMU-Ethics-Processes_v2_15-02-2017.pdf

   Manchester Metropolitan University Ethics Checklist:
   http://www2.mmu.ac.uk/media/mmuacuk/content/documents/research/MMU-Ethics-Check-List-v9-10-Jan-2017.pdf

3. **Finance, Procurement and Fundraising**
   Financial / Anti-Fraud Suite of Policies:
   https://www2.finance.mmu.ac.uk/documents/

   Ethical Investment Policy
   https://www2.mmu.ac.uk/media/mmuacuk/content/documents/facilities/FINAL_ETHICAL-INVESTMENT-POLICY-2017.pdf

   Fundraising: The University's Supporter Promise:
   http://www2.mmu.ac.uk/giving/our-supporter-promise/

   Modern Slavery Statement:
   https://www2.finance.mmu.ac.uk/documents/public/21.9.16%20Modern%20Slavery%20Act%20Policy.pdf

   Sustainable and Ethical Procurement Policy:
   www.mmu.ac.uk/policy/pdf/policy_ref_sustainableprocurement.pdf

4. **Governance**
   Constitutional Provisions
   https://www.mmu.ac.uk/policy/pdf/policy_ref_constitutionalprovisions.pdf

   Public Interest Disclosure Policy:
   https://www2.finance.mmu.ac.uk/documents/public/MMU_Public_Interest%20Disclosure_Policy.pdf

9.10 Appendix 10   Internet Research Paper (Preliminary Study)

Preview below. Full paper here

http://www.emeraldinsight.com/journals.htm?articleid=17106747&ini=aob

Managing brand presence through social media: the case of UK football clubs

Jeff McCarthy
Business School, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK
Jennifer Rowley
Information and Communications, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK
Catherine Jane Ashworth
Business School, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK, and
Elke Pioch
Business School, University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham, UK

Managing brand
presence

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to contribute knowledge on the issues and benefits associated with managing brand presence and relationships through social media. UK football clubs are big businesses, with committed communities of fans, so are an ideal context from which to develop an understanding of the issues and challenges facing organisations as they seek to protect and promote their brand online.

Design/methodology/approach – Due to the emergent nature of social media, and the criticality of the relationships between clubs and their fans, an exploratory study using a multiple case study approach was used to gather rich insights into the phenomenon.

Findings – Clubs agreed that further development of social media strategies had potential to deliver interaction and engagement, community growth and belonging, traffic flow to official web sites and commercial gain. However, in developing their social media strategies they had two key concerns. The first concern was the control of the brand presence and image in social media, and how to respond to the opportunities that social media present to fans to impact on the brand. The second concern was how to strike an appropriate balance between strategies that deliver short-term revenue, and those that build longer term brand loyalty.

Originality/value – This research is the first to offer insights into the issues facing organisations when developing their social media strategy.

Keywords Social media, Relationship marketing, Social networking, Football

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Social media sites have become an important digital meeting place for friends and acquaintances, and their reach has grown significantly in the last few years (Halliday and Vrusias, 2011; Harrigan, 2011). Social media is a broad term often used to encapsulate the applications that enable increasingly popular social activities, such as blogging, micro-blogging, social networking, photo-sharing and video-sharing (Centeno *et al.*, 2009). For example, the UK Facebook population reached 30.1 m as of July 2012 (Checkfacebook.com, 2012) whilst UK Twitter UK profiles have grown to 23.8 m (Social Media Today, 2012). Twitter follower statistics for English Premier League (EPL) clubs total 8.5 m as of March 2013 (Digital-Football.com, 2013).

In this paper social network sites (SNS) are defined as: "[...] web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded

9.11 Appendix 11 Soccer & Society Paper (Main Study)

Preview below. Full paper here

https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14660970.2022.2059872

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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Social media marketing strategy in English football clubs

Jeff McCarthy, Jenny Rowley and Brendan J. Keegan

Marketing, Retail and Tourism, Faculty of Business and Law, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT
The aim of this study is to explore the evolving social media marketing strategies of football clubs involved in the English Premier League (EPL), in a constantly changing sporting and digital landscape. Interviews conducted with practitioners from a range of clubs revealed that social media marketing has been fully adopted as a key strategic marketing channel. Other insights include the importance of trust to clubs being able to harness the collective of passionate fans on social media platforms. Also, how clubs are using social media to grow their global reach and capitalize on worldwide EPL exposure. The paper also highlights some of the negatives of social media, as experienced by football club social media marketing practitioners. Finally, a social media marketing strategy framework applied to football is proposed, based on the social media marketing strategy of football clubs and their understanding of why and how their fans use social media.

Introduction

Social media marketing (SMM) is a key strategic activity that can achieve organizational goals and create value for internal and external stakeholders.[1] Focused on customer engagement and informed by analytics, SMM will be more effective and make a more significant contribution to marketing and commercial performance.[2] Deeper levels of customer interaction and data insights enable trust and an increased chance of success through effective social media marketing strategy (SMMS).[3] Despite increased scholarly attention on the role of SMMS in sport, there remains a paucity of insights across a variety of football leagues,[4] resulting in a lack of theoretical depth.[5]

The English Premier League (EPL) is the wealthiest and most popular football league in the world,[6] its global success evident by the fact that all EPL clubs are again in the top 50 revenue generating clubs in the world.[7] EPL clubs' revenues totalled over £5bn for the first time in 2018/19,[8] with broadcast rights being worth 59% of this total. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted EPL clubs significantly, primarily through matchday revenues plummeting thanks to matches having to be played behind closed doors.

Because of the riches to be made and brand awareness to be gained, many Championship clubs gamble on promotion to the EPL, reflected in the Championship level wage/revenue ratio hitting a record 107% for 2017/18.[9] With annual promotion to and relegation from the EPL, parachute payments accounted for 30% of total Championship clubs' revenue,[10] the single biggest revenue contribution to the combined record 2017/18 Championship figure of £785 m.[11]

Interest in the EPL has coincided with a digital revolution that has changed the way we consume football-related content. Driving this is the rapid growth of the social media channel, via platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat.[12] Football fans have indicated a preference for

CONTACT Jeff McCarthy jeff.mccarthy@mmu.ac.uk Marketing, Retail and Tourism, Faculty of Business and Law, Manchester Metropolitan University, Oxford Road, Manchester M15 6BH, UK.
Brendan Keegan currently works as Assistant Professor in Marketing, Maynooth University, Ireland.