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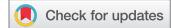
Social media marketing strategy in English football clubs

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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

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engaging with football clubs via social media,[13] arguably underpinned by the pandemic where social media usage continues to increase,[14] and with 98.8% of global social media users accessing platforms via their mobile phones.[15]

In response to the above growth trends, ongoing SMMS changes offer ever-growing opportunities for research,[16] yet very few studies have explored how clubs shape and use their SMMS.[17] This article aims to redress this deficit by exploring SMMS's of English football clubs in a constantly changing sporting and digital landscape. More specifically, the aims of this article are to explore the SMMS developed by English football clubs and propose a 'Social Media Marketing Strategy Value Proposition Planner' framework of English football clubs' use of SMMS.

Literature review

Digital and social media marketing revolution

The digital landscape is unrecognizable from 1992/93. In the late 1990s when English clubs launched their websites, they were considered by fans to offer poor quality of information.[18] However, clubs continued to attempt to generate revenue benefits through digital advertising and e-commerce.[19] In 2010, the number of people worldwide using social media was 0.97bn, and by 2020, 3.6bn people are spending an average of 144 minutes per day on social media and messaging apps; this is projected to reach 4.41bn in 2025.[20] Facebook is currently the leading platform in its own right (2.7bn).[21] In addition, it owns three of the other platforms, each with over 1bn users, in WhatsApp (2bn), Facebook Messenger (1.3bn) and Instagram (1.2bn).[22] Twitter remains very popular (0.4bn), despite being overtaken by rapidly emergent platforms like Snapchat (0.4bn), and Chinese-owned platforms Douyin (0.6bn) and TikTok (0.7bn).[23] Such social media growth, coupled with the rise in mobile use of social media, has had a profound impact on the consumption of football-based content,[24] leading to a surge in interest from academics and practitioners and a call for more research across different platforms.[25]

Social media marketing strategy

The catalyst for SMMS in sport as a research field was the changes to consumption of sporting content, due to an explosion of social media popularity and a changing sporting landscape.[26] Some of the earliest work in this area, by McCarthy et al. in 2014,[27] explored challenges and opportunities in the context of UK Football Clubs from a brand perspective and identified three main issues and four perceived benefits of SMMS. Issues included: control of conversation, fan engagement, and commercialization. Perceived benefits were: content, interaction, community, and revenue generation. This early study indicated a certain wariness of social media in the football club community.[28]

In the absence of an empirical SMMS framework for sport, this study draws upon three key SMMS studies. McCann and Barlow's[29] model proposed a cyclical process that included planning, implementation and evaluation. Despite the authors' description as 'fairly simplistic',[30] their model was based on research with 96 Scottish SMEs with a lack of social media experience. Effing and Spil focused on the transition of SMMS from Initiation, through Diffusion, to Maturity.[31] Of particular relevance is the inclusion of a sports brand in its sample. Felix et al.'s framework pivotally considers external factors, offering four dimensions that shape SMMS strategy: Culture, Scope, Structure, and Governance.[32]

In summary, the available SMMS frameworks offer consistency in prioritizing strategic approaches such as planning, implementation and control. Furthermore, these works also recognize the influence of external factors on the generation of SMMS. The wider literature suggests that trust has a key role to play in relationships between digital brands and users,[33] and brand and customers on social media.[34] To further knowledge, research agenda calls have been made for a wider range of industries to demonstrate how companies use social media,[35] and the role of social media in those industries.[36] Several calls have been made for studies that incorporate a wider range of social media

platforms rather than just one platform in isolation.[37] Furthermore, scholars have also identified how interaction and engagement play a key role in the effective social media marketing of sport brands,[38] calling for more research on the use of social media by sport brands and individual sports within a European perspective. Thompson et al. evaluated social media and brand relationships in Grand Slam tennis[39]; Kharouf et al. worked on social media communication, engagement and interaction around mega sporting events (Olympics, World Cup),[40] and Tiago et al. examined social media content types to leverage athletes' ambassador roles for brands (based on Facebook and Twitter data from 6 athletes across 3 sports).[41]

While SMMS research from the football club perspective is still very limited, a few studies have offered insights into this arena in Europe. For example, in analysing the case of FC Bayern Munich, Baena demonstrated effective club use of social media to raise brand awareness and fan commitment globally and locally.[42] In particular, Bayern's dissemination of information through social media was key to enhancing relationships with fans, resulting in ticket and commercial revenues and attracting sponsors. Moreover, a recent study of Salford City Football Club (SCFC) by Fenton et al. explored the potential of social media brand communities (SMBC) in developing a sense of community and place amongst sports fans.[43] By focusing on football industry participants, findings demonstrated how SMBC communications between the club and supporters was pivotal to creating a sense of community and place, which, in turn, enhanced the bridging and bonding social capital of the fanbase. They also discovered that in seeking to diversify to a more global fanbase, friction may be created with local fans who may then feel alienated.[44]

Parganos and Anagnostopoulos' empirical study of Liverpool Football Club (LFC) was conducted with two senior SMM managers at the club[45] and demonstrated how social media was being used to raise brand awareness and get closer to local and global fans. LFC were found to use the passion fans had for the club as a means of engaging them in social media interaction with strategically developed posts. It was also identified that social media can influence commercial benefits indirectly through long-term relationships with fans, and directly through the attraction of sponsors and commercial partners wanting to reach the LFC fan base. However, there must be a balance between posts of a commercial or promotion nature and posts that focus on the team, otherwise LFC would risk alienating fans and losing their trust. This balance was one of two issues identified as common to other clubs. The other being control of the conversation and emotions occasionally leading to overly negative sentiment on social media that may damage the club brand and revenues. Finally, their study identified the importance of social media analytics to gain audience insights as a basis for enhancing the club's SMMS.

Turning to studies that examine SMMS from the fan perspective, Anagnostopoulos et al. found that LFC and Manchester United (MU) fan responses to club Instagram posts comprised of four categories of aspiring, belonging, criticizing and loving.[46] In generating comments, product-related posts featuring star players, team performance and success were found to encourage most fan interaction for both clubs.[47] On the other hand, in Portugal, fan engagement with clubs' social media prioritized: information seeking, empowerment and brand love, whilst the need for integration and social interaction were the second most important motivators.[48] A study of US soccer fans found how content was received more favourably by fans if delivered via the US club rather than the athlete themselves.[49] Importantly, fans react more negatively to sponsors posting on the official social media presence of Bundesliga clubs,[50] as well as in Chile.[51]

Fan research has therefore demonstrated the importance of fans using social media for: (a) a sense of community and belonging; (b) information and entertainment related to their supported football club; (c) esteem through their own influence amongst the fan base; (d) based on trust, the expression and nurturing of their emotional connection and passion for the club they support; and, (e) positive and negative reactions to club and sponsor content.

This literature review shows that, whilst the body of work is growing, SMMS football industry research from the practitioner perspective is relatively sparse compared to fan-based research. This appears to reflect the wider argument that SMMS has 'received relatively little attention from researchers, possibly because exploring this area involves access to managers in organisations'.[52]

In summary, the literature review has identified: (a) a very limited body of work using empirical football club practitioner data; (b) there is no SMMS framework applied to football and sport; (c) a gap in research that explores SMMS across a range of English football clubs; (d) a need for more research incorporating a wider range of platforms and the influence of mobile marketing. Therefore, based on club practitioner insights of SMMS and their understanding of why and how fans use social media to follow the club, this study seeks to advance knowledge within the field of SMMS that will be of benefit to the research community and to SMMS practitioners.

Methodology

Since there is limited research into the evolving nature of SMMS of UK football clubs, the present study adopted an exploratory approach based on multiple case study design. Case study research is becoming increasingly common in football-related studies, including those focused on SMMS, however most tend to focus on a single case.[53] This demonstrates a need for a wider range of cases using qualitative methods to increase the knowledge base of SMMS in sport.[54] With the exception of studies by Fenton et al.,[55] Parganos and Anagnostopoulo,[56] and McCarthy et al.,[57] there appear to be very few studies generated by empirical insights from practitioners based within football clubs.

Calls for research to reflect a wider range of leagues, clubs and countries have been made,[58] but no studies published to date have covered a range of clubs that are or have been in the EPL. Therefore, a key contribution of this present paper is to generate rich insights from 15 representatives from six purposively sampled clubs,[59] with extensive experience of SMMS in football. These clubs were selected because:

- It is important for a range of clubs from specific European Leagues to be incorporated in order to offer a wider variety of perspectives of SMMS in sport.[60]
- The EPL is the leader of the 'Big Five' European Leagues which collectively dominate world football.[61] In 2016/17 alone, the EPL contributes substantially to the UK economy in the form of £3.3bn in taxes, £7.6bn added value to the economy, 100,000 jobs, 686,000 people travelling to the UK to watch a EPL club.[62]

Data was collected through 15 inductive semi-structured interviews to generate qualitative data insights,[63] with some structure to enable across-case comparison,[64] in addition to the flexibility that is so important to qualitative interviewing.[65] Club representatives were all in senior positions such as Head of Commercial and Marketing, Head of Social Media, Head of Digital and Marketing. Those interviewed had responsibility for strategy development and tactical output of such areas as SMMS, digital marketing, marketing and commercial, retail, branding, supporter relations. The number of representatives per club ranged from 1 to 5, depending on their specific areas of responsibility and size of the team responsible for SMMS. Honesty and openness are key to exploratory research that will provide meaningful data,[66] therefore access was granted and candour of answers assured based on total anonymity,[67] hence only brief details are provided in Table 1. An interview pilot was developed and tested,[68] with the main sections informed by extant SMMS literature. The questions were designed to provide scope for interviewees to express their experiences and expert opinions.[69] Interviews with each individual took place between late 2017 and mid-2018 and were recorded and manually transcribed,[70] before the transcript was returned to each participant for checking and their written approval for the purposes of this study.[71] Informed by the work of Braun and Clarke,[72] thematic analysis was undertaken on the interview transcripts. The process used was based on the schematic proposed by Bambrick and Hines[73] and involved coding of data and mapping of codes to identify initial themes within-case, followed by refinement and development of final themes across-case.

Table 1. Participant list.

Case (letter) Participant (number)	Title	League
A1	Head of Marketing and Communications	Championship, previously promoted to and relegated from EPL (EPL 13 years)
A2	Digital Content Editor	Championship, previously promoted to and relegated from EPL (EPL 13 years)
B1	Head of Marketing	Championship, previously promoted to and relegated from EPL (EPL 7 years)
D1	Editor in Chief	EPL (EPL 21 years)
D2	Social Media Exec	EPL (EPL 21 years)
E1	Head of Digital and Marketing	Championship, relegated from EPL (EPL 15 years)
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)
G1	Supporter Growth and Services Officer	Championship, relegated from EPL (EPL 10 years)
G2	Head of Media and Communications	Championship, relegated from EPL (EPL 10 years)
H1	Media and Digital Content Manager	EPL return, promoted from Championship (EPL 5 years)
H2	Head of Media	EPL return, promoted from Championship (EPL 5 years)
H3	Head of Marketing	EPL return, promoted from Championship (EPL 5 years)

Findings

Social media marketing strategy: trust

Interview evidence suggests clubs have used SMMS to be more transparent in their communications. Effectively a 'shop window' to the club that has helped foster fan relationships built on trust. The notion of trust includes other internal and external stakeholders such as senior management, Directors, club owners, or partners such as sponsors. Respondents confirmed that more open dialogue and transparency was an outcome of clubs ultimately embracing social media. Findings also show clubs have varying levels of openness, in order to retain an element of control on transparency and the open dialogue.

> As a club I think we've got a good relationship. Trust is probably the biggest aspect. They can trust a) our [social media] account to deliver information they want and b) that we'll do it the right way so they don't feel embarrassed or let down by it. (Case H1)

> It's a centre piece for the club to give and receive information. Social media is like a portcullis; you 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." (Case A1)

Open dialogue with fans should be based on interaction rather than just pushing messages out via social media and, because it is interdisciplinary, it needs internal buy-in of senior executives and other colleagues to facilitate this. Clubs indicated how open and honest dialogue has helped their fan relationships and contributed to the commercial development and success of the club.

Findings suggest clubs are very much in control of the level of transparency and open dialogue they choose to pursue in building trust via SMMS. There was some concern expressed as to how healthy this is for the democratic dissemination of information as clubs increasingly become media companies in their own right.

Clubs work with stakeholders to nurture trust and encourage public backing of what the club is trying to achieve via SMMS. Successful buy-in of influential fan groups can facilitate less negative social media feedback from fans. Trust and effective collaboration between the club and key commercial partners and other stakeholders is key to successfully applying a SMMS that delivers

content appropriate for the club audience. Clubs are also selective about which sponsors are given access to their social media channels, in order that content on club social media platforms does not become a stream of advertising messages. Content from preferred sponsors needs to be adapted so that it is relevant to the football fan audience.

> There's been a huge change probably in the last three years when I think it was realised by the top brass of the club how important digital and social was going to be. (Case E1)

> We also have a policy that only our very top tier sponsors have any 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 that only the right content is contracted and we try to make things a little more engaging. [With one partner] we've seen triple the amount of reach and they're thrilled. (Case B1)

The research found that those responsible for SMMS faced some resistance from colleagues in other departments when it came to varying content on the main social media accounts of the club. For example, communications team buy-in is key to clubs developing social media that offers a wider narrative than purely football-related content. Respondents mentioned 'a natural push from other club areas for our media team to produce a more rounded and holistic social media content' (Case G2) and 'internal politics' to overcome 'a bit of resistance because the Content team see it very much as a football only channel'. (Case E1)

Social media companies themselves are important stakeholders who can and do help their football club clients improve their use of social media. This may be through regular sharing of best practice, trialling new initiatives, or hosting of sport and/or football-themed events. EPL clubs will sometimes be given the opportunity to beta test new platform innovations before full market release. Finally, the research found that trust is a major factor in underpinning the dialogue with fans and how they respond to club SMMS content, since they are so passionate about the club they support.

Social media marketing strategy: the collective

Football and sport are considered by respondents to be a unique environment. This was evident when articulating the nature of each club's audience for SMMS and why fans use social media. Respondents confirmed the tribal nature of football and how this forms the basis of that collective community of passionate fans. Evidence also demonstrated that clubs have learned how they can take a lower profile on social media due to the collective self-regulating.

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

> They become self-regulating where you get people who actually defend the club. There's three distinct personas – [i] we just want to absorb stuff and not comment but have actually taken it in; [ii] the ones that want to feel special because they've shared it; [iii] the ones who just basically want to have an argument with someone. (Case E1)

To add some context, in exploring why fans use social media and why it is a key communication tool for the fan community, interviewees were very clear about the insatiable appetite fans have for club news which is 'literally at their fingertips' (Case A1). It is also worth noting how this can inform content marketing.

> First and foremost information. Communication. Taking the pub and moving it online. It's entertainment. Follow your favourite people, watch video content, see banter, have some fun. It's moved brands closes to customers and their public. Yes there's not so good parts to it but it's incredibly addictive." (Case H3)

A high driver of the collective is the passion for the club and how this can lead to extremes in sentiment and the relationship with the club and each other, sometimes within very short time-scales. In a social media context, clubs are also conscious that, whilst tribalism can be such an asset

to them, they should not encourage this to overspill into more ill feeling than may already exist between rival sets of fans.

> It's the passion that you're feeling at the time. You can vent or celebrate together. It's definitely to incite others to get involved, or celebrate. (Case E3)

> Fans are very emotive . . . When the team is doing well, they're great. When the team is doing badly, liquidate. They are very vocal and react to everything. Football is an emotional sport. (Case A2)

One area emphasized by many is the double-edged sword that comes with such amplification and immediacy of SMMS activity. Combined with the passion of fans, emotive and tribal nature of football, insatiable appetite for information, this can have real impact on the wellbeing of the very people responsible for posting on behalf of football clubs.

> 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)

> Dealing with the abusive side of social media. Obviously it's not directed at you but you can't help but take it personally and take that home with you because it's really bad abuse. You've got 100s ticking over. Sometimes you just 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)

Such extremes reveal the negative aspects of SMMS and the impact it can have on those doing the posting on behalf of clubs. With passionate tribal support and comments amplified by social media, clubs indicated this can be overwhelming. They also questioned the role of wider media and journalists in deliberately using tribalism to increase their SMMS and website metrics.

Social media marketing strategy: bandwagon

Regarding SMMS planning and implementation, clubs are constantly scanning the landscape in order to decide which social media platforms to continue with, which to launch and test a presence on, or to cease having a presence on. Clubs do not want to lose ground to a rival. There was consensus this is very difficult to keep up with. Success can depend on relationships between the football club and the social media platform.

> The trends change weekly, monthly so you've got to be prepared to change your style, not completely, but make little amendments. You've got to be prepared to do that in quite a short space of time, so being adaptive. (Case H1)

> In terms of platforms Snapchat is one we do quite a lot with. I think that's because the other club down the road doesn't have a Snapchat account so we realise we actually dominate that market in [city]. (Case D2)

Decisions as to what social media platforms are worthy of roll out may be based on the potential of the international market, in relation to the global ambitions and opportunities of the individual football club. Clubs also look to what is happening in other sports, such as NBA, NFL, F1, to inform their own SMMS. They also demonstrated an accurate anticipation of the wider broadcasting terrain as it continues to be shaped by new entrants, with mention of potential Amazon and Facebook bids.

While the evidence points to constant, often fast-paced change, it is acknowledged that many clubs played safe and did not necessarily innovate enough or with sufficient speed. This may be explained in part by the change in ethos through trust and the nature of the collective mentioned previously. Emerging 'bandwagon' trends included some clubs shifting from a focus on growing their audience, to engaging with them more actively. The extent of this can, for example, depend on the relative size of the social media following of individual clubs. For those benefitting from promotion to EPL there may be more emphasis on audience growth.

With changing algorithms and social media platforms focusing more on driving their own commercial revenue, clubs are forced to shift from organic to paid social media in order to ensure their audience is exposed to their content, or lose out on potential growth. They are also increasingly making use of non-sporting social media presences or influencers to reach new audiences.

> We don't use any paid for yet and we know that is restricting us massively. The only way you are going to grow is through clever paid for strategy which we've never had. Our organic growth is going to be slow until we can start to do that. (Case H3)

> And influencers. A big percentage of our big content drivers will be from collaborations. You find someone that's got 10 million subscribers on YouTube and they invariably like football, so we invite them here and suddenly we have a great video. Collaborations are massive at this level for engagement and getting new audiences and influencers. (Case D1)

Social media marketing strategy: content marketing

For successful SMMS implementation, clubs are increasingly focused on the quality of their SMMS content, rather than the volume of posts they publish within each platform and across all platforms. They learn from clubs at all levels. The ultimate focus is adding value for their audience.

All clubs use a content calendar to plan their posts over a season and the close season. This helps ensure they are delivering to a timeline across platforms they can resource, and that it fits with their content on other channels such as the website. They usually build it up from the fixture list and key events, such as kit launches. Then, they plan content around that based on a monthly cycle, with weekly or fortnightly reviews to respond to fixture changes, league form, cup runs. Other departments such as media and commercial will often provide input.

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

The content of SMM posts may vary depending on what clubs deem appropriate for the individual platform and its audience. They understand many supporters engage with them on multiple platforms because each offers a different experience. Facebook algorithm encourages and rewards long-form content whilst clubs will use Twitter as an information feed while directing fans to the club website for more information. With Instagram having a younger audience profile, clubs are increasingly creating specific content, often with more fun and character towards their brand. Such differentiation helps clubs achieve relevance for their audience in their preferred environments. Clubs will also trial other platforms like VSCO where their audience spend their time, in order to be remain relevant.

Regarding monitoring and evaluation, all clubs were working to improve their use of platform analytics, to gain insights that inform their content. They use analytics to further understand what types of content generate interaction, such as comments, likes, love, shares, what might generate negativity. Some were much more sophisticated than others, dependent on resource available. One 'Big Six' club employed data analysts whilst all other clubs were reliant on their SMMS teams developing more basic expertise in this area.

> Insight to track supporters' behaviour and sentiment allows us to reflect on campaigns and what we can change next time to make them more successful. (Case B1)

Clubs are finding that if they focus on dialogue with their audience, they can grow their audience in the process. Interaction has therefore encouraged a shift away from what one respondent referred to as 'vanity metrics' (Case E1). Such interaction is very important to maintaining the community and collective feel, while still growing numbers with an increasingly global audience.

Social media marketing strategy: strategic development

Regarding planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of their SMMS, rather than creating a yearly strategy that is then rolled out, club SMMS is highly responsive. All clubs stated the need to plan but it was very important to be aware of social media trends in order to tap into anything relevant that suddenly happens. As of late 2017, mid-2018 only two clubs interviewed (one EPL, one former EPL) had a formal written SMMS. Three had an informal unwritten strategy (one EPL, two former EPL), usually in the form of a broad framework. Finally, one former EPL club did not have a strategy but did use a content calendar as their planning document. On the other hand, all clubs had a clear view of what they wanted to achieve with SMMS and ensured all departments in their club were aligned to this. All clubs had a clear sense of how they adapted to each social media platform in order to be communicating in a manner that suited their audience, and making the most use of the capabilities of the various platforms.

> 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. (Case B1)

The clubs adopted a range of different approaches to SMMS: some were innovators and others followers, i.e. innovator clubs may quickly and effectively develop a presence on a new platform and/or test out new iterations, e.g. Instagram and Instagram TV (IGTV). Although one of the innovators was a 'Big Six' club, so too was a newly promoted EPL club. The approach adopted was influenced by club ethos, culture and senior management, more than by level of investment. Tone of voice was also influenced by the club ethos but more explicitly, by brand values. For all clubs, it was essential their SMM content was aligned to those values. Finally, club levels of sophistication varied greatly, usually in relation to skills and team resources, which, in turn, were dependant on financial resources. All clubs ensured their SMMS was aligned to club goals and the overall vision of their business. Most produced guidelines. Some clubs had very clear targets regarding number of followers, total and broken down by markets, levels of engagement and much more. Others only had very broad goals regarding follower numbers and a wish to grow their audience. One club had a very specific approach for their SMMS related to fans and partners.

> If you get them early you have more chance of them buying into a club when they're older – monetary buying. We want to make a profit, right? It all starts in recruiting them, then engaging, then monetizing. (Case D2)

In summary, the flexible approach to strategy permitted clubs to be more fluid and adaptable to the ever-changing landscape that is SMMS in sport.

Discussion and conclusions

This study demonstrates how football clubs have increasingly embraced social media while continually adapting to the digital and sporting landscape. It confirms clubs now consider SMMS to be core to their communications with fans. The research is further evidence that brands use social media as a strategic tool to build relationships with local and global fans and stakeholders, in addition to informing fans to encourage interaction.[74] Trust is at the centre of a successful SMMS, with the club as the unifying intermediary between fans and the business organization that is the actual club.

Similar to research that focused on the fan perspective,[75] this study finds that passion, based on an emotional connection with the club, is central to fans following clubs on social media. Moreover, a sense of community and social interaction are key to informing, entertaining and keeping fans engaged with the football club and its SMMS.[76] Every club emphasized the insatiable appetite for information their fans have from the SMMS of their chosen club. Such findings link with research claiming fans are motivated to engage with football club SMMS for information, for their own social influence with their community, and for entertainment.[77] It also concurs with

research that fans are motivated to engage with EPL clubs on social media for information, empowerment via influencing other consumers, social interaction, and passionate, emotional attachment.[78]

Agreement is found with research that claimed clubs use SMMS for getting closer to fans, engaging fans, monetizing, and dealing with challenges.[79] In finding trust is key to the club–fan relationship on social media, it is therefore proposed trust be considered a key concept in SMMS in sport. By being mindful of trust as the key to club–fan relationships, club practitioners can use social media to preserve and enhance the reputation of the organization.[80] Trust is a central element in a mutually beneficial club–fan relationship using SMMS, reaffirming the need for trust between digital brands and their audience.[81]

Findings that the collective community of tribal fans can be harnessed in positive and negative ways, often reflecting the emotive nature of football fandom, finds common ground with a recent study of official Liverpool FC and Manchester United Instagram accounts.[82] In a positive sense, practitioners will actively build trust with their fan base and very often leave the defending of the club to that 'collective' fan community, in order to harness trust while reducing the impact that negative social media sentiment can have on themselves as club practitioners.[83]

In a negative sense, this study builds on existing research that has demonstrated how sponsor content on official club social media platforms needs to be adapted in order to minimize any negative reaction from fans.[84] This study has also exposed the dark side of social media, discussed in very recent research,[85] namely the extent to which club practitioners can be negatively affected by relentless fan comments especially when team on-pitch results are not going well. When these argumentative behaviours[86] are embedded in the masculine framework and boyish banter of tribal football,[87] they can be very unpleasant. Indeed, the findings further highlight the significant challenges and opportunities for organizations 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 organization.[88]

All clubs had a responsive approach to SMMS,[89] in that it was adaptable and was affected by external influences such as organizational goals and audience behaviour,[90] as well as the environment the organization operates in.[91] However, the SMMS was not always a formal written document, and responsibility for delivery of any strategy at some clubs was fragmented between departments. This research demonstrates that there is scope for improvement in the clubs' strategic approach to SMMS.[92] Previous research suggests that SMMS is inter-disciplinary and involves other departments and stakeholders in content generation.[93]

Regarding monitoring and evaluation, all clubs were increasingly focused on improving their use of data analytics for improved insights for their SMMS, through a mix of qualitative and quantitative social media data.[94] For example, which types of content achieve most comments or likes, who and where the audience is. While this informs planning and implementation, it is also very often used to inform social media content. Insights are also used to generate more specific SMMS objectives. All of the above expertise is used to shape the process that may begin again as a presence on each new social media platform is rolled out. Levels of sophistication may vary between platforms.[95] It is further empirical evidence that those developing SMMS using deeper behavioural insights and customer interaction are increasing their chances of success.[96]

The 'Social Media Marketing Strategy Value Proposition Planner' is introduced based on the results of this study (Figure 1). It is the first SMMS framework based on sport and specifically football. The organization square is based on the three stages of SMMS in the extant literature: planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Thematic analysis helped identify how to develop their SMMS in each of these iterative stages.

The fans circle is the result of themes related to club understanding of why and how fans use social media to follow and engage with the club and each other. In understanding the four areas of passion, community, information and entertainment, esteem, football clubs will have a much
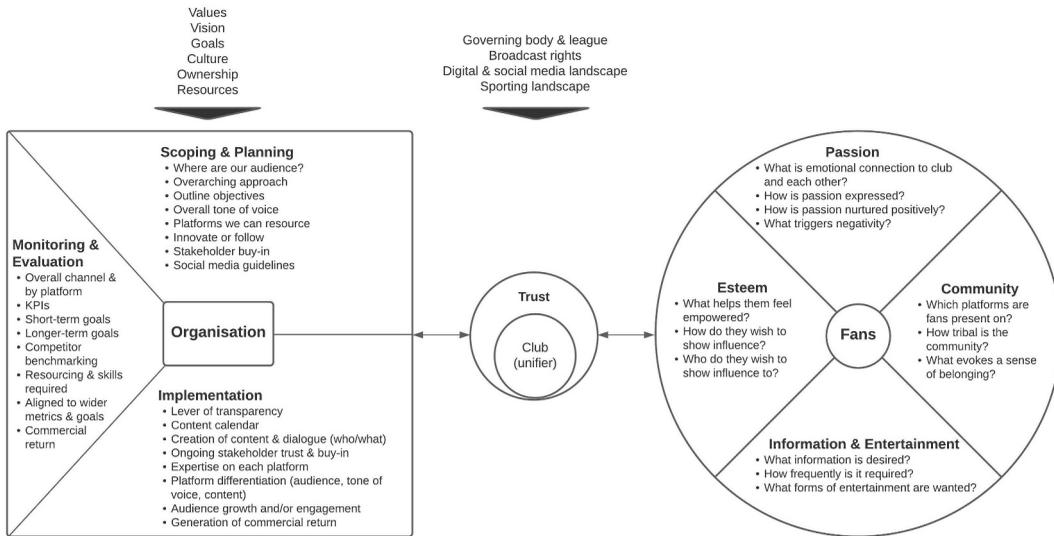
Figure 1. Social media marketing strategy value proposition planner.

clearer idea of what needs and expectations their fans have of the club SMMS. 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 SMMS of football clubs.

Finally, thematic analysis enabled the study to ascertain external factors that influence club SMMS, such as the goals and values of the organization. Also external factors that influence fan and club alike, such as the digital and sporting landscape, broadcast rights. The evidence demonstrates how the Social Media Marketing Strategy Value Proposition Planner emerged from the thematic analysis and findings presented. To use the framework, those responsible for developing the SMMS would complete the detail in the four segments of the Fans circle, before completing the segments in the Organization square. Whilst doing so, clubs need to take into account internal and external stakeholders, in addition to a range of external factors as highlighted above each arrow. In seeking to achieve a match between the organization and fans, the SMMS builds trust between fans and the unifying club.

Limitations and future research

This research has helped broaden knowledge in sports marketing by making a significant contribution to SMMS of football clubs, an area under-explored[97] and lacking theoretical underpinning.[98] Since the 2017–2018 research was conducted, more platforms, such as TikTok, Snapchat, Sina Weibo have become more prominent and global organizations like football clubs have also been more active in developing a presence on such platforms. Future research could therefore explore football club use of such platforms and the differing uses and impacts of different social media platforms in relation to their respective regional and/or international audiences. Studies could also explore how the SMMS of clubs reaching a global audience are adapted to suit individual cultures and language.

Research could also provide in-depth analysis of one or two case studies that compares club strategy with content produced and fan/community response and engagement. Studies may also explore SMMS in women's leagues specifically. Also, if there is any alignment between football cultures in particular countries and their impact on SMMS. Finally, further studies could explore in more detail the impact of negative social media on the wellbeing of practitioners responsible for the SMMS in a tribal football context, in addition to the development of strategies to manage this.

Notes

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Disclosure statement

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