



The field behind the screen: Social capital and the social media communications of a football club brand

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Abstract

Football is an incredibly popular sport around the world. It boasts hundreds of millions of networked fans interacting with their favourite clubs through social media channels and content. This study aimed to discover how social media is used by fans and the role of social capital relating to Digital Marketing. It uses the buyer persona spring with social capital theory in order to better understand channels, content and data. Football clubs are wrestling with questions around the use and maximisation of online communications and this study provides both practical and academic contributions in this important area. It presents a literature review, drawing upon the established disciplines of Information Systems and Marketing to contribute to the evolving discipline of Digital Marketing.

This interpretive study used social capital as a theoretical framework and lens on the data, with authors such as Putnam (2001) and Lin (1999) being key. Salford City Football Club (SCFC) was used as a vehicle for this research. During the period of study, social media was playing a critical role in their evolution from an unknown non-league football club to becoming better known around the world. The study used a blended methods approach as part of a netnography. Ethnography is the study of people, and netnography is a well established framework for conducting ethnography online (Kozinets, 2015). The qualitative methods of interview, participant observation and social network analysis (SNA) were blended for the primary data collection. Two years of participant observation were blended with insights from SNA visualisations and 33 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 participants. The findings were further tested by utilising primary and secondary data from other clubs to make them more generalisable. This blended methods approach also provides a methodological contribution.

This thesis found that clubs should identify, segment and engage their fans wherever they are in the world. They should consider the development and cultivation of social capital through online interaction, content and encouragement of fan led content and groups. Social capital can be developed and grown online, which concurred with the findings of Lin (1999) and Bauernschuster et al. (2014). Clubs should interact with fans and also engage with weakly connected lurker fans through appropriate social media channels and content. If these groups are not engaged online, social media communications risk being drowned out. This is due to the social media algorithms, which are designed to deliver relevant and emotive content to

fans. Social capital was therefore found to be a key enabler for football clubs to engage fans through social media channels and content in order to strengthen their brands.

The thesis presents a pyramid model, which highlights the synergy between types of social capital, types of fan and types of Internet user. The research provides implications for other organisations with social media followers and highlights the key role of lurker fans as real people who have great value to brands. Lurkers can be engaged directly by football clubs, increasing their connection to a club and also enhancing the partnerships and sponsorship potential of brands. This study created new insights into online behaviour within sports fan social media communities.

1. Introduction

This thesis concerns digital marketing in the business of sport, using social capital as a theoretical framework. It studies social media and gathers data from it. Digital marketing is a new and emerging discipline and the application of social capital is required in order to better understand the power of relationships for the growth of brands. In the sport and digital marketing literature, there are several recent calls for research, which this thesis aims to fill. From a practical perspective, brands need to understand more about the ways in which social media and relationships operate in order to grow and improve their brands. Football is the world's most popular sport, with many millions of fans following and interacting with their favourite clubs and fans from around the world. This thesis adopts a netnography approach and uses Salford City Football Club (SCFC) as a vehicle for the study. Social and digital media are key for both the data collection and study of digital marketing and brand.

1.1. Social and digital media

By 2013, the use of social media and mobile devices had become widespread around the world (Davis et al., 2013). The term social media in this study refers to digital communication channels, which enable two way interactions between clubs and fans (McKenna et al., 2016). "Compared to other traditional offline and online media: a social medium is, by definition, multi-way, immediate, and contingent" (Peters et al., 2013). Singh (2013, p.31) defined digital media content as media stored in an electronic way including "text content, pictures, audio content, as well as video content". This thesis focuses on social media channels and digital media content, which is the fuel for digital marketing.

This study focussed primarily on the social media channels of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. These were the primary channels used by SCFC at the time of study. These were also typical of the primary channels used by UK football clubs. In addition, SCFC and most other football clubs have a website and forum, which was also considered in this research. The study is ethnographical and therefore, it followed people and clubs to other areas of the Internet. This included channels such as Russian based social media channel, VContact. Ethnographer Paul Atkinson (2015) and Netnographer Kozinets (2015) outlined that ethnographers should follow and communicate with the group under study including social and digital media communities. The term digital media can potentially also extend to TV, smartphone applications, eSports and various other formats. This study focuses on social

media, which is a primary mode of digital communication for football clubs globally at the time of writing. Social media is also fundamental to the digital marketing efforts of football clubs and the growth of their brands (McCarthy et al., 2014).

1.2. Social media and sport

This PhD thesis commenced in 2014 at a critical time for social media and sports clubs. In 2009, Chadwick argued that many sports clubs were struggling to cope with disruptive changes and that this provided great opportunities for academic and practical research in this area. This is still true today as football fans world-wide increasingly interact online through social media (Parganas et al., 2017). According to Statista (2017), there are 2.46 billion social media users around the world and this is set to increase to 2.77 billion by 2019. Football is the world’s biggest sport and social media is a global enabler for fans to follow football clubs. The table below is from KPMG’s Football Benchmark, Social Media Analytics (KPMG, 2017). This tracks 517 of the world’s most popular football clubs across the most popular social media channels. The top five most followed football clubs are shown below. Many fans are following multiple football clubs through social media across multiple platforms, but the numbers below give some indication of the global penetration of football and social media, which amounts to many billions.






| Club | League | Facebook Page Likes | Twitter Followers | Instagram Followers | YouTube Subscribers | TOTAL |
|--|----------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------|
|  Real Madrid CF | La Liga | 106,003,477 | 44,878,727 | 53,750,270 | 2,617,500 | 207,249,974 |
|  FC Barcelona | La Liga | 103,577,672 | 46,456,506 | 53,020,171 | 3,327,290 | 206,381,639 |
|  Manchester United FC | Premier League | 73,788,371 | 17,085,105 | 19,699,952 | | 110,573,428 |
|  Chelsea FC | Premier League | 47,867,417 | 13,609,462 | 10,454,150 | 700,239 | 72,631,268 |
|  Arsenal FC | Premier League | 37,949,632 | 12,426,154 | 10,374,514 | 715,802 | 61,466,102 |

Figure 1 - Table showing the top 5 football clubs, most followed on social media (KPMG, 2017). Real Madrid top this league with 207,249,974 combined between Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube

1.3. Football clubs, fans and social media research

UK football clubs at all levels have embraced digital communication technologies at board and fan level (McLean and Wainwright, 2009). Football clubs want to know how best to use these disruptive technologies in an era where smartphones have radically changed media consumption (Rowles, 2017). Only a small proportion (4%) of sociological and psychological studies of sport focus on fans (Crawford, 2004). Out of this small percentage, most studies focus on sports fans at live events and often ignore the wider fan base who follow sports

through social media. Whilst studies of fans have grown more recently, there has also been a significant shift in sports fandom, where social media is playing a key role (Lawrence and Crawford, 2018). Lawrence and Crawford noted a shift from ‘post fandom’ in the 1990’s to ‘hyperdigitalization’ where the social media, ‘millennial generation’ of fans born since 2000 have entered mainstream football culture.

Social media channels are therefore “transforming sports and sports businesses” (Cave and Miller, 2015 para.1). This growth has opened up exciting new channels of communication, new communities and increased global reach for football fans, clubs and their brands. Fans are key to the rich online dialogue of media which is then consumed by other fans (Crawford, 2004). Sports fans globally are following their teams across multiple social media channels, interacting and creating digital content. They are accessing content on demand from anywhere, creating a global sports market worth an estimated \$700bn (Bashford, 2017). Football clubs and fans are using social media to innovate and differentiate their brands, which is becoming increasingly important (Chanavat et al., 2017). Fans are also customers and they are central to digital marketing activity (Ryan, 2017). Social media is a fundamental part of digital marketing (Heinze et al., 2016) and digital marketing is fundamental for brands, including football clubs.

Filo et al. (2015. p166) highlighted the growth of social media for sports clubs and fans; “sport brands invest significant time and resources to drive engagement and relationships online”. The growth of social networks has opened up interesting new possibilities and global connections for relationships between fans and clubs (Chadwick, 2009). Kuzma et al. (2014) studied how football clubs were using social media in the digital era and highlighted a gap in the academic literature for studies of football and social media. They found that although most football clubs now have a social media presence, they were not using this to the full potential given how engaged, passionate and numerous football fans are.

McCarthy, et al (2014, p.198) published one of the relatively small number of academic studies which evaluated the growth of social media for football clubs by collecting data from English Premier League (EPL) clubs. They found that football clubs and other organisations with a strong membership or customer base faced tensions and confusion regarding their brand and social media (McCarthy et al., 2014). Even well known clubs could be using social media more effectively to engage their fans (Kuzma et al., 2014). Parganas et al. (2015,

p.533) concur with Kuzma and McCarthy et al, calling for more research, they stated, “our knowledge of how social media are used for branding purposes is still at the embryonic stage and scholars have called for additional empirical research”. These sentiments were also echoed by McCarthy et al who stated, “There is considerable scope for enhanced understanding of the way in which fans, members and customers will evolve their engagement with brands through social media over the next few years”. This highlighted the need therefore for further research in this area.

Sports clubs and other companies are learning how to take advantage of this combination of digital marketing, “How companies adopt and manage social media will be key” (Griffiths and Mclean, 2015, p.150). This PhD thesis rose to this challenge to understand the benefits and challenges of digital marketing using the information system of social media and content of football clubs and their fans. It focussed on SCFC as a vehicle for this thesis. In 2014, ex-Manchester United players, ‘The Class of ‘92’ purchased SCFC. The takeover created a new era of social media use on a global scale.

1.4. The rise of Salford City FC and the Class of ‘92

Salford is a city in the North-West of England, with a population of approximately a quarter of a million people (Salford City Council, 2018). Salford is situated in Greater Manchester in very close proximity to the City of Manchester. The fortunes and histories of the two cities have been closely connected. Both cities have a long and rich history with football, with nearby English Premier League clubs Manchester United and Manchester City. “Football in Greater Manchester though is not just City and United. The likes of Bury, Oldham Athletic, Stockport County, Salford City and FC United are also making an important contribution to Greater Manchester and beyond” (Chadwick, 2017a).

SCFC are a non-league football club, playing in the English league. The club was founded in 1940 as Salford Central. They changed their name to Salford Amateurs (The Ammies) in 1963 (Keeling, 2015). After a successful spell in the 1970’s, The Ammies won the Lancashire Amateur Cup three times. Non-League status was finally achieved in 1980 and the amateurs tag dropped in 1989, as The Salford Amateurs became Salford City.

In March 2014, The ‘Class of ‘92’ purchased SCFC. The Class of ‘92 are composed of successful ex-Manchester United players Paul Scholes, Ryan Giggs, Nicky Butt, Gary

Neville and Phil Neville. The takeover of SCFC by the Class of '92 and billionaire Peter Lim and partnership with the University of Salford provided an opportunity to undertake research in this field. University students were filming all of the SCFC matches for YouTube and helping with the social media channels and content (Draper, 2016). This new era led to greatly enhancing the social media communications at the club. On the field, the ambitions of the new owners were to raise the club up to the second tier of English football within 15 years (Wheatstone, 2014). Gary Neville said, "We want to take this club as high as we possibly can from the 8th tier of football and raise awareness of the club and the City" (Draper, 2016, p.332). In addition, the new owners were reported to want to create the "world's first digital, 'always on' football club, giving fans unrivalled access to behind-the-scenes activities and up-to-the-minute information about Salford City's on-going development" (Mirror, 2014). After a successful FA Cup Run in 2015/16 and two promotions, SCFC became a full-time professional football club in 2017.

This situation allowed for research into what this meant in practice. It came at an important time for SCFC and many other football clubs who were evolving and learning more about their social media audiences. Gaps in the academic literature in sport and digital communications and the involvement of the University of Salford with SCFC also provided an opportunity for research in this area.

1.5. Theory construction

This thesis utilised SCFC as a vehicle for the study, but it takes a wider view of online football and sports communities. The words 'football clubs' are used in the research questions, but from a wider lens, football clubs are also examples of brands with loyal customers (McCarthy et al., 2014). The primary and secondary data collected in this thesis therefore examines football and social media in depth and from different angles. Jonsen and Jehn (2009) used the analogy of a photographer changing lenses to capture different motives, and the same analogy can be applied to moving from a micro (SCFC) to meso (football and other sports) and macro level to other brands (Bolibar, 2015). This enabled theory to be constructed, which is useful beyond the boundaries of SCFC. The application of theory to the business of sport in order to make an academic and practical contribution sets the context for this study.

In Granovetter (1985, p.481), he outlined “how behaviour and institutions are affected by social relations is one of the classic questions of social theory”. He ended the article with an urgent call for sociologists to evaluate social structure of markets and the connection to economic and social action (p.507). Traditionally, marketing has been built on economics. Over time, social structures and the customer have become central in parallel to the growth of social and digital marketing (Ryan, 2017). Social capital is built on structure and relationships and therefore has a fundamental connection to digital marketing (Heinze et al., 2016). This connection also relates to the gift economy. Gift giving can be physical gifts, services or virtual to improve relationships (Skågeby, 2010). Gifting and its connection to social media and social capital is further explored in the literature review. This thesis aims to apply the idea of social relations to behaviour and institutions in order to advance the work on social capital and digital marketing and the connection between the two.

1.6. The growth of digital marketing

This thesis is placed in the new discipline of digital marketing. As a less developed body of literature, it also draws on the literature from the more established disciplines of Information Systems (IS) and marketing. It focuses on social media, which is a core part of digital marketing (Heinze et al., 2016; Ryan, 2017). By 2010 the discipline of e-marketing or Internet marketing as it was also known at the time, had finally come of age and was being called a mainstream activity in its own right for organisations (Taylor and Strutton, 2010). By 2016, over 80% of company bosses agreed that it was important to have a social media presence (McKenna et al., 2016). In marketing education, Crittenden and Crittenden (2015, p.71) found that “marketing is in the midst of constant reinvention, with social media technologies engendering radically new ways of interacting”. The progressive growth of social media, mobile devices and Internet speeds therefore over this time period meant that authors such as Cooperstein (2013) argued that this growth had made the customer central. The rise of social media and customer interaction was fundamental to the growth digital marketing and the customer should be the central focus of activity (Ryan, 2017). Mobile devices and social media apps were making it difficult to distinguish between online and offline interactions (Weijo et al., 2014). Massive digital technology investments and billions of people interacting online had created a wave of massive, disruptive change to business (ibid.). Heinze et al. (2016, p.24) argued that organisations were becoming increasingly digital, “In organisations that understand the marketing function, digital techniques are combined with traditional forms of marketing activity. However, in digital business,

traditional activities are led, guided and integrated with digital marketing”. This demonstrated the growth of digital marketing to business and its evolution.

Rodriguez et al. (2014) evaluated the interactive marketing literature dating back to 1998 before the newer term of digital marketing was used. They found that there had been a sharp rise in academic publications in areas such as technology and social media marketing since 2006. The terms interactive, e-marketing and Internet marketing had also been replaced by some authors and practitioners with the phrase digital marketing. Wymbs, (2011, p.93) for example, argued that the rise of digital marketing was “challenging the relevance of existing marketing practices, and a radical redesign of the marketing curriculum consistent with the emerging student and business needs of the 21st century”. In their view, this had led to the development of a new academic major of digital marketing. Wymbs defined digital marketing using the Digital Marketing Institute definition quoted by Smith (2007) “the use of digital technologies to create an integrated, targeted and measurable communication which helps to acquire and retain customers while building deeper relationships with them”.

1.7. Information Systems, marketing and digital marketing

This study sits within the discipline of digital marketing, underpinned by the Information Systems (IS) and marketing literature. The established disciplines of IS and marketing serve in this thesis as the reference disciplines for the emerging discipline of digital marketing. In 2002, Baskerville and Myers wrote a paper suggesting that IS had emerged to the point where it was an established discipline in its own right. “We suggest the intriguing scenario that IS can now serve as a reference discipline for others” (p.1). IS had become a fully-fledged discipline with a significant body of work supporting it. IS and marketing have traditionally connected to other disciplines such as mass communications, computer science and various others over the years both in an academic and professional sense (Babb and Carley, 2015). IS and marketing therefore have a rich history of being connected to a number of other disciplines.

The marketing and IS literature relating to digital marketing in its various guises has grown proportionately with the Internet since the middle of the 1990’s (Taylor and Strutton, 2010). Initial articles featured in marketing journals, developed conceptual models and attempted to predict the incredible potential for marketing using the Internet (ibid). The IS and marketing literature developed in parallel with the growth of interest of the Internet to researchers and

practitioners. These articles related to topics such as customer satisfaction and purchasing behaviour using the Internet. Digital marketing has continued to grow in importance, becoming pervasive in almost every area of life and business (Babb and Carley, 2015).

The growth of the Internet had created a multi-functional information system enabling interactive communications. Babb and Carley (2015, p.54) wrote about this change and how it applied to IS and marketing “The digital revolution is upon us, bringing with it disruptive forces in every aspect of business and personal interactions. The business marketing function has become so technologically driven it is sometimes hard to tell where the boundaries between the marketing and IS disciplines lie”. As established disciplines, IS and marketing can serve as reference disciplines for the emerging discipline of digital marketing and this is the case for this PhD study. In terms of IS research, Brown (2014, p.168) noted that, “The most spectacular example of an IT artefact that has had industry effects is that of the world wide web”. It is the publically accessible Internet as an information system, which is used as a means to communicate between football and fans and clubs, which is the subject of this study. Lee (2001, p.iii) also discussed research in IS as examining “more than just the technological system, or just the social system, or even the two side by side; in addition it investigates the phenomena that emerge when the two interact”. This thesis researched the disruptive interactive system of social media and the interaction with the social system of football fans and clubs, underpinned by social capital theory.

1.8. Social capital theory

Walsham (2006) advised new researchers to “choose theories which they feel are insightful to them”. He advised that this comes from reading widely as opposed to choosing theories because they are fashionable. Choosing an appropriate theoretical framework that ‘fits’ to a study is important according to Walsham. This thesis used a theoretical framework of social capital as a lens on the data. Social capital authors Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Putnam are explored in greater depth in the social capital chapter. In this thesis, social capital is defined as the positive effect of interactions within a social network (Helliwell and Putnam, 2004). For Andriani (2013), the principle of social capital is that relationships matter. Andriani discussed the effect of relationships and how “trust, cooperation and reciprocity involved in these relationships can have a positive impact” (Andriani, 2013, p.2). After analysing the literature, social capital was found to be a positive fit for this study. Social capital theory can be used gain a greater understanding of subjects including social media (Bauernschuster et al.,

2014), digital marketing (Heinze et al., 2016) and sport (Widdop et al., 2014). Social capital is also an important part of fan engagement and community building for sporting brands on social media.

Social capital in this study is therefore appropriate because it focuses on social media connections, relationships and interactions. In his study of sports fans, Underwood (2001, p.1) noted that “strong service brands are built by making an emotional connection with the audience” and that “one path to this emotional loyalty is the formation of a strong user community around the brand”. Underwood highlighted that sports clubs have the highest identification levels of any service brands. Some authors have highlighted that the trust between people as a vital component in the connections between people and brands. Fueller et al. (2011, p.3244) for example, found that brands “play an important role in linking people together and thereby help build relationships and social capital”. Trust is therefore key for brands to build credibility with their audiences in the age of the social web (Ryan, 2017). In addition, understanding the presence and role of trust was identified by Adams (2011) to create better marketing programs for brands and to connect with the people that want to hear from them.

Social capital authors Robert Putnam and Nan Lin are also important to this study and are introduced in the social capital chapter. Putnam’s work demonstrated the importance of social capital in order for society to function effectively (Putnam, 1995). Putnam questioned the ability of online networks to foster and increase social capital. This thesis found that social capital could be developed and grown online, which concurred with the findings of authors such as Lin (1999) and Bauernschuster et al. (2014). Tsatsou and Zhao (2016, p.9) studied the role of Facebook and ‘online social capital’ for civic activism. The authors found that “the bridging/linking dimensions of Facebook enabled social capital were central to the movement”. This was found to be “Due to the openness of the platform and the speed at which information can be circulated across it”. The authors found that social media openness was an enabler for the development of online social capital. Social capital, connections and questions relating to digital communications have also been present in IS and marketing research for many years (Bauernschuster et al. 2014; Huysman and Wulf, 2004). These concepts are further discussed in the social capital literature review chapter.

Filo et al. (2015) reviewed 70 sport and social media related journal articles. They found that many studies did not use a theoretical framework and only one of the 70 used social capital as a framework. Outside of this review, there are a few examples of social capital and sport studies such as (Palmer and Thompson, 2007 ; Walseth, 2008). Palmer and Thompson (2007, p.189) found that “social capital remains under explored in studies of sporting communities”. This thesis explores this gap with regard to online football communities and broadens the literature of social capital and sport business.

1.9. Research questions

Qualitative researchers such as Creswell (2013) recommended an overarching research question followed by sub-questions in order to maintain a focussed approach. This approach is adopted in this thesis and the research question and sub-questions are presented below. The sub-questions are referred to as research questions. Boellstorff (2012, P.32) argued that research questions should be agile, and crafted to flow along with the study. There is flexibility within qualitative, interpretive studies to gather data and further refine research questions which can be subject to change as a project progresses (Brown, 2014). Based on a review of the existing literature, discussions, conference presentations and empirical data collection, the research questions were formulated and modified using an inductive approach as the project progressed to settle on the questions outlined below. Data from SCFC was used as a vehicle for this study in order to help answer the research questions, but as discussed, both primary and secondary data from SCFC and other clubs and commentators were used. Underpinning each question is the importance of social capital and relationships to better understand the behaviour of the actors in these networks (Fyrberg-Yngfalk and Cova, 2014). The role of social capital specifically is brought under review in the final question and is further discussed in the methodology chapter. The overarching research question for this study is: **How does social capital affect the social media communications of a football club brand?** In order to support this question, it was sub-divided into sub-questions as follows:

1. How is social media being used by football clubs and their fans?

Social media use has risen dramatically with digital marketing driving a demand for digital content (Lin and Yazdanifard, 2014). This question is aimed at contributing to the lack of academic studies in this area (Kuzma et al., 2014; McCarthy et al., 2014) and contributing to the literature on digital marketing with IS and marketing as reference disciplines. This

question also assesses how football clubs and fans use social media and what relationships, rituals and behaviours are present (Underwood et al., 2001). It also sets the broader context for this research.

2. How does social media influence brand communications of football clubs?

McCarthy et al. (2014) highlighted that there is great potential for a better understanding of the way fans and members evolve their relationships with football clubs as brands through social media. They stated that football clubs are at a relatively early stage with their adoption of social media channels for brand communications. Publications relating to brand communications often focus on global brands and most studies of sport and social media focus specifically on America. “There is a need for more research conducted beyond the North American perspective” (Filo et al., 2015, p.178). As a smaller, UK based brand, SCFC offered an opportunity for new insight. SCFC has also attracted a significant local and global following online. This presented an opportunity to understand more about the effectiveness of social media for brand awareness locally and further afield.

3. How can social media communications be managed according to fan segmentation?

This question is devoted to understanding if there are different segments of football fans and the implications of this related to social media communications and digital marketing.

Segmenting audiences is an important aspect of digital marketing strategy (Heinze et al., 2016; Ryan, 2017). Several studies of football clubs have divided fans into segments and classifications. This question was designed to understand how these segments are important for communications between clubs and fans using social media channels. The relationship between types of fan, types of Internet user and social capital is also explored relating to fan segmentation.

4. What is the role of social capital in football online communities?

Social capital is the theoretical framework used to underpin this thesis, but a specific question about its role derived from the primary and secondary data in this study is also included. This provides a thorough contemplation of this important concept. There are a lack of studies about social capital within sports and this question aims to help fill this gap and also explores the concept of linking capital (Woolcock, 2001) and the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). Studies that include the evaluation of linking capital are also scarce in the literature.

The role of social capital is crucial to this study and enables a key contribution to the literature on the role of social capital for online communities, specifically within sport.

1.10. Research problems and research questions

The table below outlines the research problems, questions and the literature and data required to answer them along with the contribution made. The data sources of participant observation, interview and SNA (social network analysis) are explored in more detail in this chapter and the methodology chapter.

| Research Problem | Research Questions | Literature | Data sources and types of collection | Contributions to knowledge/ practice |
|--|--|--|---|--|
| Literature calls for more studies on digital marketing and football | How is social media being used by football clubs and their fans? | Literature on both social media and digital marketing within sports clubs and other relevant organisations | Participant observation and interview | A strong contribution to theory and practice for digital marketing and IS particularly applied to sports business |
| Existing research on brand communities focus on big brands | How does social media influence brand communications of football clubs? | Brand awareness and brand community studies, tribal marketing | SNA, participant observation and interview | Greater understanding about the impact of social media for smaller brands |
| Lack of studies on football fans relating to football fan communications and segmentation | How can social media communications be managed according to fan segmentation | Other relevant studies on football fans, segments, digital communities, marketing and also football fan segmentation | SNA, participant observation and interview | Contribution to digital marketing, IS and sport business literature |
| Growth of social media means that there are a lack of studies in social capital and social media communities | What is the role of social capital in football online communities? | Social capital and social capital applied to online communities and also sports | Participant observation and interview | Contribution to the understanding of the role of social capital for social media marketers and the academic literature |

Figure 2 - Table outlining research problems, questions, sources and contributions in this thesis

1.11. Research problem

Research problems are often derived from personal experience (real life issues) or the academic literature. The research problem for this study is derived from both. As outlined later in the chapter, the researcher has first hand practical experience as a digital marketer, developer and trainer. He has experienced organisations struggling to understand how to effectively use digital and social media marketing. The background of the researcher is explored in the motivations and values section of this chapter. Understanding more about the complexities of social media and people's opinions in the context of online communities is key to this thesis. Secondly, the academic literature highlighted gaps in this area of online communities and football, and calls for further empirical studies. The research problem this thesis addresses is that there are a lack of studies concerning the relationship between sport, social media and social capital as outlined in the figure above.

1.12. Purpose statement

Authors such as Creswell (2013, p.134) have stated that a purpose statement is the road map for research and it is of utmost importance to qualitative studies in particular. Supporting this, Rocco and Plakhotnik (2009, p.1) advised that empirical studies of all kinds “must be connected to literature or concepts that support the need for the study, be related to the study's purpose statement, and situate the study in terms of previous work”. Creswell further elaborated that the purpose statement should be explicit and written in clear terms. The purpose of this netnography study is to understand the influence of social capital in online football communities for the brand of SCFC. Social capital in social media communities is the central phenomenon of the study and underpins the research as its theoretical framework. This PhD thesis is an interpretive, inductive netnography. It uses the blended methods of interview, participant observation and SNA (social network analysis) to gather data from social media football communities at a crucial time of evolution and transformation in the business of sport.

1.13. Aim

The overall aim of this PhD was to discover how social media are used within a UK football club and the role of social capital and brand communications in digital marketing and communications. The study enhances the understanding of the ways in which football clubs and fans evolve their online engagement. The implications are also relevant for other

organisations that use social media to engage their loyal fans. The research therefore contributes to IS and digital marketing from both an academic and practical perspective

1.14. Objectives

The objectives were designed to achieve the aim of this study. This was made possible by following the progress of a football club, collecting empirical data combined with key literature in order to answer the research questions.

1. To critically assess the use and effectiveness of online communications by a football club. Both club and fans are using social media, websites and mobile phones to produce digital content and communications.
2. To collect primary data using the blended, qualitative methods of SNA, participant observation and interview as part of a netnography; the effectiveness of these blended methods is also assessed.
3. To evaluate and segment football fan bases for analysis. A greater understanding of the types of football fan aids the understanding of the networks and types of people involved. The objective was to better understand how segments of fans use social media and the relevance of this. The short term and long-term effects and issues that arise with the club, players, fans and their relationships are also analysed.
4. To make recommendations to improve the digital communications strategy of football clubs. This enabled a deeper insight into social media communications and consumption within the business of football. The goal was for knowledge obtained through this study to be useful for practise and for the academic literature.
5. To apply and evaluate the role of social capital as a theoretical framework. Social capital theory underpins the entire study and the research questions. An important objective was to critically analyse the effectiveness of this approach and to make a theoretical contribution in this area.

1.15. Summary of methodology

This thesis uses netnography as a well-established way of conducting online ethnography. This thesis is therefore described as both an ethnography and a netnography. Ethnography as a method is long established and its history is therefore documented in the methodology chapter. The methodology chapter further outlines the methods used and establishes the boundaries of this study. The research is not restricted purely to SCFC as the primary vehicle for the study, but stretches to capturing data and literature from other football clubs and fans around the world. Much of the primary data collected relate to SCFC, but primary data was also collected from people affiliated with other football clubs and the football and digital marketing industries more widely. The purpose of this was to effectively answer the research questions and create theory.

1.15.1. Ethnography

Myers (1999, p.2) stated that ethnography is one of the most in depth of all possible research methods because it “enables a researcher to see what people are doing as well as what they say they are doing”. The question of boundaries and scientific standards of ethnography is addressed by Nader (2011). She referred back to the famous ethnographer Malinowski who in 1922 broke new ground by conducting what was considered to be a multi-sited ethnography. Multi-sited ethnographies are not tightly defined to one site, but use multiple sites to create new insight and illumination. Nader (p.217) noted that up until that point, ethnographies were quite bound into particular sites and viewpoints. She wrote that ethnography changes over time and that “changing industrial and technological means have transformed the world and us with it”. It is technology and online culture that has also been a driver for change in ethnography and the development of netnography. This ethnography also follows fans and social media managers across multiple sites including different social networks and clubs. In her paper “The place of ethnographic methods in information systems research” Brown (2014), noted that the IS community has a history of using appropriate, diverse methods. Ethnography can be a costly and time-consuming way of conducting research but is ideally suited to gaining deep insights (ibid.).

1.15.2. Netnography

Netnography is a branch of ethnography, developed specifically to study the online interactions of people through participant observation and other methods. Robert Kozinets is a key author in marketing and pioneered netnography as “the textual output of Internet-

related field work” (Kozinets, 1997, p.3). Netnography uses Internet communications as a primary source of data. His most recent book ‘Netnography Redefined’ (2015) provided a valuable methodological framework. Kozinets highlighted that the massive growth of social media sites in recent times called for new ways to approach the research of online communities. Branthwaite and Patterson (2011, p.430) noted “electronic social media such as Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, etc. have become a major form of communication, and the expression of attitudes and opinions, for the general public”. They highlighted that these channels had become a source of data for research studies and that in-depth, qualitative studies are the best way to study complex human behaviour and social media (Branthwaite and Patterson, 2011).

Kozinets (2015) stated that Netnography has grown from the marketing discipline and has over the last two decades been used in many different disciplines. To date however, there is limited evidence of the use of netnography and a wider evaluation of its application for IS. A key aspect of netnography is participant observation of the phenomena under study by the researcher and being absorbed into the online field. The participants of this PhD study are using social media communications and a key aspect of this study is to follow, observe and participate with fans through social media. This meant that netnography is particularly suited to this study to gather primary data.

In the methodology chapter, netnography is explored in more detail. There are other terms used in the literature such as virtual ethnography and digital ethnography. Using a netnography approach means adopting a particular set of guidelines and standards including entrée, ethics and methods. Netnography is most suited to the study of online communities. It should always contain participant observation. The body of literature around netnography, the research questions and the standards set out made it an appropriate approach for this study. Within netnography, there were three blended methods employed.

1.15.3. Blended methods

The methodology chapter outlines the empirical data collection. This study captured qualitative data through semi-structured interviews, SNA and online participant observation, which are blended together as part of a netnography. Each method was designed to work with each other. For example, SNA was used to identify participants for further observation or interview. Interviews revealed other networks and phenomena to observe and analyse using

SNA or observation. The primary data was derived from all of the methods. Secondary data was gathered through the IS and marketing literature relating primarily to sports, brand and social media.

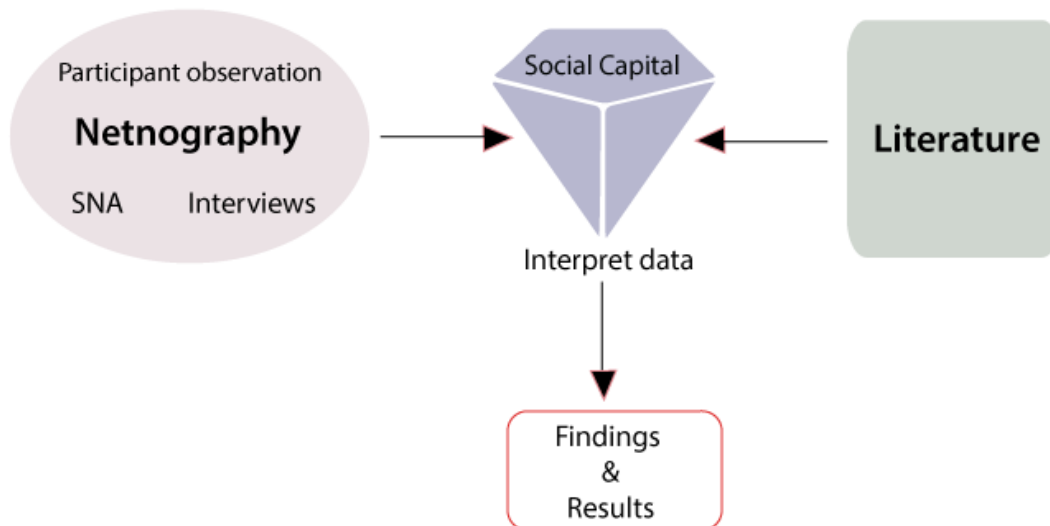


Figure 3 - The conceptual model used in this thesis. Social capital is central as a theoretical framework between the literature and the netnography

The figure above demonstrates how the primary and secondary data were brought together in this study using a theoretical framework of social capital to obtain findings and results to create theory. An expanded version of this conceptual model can also be found in the methodology chapter.

1.16. Organisation of the thesis



Figure 4 - The connection from research questions to findings that ultimately answer the research questions in this thesis. The circular and interlinks demonstrate that this is an interpretive study

The above diagram demonstrates the organisation and structure of this thesis. The circular shape and interconnections are more typical of an interpretive study. Interpretive studies are usually less linear and the interconnecting lines demonstrate that each section is connected. In addition, sections were adapted as data collection and literature were gathered. This process of adaption and iteration applies to each section of the thesis. Research questions were also adapted as data was collected. The structure of this thesis flows from this introductory chapter, which introduced the study and its research questions. In the next chapters, the relevant literature is considered including the theoretical framework of social capital. The philosophy and methodology behind this study is outlined and the data and findings are presented and discussed. Finally, the thesis ends with the contribution to knowledge and conclusions from this study.

1.17. Timeline of research

The following timeline highlights the major milestones in this study

- July 2014 – Background research and proposal
- October 2014 - PhD registered and commenced
- January 2015 – Research ethical approval granted
- February 2015 – Phase 1 of data collection including initial interviews with SCFC staff, fans and social media experts, SNA and ongoing participant observation
- September 2015 – Interim assessment completed
- January 2016 - New and follow up interviews with key people, ongoing SNA and participant observation. Interviews with lurker fans commenced through social media as an ongoing conversation.
- April 2017 – Internal Evaluation completed
- May 2017 – Final interviews with social media lurker fans
- July 2017 – Final three verification interviews with social media and football brand managers / experts
- February 2018 – Final Viva completed
- May 2018 – PhD thesis completed

1.18. Researcher motivation and values

In a qualitative, interpretive study, the motivation and values of the researcher are considered to be important (Walsham, 2006). Interpretivist researchers are the measuring instruments and bring to bear their own personal experience and interpretation combined with rigorous academic technique (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000). Richards (2015) highlighted that bias is present in all social research through the strong values and knowledge that researchers have. Good research design therefore takes this into account and uses it intelligently and honestly. Declaring ideas, motivation and values and reflecting upon this in relation to the research is an important part of qualitative research. In his paper ‘Doing interpretive research’ Walsham, (2006, p.327) advised that in qualitative studies, it is important to “describe the researcher’s own role in the process”. The following section outlines the researchers role, motivation, and values in this study. This position also relates to the philosophy chapter in this PhD study and the axiology (values) of the researcher.

This thesis derives from the researcher's lifelong fascination with computers, stories, digital communications and football. The researcher has studied academically in these areas and has over two decades experience of working with and around digital media technology. He has used social media in a practical sense as a digital developer and teacher. The researcher was setting up and using computer enabled communities in the 1990's, before the advent of the social media networks we know today and has remained fascinated with this area of computer based communications. The idea of story telling and interaction using computer networks, combined with a lifelong interest in football are key to the motivation behind this PhD study. The researcher has extensive experience working with organisations to develop their digital and social media strategies. This experience also highlighted a gap in understanding of the best ways to use social media and digital technologies to engage people and enrich relationships. It is the key questions asked by these people and the articles read that inspired this thesis.

The researcher is part of the Centre for Digital Business and Centre for Sports Business at the University of Salford, with a background in working with digital development and digital marketing in a practical and theoretical sense. He is a lecturer in Digital Business and teaches and works on various projects that involve the creation and support of digital communities with a particular interest in sports. He is fascinated with the way digital technology is used to combine these elements and the long-term desire to make a contribution to knowledge in this area led him towards this fascinating area of research.

He wanted to learn more about the way in which people and football clubs use these disruptive technologies to reach fans in the modern era, at an exciting time for football globally. In a wider sense though, he wanted to know more about how people feel about social media and digital technologies and the role relationships have to play in online communities. This also led to an interest in social capital as a theoretical framework for this study. Working with companies, students and teaching about social media and websites provided further motivation to obtain a much deeper understanding about the 'wiring beneath the board' and how these things work. Understanding the complexity of what makes people do what they do and the power of relationships and trust has always been more of a concern to the researcher than numerical data. The belief that studying what people say and the meanings behind those things and where they cross over is key to understanding the way in

which social networks are used. This naturally led towards the adoption of interpretivism and use of qualitative methods.

The blended methods approach developed as the PhD progressed. This came from helpful suggestions from the supervisory team and the introductions, conversations, books and presentations that were all part of the fabric and outputs of this study. Netnography was discussed very early on in the study as a suitable approach. The idea of talking to people online and offline and hearing and reflecting on the meaning of their stories rather than measuring has always been more important to the researcher. SNA was also discussed as a potential option. At first, it appeared that this was a very statistical, measuring approach, but on further inspection, discussion and reading, it was discovered that this could be used in a qualitative sense to blend with and support the other methods. The exploration of these methods and their blend has been incredibly enlightening and empowering. The researcher has been able to write about and present these methods and their use for conferences, books, and papers and for teaching. It has opened up conversations with people across the globe that are also passionate about these methods. This included, for example, the founder of Netnography, Robert Kozinets and some of the key people in SNA including one of the founders of Node XL, Marc Smith. The interviews with international fans through netnography were particularly useful and a network was developed. This is a digital hand of friendship extended to the far reaches of the world through a computer or smartphone screen. This PhD study opened up a rich and on-going dialogue that has stretched several years and continents and sprung yet more ideas for writing (see for example Fenton, 2017 and Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). Discovering and writing for Digital Sport.co, The Conversation and The Football Collective was also a revelation through articles and conference presentations. This has also helped to maintain enthusiasm, new ideas and inspiration throughout the study.

The researcher has worked in a practical sense, developing, studying and teaching IS development. Working for a small digital business, he has also been collaborating with organisations to help them with their digital marketing practise and their own information systems. He runs courses for students and companies about how to use digital communications to raise online visibility. People join the courses to find out how they can use search engines and social media to raise awareness for what they are doing, be it products or services. It is this question of how best to use these technologies to raise brand awareness

and what role relationships play that has been a huge influence on this study. As a practitioner, lecturer and researcher, he has been undertaking practical projects and writing on these topics both in an academic sense and via blog posts and other outlets. One particular article regarding football and social media for 'The Conversation' was read by more than 45,000 people over a few days of Euro 2016 (Fenton and Chadwick, 2016). This demonstrates the global appetite for this topic and the application of this subject and method. The work from this PhD also fed directly into the social media chapter of a digital marketing book, 'Digital and Social Media Marketing - A Results-Driven Approach' (Heinze et al., 2016). This book was just one of the outputs of the Joint European Masters in Search and Social Media Marketing (JEMSS) project. This was a European funded project aimed at addressing the needs of the growing digital marketing industry in Europe.

The motivation for this study therefore was to find out more about the way in which social media works in order to apply this in a practical and theoretical sense for teaching, publications and practical projects. The values brought are those of someone who has had a lifelong interest in computing and football from a qualitative, interpretive perspective. The overarching values are those of someone who is inquisitive to learn more about how computer based communications function and to apply these into online communities. The research overall had a much wider scope of application than just the thesis as an output.

1.19. Summary of introduction

This study comes at a crucial time for football clubs as they further embrace smartphones and social media to engage fans locally and globally. Ownership of SCFC was taken over by the 'Class of '92' and social media was an important part of their plan to grow the club. This presented an opportunity to use SCFC as a vehicle for this research. Literature on football and social media was presented in order to set the context of the study and to highlight the gaps, which this study filled. It was established that there is a need for this study from both an academic and practical standpoint.

The growth of digital marketing as a discipline was evaluated together with its connection to IS and marketing. This study focuses on social media, which is a fundamental part of digital marketing. IS and marketing served as reference disciplines for the emerging discipline of digital marketing. Digital marketing is significant to organisations and academia in a practical and theoretical sense. Prior work was considered including the introduction of the theoretical

framework of social capital to evaluate the influence of relationships online and the communication between clubs and fans. The research questions pertinent to this thesis were outlined and the purpose, problem, aims and objectives were presented. A summary of the methodology was outlined and it was introduced as an interpretive, qualitative netnography. It gathers empirical data using the blended qualitative methods of interview, SNA and participant observation as part of a netnography. As is the norm for qualitative studies, the researcher's motivations and background were outlined. The researcher is an academic and a practitioner, which drives the study.

2. Digital Marketing

2.1. Introduction

This chapter evaluates the relevant literature relating to digital marketing. It informs and is driven by the research questions and examines the salient issues relating to social media and digital marketing in the business of football in order to help to answer the research question in this study. Following this chapter is a review of the relevant social capital literature as the theoretical framework used in this study.

The literature in this chapter is evaluated and presented thematically based on channels, content and data. These three themes are based on the buyer persona spring (Heinze et al., 2016), which is introduced early in the chapter as a way to understand digital marketing strategy. Gaps in the literature are highlighted throughout the analysis and in a section at the start. Key aspects of contemporary digital marketing in football are evaluated. The questions in this study aim to better understand the effects of social media interactions between football fans and their club. The themes identified are key to this study, its research questions and aims. In the course of this study, areas of the literature that agree or conflict were also highlighted producing a critical analysis. Within the body of literature, there were other themes in digital marketing and sport which are outside of the scope of this literature review and not relevant to the research questions. The literature selected for the review was based on the relevance to the research questions in order to keep focus on the topic.

2.2. Literature gaps

After evaluating the relevant literature, it was found that there is a lack of research in the use of social media for digital marketing in sport. There is a gap in the literature for brand awareness studies of a football club. Many studies of brands and social media focus on international brands. This study focuses on SCFC, which is a smaller brand at a non-league football club.

Writing about sports and social media, Meng et al. (2015, p.202) said “the preceding studies all support the premise that social media can be used advantageously by sport organizations, but suggest that more research is needed to uncover specific strategies to engage fans”. boyd (2007) also demonstrated a need for further research into the ability of social networks to create a better dialogue between people. These gaps in the research still remain and the

growth of social networks and mobile devices has become even more prevalent. This thesis explores this relationship and interplay between club and fan communications through social media. Jussila et al. (2014) noted a lack of research in the area of social media communications. Social media use has risen dramatically in this period with digital media marketing driving a demand for content (Lin and Yazdanifard, 2014). This is reinforced by Kuzma et al. (2014) who noted that there are many studies of social media, but very little in the football sector.

Holmes et al. (2012, p.152) also highlighted the need for Internet ethnography by “analyzing data that has been created through SM [social media] and web technologies”. To complement this idea, Stone and Woodcock (2014) outlined the importance of marketing in a digital world for corporations. They highlighted an excellent opportunity to bring together business information and interactive marketing to make a strong contribution to business theory and practise. Many of the published papers on social media and football evaluate the top football clubs in the world only. The access to the case of SCFC provides an opportunity for unique insight because the club is much smaller. McCarthy et al. (2014) identified UK football clubs as big businesses with committed fans. This makes them a good subject for research into the issues and challenges of managing their brand presence online.

With regard to gaps in the literature, Pomirleanu et al. (2013) conducted a comprehensive literature review analysing Internet market research over a twenty year period. Their study also includes the identification of gaps in the literature and future research opportunity. Their objective was to provide future researchers with a comprehensive and ‘big picture view’ of digital marketing research in order to identify key opportunities. The gaps are split into six categories as outlined below:

1. Trust and the impact on internet usage
2. How consumers use the internet for purchasing
3. Business to business Internet research
4. Internet analytics
5. Social media research
6. The future of the Internet

The key area identified by Pomirleanu, et al as a growth area and opportunity is number 5, social media research. This area in particular is highlighted by the authors calling for

researchers to keep up to date with this ever growing area and evaluate the role of social media as part of digital marketing (Pomirleanu, et al., 2013). Lawrence and Crawford (2018) released a book, which addresses the gap in the literature on social media and football fandom. The authors highlighted the radical changes in football fandom in the last decade towards ‘hyperdigitalization’ and called for further research in the area of social media and football fans. In order for this thesis to contribute to the literature on digital marketing, it is also necessary to review the relevant literature in this area.

2.3. Digital marketing and brand

Digital Marketing is defined as the “practice of promoting products and services using digital distribution channels via computers, mobile phones, smart phones, or other digital devices” (Smith, 2012, p.86). Stone and Woodcock (2014) conducted a literature review and from their work in consultancy, they found that most organisations now market in our “digital world”. Stone and Woodcock described all modern customers as “always on”. This concept refers to the increasing prevalence of using a mobile device to “search, enquire, interact, complain, buy and pay” according to Stone and Woodcock (p.4). Social media is a fundamental part of digital marketing and it is the elements of “enquire, interact and complain” which are most pertinent to social media and this study.

Careful development of a football club brand is fundamental (McCarthy et al., 2014; Parganas et al., 2015). “A brand represents everything that a product or service means to consumers” (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013, p.259). This makes brands a very valuable asset to football clubs and other organisations. Studies on brand are numerous because of the immense importance of the brand to organisations. A football club ‘brand’ therefore refers to every aspect of that club. For fans on a match day, the brand includes the stadium, the match day experience, the team, the music and entertainment, food, the people sat around, the noise in stadium, the social media and other media coverage. It encompasses anything influential that the fans experience that has some meaning to individuals. For those millions of fans that never make it to the stadium on match days, the media and particularly social media becomes a focal part of the experience and therefore, the brand. This includes the official and unofficial channels, the interactions between club, players and fans and every aspect that the fan experiences. This explains why football clubs are so protective over the brand experience (McCarthy et al., 2014). Brand is the experience that keeps fans following clubs. Whether fans attend matches or not, clubs aim to maintain and build a positive brand image with fans

around the world. A key part of global brand communications therefore is through social media.

Social media has an increasingly important role to play in building, promoting and maintaining a brand through digital marketing (Singh, 2013; Tiago and Veríssimo, 2014). Writing about football clubs, Bodet & Chanavat (2010) noted that the most successful clubs consider themselves as brands. Other studies such as Araújo, de Carlos, & Antonio Fraiz (2014) and Jackson (2014) outlined the effects and the power of social media on the brand of football clubs. In the UK, McCarthy et al (2014) used a multiple case study of four English Premier League football clubs that were at different stages of their online presence development. McCarthy et al highlighted that UK football clubs are at a relatively early stage with their use of social media. The authors found that all four clubs in their study agreed that further development of social media strategies had the potential to increase fan engagement (McCarthy et al., 2014, p.181). The authors sought to “develop an understanding of the issues and challenges facing organisations as they seek to protect and promote their brand online”. This is a particularly important study as it is one of the few case studies of UK football gauging the effects of social media and brand. Since then, the social media and digital presence of big clubs has grown even more. For example, in 2016, Manchester United topped the list of ‘most Googled’ EPL (English Premier League) clubs with 3.4 million monthly searches (Walsh, 2016). The 2014 FIFA world cup broke records with 672 million Tweets related to the event and 88 million people generated 280 million interactions on Facebook (Helleu, 2017). Many academic and other articles usually focus on the bigger sporting brands and US based sports clubs. This thesis focuses on SCFC in the UK as a smaller, but evolving sporting brand and therefore can be contrasted with other studies of larger cor US based clubs.

Schultz (2013) highlighted the challenges of adopting social media to increase consumer-brand engagement. Shultz found that most social media initiatives are aimed at existing customers for sales promotions. The author identified future research opportunities to “better understand the role that social media plays in the integrated marketing communications mix, developing effective communication strategies and tactics, and creating and nurturing customer engagement” (Schultz, 2013, p.180). In their article 'will social media kill branding' Kohli et al., 2014, p.23) they concluded that “Social media can strengthen or kill a brand; the key to success lies in how quickly companies can change their mindset and adopt new

strategies in response to consumer preferences”. This thesis therefore aimed to better understand social media strategy to potentially strengthen brands of football clubs and to also highlight the challenges. The buyer persona spring was identified as an appropriate model in order to develop social media strategy.

2.4. The buyer persona spring

Heinze et al (2016) in their book, ‘Digital Marketing, A Results Driven Approach’ presented the dynamic model of the buyer persona spring (shown below). This is designed to create success and minimise failure in digital marketing strategy creation and management. The spring contains the three central coils of channels, content and data. These elements are also fundamental to social media engagement. These elements are explored in more depth in this chapter, which is organised thematically using these three elements.

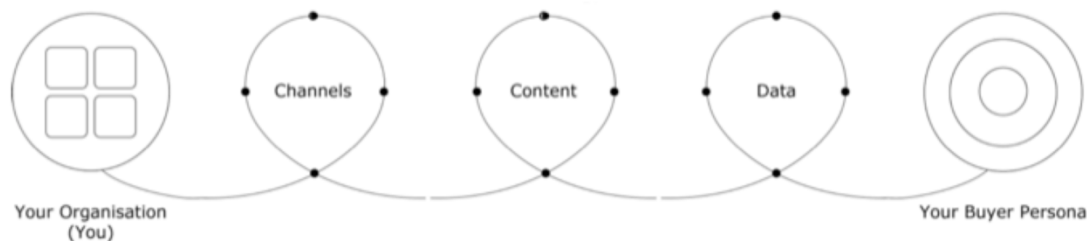


Figure 5 - The buyer persona spring (Heinze et al, 2016)

The buyer persona spring “reflects the strategic perspective necessary for successful digital marketing” (Heinze et al. 2016, p.5). It depicts ‘Your organisation’ at one end of a spring and ‘Your Buyer Persona’ at the other end. In this study, the buyer persona is football fans and this concept is explored in the next section. With regard to this study, the three central coils of the spring are:

- Channels, in this case social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube
- Content of digital media text, animation, image and video
- Data derived from social media analytics and research

Heinze et al. presented the elements of the buyer persona spring as being vital to bringing the organisation closer to the buyer persona, shaping the digital marketing strategy. All elements can be brought closer together by addressing each of the three elements. The spring therefore, can be tightened bringing the buyer persona closer to the organisation by mastering the inner coils of the spring. Understanding digital marketing and the buyer persona within brand communities is fundamental to improving social media use by brands. Sporting brands are

increasingly using social media channels, fuelled by digital content and informed by data to reach their buyer persona of fans in different segments. Literature in these areas is further explored in the following sections relating to social media and football. The diagram below shows an adapted version of the buyer persona spring with regard to the relevant literature on digital marketing and football fans presented in this chapter, organised against the three themes of channels, content and data.

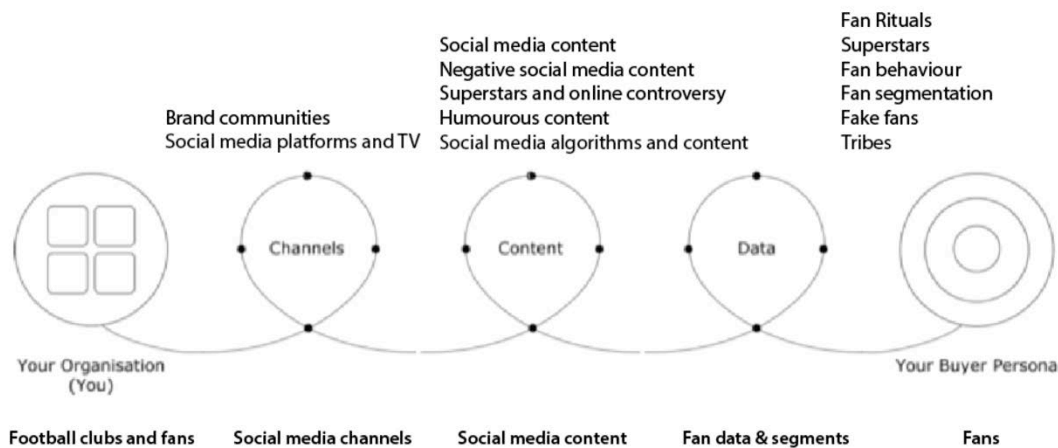


Figure 6 - The buyer persona spring (Heinze et al, 2016) adapted to show the thematic areas of digital marketing and football fan literature in this chapter. The organisation is shown as football clubs and fans and the buyer persona is fans

2.4.1. The buyer persona

In order to effectively nurture customer relationships online through digital marketing, Heinze et al. (2016, p.5) outlined the concept of the ‘buyer persona’. Identifying the buyer persona as a person helps brands to understand their target audiences and to communicate them effectively using social media. “The buyer persona recognises that you are not just speaking on a one to one individual basis with each customer but instead are speaking with definite customers who share similar qualities, attributes and attitudes”. Utilisation of the buyer persona recognises that effective use of social media hinges on working with the people that engage with the organisation online. This is particularly relevant to this thesis because the research questions aim to understand this relationship between social media, sport brands and the buyer persona of fans in particular segments. Therefore, primary and secondary data on the buyer persona of fans and social media was obtained in order to better understand the buyer persona segments.

2.5. Social media channels

The use of social media channels by football clubs and fans has grown considerably in recent years (McCarthy et al., 2014; Lawrence and Crawford, 2018). The growth of mobile devices since 2014 has further fuelled the use of social media through apps. Smartphones and social media offer opportunities for more interactive experiences for fans. Rowles (2017, p18) supported this point, “We have the opportunity to use mobile technologies creatively to deliver this value proposition via interaction”. Successful social media channels increase fan engagement and ultimately make the brand of a football club better known according to Rowles and McCarthy et al. At the time of writing, football clubs at all levels around the world are using social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat and Instagram (Helleu, 2017). In the literature on social media, there are many studies on channels such as Facebook and Twitter, but newer channels such as Instagram are much less covered in the literature, particularly with regard to football. Anagnostopoulos, et al, (2018) addressed this gap by conducting research about fans of Manchester United and Liverpool FC on Instagram. They found that some of the top clubs had very high levels of engagement and followers, creating brand communities around photographs and videos. They also found that a community and sense of belonging could be created through a brand community set up by the clubs on Instagram.

2.5.1. Brand communities

Social media channels can be used to create online brand communities. The term brand communities was first introduced by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001). They defined and introduced the concept of brand communities to describe a community of admirers of a brand set on a shared set of social relations but “not bound by geography”. The authors noted the importance of brand communities such as social media and forums. People have been collaborating in many ways including online forums for many years (Habibi et al., 2014). Increasingly, social media channels are being used to create brand communities by both football clubs and their fans.

Habibi et al (ibid.) claimed to be the first authors to identify the differences between types of brand community and analysing social media brand communities. The authors found that social media brand communities have great advantages compared to other more traditional brand communities. These benefits included; attracting more people, being lower cost and (crucially), people using their real identities compared to previous online communities such

as forums (Habibi et al., 2014). The use of real identities could also have an effect on the way in which people behave online. Another key difference is that these communities are much more visual with people often including digital media photos and videos from their smartphones. Smartphones and social media apps make online communication quicker, easier and more pervasive. These communities can be created by fans or by brands. Popp et al. (2016) concurred that social media brand communities are different. They studied 'anti-brand communities' on Facebook using a netnography approach. They found that some football fans had set up anti-brand communities that allowed fans to dissociate from a brand. These communities such as "Anti Bayern!!!" were found to be "important drivers in football-related anti-brand communities". These "Negative posts, media and comments lead to a reinterpretation of brand meaning" (Popp et al. 2016, p.1). This demonstrates that brand communities can be both positive and negative. Brand communities are also related to the concept of tribes.

2.5.2. Social media tribes

Kozinets (1999) highlighted 'electronic tribes' built around consumer interests and noted the rapid growth of these online communities who are 'e-tribalizing'. He advised managers seeking success with these tribes to be active and discerning and to "provide a wealth of valuable, cultural information". Kozinets also makes the link to Marshall McLuhan's prediction in 1970 of society as retribalising around 'electric media' (McLuhan, 1970). McLuhan's prediction from 1970 was that electric media would create clusters of affiliation. Social media channels have further enabled these tribal clusters of affiliation, which break down global barriers. Kozinets (1999, p.253) highlighted that "Networked computers empower people around the world as never before to disregard the limitations of geography and time, find another and gather together in groups based on a wide range of cultural and subcultural interests and social affiliation". Football clubs create these cultural, global and social connections through social media.

Another key author in the area of tribal marketing is Bernard Cova (Cova, 1997; Cova et al., 2002; Cova and Pace, 2006; Fyrberg-Yngfalk and Cova, 2014). Kozinets and Cova co-authored a paper entitled 'consumer tribes' (Cova et al., 2002). In this paper, they noted that consumer marketing research often focuses on individual behaviour. The concept of tribal marketing is related to the way in which groups behave. The authors suggested that tribal marketing is of great relevance to marketing research and surpasses research on individual

behaviour. This concept recognises that social links and relationships between people are more important than individual behaviour and brands. This also supports the segmentation of fans outlined in section 2.7.2.

There are several tribal marketing based netnographic studies using this concept of social relationships as the basis for the discovery of the understanding of consumer behaviour. One such study focused on the Nutella community (Fyrberg-Yngfalk and Cova, 2014). In this particular study, the online (e-tribe) is evaluated. The authors discovered four types of segment within the tribes and look at how these people behave in a group dynamic and regulate the community. The people within the community were segmented as follows, pastors, regular sheep, good sheep and black sheep (Fyrberg-Yngfalk and Cova, 2014). Each had a different role to play in the e-tribe.

2.5.3. Social media channels and TV

TV has been a channel used by football clubs for many decades. Increasingly, there is a connection between social media and TV channels for the consumption of sports (Miah, 2017). Football clubs and other brands with highly engaged fans have embraced the digital revolution and were coming to terms with what the changes meant for them and their fans around the world. Internet technologies are disruptive for football clubs (Chadwick, 2009; Miah, 2017). The Internet and social media have been cited for potentially decreasing TV viewers of football. Lawrence, S. & Crawford (2018) highlighted that viewing figures of the EPL and Champions League in the UK had decreased for the first time in 2017. They argued that this is because of ‘hyperdigitalization’ of fans. That is, fans are using technology, including social media to live stream matches and content for free. Some commentators speculate that this could impact on lucrative TV rights deals in the future (Gibson, 2016).

Miah (2017) suggested that over time, more attention would shift from TV to social media. He used the example of the increasing volumes of sporting event consumption through channels such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube and the use of multiple mobile devices whilst watching TV. This practise is also known as second and third screen viewing. Miah concluded that with the growth of social media channels and live streaming that “in 20 years from now, television as we know it today may not exist” (Miah, 2017, p.240). There has been an increasing shift of sporting media consumption from TV to social media channels and the use of multiple mobile devices whilst watching TV or a live match. The practise of second

and third screen viewing will continue to disrupt the way in which people consume and enjoy football (Miah, 2017, p.240). This disruptive change has met with some resistance from fans and owners. Internet and Sports businessman Mark Cuban for example highlighted that he wanted sports to be social and interactive, but refuted any initiatives to integrate social media into the game. He said, “I can’t think of a bigger mistake than trying to integrate smartphones just because you can. The last thing I want is someone looking down at their phone to see a replay. (...) If you let them look down, they might as well stay at home, the screen is always going to be better there” (Helleu, 2017). Digital gaming and social media were highlighted as the two biggest threats to football by English Premier League Chief Richard Scudamore (Hattenstone, 2017). The disruptive nature of social media to football clubs and fans is an important aspect of this PhD study.

With the growth of smartphones and social media in recent years, the opportunities for digital marketing and football are fundamental to the success and growth of clubs. We highlighted in the introduction that along with this growth, also comes changes in behaviour and disruption such as the concept of second screen viewing, particularly from the newer generation of younger fans (Miah, 2017). Some digital companies are starting to adapt and capitalise on these changes. Smartphone apps such as Ballr for example allow viewers to interact with a live football match using their phone by picking teams and players and winning points (FourFourTwo, 2017). Tiago & Veríssimo (2014) conducted a survey of marketing managers to discover the forces and pressures that influence a digital presence strategy. They found that social media brand communities reflect a fundamental shift in human behaviour and consequently, marketing. The authors recommended that in order to keep up with the pace, firms need to connect and converse with their audiences using social media based brand communities that empower users for co-creation. Co-creation is the process “by which both consumers and producers collaborate, or otherwise participate, in creating value” (Pongsakornrungrungsilp and Schroeder 2011, p.2). Social media channels can therefore be used by football clubs to engage the buyer persona of fans. They can be used to create and sustain interactive and mobile friendly brand communities for new generations of fans from around the world. These channels however require digital content in order to make them work effectively (Heinze et al., 2016).

2.6. Social media content

In his 2004 book 'Consuming sport: Fans, sport and culture' Crawford (2004) wrote, "Many sport supporters will frequently produce or contribute to Internet sites, fanzines and radio discussions, which are then consumed by others". The growth of social networks and mobile devices has only served to increase the growth of digital content. This is the fuel, which powers the social media channels. Miah (2017) highlighted that social media content in sports is crucial in order to make and remake experiences through "innovative media content" (p.106). Digital video content is an increasingly popular platform for football clubs to engage with fans (McLaren, 2017). McLaren recommended that clubs should have a YouTube channel rather than only using Facebook for video content. Facebook "is geared up for one-off interactions rather than community building".

Parganas et al. (2017) found that football clubs were often delivering video clips using YouTube. Some were also experimenting with live video streaming using YouTube and Facebook. This newer method of delivering video was causing some disruption however. "Such developments have raised some concerns across the sports industry for posing a threat to the broadcasting copyrights of live matches by its users" (Parganas et al., 2017, p.10). Ultimately, football clubs were using social media to create and tailor "content that drives fan engagement and loyalty and expand the value of their brand" (ibid. p.17).

Hudson, et al, (2015) conducted a study evaluating the effects of social media content on people's perceptions of music festival brands. This is relevant to this study because both football and festival online communities have large quantities of highly engaged social media followers. The authors employed a survey and a market research company in order to gauge the behaviour of festival attendees. There were several notable findings and they recommended testing these findings on other demographics. They found that people were much more likely to have positive brand perceptions responding to content via social media content rather than paid advertising. The authors found that incorporating high levels of emotional content, whilst remaining subtle, can also aid competitiveness. In effect, using social media content that arouses some emotion but in an unobvious way was found to be most effective for this audience. This is a finding that has not so far been tested in the published literature on football research studies. The closest comparison in football terms is by Araújo et al. (2014) who studied the top European football clubs use of social media and

found that videos and photos got the most interaction, followed by news announcements and statements.

2.6.1. Negative social media content

Social media content is interactive and can be generated and used by brands or individuals. This means there is potential for individuals to create negative social media content and reaction, which is also known as trolling (Gilmer, 2017). Trolling can take place between people, brands and brand to brand. Miah (2017, p.83) stated “social media has the capacity to change the structure of communication to permit more direct, intimate conversations”. He noted the great opportunity that this provides for sports people and brands but also highlighted the issue of Internet trolling. He used a particular example of athletes being abused on Twitter. Trolling can take multiple forms on different channels, but essentially it is the online communication of toxic and abusive material (Gilmer, 2017). Trolls are the people that create or propagate this abusive online material.

The social media channels are constantly working on the difficult task of removing or filtering out toxic social media content and trolls. In 2017, Google released a system to automatically rank the level of toxicity of comments in order to allow media providers to adequately filter out comments (Gilmer, 2017). De Vries et al. (2012) studied the effect of positive and negative social media posts for brand awareness and found that “Negative comments to a brand post are likely to decrease the attractiveness of the brand post. Consequently, brand fans will have a lower attitude toward the social media content and hence like it less. Also, brand fans might follow the mass and do not want to press the like button if their peer brand fans comment negatively”. This suggested that positive social media comments should be encouraged and that people are also heavily influenced by social media content of their own networks and influencers.

2.6.2. Superstars and online controversy

Ex-Manchester United player Rio Ferdinand criticised current Manchester United player Paul Pogba and his antics on social media. This included Pogba recording his practise goal celebrations with his smartphone for his very large online following. Pogba even launched his own social media icon. After visiting and reporting on the American NFL Superbowl, Ferdinand retracted his comments about Pogba and admitted that times have changed since his playing days, “sport is becoming increasingly geared to social media” (Lovett, 2017). Deleting a controversial Tweet or account, even within seconds is no escape because

journalists and others will take screenshots and respond. For players, fines and bans are then strongly enforced. It is also notable that some sporting celebrities (and others) are deliberately controversial on social media. Causing controversy online can be an effective way of gaining more social media followers and notoriety. Other examples from football include players such as footballer and pundit Joey Barton who has over 3 million Twitter followers in 2017 and is known to be controversial both online and offline (MacInnes, 2017).

The use of banter and humour for social media content by brands is considered by Griffiths and Mclean (2015, p.154) to demonstrate more of a human and less corporate and scripted approach to social media brand management. The authors noted, “Adopting a human voice becomes a very effective strategy for brand building and PR. However, unscripted social media conversations are not always positive for organisations”. They also give some examples of when unscripted social media communications end up negatively affecting the brand. It is therefore important to maintain a balance between communicating effectively with the buyer persona (fan) through social media, but having the right procedures and training in place for those in control of social media content.

2.6.3. Social media algorithms and content

It is the algorithms behind search engines and social media channels, which are able to deliver specific digital content for specific users. “When users click ‘Search,’ or load their Facebook News Feed, or ask for recommendations from Netflix, algorithms must instantly and automatically identify which of the trillions of bits of information best meets the criteria at hand, and will best satisfy a specific user and their presumed aims” (Gillespie, 2014). Because of this, some authors such as Dakin (2016) found that social media were causing an ‘echo chamber’ effect. This means that social networks are repeatedly delivering the same or similar content to timelines. “The algorithms which all major social channels use to control which content you see optimise automatically around the content you best respond to, almost certainly again further filtering out opposing opinion” (Dakin, 2016). This echo chamber effect can also be related to the darker side of social capital (Field, 2008) and cyber-balkanisation (Putnam, 2001) as outlined in the social capital chapter. Essentially, if the social media algorithms were creating an echo chamber, this would prevent enhanced interaction between different groups of people. This interaction between different groups is also explored in the next chapter on social capital.

2.7. Data, social media and fan segmentation

Data is fundamental to the buyer persona spring in order to better understand how the buyer persona can be identified and reached through social media channels and content (Heinze et al., 2016). Data sources can be made up of social media analytics, which can be derived from social media channels and content. Data can also be derived from research, which gives insight for brands and researchers. Ultimately, this can increase the reach of the brand and bring the buyer persona closer to the organisation (ibid.). This data helps “leagues and teams gain an understanding of what various teams use and how it may help increase communications with fans” (Kuzma et al., 2014, p.728). This includes numerical analytics data, but also includes data gathered qualitatively through research including netnography. Studies such as Zaglia (2013) evaluated the effects of large numbers of people collaborating and discussing a brand online and noted the benefit to marketing such as “access to unbelievable numbers of consumers, at low costs, high speed and ease of applicability”. In this section, secondary research data is utilised in order to better understand the data aspect of the buyer persona spring and inform the research questions pertinent to this study. An important aspect of this data is the data and literature on social media and buyer persona of fans, including fandom.

2.7.1. Sports fandom and social media

The word fandom is often taken to mean a group or sub-culture of like-minded people with a common interest (Fillis and Mackay, 2013). Fans will alter their life styles and show high involvement with their sub-cultures. This is particularly true of football, where engagement and fandom is high (McCarthy et al., 2014). Crawford (2008, p.134) differentiated sports fandom from other types of fandom such as that of music. He argued “fans of sport teams/clubs are different in the nature of their affiliations to those who follow individual celebrities, such as film, pop music or even individual sports competitors”. He argued that whilst fandom could be affiliated with different individuals, once these individuals leave a football club, the fandom sub-culture often remains with their club. In their paper on Instagram and football fans, Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018, p.28) discussed the concept of remote fandom through social media. They call for football clubs to assess “the way remote fandom interacts with fans’ need for a sense of ‘belonging’” this creates some interesting possibilities for teams. This thesis evaluates this concept of remote football fandom. There are however, different segments of football fans, which are now further explored.

2.7.2. Football fans and segmentation

It is important not just to understand the social media content and channels, but the buyer persona of fans. Segmentation of fans into groups can aid this understanding from a social media perspective (Heinze et al., 2016; Ryan, 2017). Understanding the behaviour of football fans is key to this study and the ability to use digital marketing to communicate effectively. The concept of segmenting an audience in order to better understand and communicate with them is also fundamental to tightening the buyer persona spring (Heinze et al., 2016). Understanding fan behaviour and segments of fans provides opportunities for clubs to develop increasingly sophisticated marketing techniques (Fillis and Mackay, 2013). These techniques can be refined and improved through data gathered from fans. Whilst there are a wide number of studies of typologies of customers, this section focussed on the models created specifically of football fans, which are most pertinent to this study and its aims. Segmentation by loyalty and strength of connection of fans was a prominent feature of the literature and is therefore explored in this section.

In their study of Scottish football fan behaviour, Fillis and Mackay (2013) attempted to understand more about fan loyalty and communications. On page 334, the authors stated “reaching an improved understanding of football loyalty by assessing the impact of social integration, rather than just focusing on the application of existing fan typologies to explain the relationship”. This demonstrated that it was necessary to create new segments in order to better understand fans. Their initial attempt was to collect data, which allowed them to classify fans as: situational fans, kids, devoted fan, 12th man and professional fan. With further research, including qualitative interview data, they eventually rejected their initial data segmentation as flawed. In their second attempt, they captured further data and identified four key categories of fan. These categories were casual followers, fans, social devotees and committed supporters. The characteristics of these categories are shown in the figure below. It is notable that loyalty and social media form part of the characteristics of the fan types identified in the table below.

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Social Devotee: Looks to fit in Seeks group attachment within a community Sees football as day-out experience at stadium, pub, or other venue Craves social recognition and belonging Supports team through match attendance and online forums Lower chance of acquiring and displaying subcultural capital attributes</p> | <p>Committed Supporter: Highly socially active Dense network Traditional match attendance Followers, fans, and social devotees depend on supporter for inspiration and motivation Catalyst behind creation of new fans Relies on other groups to lend support Support is lived experience involving sacrifice, ritual, high levels of loyalty, allegiance, fanaticism, religiosity, and pride Will actively use social media to heighten their connection with the club and with other supporters Exhibit high levels of subcultural capital, not only through wearing of club shirts but also through singing, chanting, and feelings of togetherness during match day and other times of the week</p> |
| <p>Casual Follower: Initial limited social integration Less inclined to attend matches but interested in the team and their performance Lacks knowledge and experience Loose connection with others Less committed followers forget the experience over time Do not attend regularly Consume at a distance Use technology to collect information but do not become part of virtual community Exhibits some flaneur characteristics but has different motives No real possibility of exhibiting subcultural capital characteristics</p> | <p>Fan: Displays attachment to the team through match attendance and conveys a degree of subcultural capital through wearing of team shirts, scarves, etc. Gains experience of the team over time Impacted less socially Expresses lower level of affinity with others Although individual lived experience is important, affected more by specific memories and incidents Differs to Giulianotti's fan who switches attention when dissatisfied by consumption experience May also use electronic media to follow the team, but level of intensity is less than the committed supporter</p> |

Figure 7 - Supporter characteristics split into the types of social devotee, committed supporter, casual follower and fan (Fillis and Mackay, 2013)

Another important study that identified segments of fans was conducted by Kantar (2012). This study was the largest ever football survey and it used quantitative survey data to show that Manchester United had 659 million followers worldwide, with half of these coming from Asia. This study places Manchester United fans into three categories, Core Fans, Current Fans and Followers (see figure below). There are some similarities and differences with Fillis and Mackay's supporter matrix of four categories. Again, loyalty or strength of connection to the club is used in the segmentation process. It could be argued that a study of a different

club's fan base at different points in time by different researchers could also yield different results. A different research approach, dataset and interpretation could also lead to differing segments and labels on each segment. How studies define segments of fans is also debateable.

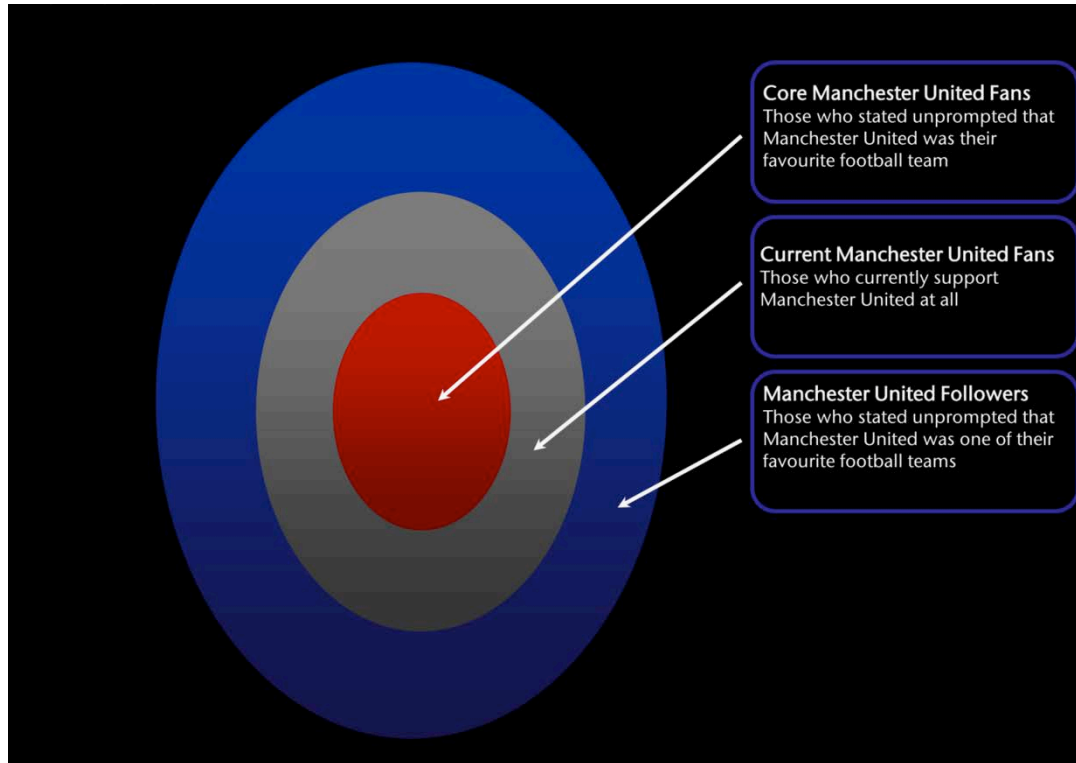


Figure 8 - Segmentation of Manchester United fan base spit into Core, Current and Followers (Kantar, 2012)

This area of understanding football fans is connected to all of the football literature in this study, but the specific segmentation of fans through data is an area for further research. For example, Fillis and Mackay (2013) highlighted the opportunity to research the effect of digital media on the speed and effect of fans moving between segments. Football fan behaviour in terms of loyalty is a key area to understanding the behaviour of fans and segments. Loyalty was seen in the literature as an important aspect of understanding fans and their behaviour.

Tapp (2004) conducted a study of football fans and loyalty and uncovered a complex picture of fan behaviour. Tapp posed the question “to what extent does loyalty follow the ‘rules’ familiar to marketers?”. Tapp found that loyalty is a complex picture and that different types of fan display different types of loyalty. Tapp identified three main categories of football fans (see figure below), which are:

- Fanatics (highly committed fans, who attend most matches, these were split also into collectors of club memorabilia and repertoire fans who also watched other matches, even of rival clubs)
- Light attender - committed casuals (casuals who strongly agree that they are loyal to the club)
- Light attender - carefree casuals (only slightly agree, or disagree, with the notion that they are loyal supporters).

Tapp uses loyalty as a way to segment fans, which is particularly relevant to research question 3 in this PhD study.

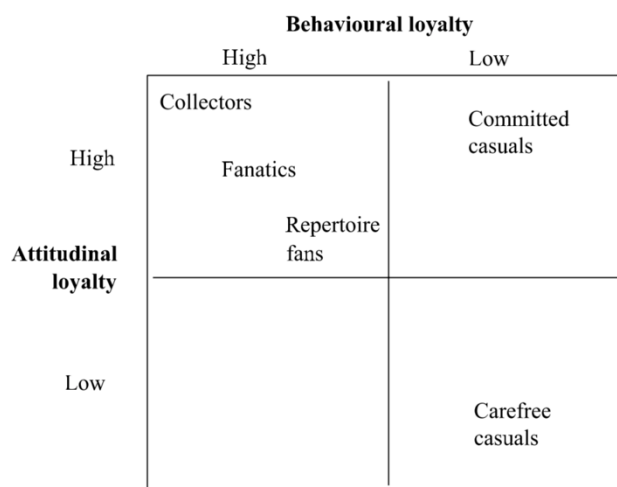


Figure 9 - Diagram showing different types of fans by loyalty in three categories Collectors, Fanatics, Repertoire fans, committed casuals and carefree casuals (Tapp, 2004)

The concept of loyalty and understanding fans through communications, data, interaction and marketing is a key point raised in several studies of the football industry. Tapp (2004) gave the warning that it is unwise to consider that fans will remain loyal forever. There is in fact a much more complex picture that involves understanding different types of fan behaviour. The three models of fan segments of football fans presented all utilise loyalty or strength of connection. The model most relevant to this thesis is the one presented by Kantar (2012) and this is further explored in the discussion chapter. There is also a connection between loyalty and trust through social capital (Putnam, 1995) which is explored in the social capital chapter. Building up trust with fans is important to increasing engagement, social capital and loyalty (Heinze et al., 2016).

2.7.3. Social media and football fan behaviour

The behaviour of the people involved in social media brand communities is another key area of the literature. Ioakimidis (2010) recommended that sports clubs establish brand communities to increase engagement with the club. This can “increase [fans] ‘felt’ connection to the team and to other fans” (Ioakimidis, 2010). Similarly, Fillis and Mackay (2013, p.357) conducted an ethnographic study of football fans in Scotland and noted “Supporters, both physical and virtual, are now able to collaborate and co-create value with producers within their brand communities”. Evaluating practices and behaviours of brand communities in football is an important angle on this topic and is also tackled in studies by Schau et al. (2009) and Healy and McDonagh (2013).

Healy & McDonagh (2013) evaluated a football brand community of Liverpool Football Club using a netnography approach and formulated a theory around co-creation and ‘twist’ of a club’s brand. The study evaluated one particularly large Liverpool fan led forum. Twist is effectively the twisting of a clubs brand by the community. One example of this is a story of a particular fan creating an altered version of the clubs sponsor logo (Standards Corrupted rather than the official sponsor, Standard Chartered). This was a protest to object to the perceived corrupt behaviour of the club management at the time. This concept of twist or co-creation could be positive or negative for a brand. This concept is observed in other brand community studies, such as Schau et al. (2009). The findings of Schau’s study highlighted the power of user-generated content and recommended that organisations allow these communities to thrive by building, sustaining and enabling co-creation.

A key study in this area applied to football is by McLean & Wainwright (2009). They researched the impact of IS and digital culture on football and found that social media and mobile technology are giving fans more opportunities to connect, share and communicate. Sometimes this is against the wishes of official football brands and can also cause tension between the official and unofficial social media communications. This phenomenon was also observed and discussed in the findings chapter of this thesis. McCarthy et al. (2014, p.190) also revealed that fans were setting up unofficial social media channels, websites and digital content. Clubs were concerned about these and particularly about “unfavourable comments about the club, or offensive language, and a shared awareness that these comments were being posted on unofficial web sites” (ibid).

Lewis et al. (2017) found that sports fans consume information about their teams through social media in three primary ways. These were unofficial fan-based followership, official team-based and mainstream media. They found that “mainstream outlets were the most-frequently utilized by sports fans, followed closely by team-based accounts” (p.212). Fan based were the least followed and Lewis et al found that this was because of the “perceived lack of a correlate to player-specific information and interaction” (p.122). Interaction is key to social media behaviour of football fans and clubs and rituals are also an important part of online behaviour.

2.7.4. Rituals

In order to better understand the behaviour of fans, it is necessary to understand rituals. The study of rituals is important to ethnographic studies such as this thesis. It is important to understand rituals in order to better understand a specific group (Kozinets 2015) and its buyer personas (Heinze et al. 2016). Rituals are often explored through qualitative ethnographic data collection from tribes, which are the group of people under study (Geertz, 1973). An example of rituals within ethnography comes from Geertz work in Java. He recounts a story of a funeral ritual with a death of a village boy and the ritual behaviour that occurs. Geertz refers back to the work of Malinowski who notes the love and loathing effect that death and funerals bring whereby rituals brought order to the funeral ceremony. In the case of the boy, his death came at a politically fraught time of change and a situation arose where people did not know which ritual to follow. In addition, bonding social capital between different groups caused conflict and mistrust in this example, along fault lines created by divisions that had arisen due to change. Essentially, change in rituals had occurred which caused suspicion, conflict and unusual behaviour. This data is relevant to this thesis because ritual and change can also be observed in online football communities including this study. This phenomenon is further explored in the findings and discussion chapter.

Fillis and Mackay (2013, p.336) also wrote about ritual within football communities, “Reasons for consuming include the desire to seek out the experience and obtain and manipulate object meanings through ritualisation behaviours. These rituals were also an important aspect of online communities. Similarly, in his 2006 study of Star Trek fans online, Kozinets (p.279) highlighted that “Advertisers and copywriters in particular would benefit from a culturally-grounded understanding of the language, meanings, rituals, and practices of the consumer tribes with which advertising seeks to communicate”. Successful brands are

therefore built by creating relationships with people and understanding behaviours and rituals through data collection. This is evidenced by authors such as Ryan (2017) and Kozinets (ibid.) who outlined that the goal for digital marketers was to form an emotional connection with the customer through the relationship development that could then be transferred to the brand (ibid p. 276). Taking into account the data on language and rituals of fans is important for building online social capital through social media and digital content (Heinze et al., 2016).

2.7.5. Online superstars and buyer persona

Another important aspect for fans is the concept of the superstar. Superstars could be celebrity owners, players or fans. These superstars can be very influential to the buyer persona of fans and interact with them on social media. Some superstars are fans and some form part of the staff of the club. Superstars are considered as those people who are well known and popular with fans both locally and internationally (Hoegele et al., 2014). The concept of the superstar and celebrity resonates with the case of SCFC because they have celebrity owners who are also former superstar players. Football buyer personas often follow successful superstars and sporting brands in order to project a positive image on their own social media accounts. For example, Chadwick (2017) stated, “Being able to post messages and photographs that confer an image of success upon oneself is a good way of drawing the attentions of the friends and followers looking at one’s social media accounts”. The idea of digitally associating oneself with a successful brand or player is popular globally (ibid.). In the case of SCFC, some of the owners are particularly popular on social media networks with fans. Having a large social media following can also play a key role in digital marketing (Heinze et al., 2016; Ryan, 2017). This hinges on the connections between players and fans with a “shared consumer interest” (Kozinets, 1999).

On this point, Hoegele et al. conducted a study of German football clubs and players, collecting survey data from 900 football fans to better understand their behaviour and influences. They found that football superstars have a significant impact on the behaviour of fans including the ability to attract new fans and retain existing fans. They recommended that clubs should put a lot of effort into attracting and retaining these superstar players and use these players constantly in their marketing activities. Superstar players are bought and sold for incredible sums of money. Many of these superstars also have vast numbers of social media followers. A recent example is Manchester United re-signing Paul Pogba for a record

£89 million (BBC, 2016). This record was more than doubled the following season with Neymar signing from Barcelona to Paris St. Germain for £198 million (Laurens, 2017). Neymar and Pogba both have a significant number of social media followers to their official accounts. As of 07/2/17 Pogba had 3.09 million Twitter followers and over 6 million followers on Facebook. This had grown to 3.76 million Twitter followers on 21/8/17. On the same date, Neymar had 31.5 million Twitter followers and 59.9 million Facebook followers. These are just the official social media channels, there are also unofficial channels set up by fans. These large quantities of social media followers following football players globally is of particular interest to this thesis.

Kozinets (2015, p.74) described these superstars with large online followings as ‘macro celebrities’. The established superstars the Class of ’92 could be classed as macro celebrities and other celebrities with a smaller digital following can be classed as micro celebrities. Kozinets suggested that future research could focus on developing a scale and more detailed descriptions of the different levels of the online celebrity. This supports the idea of further understanding buyer personas through data and segmentation taking into account the scale of a social media following. With social media fans however, there is a question of whether these people are real or not.

2.7.6. Fake social media fans

In this study, we have identified our buyer personas as social media fans. Some authors however have questioned whether all social media fans are real or not (Light and McGrath, 2010; boyd, 2014). Authors such as Haythornthwaite (2005) posed a similar question – are online ties ‘real’ ties? Weakly connected social media followers are often the largest segment of fans (Ferneley et al., 2009). With any social media following, there may be a percentage of fake profiles, which can misrepresent and confuse the data and understanding of clubs and fans. On this topic, Light and McGrath (2010, p.12) highlighted “the lack of validation work by the Facebook registration application which presents users with an opportunity to create fake or bogus profiles affording them privacy”. Facebook and other social media channels have done much work to clean up and remove fake profiles, but a percentage of these large numbers could potentially be fake. In 2015, Facebook estimated there might be as many as 170 million fake users or bots (automated programs). The social media channels are committed to deleting these accounts to make sure that users are real, but it is an on-going challenge (Parsons, 2015).

There is also a philosophical question as to whether all social media accounts are real. For example, a person that happens to click Follow on SCFC's Twitter profile is one of over 100,000 followers. If that person is not then interacting in any way with the club, are they classed as real? In an earlier work on Netnography, Kozinets (1998, p.367) highlighted this debate and stated "these social groups have a "real" existence for their participants, and thus have consequential effects on many aspects of behaviour, including consumer behaviour". Kozinets noted that these communities were not just for "simple transfer of information" but vibrant villages created through forums, newsgroups and other computer-mediated communications (CMC). Kozinets highlighted that communities can be purely online, or a combination of RL (real life) and CMC. He described the technologies used for CMC in the late 1990's but these formed the foundations of the social media communities we know today. This fact acknowledges a blurring of boundaries between what is fake, real or half real.

In his book 'Half Real' Jesper Juul addressed this philosophical question of what is considered real with regard to digital games (Juul, 2005). The games were based on fictional worlds where slaying a dragon in a game for example was considered by Juul to be "Half Real". That is, it was not a real dragon that was slayed, but it is in a sense a reality that a virtual dragon has been vanquished. With regards to social media and digital communities where humans interact with other humans, engaging around the non-fictional subject matter of sport, the question remains if these interactions are also half real in the same way? Miah also addressed this question, making the connection between sport, digital media and games. He questioned, to what extent sport and social media interactions are real (Miah, 2017). He questioned if sports operate outside of the normal world because of their game like nature. Miah (p.58) concluded the debate by saying "life online shapes and is shaped by life offline in many ways, establishing nuances in our use of the term reality. How these practices inhabit our lives and the various roles they play in constituting our worlds are crucial to our deciding whether or not to ignore the emergence of new practise communities in digital space". In the Western world especially, with the growth of smartphones, life online is increasingly prevalent and interwoven into our lives. We form tribes online and offline and often the two interlink and the boundaries begin to blur.

2.8. Digital marketing summary

This chapter highlighted the need for further research into digital marketing, and football with social media being a key area for new studies. This will enhance our understanding of how clubs evolve their interaction with fans and grow brand awareness. The literature review showed that social media plays a key role in raising brand awareness of a football club. This chapter evaluated the relevant literature on digital marketing and introduced the buyer persona spring as a way to connect with the buyer persona (fans) through social media. The literature on digital marketing was split thematically using the buyer persona spring key areas of channels, content and data. These three elements are fundamental to digital marketing with social media.

Social media channels are fundamental to this study. It was found that football clubs could create and maintain brand communities using these channels. Social media was also having an impact on TV consumption by football fans and this relationship and disruption was also explored. Social media content was evaluated and found to be the fuel for social media, but the interactive nature of social media also highlighted some challenges including online controversy and trolling. In addition, the concept of engaging fans through banter and humorous social media content was explored. Lastly, the social media algorithms and their role in displaying content were discussed. The literature demonstrated that these algorithms were more likely to display similar content that was already being discussed or interacted with by a user and their followers. This ties in with social media interaction and social capital.

Data can be utilised in order to better understand football fans. A clearer understanding of fans can be gained by using data including fan segmentation. Studies on segmentation of football fans in the literature and their connection were presented. There were similarities and differences between the studies and situations presented. There are opportunities highlighted in the literature to examine the effects of digital marketing and fans moving between different categories of fans and the importance of connections, loyalty and social relationships for marketing. This was reinforced by the concept of brand communities and tribal marketing, moving away from the study of individuals and brands and towards the understanding of the importance of these social relationships and tribal dynamics.

The concept of whether digital followers are real was explored from both a physical perspective (fake accounts and bots) and a philosophical perspective, citing the works of Juul (2005) and Miah (2017). It was concluded that there is a state of being ‘Half Real’ associated with fictional computer games. In terms of online interactions between people, the rise of smartphones and the blurring of online and offline life, mean that the real or unreal are less distinguishable, creating the state of being half real.

In general, the literature corroborated that digital marketing is an important asset for business and this includes the business of football. The literature on football, digital marketing and brand awareness is currently underdeveloped with several studies calling for further research in these areas including social media and social capital. The effects of social media and brand awareness are inconclusive from the literature and this study aims to help to bridge this gap. The concept of tribal marketing is also important and is influential in the consideration of method and theoretical frameworks around segmentation in particular. De Vries et al. (2012, p.24) conducted a study of the popularity of social media posts. They found that “Managers invest in social media to foster relationships and interact with customers. One way to realise this aim is to create brand communities in the form of brand fan pages on social networking sites where customers can interact with a company by liking or commenting on brand posts”. This also highlighted the importance of relationships to the success of social media brand communities. A key part of this thesis and its contribution relates to these social media relationships and application of social capital within online communities as a theoretical framework for this study. The literature on social capital is therefore explored in this next chapter.

3. Social capital

Social capital relates to the fact that relationships between people matter (Andriani, 2013; Field, 2008). Ryan (2017, p.4) highlighted that digital marketing is about people connecting with other people more effectively and the development of trust between them. This serves as a starting point to explore the connections between the discipline of digital marketing and the theoretical framework of social capital. The development of online social capital and trust between brands and people is fundamental therefore to digital marketing (Heinze et al., 2016). This chapter explores the social capital foundational authors Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam. It evaluates the effect of social networks and online interactions and social capital. The work of Lin and Bauernschuster et al is introduced to evaluate the roots and history of social capital and how it is important in today's networked society (Castells, 2010; Rainie and Wellman, 2012). In this section, therefore, social capital is defined, explored, analysed and critiqued and its connection to the discipline of digital marketing and networked individualism relating to football is further explored.

3.1. Social capital literature review

In terms of gaps in the literature, there have been several calls for more research in the area of social capital and Information Technology (IT) (e.g Wulf and Huysman, 2004). Wulf and Huysman created a conference on social capital and IT from which they created a book. Their book highlights the need for more research and empirical studies for IT and social capital (Wulf and Huysman, 2004, p.12). Comparatively, Lee and Lee (2010, p.5) found that “little empirical research has been done to date on the relationship between social capital and online communities”. Social capital has seen a growth as a theoretical framework in the literature in recent years (Henry & Bosman, 2014). It can also be applied to the study of online or offline social networks (Heinze et al., 2013). It is known by many as a resource and an enabler to achieve aims that may not be possible without it (Henry & Bosman, 2014).

The study of the power of networks and connections can be traced back many years (Tzanakis, 2013). The phrase social capital is a relatively new concept for sociology (Portes, 1998) but the key underpinning concept is that networks and the relationships between people matter (Andriani, 2013; Field, 2008). Social capital is concerned with the connections between people and the value and meaning of those connections. Huysman and Wulf (2004,

p.1) define social capital as the “glue that holds together social aggregates such as networks of personal relationships, communities, regions or even whole nations”. Some of the diverging views of social capital are explored in this chapter. In John Field’s 1998 book on social capital, he explored this concept in depth from a number of angles and created what he considered to be the first extended introduction to the concept.

Exact definitions and standpoints of social capital vary between authors and have also evolved over time. In 2002, Adler and Kwon wrote a paper entitled, “Social capital: Prospects for a new concept”. They found that social capital had become very broad in its meaning and therefore sought to clarify the concept and create a new conceptual framework. They defined it as “good-will that is engendered by the fabric of social relations and that can be mobilized to facilitate action” (Adler and Kwon, 2002, p.17). This is based on their literature review at that time. The authors identified two major types of theme, internal and external social capital. They classified each social capital author as internal, external or both. Internal refers to the relationships people have with each other and external, the structure of relationships within a group (ibid). Adler and Kwon outlined several definitions of social capital from various authors. They demonstrated that social capital has a variety of meanings to different authors (Adler and Kwon, 2002). The work of social capital authors Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam are explored in more depth in this chapter. These three social capital theorists have also been called the ‘foundational’ authors (Field, 2008; Tzanakis, 2013). These foundational authors added a great deal to the literature, theory and debate on social capital and much of the subsequent writing on this subject stems from their work. They each have their own angle on social capital and these are now explored in more depth.

3.2. Bourdieu and social capital - red chips for the elite

In the 1970’s, Pierre Bourdieu started to formulate the idea of social capital to explain the way that people in elite positions secure their positions and maintain the status quo in society. In his first writing on the subject, he considered social capital to be “indispensable if one desires to attract clients in socially important positions and which may serve as currency” (Bourdieu, 1977, p.503). It was not until his later work, ‘The forms of capital’ (1986) that Bourdieu described the links between cultural and economic capital in order to further develop his concept of social capital. Cultural capital refers to things like education or physical appearance and economic capital to the finances. Bourdieu defined social capital as

the “aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.86).

Individual ties and the number of important connections made up a durable network according to Bourdieu (1980). It is the number and, in each case, the volume of capital that each of these members have which is key to the strength and durability of this network. This durability is ultimately based on economic capital and the personal profit in question, which is the root of Bourdieu’s thinking. “It is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.83). The roots of this position of power and control can be traced back to a Marxist standpoint and the link with economics (Siisiainen, 2003). Bourdieu believed that economic capital was at the root of all other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital for Bourdieu is key to understanding the connections between people, which can also lead to the exchange of economic (financial) capital. For Bourdieu financial and social capital are intertwined. The membership of groups or social networks can provide real value or “credit” (ibid). In order to understand the social world according to Bourdieu, you would have to understand capital in all its forms (Bourdieu, 1986). One analogy that Bourdieu used was to compare the social field to a casino, which again related to the financial. He compared black casino chips to economic capital, blue chips to cultural capital and red chips to “the social capital we possess, our ‘connections’ and the social access to resources that not everyone has” (Alheit, 2001, p.34). Taken together, these things form our overall capital, according to Bourdieu.

Bourdieu is widely credited with the popularisation of social capital theory, but there are also present in the literature various critiques of his theories. Some authors have suggested they to focussed on class divide and therefore one-sided. He focussed on social capital as a mechanism for the wealthy elite in society to perpetuate their status. This economic angle as a device for the elite to reinforce the status quo has been said to be typical of a European sociologist at the time (Field, 2008). Other forms of capital such as financial capital can be physically touched or measured, whereas, social capital is perceived to have other, more intangible benefits (Dodd, 2016). Field (2008) and Tzanakis (2013) have suggested that social capital was one of the least developed of Bourdieu’s theories. Bourdieu saw social capital as primarily reinforcing the class system where other authors see the potential for social good or mobilising groups positively as well as negatively (Gauntlett, 2011).

3.3. The darker side of social capital and social media

The negative effects of social capital have also been described as the ‘darker side of social capital’ (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Field, 2008). This darker side relates to the negative consequences of social capital such as maintaining negative behaviour or as Bourdieu highlighted, preventing social mobility. The social mobility angle of social capital maintained by Bourdieu was typical of European sociology at the time as discussed (Field, 2008). Writing about power dynamics in society with regard to social capital and also social media continues today. Kreps (2011) for example, wrote a paper on social networking and transnational capitalism. The paper analysed the social networks and the commodification of friendships online in order to maintain control by the wealthy venture capitalists. Kreps (p.694) argued that we are in a position now where the masses “surrender our personal data and the conduct of our friendships and (online) social ties to their marketplace”. “Their marketplace” in this case refers to the elite and powerful. Other authors have subsequently developed and tested social capital in other circumstances and other angles. Bourdieu saw social capital as a device for the elite, whereas other authors such as Coleman take a different stance and highlight the wider benefits of social capital to society (Huysman and Wulf, 2004).

3.4. Coleman and the communitarian view of social capital

American sociologist, James Coleman was a key author in developing social capital theory. For a communitarian such as Coleman, it is the community that is the important aspect. Some authors argue that Coleman’s work on social capital and education has had a much wider influence than Bourdieu in this area (Field, 2008). Coleman looked at the influence of social capital to explain academic achievement. In his 1961 study, he found for example that a students’ peer group was more influential than the adults and teachers (Coleman, 1959).

According to Coleman (1988), the social capital literature has two primary intellectual strands. The most common one viewed people as actors who are socialised and work within social structures. The second saw the actor as “wholly self interested”, acting alone. It is the first strand of social structures and segments that has most relevance to this thesis. Coleman focussed primarily on education and rational choice theory. He believed that all behaviour results from people looking after their own interests. This is a departure from Bourdieu who argued that it is only the elite and powerful that can leverage social capital for their profitable

gains. Coleman argued in fact that everyone could potentially benefit from social capital including those in poor and marginalised circumstances.

Bourdieu saw social capital as ultimately connected to economic capital, whereas Coleman was known for his analysis of the interconnections between social and human capital (Field, 2008). An important research study by Coleman is 'Social capital in the creation of human capital' (1988). In this research, Coleman defined physical capital as tools and other equipment and human capital as the skills and capabilities of people. With relation to this, he described social capital as "less tangible yet, for it exists in the relations among persons" Coleman (1988, p.100). "For example, a group within which there is extensive trustworthiness and extensive trust is able to accomplish much more than a comparable group without that trustworthiness and trust" (ibid.). Building trust between customers and brands is also critical to digital marketing. Ryan, (2017, p.394) outlined that developing this trust is fundamental to digital marketing and predicted that digital marketers will "recalibrate their 'trust' efforts to a level never seen before in the marketplace". Social capital can therefore be used to leverage gains, which connects to the literature on the gift economy. Skågeby (2010) highlighted the connection between social media, social capital and gifting. Gifting builds social capital and strengthens relationships, meaning that people within a group can benefit as Coleman suggested.

Coleman has received some criticism for being almost too optimistic about social capital and not considering the darker side of social capital (Field, 2008). Coleman focussed almost exclusively on social capital as a positive force, but not as a negative, prohibiting force. Other authors (Field, 2008; Andrade, 2009) have considered social capital as a double edged sword. Bourdieu considered a light side (for the elite beneficiaries) and the dark side for the others (Bourdieu, 1986). Tzanakis (2013) outlined a number of other criticisms derived from the literature of Coleman's work. One of the major criticisms of Coleman's position is that closure of a group is a precondition for social capital. That is, where the group in question shows network closure, it offers a distinct advantage. Several authors refute this idea. Tzanakis, (2013, p.5) stated for example, "when members are searching and obtaining resources, they require bridges with other network members and so, closure is neither needed nor desired". Similarly, Nan Lin stated "I believe that the necessity for network density or closure for the utility of social capital is not necessary or realistic" (Lin, 1999, p.34). Coleman's work had much in common with that of Robert Putnam, another 'foundational

author' of social capital and communitarian. Putnam researched the rise and fall of social capital for societies as a whole.

3.5. Putnam and the decline of social capital

Putnam, in his seminal work "Bowling Alone" (1995), noted the negative effects of a decline in social capital and how affiliation with groups and societies such as sports clubs can have a positive effect on society. He defined social capital as "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1995, p.2). Putnam stated that "life is easier in a community blessed with a substantial stock of social capital" (Putnam, 1995, p.2). In a guest lecture in Manchester (UK), Putnam described the basic concept of social capital as "embarrassingly simple" he went on to say, "on the whole, communities and organisations that have more social capital are better off" (Putnam, 2007). For Putnam, relationships matter and trust is important for positive social capital, which is crucial for societies and groups to thrive (ibid). The norms of the networks in question are also analysed in this PhD research by analysing the importance of the relationships, rituals and the description of the culture under study.

Putnam's work transcended sociology and into the political sphere, observing the rise and fall of social capital in society. Bowling Alone was highly influential and concluded that the growth of TV was a substantial factor in the decline of social capital in Northern America. Putnam concluded this by looking at the falling numbers of various social groups at a meso level in team sports, church attendance, voting numbers and several other factors. This allowed him to draw conclusions about the macro level of society. He devoted a section of his book in 2001 to discuss computer mediated networks and social capital, which is particularly pertinent to this thesis.

3.6. Social capital and computer mediated networks

In Putnam's later book in 2001, he noted the potential power of the many thousands of online groups to foster social capital. He did however point out several barriers to fostering social capital online. This included the inability of online networks to adequately transmit non-verbal signals, which are so vital to communication. He also questioned if some of the negative effects of online interaction such as depersonalisation, distance and weak social cues could be solved in the future by technology. He highlighted the future potential of broadband and video as part of online networks, which could ultimately address or solve some of these

issues. We have explored already the rise of social media and video content in more recent years and its impact is further explored in the findings chapter.

Putnam's greatest problem with online communities and social capital was what he called 'cyberbalkanisation' (Putnam, 2001), where online communities are divided into specialised groups. According to Putnam, these specialised silo groups have less scope for diversity and cross fertilisation than their offline counterparts. This could also be described as an echo chamber effect. This is where the same content circulates within specific channels (Del Vicario et al., 2016). Putnam also made the point that social capital might be a prerequisite for online networks to work effectively, augmenting face-to-face interaction. In a balanced debate, Putnam noted that computer mediated networks may be an important way for declining social capital to be restored if they develop in the right way. He stated "The Internet may be part of the solution to our civic problem, or it may exacerbate it" (Putnam 2001, p.23). This concept of solution or exacerbation will be explored in the next sections.

Putnam has faced similar criticisms to James Coleman, perhaps because his work had such political impact and also built on Coleman's (Tzanakis, 2013). His reliance on trust as a measure of social capital and desire to isolate single factors narrows the scope of his work according to authors such as (Portes, 2000). Portes found that Putnam's study also required more care and refinement "While I believe that the greatest theoretical promise of social capital lies at the individual level, exemplified by the analyses of Bourdieu and Coleman, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with redefining it as a structural property of large aggregates. This conceptual departure requires, however, more care and theoretical refinement than that displayed so far" (Portes, 2000, p.21). Putnam's theories are also critiqued by authors such as DeFilippis (2001). DeFilippis argued that Bourdieu's theory of social capital and individuals is more accurate than Putnam's. This is because social capital rests with individuals and not communities as Putnam describes. Furthermore, Putnam detached the concept of social capital from that of economic gain. In this PhD study, Putnam's concept of social capital as an enabler for the better functioning of communities is important and his discussion around online communities. In the case of football communities and the better functioning of social media communities, the link to economic capital is retained. This is explored further in section 3.13, which links social capital to economic gain.

3.6.1. Beyond the foundational authors

Bourdieu, Putnam and Coleman have made a great impact on the exploration of social capital, but there is still much ambiguity in its use. These authors for example have had criticism levelled for being too blinkered, not fully considering the darker side of social capital or distinguishing between different types (Field, 2008). In terms of this study, these authors were writing before the growth of the social media channels that we know today which are the subject of this thesis. Despite this, the work of the foundational authors has been used to inform a wide number of new studies in different areas and also critiques and also serves as a basis for further consideration of the nature and use of social capital.

With regard to sport, Widdop et al. (2014) stated that “there has been for some time a significant and growing body of research around the relationship between sport and social capital” (ibid., p.1). Widdop et al reinforced the value of sport and its positive effect on social capital as a force for good. This connects well to Putnam’s study ‘Bowling Alone’ (Putnam, 1995) in its observation that team sports, such as football, can increase social capital as opposed to other more individual sports. It is notable also that Widdop et al use a social network analysis (SNA) approach to analyse social capital, which is connected to the work of Nan Lin (1999). SNA is also used as a method in this research study in order to ascertain the connections between people and identify social media influencers, which is further explained in the methodology chapter.

3.7. Networked society, individualism and social capital

Castells (2010) outlined how technology has enabled society to move from the industrial to the networked society. He explained how not everyone would benefit equally from this shift because networks are “both social and technical—are neither evenly distributed nor meritocratic” (boyd, 2014, p.173). In their book ‘Networked’, Rainie and Wellman (2012) also discussed this societal shift through the triple revolution of social networks, Internet and mobile and how these are transforming our lives. The authors outlined how we have evolved from a group centred society to ‘networked individualism’. According to the authors, technology has helped people to become networked as individuals rather than in their traditional groups. Increasingly, the person becomes the focus rather than the family or social group. Networked individualism according to Rainie and Wellman is an operating system, which allows “people to connect, communicate and exchange information” (p.7). Networked individuals are hooked not to their devices, but to the interaction with others. This interaction

is also closely linked to social capital by the authors. Social capital provides “interpersonal resources” (ibid. p.19) but the triple revolution creates a shift from local ties to local and distant and the social capital contained within a group is diversified to a wider group (p.38). The table below illustrates this shift.

| Group Centred Society | Networked Individualism |
|---|---|
| Neighbourhood community | Multiple communities |
| Homogenous ties | Diversified ties |
| Broad spectrum of social capital within group | Diversified search for specialized social capital |
| Bulletin board | Facebook, Twitter |

Figure 10 – The move from a group centred society to networked individualism (Rainie and Wellman, 2012)

The authors also discussed the role of networked individualism and social capital in other countries. Mobile phones provide an “increase connectivity to people in the developed world, they provide even greater improvements in connectivity and social capital in the less-developed world” (ibid, p.88). The growth of social networks and social capital is now further explored.

3.8. Nan Lin, cyber-networks and the rise of social capital

Like Putnam, Nan Lin also studied social capital in societies such as North America, but with differing opinions. In Lin’s study ‘Building a network theory of social capital’ (Lin, 1999), he proposed a new framework for social capital based on cyber networks or, social networks in cyberspace which are a significant source of social capital. He also refuted Putnam’s concept that social capital is declining stating “I suggest that indeed we are witnessing *a revolutionary rise of social capital*, as represented by cyber-networks” (Lin, 1999, p.45). Lin noted that, whilst not everyone has access to the Internet, this was changing rapidly and the access to information is empowering for people. He went on to say that “There is strong evidence that an increasing number of individuals are engaged in these new forms of social networks and social relations, and there is little doubt that a significant part of the activities involve the creation and use of social capital” (Lin, 1999, p.46). Lin highlighted the need for further studies and better understanding of social capital using online networks. This statement and call for further research is still valid today with online networks continuing to grow massively in size and level of interactivity.

Reflecting on the evolution of social capital and online communities, Kozinets (2015) noted that scholars have been studying online social relations since the birth of the Internet in the 1970's. The "early Internet environment was viewed as a social environment with leery suspicion and cynicism" (Kozinets, 2015, p.26). Kozinets noted that the pendulum has swung both ways, with a minority of scholars believing that Internet use can "corrode groups, families and communities" (ibid. p.28). He went on to highlight other studies such as Valenzuela et al. (2009) who found a positive relationship between use of Facebook, social trust and civic engagement. Kozinets noted, "we value social capital" (ibid. p.28) and this can be enabled through social interaction on the Internet.

In their empirical study entitled 'Surfing Alone: The Internet and social capital', Bauernschuster et al (2014), analysed social capital levels of people online in East Germany. They found that due to the interactive and social nature of the Internet, social capital levels of the people studied had in fact increased. "Our pattern of results across the two identification strategies provides no indication that the Internet has a significant negative impact on average on any of our social capital measures. Rather, virtually all estimates in both models and for all social capital measures point in the positive direction" (Bauernschuster et al., 2014, p.22). In a comparison to Putnam's earlier findings, they concluded that this is because TV is a passive medium, whereas the Internet was being primarily used for interactive communication between people, strengthening and fostering new relationships and increasing social capital. Miah (2017) outlined the shift to web 2.0 and the impact on sports consumption. Web 2.0 is a phrase used to describe the read/write web with the increase in Internet connection speeds and social media channels. Sports brands and fans were able to interact and easily publish their own digital media content. This led to more interactivity, conversation and new groups of fans, co-producing content and discussion online. Former Global Brand Experience Manager of Facebook, Paul Adams wrote "We're social creatures, and social networks have been around for 10,000 years" (Adams 2011, p.46). In his book 'Grouped', he outlined how the web and marketing had been reinvented towards relationships between connected groups of friends and relatives.

Henry Hemming also wrote about the power of friends and relations online in his book "How small groups can achieve big things" (2011). He argued that contrary to social capital and group participation declining in Britain, that quite the reverse was true. The Internet was said by some to be creating a decline in face to face participation. Hemming however, described it

as creating a 'virtual club house', "enriching the experience of belonging to an association" (Hemming, 2011, p.161). Finally, Hemming noted that the Internet has invigorated the experience of belonging to a club in the 21st century and the simplicity and cheapness of the Internet to strengthen the identity of the club (ibid, p159). Comparatively, Lee and Lee (2010) undertook a literature review and analysed students using a survey at the State University of New York. They found that "Although some have argued that internet use may erode an individual's social capital, this study found that people who access the internet for online community use tend to have more sociability and higher levels of generalised norm than do online community non-users" (Lee and Lee, 2010, p1).

In Linda Fuller's book "The power of Global Community Media" (2007), several authors discuss this topic including Stewart and Pileggi, who evaluate an online community called CommuniTree. They said, "Reminiscent of McLuhan's notion of the wheel as an extension of the foot, a part of the physical being, CommuniTree's creators saw the network as an extension of social beings" (Fuller, 2007, p.243). This highlighted the use of virtual communities as a method for people to become more sociable in the correct circumstances with people they know physically, virtually or both. Quan-Haase and Wellman highlighted the power of virtual communities to connect communities locally and globally. In a chapter entitled, "How does the Internet affect Social Capital?" (Wulf and VolkerHuysman, 2004, p.125), they concluded that the Internet increases social capital "connecting friends and kin, near and far" and "adding on to-rather than transforming or diminishing-social capital". These are some examples of studies, which demonstrate that social capital can be increased through the use of Internet based communities including social media. These different types of community and social capital and the connection between these are now considered.

3.9. Types of social capital

Michael Woolcock (2001) described three different types of social capital which are bonding, bridging and linking. These three types of social capital are described below. They are important to the understanding of online communities and the way these work. The types of social capital also relate to the fan segmentation and buyer persona spring as discussed in the previous chapter. These types of social capital can also explain online behaviour and the connection between group members. Bonding, bridging and linking capital also relate to the strength of the connection and trust between people (Helliwell and Putnam, 2004 and Woolcock, 2001).

3.9.1. Bonding social capital and family

Helliwell and Putnam (2004, p.1437) described bonding social capital as “links among people who are similar in ethnicity, age, social class, etc.”. The link between bonding capital and family is also significant to this study. Family may refer to ones blood relatives or a group where bonding social capital exists. Woolcock (2001, p.10) described bonding social capital as the “relations between family members, close friends, and neighbours”. Bonding capital is found in the relationships between core members of a group. Helliwell and Putnam, (2004, p.1436) also noted the strong connection of bonding social capital which is “embodied in bonds among family, friends and neighbours, in the workplace, at church, in civic associations, perhaps even in Internet based ‘virtual communities’”. This demonstrates a connection between bonding social capital, family and virtual communities such as social media. Family is a recurring theme in this thesis and will also be explored in more detail through the findings and discussion chapters.

3.9.2. Bridging social capital

Bridging social capital refers to ties that are weaker than bonding. It has been described as, “distant ties such as loose friendships and workmates” (Woolcock, 2001, p.10). Bridging social capital creates links between different groups including “links that cut across various lines of social cleavage” (Helliwell and Putnam, 2004, p.1437). Woolcock (2001, p.10) reinforced this point describing bridging social capital as the group of “more distant friends, associates, and colleagues”. External ties are also called “bridging capital” where actors interact in a “collectivity” (Adler and Kwon, 2002, p.19). Valenzuela et al. (2009, p.880) also described bonding social capital in terms of its strength of ties “Weak-tie networks produce bridging social capital because they connect people from different life situations”. Bridging social capital ties are therefore weaker than bonding.

3.9.3. Linking social capital and weak ties

Linking social capital has been described as, “reaching out to unlike people in dissimilar situations” to “leverage a far wider range of resources than are available within the community” (Woolcock, 2001, p.13). Weak ties are the looser connections between people. These have been considered by some authors such as Granovetter (1973) to be very important in the spread of information and growth of networks. Linking social capital offers the “capacity to leverage resources, ideas, and information from formal institutions beyond the community” (Woolcock, 2001, p.11). Hawkins and Maurer (2010) studied the effects of bonding, bridging and linking social capital after a natural disaster. They found that whilst

bonding capital was important in the short term – reaching out into wider networks through bonding and linking capital was important for long-term survival. The authors highlighted that bridging and linking capital are associated with the development of new ideas, values and perspectives. This is relevant to this study because football social media groups enable different groups to come together and different strengths of connections. Rainie and Wellman (2012, p.146) noted “The internet is especially good for connecting people with their weaker ties and with a broader diversity of people”. In the next section, we explore different types of Internet user, which is also applies to social media Internet users.

3.10. The 1% rule of Internet culture

The 1% rule of Internet culture (1-9-90) (Arthur, 2006; Nielsen, 2006) shown below divides up online users into three categories as shown in the figure below.

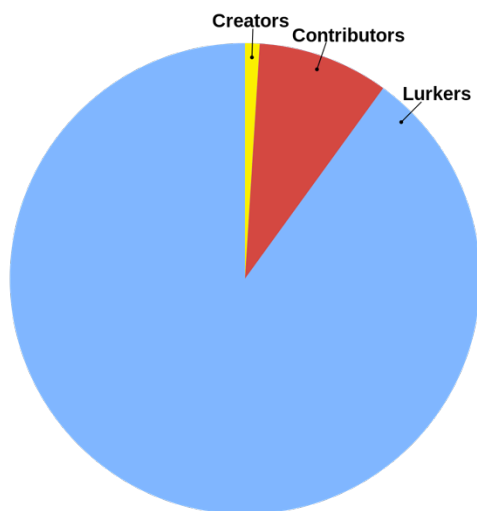


Figure 11 - 1% rule of Internet culture showing Creators (1%), Contributors (9%) and Lurkers (90%)

- Creators – these are approximately 1% of the online community and are the people that visit regularly and actively create content for the community
- Contributors – approximately 9% of the community are people that actively post with some regularity
- Lurkers - The majority, 90% will read, but almost never post or contribute to the group.

3.11. Internet user types and social capital

A connection was found in this study between the three social capital types and Internet user types as demonstrated below. Bonding social capital can be compared to the category of

creators, regularly visiting and driving a social media group and creating discussion. This connection will be more fully explored and a model developed in the discussion chapter.

| Social capital type | Internet user types | Typical % of group |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Bonding / Strong | Creators / Leaders | 1% |
| Bridging / Intermediate | Contributors / Participants | 9% |
| Linking / Weak | Lurkers | 90% |

Figure 12 - Table of the comparison of social capital type relating to the 1% rule of Internet culture Internet users types and their typical percentage of the group

In ‘Bowling Alone’ Putnam (2001, p.171) quoted sociologist Barry Wellman, noting that “computer-supported social networks sustain strong, intermediate and weak ties”. These three categories appear throughout the literature and relate also to bonding, bridging and linking capital respectively.

3.12. Lurkers

The final group is generally the largest group of around 90% of ‘lurkers’ who almost never post or contribute to the online group. Nonnecke and Preece (2000) were two of the first researchers to identify the importance of these lesser connected ‘lurkers’. They stated on page 1 that “as online groups grow in number and type, understanding lurking is becoming increasingly important. Recent reports indicate that lurkers make up over 90% of online groups, yet little is known about them”. Lurking is essentially the normal behaviour of the majority of people. The authors refuted the idea from some commentators that lurkers are resource draining free-riders. Muller et al supported and built on this point saying that lurkers have sometimes been considered to be a problem, “systems have tended to focus on the creators of information, and to leave the consumers unmeasured – or to dismiss consumers as “lurkers” or “free-riders” (Muller et al., 2009, p.149). Nonnecke et al. (2006) conducted a study of lurkers in 375 online communities. They found that lurkers considered themselves to be part of a community and that “lurking was important for getting to know a community” (ibid p.8).

Sun et al. (2014) undertook a literature review of lurkers in online communities. They found that “the top 1% most active users created 73.6% of posts on average, the next 9% of the

population accounted for an average of 24.7% of posts, and the remaining 90% of the population posted 1.7% of posts on average (p.1). This is consistent with the 90-9-1 rule of Internet culture outlined in section 3.9. The literature reviewed revealed a wide variety of reasons that stopped people from posting on social media. Sun et al identified four main strategies for allowing people to post and interact with the group, these are:

- External stimuli – rewarding people for posting financially, with merchandise or some other reward mechanism
- Encouragement – building confidence, encouraging people to post, welcome statements and praise
- Usability improvement – improving user interfaces to make it as simple for new users to browse and post
- Guidance for newcomers – directions and encouragement from elder members to post and usability support.

These strategies could also be underpinned by the development of social capital (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998) “people who share a common identity are likely to have similar goals, rules and interests and are therefore more likely to share information and participate in discussions” Sun et al., 2014, p.112.

3.13. Lurkers, sponsorship and commercial value

In football terms, having a wider audience of lurkers can also have commercial value. For example, in the 2015/16 football season, Manchester United had failed to qualify for the lucrative Champions League for the next season. Through sponsorship and other deals, they were still able to record profits (Hobbs, 2017). Manchester United’s Chief Financial Officer Cliff Baty said “There’s also lots of categories we’ve not even entered into yet and an opportunity to attract new sponsors and partners. Partnerships are a great way to make money as our brand has so much history to be leveraged”. The club overtook Real Madrid as the worlds most valuable club in 2017, despite Real becoming the first club to retain the Champions League in that season (Chapman, 2017). This demonstrated that it is not always the most successful team on the pitch, which makes the most money. The valuation also took into account media rights including digital media; “KPMG studied the publicly available financial information of 39 clubs, as well as their popularity on social media”. A UEFA report highlighted by CNN in 2017 elaborated on the connection between social media and an increase in commercial revenue. The worlds top football clubs no longer need to travel to other countries in order to attract fans from that country. Fans "can be accessed far better

through social media than was ever possible through traditional marketing in the past. It all leads to an increasing concentration of sponsorship and commercial revenue among a handful of clubs" (Young, 2017). Being successful on social media is judged by having a large social media following. A large percentage of a club's social media followers will be made up of lurkers and these are vital to the success of the online group (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000; Muller et al., 2009) and therefore, commercial success (Young, 2017). Social capital is fundamental to the development of social media communities, which in turn have great value to the brand of a football club. Hughson et al., (2016) also highlighted that social media platforms are an increasingly important aspect of marketing and promotional activities for football clubs and at the core of their ability to accumulate capital. The connection between lurkers and social capital is now explored in more detail.

3.14. Lurkers and linking social capital

Lurkers can be associated with linking social capital or the wider group of different people who have a weaker connection to the group and may be based in other geographical locations and from different cultures. Ann Blanchard explored this concept in more depth in a chapter entitled "Dispersed Virtual Communities and Face-to-Face (FtF) Social Capital" (Wulf, VolkerHuysman, 2004, p.59). Blanchard undertook an empirical study of a virtual community and interviewed people from the segments she outlined as leaders, participants and lurkers. Harridge-March (2011, p.63) highlighted that "interested consumers may "lurk" on a social network to familiarise themselves with the operating culture of that network before actively contributing". These three groups are given different names by different authors with differing functions between groups. In Wulf, VolkerHuysman, (2004, p.71) it was found that people interacted in meaningful ways online, but that the members interviewed were "less attached and obligated to the virtual community compared to the FtF one". It was also highlighted that there is a need for more research on "why lurkers participate in virtual communities and how that relates to social capital in FtF communities" (ibid). This is also a pertinent part of this thesis. Kozinets, (2010, p.53) highlighted that online communities can help weak ties grow into stronger ties and trust to build through interaction in different ways (online and offline). A practical use of this increased interaction and trust is the increased likelihood of customers engaging in online commerce.

3.15. Social capital within online brand communities

Social capital theory has been used in several market research and academic studies of social media based brand communities. Heinze et al. (2013) for example, studied two online

communities. They noted the value of the intangible social capital that can belong to both an individual and a group. They also applied the typologies of people in the group against social capital and concluded that for online groups, “participants can be enticed by the social capital that members accrue” (p.14). This research highlighted the tremendous potential to build, sustain and gather valuable data for a brand via an online community. For football brand communities, there have been some notable examples where social capital has been built up around new social media brand communities. One example includes ‘Hashtag United’, who are an amateur team set up to play in a fictional style league and covered extensively on social media (Hattenstone, 2017). “Hashtag United play real football in an imaginary league and their matches are watched on YouTube by upwards of half a million people – figures that most professional teams wouldn’t dare dream of”. Clubs such as SCFC and FC United of Manchester have taken more of a traditional route through the UK football league pyramid. They have both also developed a strong social media following attracting many more followers compared to other clubs in the football pyramid (Conn, 2015; Fenton, 2017b).

The connection between social capital theory and brand is key for organisations and their networks of “admirers or consumers of the same brand” (Habibi et al., 2014). Brands can offer an opportunity for people to interact, particularly in the era of online social networks, by supporting and encouraging these networks. This ultimately builds social capital around a brand (Fueller et al., 2011). This social capital is often seen as a positive force (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004 cited Henry and Bosman, 2014). This enables “the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible” (Coleman, 1988, p.98). These ‘ends’ for example could be the objectives of an organisation including strengthening the brand or encouraging new partnerships. Bolton (2005) highlighted that social capital can have both positive and negative effects because the tight bond between people could amplify anti-social behaviour for example.

3.16. Measuring social capital

Measuring social capital has been a subject of much debate in the literature (Haynes, 2009). Authors such as Putnam and Lin set out to measure social capital using statistical data in societies to gauge its rise and fall. They believed that higher volumes of social capital is generally a positive force for society. In terms of digital marketing, increasing social capital between brands and customers is also considered to be positive (Heinze et al., 2016). To that end, over the last decade, there are a growing number of online tools that attempt to keep

track of and measure engagement and influence. Tools such as Klout aim to measure an individual's social capital (McCue, 2013). Klout works by using an algorithm to measure an individual or brand's level of engagement on social media channels to give a comparative score. This score is based upon the level of social media engagement and influence between the networks that are connected to give an aggregate score. This concept is also connected to SNA and centrality (Borgatti, 2005), which can be used to gauge how influential a person or brand is. "Centrality is an indicator of an individual's structural position that assesses the importance of the individual in the network" (Luo and Zhong, 2015, p.279). Helliwell and Putnam (2004) used survey data to measure the connection between social capital and wellbeing. Measuring social capital levels and centrality also provides an opportunity for further study but is beyond the scope of this thesis. Measurement of social capital is not directly relevant to the research questions in this thesis, nor its underpinning interpretive stance as outlined in the philosophy chapter. The measurement of social capital is also considered to be complex and problematic because it is complex and woven in to human understanding (Andriani, 2013).

3.17. Criticisms of social capital

A number of criticisms and challenges of social capital theory have been noted in this chapter with regard to individual theorists. Authors such as Putnam had a wide reaching impact across academia and the political sphere. We have explored so far some of these criticisms of this research, but it is also necessary to address some of the wider challenges raised to the application of social capital theory. For example, Haynes (2009) noted a significant increase of interest in social capital research, but heeded a warning that 'before going any further with social capital' there are a number of criticisms to be considered. He wished to address social capital criticisms as a unified concept. Haynes stated that social capital is:

1. a misleading metaphor
2. a way of economists entering sociological territory
3. not a theory, but a loose collection of themes
4. not an explanation but a tautology
5. not able to explain how change happens in a community
6. impossible to measure
7. potentially a hindrance to economic success (has a dark side)
8. difficult to operationalise

In terms of this PhD study, it has been acknowledged that social capital still has varying definitions (1, 3 and 4 above) and it that it is difficult to measure (5 and 6). The relevant criticisms have been evaluated, but it also worth noting that this thesis accepts that social capital is not and should not be a unified concept or panacea. Campbell (2001, p.2) for example stated, “the concept of social capital has fallen victim to hopelessly unrealistic expectations. I believe that once we tone down our expectations, the concept of social capital [is] potentially extremely important”.

Essentially, social capital is critiqued in this thesis and it is adopted as a theoretical framework for online communities. By contrasting the relevant social capital research with empirical data, the thesis makes a contribution to social capital theory. The wider critiques of social capital as a unified theory however will no doubt continue alongside the development and contribution to this theory. It is unlikely that it will become a unified or grand theory, but will continue to be a useful concept for understanding more about communities and interaction. It has proved to be a particularly useful theoretical framework for the better understanding of football fans in the discipline of digital marketing.

3.18. Social capital summary

Social capital was introduced and evaluated as the theoretical framework in this study. There are several definitions associated with social capital as outlined by the foundational authors Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam and subsequent authors. Huysman and Wulf (2004) described social capital as the glue that holds together networks. Andriani (2013) highlighted that with social capital, ‘relationships matter’. These two definitions are the most appropriate to this research and its questions. This thesis analyses the glue (social capital) that holds together different social media groups and the relationships between fans and football clubs. Social capital and the connection to social media communities are most pertinent to this study and its research questions.

James Coleman was widely regarded as one of the most influential social capital authors including influencing Putnam’s work. His work is rooted in education and again, some distance from the effect of online communities. Coleman’s position that networks need to be closed for social capital to prosper is debateable. For online communities, this concept does not appear to hold true when these have been shown by studies such as Bauernschuster et al. (2014) and Lin (1999) to foster and increase social capital. The concept of bonding, bridging

and linking social capital is also important to this study. A connection was found between types of online user and social capital types. The relationship between these types and online communities is particularly relevant to this research. The 'glue' of social capital between different groups and the connections between Internet user type and social capital type is critical to this study and is further explored in the discussion chapter.

The perspectives of Putnam and Lin were found to be the most relevant to this study and its research questions. An interesting contrast was found between the work of Putnam (1995) and Lin (1999) on the nature of social capital. Putnam observed that social capital in society was in decline, with TV considered as a key factor whereas Lin argued that the growth of online communities has led to an increase in social capital (Lin, 1999). In a later book, Putnam (2001), considered the growth of online communities and produced a balanced debate on the role of computer mediated networks pointing out both threats and opportunities for social capital. This is an important debate for comparison in this research. Those threats and opportunities between different online groups and types of social capital are key to furthering the understanding of social capital. More research is required to understand the role of the 'lurker' or the less engaged member of the community. This thesis also contributes to theory in this area.

This PhD focuses on an era where social media and more open networks have grown exponentially from the early days of the more closed and subject specific networks which Putnam classed as cyberbalkanisation (Putnam, 2001). An important aspect of this study was to ascertain to what extent these digital networks can foster or increase social capital and to gauge the importance of social capital as a prerequisite for success. More recent studies (Lee and Lee, 2010; Bauernschuster et al., 2014) have suggested that online communities can increase social capital. The connection between modern online communities and types of social capital is also crucial to this thesis. Social capital is used as a theoretical framework in this study, but also specifically, research question 4 explores the role of social capital. This concept is further explored in depth in the findings and discussion chapters. Finally, some of the criticisms of social capital authors and social capital as a unified theory were raised. It was stated that this thesis aimed to acknowledge these criticisms, but an in depth defence of social capital theory as a unified concept was not the aim of this thesis. Social capital theorists and findings are in fact blended with empirical data to make a contribution to social capital theory with regard to digital marketing based on social media communities.

4. Philosophy

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, the underpinning research philosophies are considered. Easterby-Smith et al. (2008) argued that research philosophy is the most important part of methodology and is crucial to set in motion the journey through the research process. Initially in this chapter, the meaning of philosophy in research is discussed and why this is important. The philosophical concepts of ontology, epistemology and axiology are explored and their connection between four key paradigms is discussed. The philosophies of positivism, interpretivism, critical research and pragmatism are introduced and debated. An understanding and appreciation of research philosophies is an important aspect of this study and to the researcher. The summary synthesises the chapter and its relevance to this research including its philosophical position.

Oates (2006, p.13) stated that all research has an underlying philosophical paradigm. Oates defined a paradigm as a pattern, model or shared way of thinking. Gibson and Morgan (1979, p.ix) advocated that a researcher should “become familiar with paradigms which are not his own. Only then can he look back and appreciate in full measure the precise nature of his starting point”. Whilst many authors highlight the importance of philosophical underpinnings, there is also much confusion in the literature. Crotty (1998, p.1), for example, highlighted that terminology is often unclear and far from consistent, even sometimes contradictory. This could be explained because of the geographical, time and discipline differences between researchers (Collis and Hussey, 2013, p.45). The use of the word paradigm varies for example, but for the purposes of this research, Kuhn and Oates’ definition is adopted. Kuhn defined a paradigm as a “unitary package of beliefs about science and scientific knowledge” (Crotty, 1998, p.35). Oates (2006, p.282) defined paradigm in more straightforward terms as a “set of shared assumptions or ways of thinking about some aspect of the world”.

“Teachers and students of research will improve their practice by engaging in critical self-reflection and dialogue about the philosophical assumptions that underlie their positions as researchers” (Mertens, 2010). There is a strong body of literature from books and journal papers, which highlight research philosophy as a fundamental part of research. Easterby-Smith et al. (2008) highlighted three primary reasons as to why understanding philosophical issues are important to research:

1. Clarifies research design and how a researcher would get the best answers
2. Avoiding confusion in order to evaluate the best possible options and limitations of designs
3. Identify, create and adapt designs according to the constraints of particular knowledge structures

Easterby-Smith et al. noted however that criticisms and debates are key to the development and progression of research philosophy. They advocated evaluation and discussion rather than denigrating or ignoring other perspectives as the key to the progression of future research. This means that researchers should make themselves aware of a range of philosophies and designs and sometimes draw on combinations of relevant elements to create informed and high quality research. The evaluation of philosophies, the debates and relevant paradigms are key to the underpinning methodology of this research.

A number of authors including Crotty (1998) and Mertens (2010) noted that an influential study for modern day philosophy is Kuhn's 1962 book 'The structure of scientific revolutions'. Kuhn's work at this time shifted the thinking about research philosophy by analyzing the history of philosophy and highlighting the power of anomalies and departure from the norm to create new paradigms. This approach asked questions of old data and viewed development of philosophy in a new way. Kuhn saw the anomalies and mistakes in research as being key to revolutionary periods of thinking. Kuhn considers these mistakes as vastly important for the development of philosophy and new ways of thinking.

Saunders et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of philosophical paradigms that different researchers and studies may employ as appropriate to the research. The outer layer of the research onion diagram below highlights research philosophies, which are most relevant to business research studies. Interpretivism and positivism are seen as two of the main paradigms (Collis and Hussey, 2013) and authors differ in the list of others that they consider to be meaningful or relevant. It is notable that even between versions of books by the same authors, the list of paradigms changes as time moves on. Saunders diagram below for example, changes again in the 2015 edition to incorporate a post-modern paradigm in addition to the ones shown below from 2012.

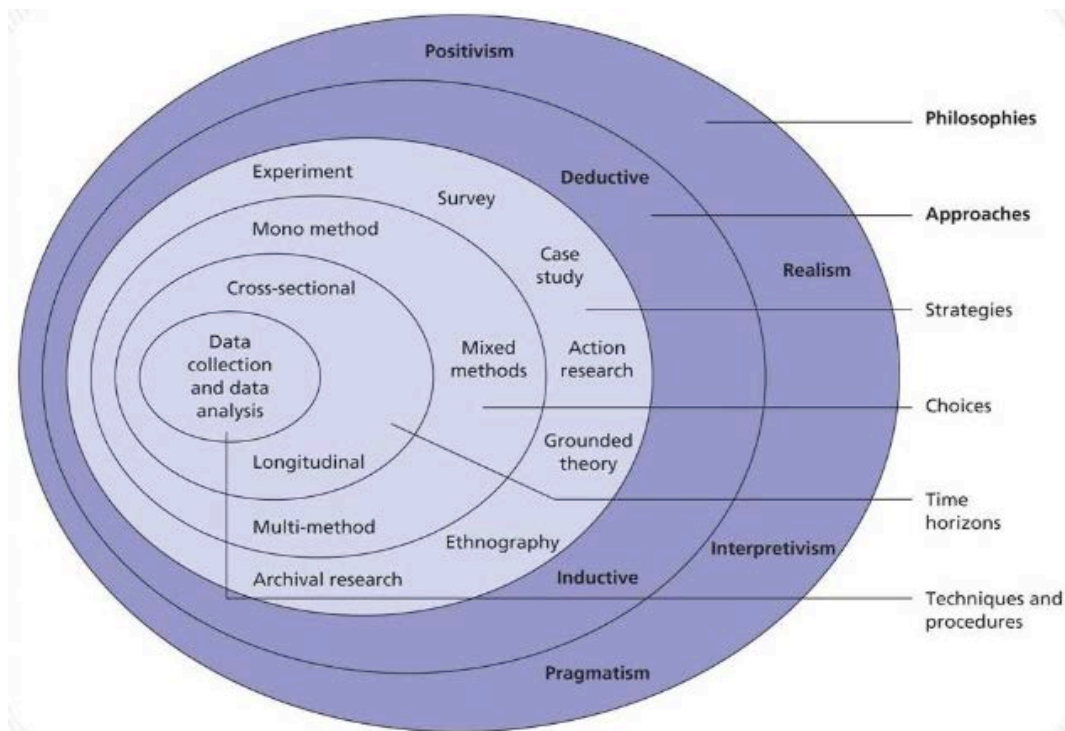


Figure 13 - The research onion, (Saunders et al., 2012)

Saunders research onion contains research philosophies in the outer layer. As highlighted, the philosophies included in the outer layer change between different editions of Saunders book as times and research have changed. Although realism is shown on the outer layer of this version of the onion, in this chapter, critical theory as opposed to realism was evaluated as a potential option for this research.

In the next layer in, inductive or deductive approaches are shown, which also link to the selected philosophy. A deductive approach implies the testing of a theoretical position. This can be achieved by designing a methodology specifically to test the position or hypothesis. The deductive approach is purposefully positioned next to the positivist end of the spectrum in the diagram above. Conversely, an inductive approach is about developing theory from the observation of empirical data (Saunders et al., 2012, p.672). This approach is usually associated with the stance of the interpretivist. These concepts will be further discussed and contrasted later in this chapter including how they view the world, gather knowledge and the role the values of the researcher plays.

Mingers (2001) found that historically, much research has been based on positivism, with a rise in non-positivist research, particularly interpretivist, in more recent times. The careful selection of appropriate paradigms and methods is seen by Mingers as a strong way forward

for research. He wrote that “consideration should be given to the different dimensions of a real situation, material, social, and personal; to the tasks involved in the different stages of a research study; and to the research context (including the capabilities and characteristics) of the researcher(s) (ibid p.256).

4.2. Ontology, Epistemology and Axiology

The different research philosophies can be better understood and separated by their ontology (views of the world), epistemology (how they gather knowledge about it) and axiology (values). Gibson and Morgan (1979) wrote a key paper in this area where they found that these issues were vitally important in understanding debates between different research philosophies. They highlighted that theory building requires this consideration of history and debate between these perspectives. They stated that social scientists are “faced with a basic ontological question: whether the 'reality' to be investigated is external to the individual - imposing itself on individual consciousness from without - or the product of individual consciousness; whether 'reality' is of an 'objective' nature, or the product of individual cognition; whether 'reality' is a given 'out there' in the world, or the product of one's mind” Gibson and Morgan, (1979, p.1). Consideration of the nature of reality and being, form the ontology of a philosophy.

4.2.1. Ontology

Ontology is the study of being (Crotty, 1998). It is the nature of reality and the way the world works from the perspective of the researcher. Saunders et al., (2012) highlighted two key aspects of ontology, which are subjectivism and objectivism. Subjectivism is the perspective that the actions and perceptions of people (social actors) create social phenomena (behaviour). Objectivism meanwhile demonstrates that social entities exist in reality, external to social actors. Saunders et al gave the example of management as an objective entity. An organisational researcher’s philosophical standpoint would be objectivist if they decided that the phenomenon would remain the same independent of the people involved. If they believed that it is the people that in fact influence the phenomenon then the ontology would be subjectivism. Ontology will be discussed in more detail with specific regard to philosophical positions later in this chapter.

4.2.2. Epistemology

Epistemology relates to the theory of knowledge and the researchers view as to what constitutes acceptable (Saunders et al., 2012) and valid knowledge (Mingers, 2001; Mertens,

2010). Crotty (1998, p.3) stated that epistemology is “the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology”.

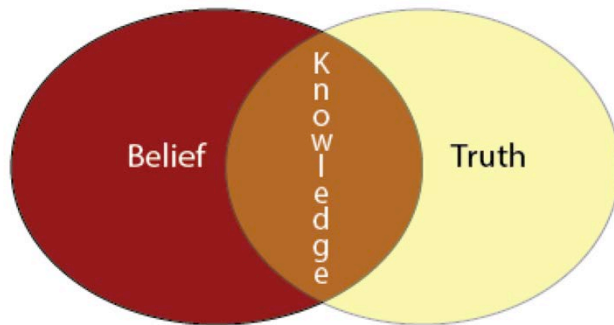


Figure 14 - Knowledge at the centre of truth and belief (Crotty, 1998)

The diagram above demonstrates that the nature of knowledge is centred between the belief of the researcher and the actual truth of the situation. This relates to the earlier position of the role of the researcher and his/her beliefs, motivations and values, which should be acknowledged for qualitative research studies in particular. The nature of truth can be complex and is discussed by authors such as Rorty (2005) in relation to pragmatism. Rorty (p.2) stated that truth “is just the name of a property which all true statements share”. Commenting on the nature of truth for interpretivists, Klein and Myers (1999, p.78) stated “what is at stake here is not the truth or untruth of the claims, but the world of social relations”. It is these social relations and their analysis from an interpretive perspective, which is key to this study. The objective is to create new and interesting knowledge.

Williams (2008) evaluated the epistemology of knowledge and identified a number of factors within the nature of knowledge, whether it is:

- Subjective or objective?
- Tacit or explicit?
- Positivist or interpretivist?

In terms of this research study, the knowledge created is derived from an interpretivist perspective and the intention was to be as explicit as possible, presenting knowledge in a way that can be understood. The study aims to be objective in the interpretive tradition, acknowledging the researchers values that may provide some subjectivity. This is acceptable and indeed considered to be a positive thing for interpretivists and ethnographers (Kozinets, 2015). Crotty (1998, p.10) highlighted that the concepts of ontology and epistemology merge and work closely together. They observed that authors could have difficulty in keeping the

two apart conceptually. Crotty highlighted the importance of epistemology in deciding what kind of knowledge will be produced. He described epistemology as further subdivided into objectivist, constructivist and subjectivist.

Crotty explained that the objectivist epistemology is where meaning exists apart from consciousness. For example, a tree is a tree regardless of whether anyone knows about it. Constructionism holds that there is no meaning without mind and that people construct meaning in different ways. With subjectivism, meaning is imported from elsewhere. In Guba and Lincoln's paper "Competing paradigms in qualitative research" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p.108) they raised the epistemological question of the nature of the relationship between the knower and what can be known. The epistemology of an interpretivist study focuses on the details and reality of a situation and on the details which motivate the actions of people (Saunders et al., 2012).

4.2.3. Axiology

Axiology is the nature of human nature (Mertens, 2010). It is the area of philosophy that considers judgement about values within ethics, aesthetics and social enquiry (Saunders et al., 2012). When considering axiology, Saunders suggested that in order for research results to be credible, the values of the researcher in question should be considered. Creswell (2013, p.20) also reflected on the role of axiology within research philosophy and stated "All researchers bring values to a study, but qualitative researchers make their values known in a study". The values of the researcher were made known in this study in the introduction chapter and are referred to at other relevant points of this study where necessary.

Mertens (2010, p.10) highlighted four sets of philosophical beliefs: axiology (ethics), epistemology (knowledge), ontology (reality) and methodology (inquiry). These four sets of beliefs and their meaning in each case are highlighted in the table below, compared against four common research philosophies.

| | Positivism | Critical theory | Interpretivism | Pragmatism |
|--|---|--|---|---|
| Ontology view of the nature of reality | External, objective and independent of social actors | Society is rife with inequality and injustice | Socially construed, subjective, may change, multiple | External, multiple, view chosen to best enable answering of the research question |
| Epistemology what constitutes acceptable knowledge | Only observable data can provide credible data. Focus on causality and generalisations, reducing phenomena to simplest elements | Subjective meanings and social phenomena, but reality is that injustice and power balance exist in society. Illumination of false consciousness and human empowerment is key | Subjective meanings and social phenomena. Focus upon the details of situation, a reality behind these details, subjective meanings motivating actions | Either or both observable phenomena and subjective meanings can provide acceptable knowledge dependent upon the research question. Focus on practical applied research, integrating different perspectives to help interpret the data |
| Axiology Role of values | Value free, independent and objective stance | Research is value bound but has a duty to expose injustice and power imbalance objectively or subjectively | Research is value bound, the researcher is part of what is being researched and cannot be separated and so will be subjective | Values play a large role in interpreting results, the researcher adopting both objective and subjective points of view |

Figure 15 - Comparison of four research philosophies, adapted from (Saunders et al., 2012) with additional critical theory information (Oates, 2006)

The philosophical paradigms of positivism, interpretivism, critical theory and pragmatism will now be evaluated in more depth.

4.3. Positivism

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), positivism has a long history, dominating research from the 1930's to the 1960's in particular. It's "core argument being that the social world exists externally to the researcher, and that its properties can be measured" (Gray, 2017). Positivist research primarily utilizes quantitative data in the shape of surveys, experiments and analytical, numerical data. Crotty (1998) noted that the meaning of positivism has grown and altered over time. Positivism is one of the oldest and most established paradigms, evolving over 500 years from the time of Bacon, Newton and Galileo (Oates, 2006). The popularisation of the term positivism is often attributed to August Comte in 1848 but Crotty (1998, p.19) stated that the roots of positivism predates Comte. The terms 'positive philosophy' and 'positive science' are found in the work of Francis Bacon in the 14th century. Crotty noted that Comte's version of positivism however would hardly be recognisable today. Despite the various changes and schools of thinking, Crotty (p.27) stated that "one thing is certain: positivism is linked to empirical science as clearly as ever". Crotty stated that positivism is "objectivist through and through". Saunders (2012) concurred with this view that positivism is derived from the natural sciences and is about the observable realities and relationships within the data collected. Collis and Hussey (2013, p.45) buttressed the point that positivism is about objectivity in that it "rests on the assumption that social reality is singular and objective, and is not affected by the act of investigating it".

For some researchers, the "methods of natural science constitute the only legitimate methods for use in social science" (Lee, 1991, p.343). Oates (2006) outlined several characteristics of positivism and its key features:

- Measurement and modelling
- Objectivity
- Hypothesis testing
- Quantitative data analysis
- Universal laws

Oates warned that some researchers consider positivism to mean quantitative research exclusively. Although quantitative research is most closely associated with positivism and

qualitative at the other end of the spectrum with interpretivism, the distinguishing factors are their respective ontology and epistemologies as opposed to the types of data used.

From its long historical routes, positivism has naturally evolved. Authors such as Heisenberg and Bohr in the early 20th century noted the ‘uncertainty principle’. This calls into question the claims of positivism to be completely objective (Crotty, 1998, p.29). This questioning has led to the development of post-positivism (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell, post-positivists do not believe in strict cause and effect or that the research and researcher are independent of each other. Creswell said that post-positivists do still pursue objectivity, whilst accepting that there may be bias. Objectivity, according to Saunders et al. (2012, p.676) is the “avoidance of (conscious) bias and subjective selection”. The nature of truth and bias relates to the nature of knowledge and also the values of the researchers. Positivism still dominates research in the USA in particular and is seen as a ‘safe bet’ in research according to Oates (2006). In Europe in particular, interpretivism has grown over the past decades as a way to understand the social world (Creswell, 2013, p.304). Mingers (2001) also noted a shift in journal editorial policy in the late 1990’s to become more amenable to non-positivist research.

The debate in academia between the philosophies of positivism (hard science) and interpretivism (soft science) is important to an understanding of research philosophy. There have been many critics of both approaches and the debate concerning the (in)compatibility and differences between interpretivism and positivism. This is particularly important to research philosophy (Oates, 2006). Positivism is aimed at the creation of laws that can be generalized whereas interpretivism asserts that scientific success is partial because of the sheer size, complexity and shifting nature of culture (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.30). Interpretivism and positivism are essentially two ends of the philosophical spectrum.

Positivists tend to believe that positivist science produces the clearest and most ideal knowledge (Cohen, 2007, p.11). This position is questioned by a number of authors and in fact, some interpretivists would question whether positivism is suited to the study of human affairs at all (Mack, 2010). In the modern day, positivists claim “a certain level of objectivity rather than absolute objectivity, and seeks to approximate the truth rather than aspiring to grasp it in its totality or essence” (Crotty, 1998, p.29). In order to study the complexity of human interactions, some authors believe interpretivism is the preferable way (Klein and

Myers, 1999). It is a paradigm that “emerged in response to criticisms of positivism” (Collis and Hussey, 2013, p.44).

4.4. Interpretivism

Interpretivist research is underpinned by the underlying assumption that social reality is in the minds of people and that it is subjective and affected by the act of researching it (Collis and Hussey, 2013). Oates (2006, p.292) further defined interpretive research in the IS discipline as “concerned with understanding the social context of an IS: the social processes by which it is developed and construed by people and through which it influences and is influenced by its social setting”. The roots of interpretivism lie in idealism, which is a philosophy associated with Kant in the 16th century and further developed by Rickert and Weber around 1900 (Collis and Hussey, 2013). Ethnographer Franz Boas was also key to the development of interpretivism. He stated that “civilization is not something absolute” and that “our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes” (Boas, 1887, p.184).

Baraldi and Bocconcelli (2001) explained the strengths of interpretivism by using an analogy. They asked their readers to imagine trying to describe the complexity and meaning of a famous painting using data factors such as the intensity of the lighting or the number of colours used. This analogy sets the scene for the philosophy of interpretivism as a way of approaching and thinking about research. Interpretivist research is aimed at understanding the complexity of human meaning which is its strength and power (Black, 2006). Shah and Corley (2006, p.1823) stated that the goal of interpretivist research is to ensure that “results are representative of the interpretations of those experiencing the phenomenon under study and that they embody a rigorous interpretation of the phenomenon such that plausible theory development is possible”. It “assumes that every person conducting a research study will have a unique interpretation of the results” (Labianca et al., 2000, p.241).

Walsham (1995) highlighted the growth of interpretive research based on human actions and called for more quality research addressing philosophical issues for guidance of future studies. He used the example of the work of ethnographer Geertz to emphasise the differences between interpretivist and positivist approaches. Interpretivists do not set out to answer the deepest questions of society, but simply to make their own interpretations of particular phenomena as a ‘consultable record’. Walsham recommended that interpretivists can and should build theory from their qualitative data. He discussed the concept of first and

second order concepts. First order is the qualitative data collection and second order is the application of insightful analysis and derivation of good theory from this data. So in other words, just collecting data is not enough to provide meaningful results, the research must add meaning to that data to create theory (Van Maanen, 1979).

Walsham (1995, p.76) also explained the epistemology and ontology of interpretivism. With regard to ontology, he highlighted three positions: “‘external realism’ which considers reality as existing independently of our construction of it, ‘internal realism’ which views reality for us as an intersubjective construction of the shared human cognitive apparatus, and ‘subjective idealism’”. Walsham highlighted that interpretivist researchers would generally select either ‘internal realism’ (meanings are constructed by people) or ‘subjective idealism’ (people construct their own reality) when interpreting the meanings associated with computer systems.

4.5. Principles for interpretive field studies

Klein and Myers published an influential study in 1999, ‘A set of principles for conducting and evaluating interpretive field studies in IS’. They asserted that “Interpretive research can help IS researchers to understand human thought and action in social and organizational contexts; it has the potential to produce deep insights into information systems phenomena” (p.67). They outlined seven principles with guidelines for the production of quality interpretive research as follows:

| |
|--|
| <p>1. The Fundamental Principle of the Hermeneutic Circle This principle suggests that all human understanding is achieved by iterating between considering the interdependent meaning of parts and the whole that they form. This principle of human understanding is fundamental to all the other principles.</p> <p>Example: Lee's (1994) study of information richness in e-mail communications. It iterates between the separate message fragments of individual e-mail participants as parts and the global context that determines the full meanings of the separate messages to interpret the message exchange as a whole.</p> |
| <p>2. The Principle of Contextualization Requires critical reflection of the social and historical background of the research setting, so that the intended audience can see how the current situation under investigation emerged.</p> <p>Example: After discussing the historical forces that led to Fiat establishing a new assembly plant, Ciborra et al. (1996) show how old Fordist production concepts still had a significant influence despite radical changes in work organization and operations.</p> |
| <p>3. The Principle of Interaction Between the Researchers and the Subjects Requires critical reflection on how the research materials (or "data") were socially constructed through the interaction between the researchers and participants.</p> <p>Example: Trauth (1997) explains how her understanding improved as she became self-conscious and started to question her own assumptions.</p> |
| <p>4. The Principle of Abstraction and Generalization Requires relating the idiographic details revealed by the data interpretation through the application of principles one and two to theoretical, general concepts that describe the nature of human understanding and social action.</p> <p>Example: Monteiro and Hanseth's (1996) findings are discussed in relation to Latour's actor-network theory.</p> |
| <p>5. The Principle of Dialogical Reasoning Requires sensitivity to possible contradictions between the theoretical preconceptions guiding the research design and actual findings ("the story which the data tell") with subsequent cycles of revision.</p> <p>Example: Lee (1991) describes how Nardulli (1978) came to revise his preconceptions of the role of case load pressure as a central concept in the study of criminal courts several times.</p> |
| <p>6. The Principle of Multiple Interpretations Requires sensitivity to possible differences in interpretations among the participants as are typically expressed in multiple narratives or stories of the same sequence of events under study. Similar to multiple witness accounts even if all tell it as they saw it.</p> <p>Example: Levine and Rossmore's (1993) account of the conflicting expectations for the Threshold system in the Bremerton Inc. case.</p> |
| <p>7. The Principle of Suspicion Requires sensitivity to possible "biases" and systematic "distortions" in the narratives collected from the participants.</p> <p>Example: Forester (1992) looks at the facetious figures of speech used by city planning staff to negotiate the problem of data acquisition.</p> |

Figure 16 - Summary of principles for interpretive field research (Klein and Myers, 1999)

Klein and Myers created the seven principles above in response to the growth of interpretive research. They were created in order to guide interpretive field research in the correct way to conduct and to judge the quality of studies. These principles are also used to guide and judge this thesis, which is interpretive field research. The principles outlined are absorbed into this

study and in particular the relevance of the fundamental principle of the hermeneutic circle (principle 1) is specifically outlined below.

4.5.1. The hermeneutic circle

The hermeneutic circle is an important concept to interpret qualitative data. Crotty (1998) noted that hermeneutics dates back to the 17th century, providing scholars with a way to interpret biblical texts. Not only has scholarship expanded beyond biblical texts, but also hermeneutic understanding has evolved from text to areas such as human practices, events and behaviour. In the hermeneutics literature, the term hermeneutic circle plays a prominent role. According to Crotty (p.92), in the natural world, a phenomenon can be understood by analysing its component parts. He argued, in the human sciences however, this “simply will not do. To understand a text bearing upon human affairs or a culture that guides human lives, one needs to be able to move dialectically between part and whole, in the mode of the hermeneutic circle”. This concept and process is particularly important in making meaning from empirical, qualitative data from an interpretivist perspective.

In his paper “The presentation of interpretivist research”, Black (2006, p.319) addressed the question “how can words fully express the meaning inherent in our observations, personal interviews and pictures when so much of it is subtle, hidden and contextually bound”. Black also found that journals often favour research based on positivism. Of those journals that accepted interpretive work, he found that the guidelines were restrictive and not conducive to fully expressing meaning. For example, words and a few black and white pictures were the only way to express ideas. The suggestion was that the use of colour, animation and video would better express interpretive research results and would add additional meaning. Sandelowski (1998, p.375) also called for qualitative researchers to be able to “select from an array of representational styles and formats, those that best fit their research purposes, methods, and data”.

Mack (2010, p.8) highlighted a number of criticisms of interpretivism. One such limitation according to Mack is the lack of verification and therefore generalisability of findings. This is because it “abandons the scientific procedures of verification and therefore results cannot be generalized to other situations. Therefore, many positivists question the overall benefit of interpretivist research”. Another criticism relates to the ontology of interpretivism as being subjective rather than objective. Mack asserted that interpretivist researchers are objective

when it comes to analysis of results. The strongest criticism Mack highlighted from the literature is that it neglects “to acknowledge the political and ideological influences on knowledge and social reality. Moreover, interpretivism was not radical enough” (p.9). Critical research is particularly concerned with these political influences.

4.6. Critical research

Oates (2006, p.296) defined critical research as “identifying power relations, conflicts and contradictions, and empowering people to eliminate them as sources of alienation and domination”. Klein and Myers (1999, p.69) highlighted that critical theorists assume that human actions can lead to change in order to improve situations. According to Klein and Myers, this is “constrained by various forms of social, cultural, and political domination as well as natural laws and resource limitations” (ibid). Like interpretivists, critical researchers believe that reality is social reality and is created and re-created by people. The major departure though is that critical researchers analyse patterns of power control, looking for ways to empower people through research. Creswell (2013) also defined critical theory as empowering humans from constraints such as race, class and gender. The researchers can illuminate power imbalance and social action, seeking transformation and empowerment.

Crotty (1998, p.59) wrote, “Critical theory is even more suspicious of the constructed meanings that culture bequeaths to us”. He noted that the critical tradition has its roots with authors such as Marx and questions social imbalance and hegemony. Crotty identified the tensions and differences between critical research and interpretivism. Some critical researchers would consider interpretivism to be overly optimistic and ignoring manipulation, oppression and injustice in society. Interpretivists such as Benner (1985, p.5) argued, “No higher court for the individual exists than meaning or self interpretations embedded in language, skills and practises”. This perspective could be considered to be an unquestioning, optimistic reading of culture that contrasts and separates the concept of critical theory. Similarly, there are contrasts between critical theory and pragmatism. Max Horkheimer for example, accused pragmatism as being ineffective, which created a rift between pragmatism and critical theory (Crotty, 1998, p.62).

Oates (2006) made the point that critical and interpretive research are not yet as well established in the literature as positivism. Oates noted that critical research has grown, but it is still not mainstream or widely accepted. This makes it a riskier approach for new

researchers according to Oates and therefore requires careful consideration. Myers (2013, p.42) concurred with Oates that critical research is less common, but that it is on the increase. In IS research, there have been several special issues of journals devoted to critical research, but “its potential has yet to be realised” (ibid).

4.7. Pragmatism

As time and philosophies have developed, some authors have argued that the appropriate combination of philosophies and methods is important for the development of quality research (Rorty, 1982). Pragmatism is “not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality” (Creswell, 2013, p.28). Pragmatists believe in multiple interpretations of the world and undertaking research; there is no single point of view (Saunders et al., 2012). Ultimately, the philosophy and multiple methods are chosen as the best way to answer the research questions with a philosophy of pragmatism. Mertens (2010) asserted that pragmatism is not the ignorance of philosophy, but the careful consideration and selection of appropriate ways to think about and undertake research. Mertens stated that pragmatism deserves better than the ignorance of other philosophies and their integration in some circumstances.

Lee (1991) wrote an important paper to establish a framework for integrating positivist and interpretive approaches for organisational research. Lee highlighted the growth of interpretive research, but the strengths of combining the approaches sequentially. Lee concluded that the developed framework and case highlighted “provides a demonstration of the feasibility of integrating two approaches often believed to be opposed and incompatible when performing organizational research” (p.363).

In 1996, Schultz and Hatch researched the combination of multiple paradigms in a paper entitled “Living with multiple paradigms, the case of paradigm interplay in organizational culture studies” (Schultz and Hatch, 1996). They highlighted that research to date had combined paradigms in one direction. They advocated a strategy of multi-paradigm research, which promoted interplay between paradigms and challenging the borders between them. They concluded that with “multiparadigm diversity, the interplay strategy offers a means to take advantage of the tensions between paradigms and thereby generate new forms of understanding” (p.553). In his paper ‘Pragmatism vs. interpretivism in qualitative information systems research’ Goldkuhl (2012) specifically compared these two philosophies and produced the following table.

| | Pragmatism | Interpretivism |
|-----------------------|--|--|
| Ontology | Symbolic realism | Constructivism |
| Empirical focus | Actions and changes | Beliefs (socially constructed cognition) |
| Type of knowledge | Constructive knowledge | Understanding |
| Role of knowledge | Useful for action | Interesting |
| Type of investigation | Inquiry | Field study |
| Data generation | Data through assessment and intervention | Data through interpretation |
| Role of researcher | Engaged in change | Engaged in understanding |

Figure 17 - Pragmatism vs. interpretivism: ideal-typical differentiation (Goldkuhl, 2012)

The focus of pragmatism therefore relates to action and change and interpretivism to create understanding and interpretation. It is the latter, which is most relevant for this thesis, which aims to increase understanding of the topic through field study and interpretation.

4.8. Summary of philosophy

The rationale for the consideration of research philosophy was explored. The literature revealed that some researchers do not consider philosophy to be important to research. There is however a compelling case from a range of authors as to why philosophy is key to underpinning rigorous research (Crotty, 1998; Oates, 2006; Mertens, 2010; Saunders et al., 2012; Creswell, 2013). There are some differences in how authors use certain terms such as paradigm and indeed, which paradigms they deem to be the best and most reliable.

Philosophy is not about methods, the difference lies in:

- Ontology (the study of being) (Crotty, 1998)
- Epistemology (how knowledge is gathered) (Oates, 2006)
- Axiology (values of the researcher) (Creswell, 2013)

Four philosophical paradigms were evaluated, which are relevant to business and management studies. These are:

- **Interpretivism** – understanding social context of people and social settings (Oates, 2006)
- **Positivism** – the oldest and most established philosophy with roots in the natural sciences, focussing on observable realities within data (Saunders et al., 2012)
- **Critical research** – Power imbalance exists in society, human actions can lead to empowerment and change to improve situations (Klein and Myers, 1999, p.69)

- **Pragmatism** – Understanding and selection of the best and most appropriate philosophies and methods to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2013, p.28).

The comparison of the epistemology, ontology and axiology of four key philosophies and the debates between each were considered in this chapter. The research questions in this thesis and the values of the researcher lend themselves particularly towards a pragmatic, but ultimately, interpretivist approach. This PhD is an inductive field study. It is exploratory, observing the new phenomena of the real world situation of a non-league football club using social media channels to produce data through interpretation that leads to new and interesting knowledge and understanding (Goldkuhl, 2012).

Power imbalance, political influence and critical research are not key to the research questions in this study, nor are they a prevalent part of the case or axiology of the researcher. The research questions lend themselves to the observation of social context of people and their behaviour online and the understanding of the complexity of human meaning (Klein and Myers, 1999). This would support the concept that the study is by definition interpretivist and therefore, Klein and Myers seven principles that guide and judge interpretivist research and hermeneutics were beneficial to this study. The ontology, epistemology and axiology of interpretivism are of great importance to this study and this allows some flexibility for the research questions. In terms of epistemology, pragmatism integrates different perspectives to interpret the data (Saunders et al., 2012). Authors such as Baraldi and Bocconcelli (2001) and Mingers (2001) build a compelling case of the flexibility and adaption of this approach, where multi-methods are used and blended. This keeps options open to be adaptive both in research question and method.

5. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology used in this study. Saunders research onion below has been adapted to show the various layers incorporated into the design of this research. It also identifies this study as interpretivist as discussed in the previous chapter. We now turn our attentions to the inner layers of the onion and how these work with regard to this research.

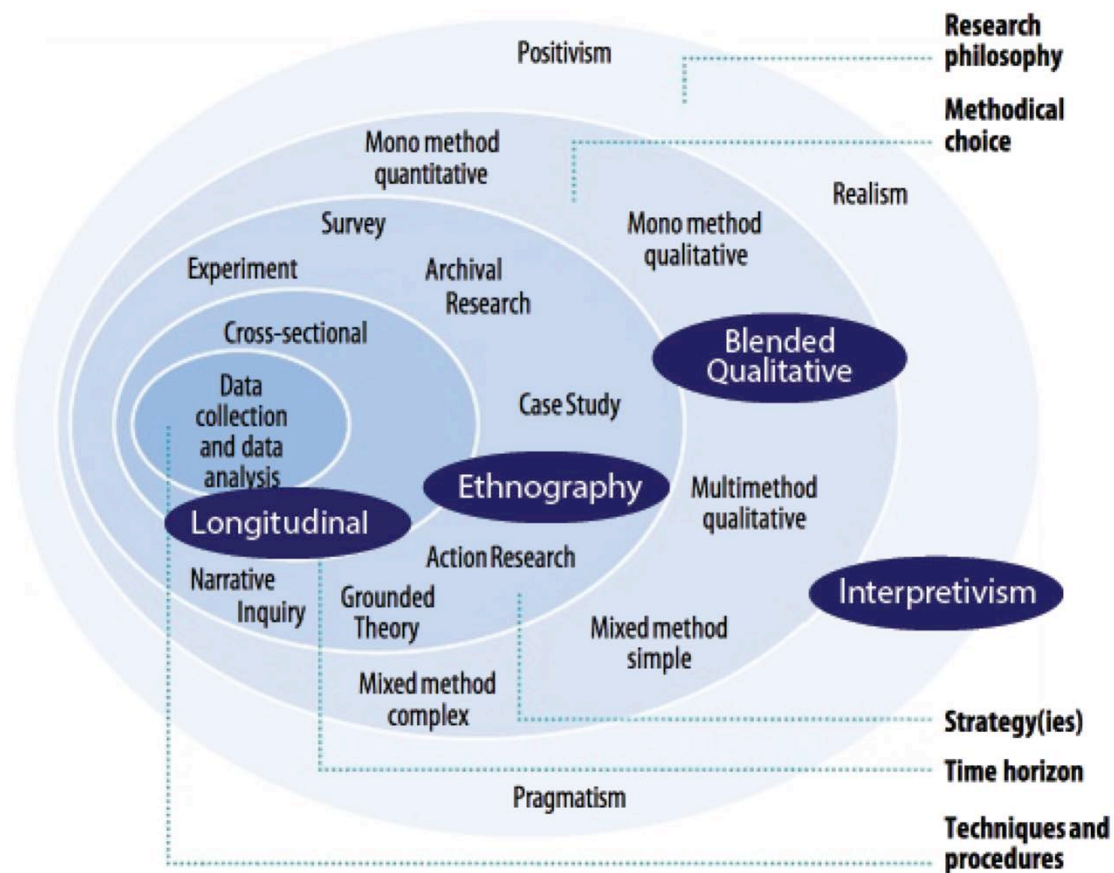


Figure 18 - Adapted research onion identifying this study as interpretivist ethnography, using blended qualitative methods (Saunders et al., 2012)

5.1. Methods and methodology

Crotty (1998) noted that researchers could become confused and bewildered at the range of research methods available because these are not laid out and organised in a neat fashion. This chapter aims to make sense of this and bring clarity to this research and the research onion is one mechanism to assist with this goal. This chapter outlines the research approach, techniques, conceptual framework and tools used in this thesis. Finally, a discussion of validation and ethical issues is presented.

The terms methods and methodology are sometimes used interchangeably (Saunders et al., 2012). This is a common confusion, but the two are in fact very different. Methods are procedures and techniques for analysing and collecting data (ibid). Methodology is the study of methods or “the theory of how research should be undertaken” (Saunders et al., 2012, p.3). The following sections outline how the research in this study will be undertaken, whilst evaluating the relevant options available. The methods and philosophy used in this thesis are outlined and described. The creation of new knowledge according to Oates (2006, p.7) is about “using an appropriate process, to the satisfaction of the users of the research”.

5.2. Research Approach

Saunders (2012) defined two main research approaches that could be adopted. A deductive approach is when a theory or hypothesis is developed at the start. The researcher then develops an appropriate methodology, which is designed specifically to test this. The inductive approach is where data is collected and analysed, resulting in the development of a theory and/or hypothesis. An inductive approach enables a topic to be explored, data collected and analysed to get a feel for what is going on and develop a theoretical position (Saunders et al., 2009).

Multiple qualitative methods are blended in this study to analyse the complexity of human behaviour and make meaning of it (Klein and Myers, 1999; Boellstorff et al., 2012). Belk et al. (2012, p.6) stated “there has never been a time when it has been more important for qualitative marketing researchers, whether they are practitioners or scholars to develop and refine their skills”. Qualitative research is becoming increasingly valuable to both journal editors and marketing managers. It is also the case that the “contexts where qualitative methods can be fruitfully applied are evolving rapidly. In particular, the burgeoning range of online activities in which consumers and marketers are engaging”. This growth of social media networks and public online conversations are providing new options and a wealth of qualitative information and opportunities to study many groups of people who are interacting online, including the many millions of football fans around the world.

5.3. Boundaries of this study

The diagram below shows two word clouds generated from both the primary and secondary data captured in this study. The larger words in the primary data cloud demonstrate that the words, Salford, fans, media, think, people and club feature most frequently. This shows the

draws upon a variety of interactions and media sites in order to build theory from qualitative data.

5.3.1. Types of theoretical contribution

Saunders (2012) outlined three potential types of theory that could potentially be developed.

He described these as follows:

- Grand theories – These have the capacity to change the way we think about the world, for example, Darwin’s theory of natural selection
- Mid range – These are not world changing, but are significant, such as the human theories that are known to us and applicable in different circumstances (Healy and McDonagh, 2013).
- Substantive theories – These theories are restricted to times, places, settings, or a particular problem or group. Many research studies are devoted to this type of contribution and these can also lead to mid-range theories.

Robert Merton first introduced the concept of middle range or mid-range theories in the 1950’s as a response to the grand theories of the time. Grand theories sought to explain many things with one theory and Merton saw this as problematic for sociology to advance (Boudon, 1991). Boudon gave a good explanation of middle range theories as helping to “explain puzzling phenomena and create new solid knowledge about the aspects of the social world it is traditionally concerned with. Middle range theory is effectively the indispensable means to reach this goal” (p.522).

This PhD study develops solid knowledge and understanding about particular aspects of the online social world using SCFC as a vehicle for this research within a particular timeframe and a particular group of people. This group of people are connected via the social media channels used by football fans. This study is an ethnography designed to combine primary data over an extended period with a range of people inside and outside of SCFC with the wider literature to create mid-range theory. Eisenhardt and Graebner, (2007, p.25) outlined that it is possible to create theory from rich empirical, qualitative data. This can be done by presenting the data in a number of ways including diagrams. This research takes this approach and also uses a variety of mediums to present and disseminate the research to different audiences. This included this thesis, the researcher blog, guest blog posts, book chapters, teaching and conference presentations of different formats and to different

audiences of Undergraduates, Postgraduates, academics, companies, journalists and sports clubs.

Extensive data was collected inside and outside the boundaries of SCFC, combined with literature and a theoretical framework. This enabled it to extend beyond the creation of substantive theory into mid-range theory. This extensive data collection included three blended qualitative methods. Kozinets (2002, p.7) supported the use of multiple methods to aid generalisation. “Triangulation of netnographic data with information collected using other methods, such as in interviews, focus groups, surveys, or traditional in-person ethnographies may be useful if the researcher seeks to generalize to groups other than the populations studied.”

The findings of this PhD study can also be applicable in different circumstances such as other sports clubs or indeed other similar situations and groups including brands with highly engaged fans. An example of this is Fenton and Chadwick (2016), which used social media qualitative analysis of sponsors and fans during Euro 2016. The findings could also influence other studies. Another example is from Heinze et al. (2016) where the methodology from this thesis was applied towards the social media chapter of this book. An example of applying findings into other circumstances is boyd (2014) (her preference is to use a lowercase b in her name). She studied American teenager’s use of social media. Whilst this was restricted to a particular group at a particular time, her findings are applicable and comparable to other countries and other times. Her research study over a period of time could be considered to develop mid-range theory based on the weight of data and theoretical contribution in this case. Ethnographical approaches study particular cases at particular times, but the richness of the data and analysis can and should create theory (Atkinson, 2015).

Eisenhardt and Graebner demonstrated how a single case could be used as the basis from which to develop theory inductively. The authors stated that single case inductive research is an increasingly popular and relevant research strategy. “The theory-building process occurs via recursive cycling among the case data, emerging theory, and later, extant literature. Although sometimes seen as “subjective”, well-done theory building from cases is surprisingly “objective”, because its close adherence to the data keeps researchers “honest” (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007, p.25). Siggelkow (2007) also noted the value of rich data and the power of persuasiveness of the single case. He concluded “I am all for theory

development; yet theory as a purely self-referential exercise rather than as an attempt to better understand the world strikes me in the end as a poor allocation of time and effort” (p.23). This provides a stark warning that any theory should be useful and therefore mid-range theories potentially have wider and more useful applications. This exciting principle is to combine themes and ideas from the literature with evidence from the data collected (Boudon, 1991).

5.3.2. Design of research questions

The research questions in this study were designed in order to facilitate a useful theoretical contribution to the wider literature. As discussed in the introduction chapter, the research questions are fundamental for a research study and are intrinsically linked to the methods and design of a study. Oates (2006) stated that both the researchers and what others propose are important in the design of the questions. Firstly, the things that motivate you and the knowledge you want to achieve. Secondly, the literature and specific calls for research from various journals and conferences. A balance can also be struck between these two. This holds true for this thesis whereby the reading, data collection and supervisory team all contributed to the selection and application of methods and research question design.

5.3.3. Time horizons

Saunders et al. (2012) stated that the consideration of time is important to the research and research questions. If the research were based on a snapshot in time, then it would be classed as cross-sectional. If the research were based around a diary or multiple snapshots over a longer period of time, then it would be longitudinal. Due to time and budget constraints, many research studies are often time limited, and cross sectional studies are most common. Cross sectional studies are considered to be less expensive than longitudinal (Ismail, 2010). These often use a survey, but can also use qualitative data over usually a shorter period of time. Longitudinal studies can be more expensive and time consuming, but can shed more light on phenomena as they also track changes over time rather than a particular snapshot.

For studies relating to change and development, Saunders advocated a longitudinal approach (Saunders et al., 2012). A qualitative longitudinal approach is used to “explore changes that occur over time” (Farrall 1996, p.2). Farrall (p.2) stated “there is currently no definition – nor will there ever be I suspect - of how long studies should last”. A longitudinal approach generally requires more time and multiple snapshots of data collection. It may also be possible to use previously collected data at one point of time and collect comparable data for

another snapshot. There are a number of examples of empirical longitudinal studies in the field of digital marketing. One such example is “A longitudinal study of digital marketing strategies targeting Millennials” (Smith, 2012). Smith conducted her study over three years and the results showed changing preferences of people over each year using quantitative data from a survey. Smith was able to demonstrate shifting customer preferences over three years. Some factors remained constant, but some changed over time. For example, people’s patience for YouTube advertisements was seen to diminish over the three years. As people grew more experienced and the online experience changed, people’s preferences and views also changed. These patterns in changing behaviour over time are key to a longitudinal study.

The primary data collection of this PhD research was conducted over an extended period of time and uses a diary of participant observation. Although some change is observed, the concept of change is not crucial to the research questions in this study. It is however, a thorough ethnography conducted over two years. It is marked as longitudinal against the research onion as opposed to cross sectional simply because it was conducted over a longer period of time in the spirit of ethnography. Ethnography should be conducted over a longer period where change occurs naturally over time and this is further explored in the next section.

5.4. Ethnography

This section evaluates the background, history and methods of ethnography. According to Van-Maanen (2011), ethnography is a representation of particular aspects of a culture. This section starts with a debate on the background and history of ethnography, it then moves to evaluate different forms of ethnography including writing styles and ways of categorising and conducting ethnography. The topic of digital technologies and ethnography is particularly important to this study and is therefore evaluated. Conducting ethnography online and using digital tools is discussed. A section is devoted to netnography, which is adopted in this study as a branch of ethnography and a set of standards for conducting ethnography online.

5.4.1. Background and history of ethnography

Baym and Markham (2009, p.180) stated, “too often, internet researchers take the stance that, since the internet is new, old theory and methods have nothing to offer in its exploration”. This view is contested by authors such as Boellstorff et al. (2012, p.13) who outlined the importance of the history of ethnography as vital. Consideration of history increases rigour,

helps to prevent duplication and helps to ‘stand on the shoulders of giants’. The concept of building on the work of others and taking into account the rich history of ethnography is vital. Kozinets (2015, p.6) agreed with this stance and noted that “experimentation and critique is welcome and useful, the consistency of ‘methodological rigour’ benefits scholarship, better theory construction, minimising needless replication”. In a paper entitled, ‘a history of workplace and organizational ethnography’, Steven Down (2012, p.72) stated that history serves “in building better understanding of the fluidity and heterogeneity of ethnographic practice and the variety of research problems addressed through time”. With this in mind, an evaluation of what has gone before in the history of ethnography is important to this study in order to set the context and understand the challenges and opportunity.

It has been argued that the roots of ethnography can be traced back to Greece and the days of Herodotus over two millennia ago (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Herodotus has been labelled, ‘father of history’ and ‘father of ethnography’ (Jones, 1996; Thomas, 2000). Herodotus reported on the Greco-Persian wars and this inquiry is considered by some to be one of the first ethnographical accounts. The words *ethnos* (people) and *graphein* (writing) have Greek origin, but the term ethnography was first used in 1767 by Johann Friedrich Schöpperlin. “The notion of ethnography grew out of disillusionment with enlightenment ideals of standardization, ideals famously exemplified in attempts during that period to create ‘encyclopaedias’ of all human knowledge” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.24). Encyclopaedias attempted to document all human knowledge in the positivist tradition, whereas ethnographies document “detailed and situational accounts of specific cultures” (ibid, p.14).

Ethnography as we know it today has evolved from these beginnings. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p.1) stated that the origins of modern ethnography lie in nineteenth century anthropology. An early nineteenth century example is Frederick Engels’ 1845 study ‘The Condition of the Working Class in England’. During his time in England from 1842, he wrote about the English working classes from his own observations and contemporary reports (Engels, 1845). Down (2012) stated that Engels would have been unaware that this study would be considered to be ethnography at the time.

One of the most important researchers in the history of ethnography is Bronislaw Malinowski (1884 – 1942). Malinowski taught a new generation of ethnographers in his distinguished career (Van Maanen, 2006; Boellstorff et al., 2012). An ethnography then was considered to

be a “descriptive account of a community or culture, usually one located outside the West” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.1). There are many classic studies in the early twentieth century studying cultures outside of the Western world. Some examples come from classic authors such as Margaret Mead and William F. Whyte, who achieved heroic status in some circles for their studies of other cultures (Van-Maanen, 2011). Mead’s book ‘Coming of Age in Samoa’ (1928) is one of the most famous ethnographical works. Mead primarily studied young adolescent girls on the island of Ta’u in Samoa. Through ethnography, Mead studied life, family, sexuality, old age and social structures in Samoa and contrasted the results with American culture. Another classic example, which overtook this work in terms of readership, was by Nelson Chagnon. Chagnon’s study, ‘Yanomamo: The Fierce people’ (Chagnon, 1968) was a monumental longitudinal ethnographic study where Chagnon lived with the sovereign tribes of the Amazon jungle for many years. Chagnon documented genealogies and stories and focussed on the role of violence within the Yanomamo tribes. Chagnon found that violence was an essential part of the evolution of the tribes, where the fittest survived.

Like many classic ethnographies, these seminal works were not without their controversies and criticisms. Mead’s study was subject to speculation, when five years after her death, anthropologist and fluent Samoan speaker Derek Freeman published ‘Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth’ (Freeman, 1984). In this work, he claimed that many of the women Mead had spoken to had effectively lied to her about their habits. He went as far as to re-interview several key informants who went on record much later in life to say that they had lied to Mead. Perhaps even more controversially, Chagnon came under heavy criticism for overplaying the role of violence in the Yanomamo people (Beckerman and Erickson, 2009). Critics claimed that Chagnon had misconstrued the Yanomamo people as being overly violent and accusations were also levelled at Chagnon that he had encouraged violence by trading weapons with the Yanomamo, exchanging equipment such as machetes for information. Other serious allegations that Chagnon did not follow ethical procedures in terms of obtaining proper permission and blood samples etc. caused great controversy at the time. The relevance of this work and ethical issues will be further discussed later in this chapter.

Since these classic works in native cultures and tribes, ethnography has evolved. In the middle of the twentieth century, the ‘Chicago School’ produced a large volume of influential ethnographies including *Street Corner Society* (Whyte, 1943), *Outsiders* (Becker, 1963) and

Asylums (Goffman, 1961). Up to this point, anthropologists had aimed to “legitimise native cultures” (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p.20). The Chicago school departed from the study of tribal culture and viewed themselves as “giving voice to populations whose perspectives were ignored by institutions shaping their lives” (Katz and Csordas, 2003, p.280). The perception that a person cannot be objective if they come from the culture they are studying was challenged by Franz Boas and his students in anthropology at the turn of start of the twentieth century (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Van Maanen (2006, p.5) stated, “Ethnography is no longer confined to single-site studies of supposedly isolated or conveniently distinct and isolated peoples”.

A key part of ethnography is fieldwork through participant observation. This involves the researcher collecting first hand data using a number of methods from the group studied over a period of time (Pole and Hillyard, 2016, p.3). Ethnography and fieldwork have evolved from the discipline of anthropology to other disciplines such as sociology. Paul Atkinson wrote “Anthropology’s stock in trade was always fieldwork with exotic peoples and face to face communities. Sociological ethnography usually included fieldwork with urban groups and sub-cultures in work settings and complex organisations among professionals and their clients” (Atkinson, 2015, p.50). Van Maanen (2006, p.20) affirmed this position; he wrote that “Sociologists get the West, anthropologists get the rest”. This is obviously an intentional generalisation, but Van Maanen asserted that generally speaking, in sociology, ethnography is usually conducted close to home. In anthropology, ethnography is central to the discipline and the groups studied can often be further afield. Van Maanen (p.23) noted that with the growth in urban ethnography, the differences in style and boundaries between sociology and anthropology are blurring. Atkinson (2015, p.50) went a step further to say that the “divide between sociology and anthropology is a silly one”. In their 2016 book “Doing Fieldwork”, Pole and Hillyard stated that “much of present-day research based on fieldwork has been conducted in settings with which the researcher has some familiarity” (Pole and Hillyard, 2016, p.20). They also highlighted a strength of this approach is that the researcher is able to seek “a different view of what may have previously been taken for granted” and even posing new questions.

Terms such as ‘focussed ethnography’ have arisen in more recent times. Focussed ethnography was the subject of a paper by Knoblauch in 2005 and describes an ethnography that is based closer to home. Focussed ethnography is characterised by short intensive bursts

of fieldwork, data and visual material (photography and video) to derive insight. Knoblauch stated that this approach in ethnography is being used in an increasing number of studies. One such example combining participant observation, interviews and photography for an ethnography of the band 'New Model Army' is by O'Reilly (2008). O'Reilly combined these methods to deliver a compelling contemporary account of a rock band in order to answer his research questions. The concept of participant observation in this study is further explored in the techniques section.

Van Maanen (2011) noted a 'renewed interest' in fieldwork, which is causing the 'high priests' of ethnography to ask sharp questions about the quality of some newer studies. Van Maanen referred here to some ethnography scholars who have expressed concern about the rigour of some contemporary ethnographies. Paul Atkinson (2015, p.12) also raised the question of the quality of fieldwork in the modern age and the distinction between purely qualitative work and ethnography as a rigorous method of study. As an eminent scholar of ethnography, Atkinson warned that there were a growing number of low quality, wrongly classified ethnographies. He stated, "We seem to have lost the understanding that the conduct of ethnography involves an intensive period of engagement (participant observation) in a given social milieu. Too often we discover the studies that have been called 'ethnographic' are nothing of the kind, but are based entirely on interviews, and contain absolutely no engagement with a 'field' of social activity" (ibid. p12). This PhD thesis is based over a longer period, contains engagement with the field through participant observation and is also composed of multiple blended methods as part of the ethnography. Aside from different methods, there are also different forms of ethnography to take into consideration.

5.4.2. Forms of ethnography

In Van Maanen's classic book "Tales of the Field" (2011), he outlined three forms of ethnography, realist tales, confessional tales and impressionist tales. Realist tales tend to be the most common type of ethnographies, "these tales provide a rather direct, matter of fact portrait of a studied culture, unclouded by much concern for how the fieldworker produced such a portrait" (Van Maanen, 2011, p.7). In contrast to this, confessional tales are ethnographies that focus very much on the researcher rather than on the culture under study. Finally, impressionist tales are lesser known and contain elements of both realist and confessional but are different again. These are "personalised accounts of fleeting moments of fieldwork cast in dramatic form" (ibid.). In Van Maanen's long and distinguished career as an

ethnographer, he undertook ethnographic studies of the police in America and worked as a cadet. In 'Tales of the Field' he demonstrated these three types of ethnography from his own experience of fieldwork. This PhD study is a realist form of ethnography as the researcher is participating but creating an objective portrait of the online culture of UK football. Realist ethnography was appropriate for this study in order to maintain the scientific rigour, giving a descriptive, but overarching etic view of the community under study. This concept is explored in more depth in the section below on participant observation.

Other key forms of ethnography are those of the emic or etic perspectives (Boellstorff et al., 2012). These terms were first used by the linguist Pike and popularised by Clifford Geertz (ibid). Etic refers to outsider analysis, comparing differences across cultures. The emic form of ethnography refers to insider analysis, looking at a culture on their own terms (Morris et al., 1999). This difference is highlighted in practise by Boellstorff et al. (2012, p.16) "We conduct research not just to mine data from informants, but to learn from their theoretical and pragmatic insights". It is important in ethnography to balance both the emic and etic and to keep them distinct. The scientific, etic data can tell us something about a situation, but "cannot answer the fundamental issues of social action, social organisation and cultural competence" (Atkinson, 2015, p.138). Often the emic and etic forms are seen at odds with each other, but Morris et al. argued that the two approaches are complimentary. This PhD study attempts to balance both emic and etic descriptions of the field, which provide a description of the situation but also builds theory as Boellstorff et al described.

Paying attention to what people do (emic analysis) is as fundamental as gathering data. Geertz stated "doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, 'thick description'" (Geertz, 1973, p.6). Finding the balance between the etic and emic parts of ethnography should be taken into account. Thick description according to Atkinson (2015, p.29) is not just descriptive detail, but "systematic attention to the multiple modes of order and action". Ethnography for Atkinson is comparable to a Japanese tea bowl – it should be unique, but conform to a recognisable type.

5.4.3. Ethnography and case study

This PhD study has been outlined as ethnography, but it is also worth considering the difference between this and a case study. Case study is defined and evaluated by Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p.301). Case study has a methodology in its own right, devoted to a detailed examination of a single example. By this short explanation, it is difficult to distinguish case study from ethnography, but there are however key differences. Ethnography for example, at its core is interaction with the field and participant observation combined generally with other qualitative methods such as interview (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994). The famous case study author Yin (2009) wrote a seminal book on case study methods and is well known for his case study research using quantitative data. Whilst participant observation and interview can be used as part of a case study, other methods including quantitative are also prevalent in case study research. Ethnography is generally known for its use of qualitative data and case study for its use of both qualitative and quantitative data. This could be considered as one differentiator between the two, but this is not clear cut.

In addition, there is also a question of the duration of study. Ethnography as discussed, would tend to require a significant time for fieldwork, which could lend itself to longitudinal research. Case study could be longer, but typically, it would be shorter in length than ethnography. In addition, a case study approach could well contain multiple cases with a clear justification for this (Yin, 2009). Ethnography would tend to focus on the researcher becoming part of a particular group using participant observation in order to describe its culture through storytelling as opposed to case study, which is more outward looking. White et al. (2009) faced this dilemma at the start of their research into young people in Australia. Their paper *Ethnography vs. Case Study* identified ethnography as closer involvement with participants and a particular style of writing. This was also discussed in the previous section. It was established that this PhD study is ethnographical, describing the culture of a particular group of people. Online communities are fundamental to this PhD study, which recognises new types of ethnography in the digital age.

5.4.4. Ethnography in the digital age

The terms cyber ethnography, digital ethnography, virtual ethnography and netnography have been used in the literature to describe ethnography by gathering data from online communities. There is some debate around the exact definitions of these different terms, which will be explored in the following sections. In modern times, communities exist and

interact offline, online and sometimes both. These online communities can be studied and digital tools exist that are useful for ethnography.

An important text for the study of ethnography is 'Ethnography, principles in practise' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). There is just over one page of the book devoted to 'ethnographies in the digital age' but several references to digital tools and technologies in the book. The concept of digital and ethnography is a relatively small concern of this book but is viewed as follows; "the true benefit of digital technology finally emerges when the reader's engagement with the ethnography and its associated data can be interactive" (ibid. p. 207). This highlighted the two-way nature of using technology to not only follow, but also to interact with participants in the field sites.

In a more recent book, Atkinson (2015, p.42) went a step further to include smartphone technology and noted that "many of our research hosts and informants inhabit multimedia worlds, producing and consuming text and audio-visual materials through social media. It is up to us as researchers to do as much". Atkinson (p.43) continued, "We are clearly in a position to create genuinely novel, exploratory ways of reconstructing social worlds through digital means". With the explosion of smartphones, social media and technology, this is having a huge impact on sport and its globalisation (Chadwick, 2009). Even the SCFC club owners Phil and Gary Neville were following their club updates and scores live on Twitter, including when they were away managing and coaching in Valencia (Draper, 2016). This is the nature of smartphones and social media embedded into the lives of football fans, players and owners. This provided the opportunity to reconstruct these digital interactions through ethnography.

The terms virtual or digital ethnography are both used with regard to ethnography of online communities. Ultimately, both terms refer to ethnography using primarily digital channels, which are best to obtain information to adequately address the research questions (Boellstorff et al, 2012). "Online ethnography and virtual ethnography (as well as many other methodological neologisms) designate online fieldwork that follows from the conception of ethnography as an adaptable method" (Bowler, 2010, p.1270). Hine (2000) described how a virtual or digital ethnography is much the same as a traditional ethnography, the difference being that we are analysing the patterns and meanings of the people behind the screen.

Turkle (1995, p.10) described digital media as an opportunity to create communities whereby people interact globally and “with whom we have fairly intimate relationships but whom we may never physically meet”. Going beyond the screen, Greschke (2007) argued that virtual ethnography should not just focus on screen research, but should also include physical observation to explore how the digital activities are part of the lives of the participants. Boellstorff et al (2012, p.6) reinforced this, making the point that the group being observed must be followed to wherever they are, be that in a virtual world, forum, blog, Facebook or at a physical event. This approach was adhered to in this ethnography. The addition of interviews in particular allowed data to be captured from beyond the screen.

Tom Boellstorff is an anthropologist who has undertaken ethnographies in virtual worlds in novel and exploratory ways. His book “The coming of age in Second Life” (Boellstorff, 2008) evaluated the issues of gender, race, sex, money, conflict and antisocial behaviour within the virtual world of Second Life. Boellstorff has also collaborated with several other authors to produce ‘Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method’ (Boellstorff et al., 2012). The authors highlighted that studying virtual worlds is not only feasible but also crucial to developing research methods that keep up with people and technology changes. This approach provides “powerful resources for the study of cultures” (ibid. p.6). Boellstorff et al focussed their ethnographical works on 3D virtual worlds, but the concept of pushing the boundaries of ethnographical research remains important (Kozinets, 2015).

Channels such as Second Life and World of Warcraft are classed as virtual worlds by scholars such as Boellstorff et al, (2012). They defined virtual worlds as always on and requiring worldness and embodiment. This embodiment is usually associated with the person having an embodied character within some kind of fictional, often 3D virtual world. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are sometimes described as virtual worlds. At the time of writing, these do not in themselves match the description of virtual worlds that Boellstorff and his fellow researchers describe. Kozinets (2015, p.35) described Second Life as a virtual world, distinct from social networking sites such as Facebook. In this PhD study of online football communities it is the social networks and other websites are of primary importance as opposed to what Boellstorff and his colleagues would describe as virtual worlds. These virtual worlds are not used by SCFC at the time of writing. Virtual worlds such as Second Life are also beyond the scope of this study. Kozinets (2015, p.35) stated that collectively, all of these virtual world channels could be classed as “Online social

experiences that can create strong social ties between members, resulting in more meaningful or longer lasting relationships”.

5.5. Netnography

Robert Kozinets is the creator of netnography and a key author in this area (1997, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2015). Kozinets was the first published author to use the term netnography and he defined this as “the textual output of Internet-related field work” (Kozinets, 1997). He derived the term from an anonymous review he received from one of his studies. In a later study, he defined netnography as “ethnography adapted to the study of online communities. As a method, “netnography” is faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography, and more naturalistic and unobtrusive than focus groups or interviews” (Kozinets, 2002, p.1). In a post on his blog, Kozinets.net (figure below), he responded to a question of the difference between netnography and other terminologies (Kozinets, 2013).

| |
|---|
| Online ethnography and digital ethnography are generic terms for doing any sort of ethnographic work using some sort of online or digital method. When you use those terms, it is unclear what you have done in terms of what procedures you used, what the methodology is, such as what ethical guidelines you used for example. The literature base you will cite is also a bit amorphous. |
| Virtual ethnography is the term coined by Christine Hine, and it refers to a method that sees online work as only partial and incomplete. I would expect that if you called your online ethnography a virtual ethnography, then you would adhere fairly closely to the research attitudes and practices, in fact the methodology of combined research philosophy and actions, of Professor Hine as she demonstrated them in her book. |
| Netnography refers to a specific set of online ethnographic procedures characterized by a particular methodology, including an epistemological background, analytic frameworks, and a consistent and evolving set of guidelines for entree, observation, data analysis, ethics, and so on. |

Figure 20 - Blog post from Robert Kozinets regarding the differences between Netnography and other forms of online ethnography (Kozinets, 2013)

Another blog post from a scholar (Alessandro, 2014) asserted that netnography “focuses mainly on the study of the online consumer communities that usually belong to either one of these categories: brand communities (ex. Apple community, Nutella community, etc.) or communities of practice (ex. the community of IT experts, the community of chocolate

lovers, etc.)”. Kozinets has further developed the concept of netnography however in more recent times.

In 2015, Kozinets released a book entitled, ‘Netnography: Redefined’ (Kozinets, 2015). Rather than being simply a new edition of his earlier book, Kozinets re-evaluates and redesigns netnography. On the first page of the new volume, Kozinets stated that Netnography: Redefined “uses social science methods to present a new approach to conducting ethical and thorough ethnographic research that combines archival and online communications work, participation and observation with new forms of digital and network data collection, analysis and research representation” (ibid. p.1). This definition is stated as a new approach that has evolved over two decades. This PhD study follows the standards of netnography as outlined in Kozinets various works outlined in this chapter. This was found to be the most suitable approach to study football fans on social media to contribute to the discipline of digital marketing.

Kozinets asserted that when his earlier book was released in 2010, “Internet communities were still a bit of a novelty” (ibid, p.2). Kozinets noted the rapid growth of online communities in terms of their increasing quantity and influence. Also, with new tools and techniques evolving, this provided an opportunity to redefine the meaning of netnography. Kozinets claimed that the “blind application of extant techniques to online social interactions will not work” (ibid, p.3). He distinguished between online and offline methods of ethnography and outlined the need for netnography as a set of standards for conducting an online ethnography, which he classed as different to traditional ethnography.

There is clear influence and reverence from Kozinets (ibid.p.80) to the work of Hine (2000) on virtual ethnography, but one clear differentiator is Hine’s suggestion that ethnography is only real when it contains face-to-face interaction. Other researchers such as Sade-Beck (2008) and Isabella (2007) have also asserted that offline face to face interviews are a vital part of Internet ethnography. Without these, these authors believe that layers of meaning are potentially lost and it is hard to see how people think. These authors however do not address the widespread growth of technologies such as social media, Skype and Google Hangouts and they conflict with authors such as Kozinets in this area who also highlighted that ethnography can be conducted purely online if practised correctly. In the early days of netnography, Kozinets (1998, p.370) stated that “Netnographic interviews and exchanges

have some distinct advantages over their ethnographic counterparts in that they emerge “already transcribed” and thus may be less subject to the vagaries of memory”. This also frees up the researcher for introspective rather than retrospective reflection. Kozinets (1998) also highlighted that where communities exist as both real life (RL) and through CMC, that data captured from face to face or telephone interviews make sense in addition to Internet based fieldwork. Belk et al., (2012, p.107) supported this position “Because the technological interface alters the already variegated human interaction experience further, face-to-face ethnographic procedures do not always make sense when applied to understanding online cultural worlds”.

Kozinets further explained the assertion that face-to-face interviews are crucial “perhaps charts where a particular conceptual boundary stood at a particular time” (Kozinets, 2015, p.80). Kozinets stated, “interviews allow netnographic researchers to broaden their understanding of what they observe online” (ibid, p.61). Whilst this face-to-face element is accepted as part of a netnography, it is not always vital according to Kozinets. Skype calls, online chat or interview is also acceptable as part of a netnography with careful analysis and interpretation. Kozinets, (2010, p.65) outlines the concept of blended netnography. A pure netnography would use online data only, but the inclusion of face-to-face data with online interaction and data is a blended netnography. This is an appropriate strategy to use in order to extend the study beyond the online community under study. In this research study, both face-to-face and online interviews are used. This study also included offline, face-to-face interviews and can be therefore considered to be a blended netnography, which uses blended methods. This is explored in more depth in this chapter.

Kozinets outlined four types of netnography, which are, Auto, Humanist, Symbolic and Digital. These are outlined in the diagram and synthesis table below.

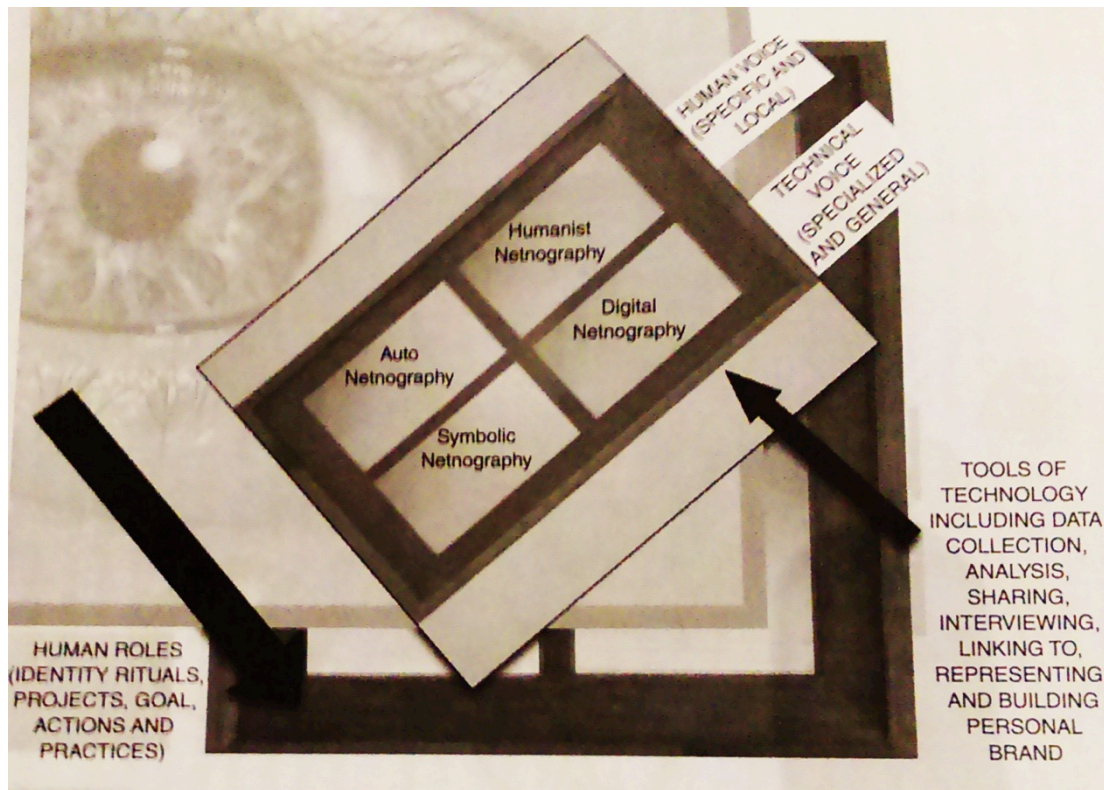


Figure 21 - Diagram outlining different types of netnography, auto, humanist, digital and symbolic (Kozinets, 2015)

| Type | Characteristics | Voice |
|----------|--|---|
| Symbolic | Most common type, they represent the online social experience and interaction of particular groups | Technical using a human role |
| Digital | Analysis of large volumes of data using tools using structure and form. Seeking principles and meanings in data patterns | Technical and computer assisted. More focus on tools than human roles |
| Auto | Documenting our own personal network and highlighting personal experience | Plain and simple |
| Humanist | Human insight and machine intelligence, highlighting oppression and using social media to disseminate problems | Deploy any technologies but humanise them |

Figure 22 - Table outlining different the four types of netnography, the characteristics and voice used (Kozinets, 2015)

There are elements of digital netnography in this study. It uses digital tools and large volumes of data from social media. However, it is not the 'principles and meanings' in the data that are core to the study and its research questions. Digital netnography for example, would have research questions firmly associated with the patterns and focussed on the tools and the results created. This thesis is more concerned with the human roles as outlined in the philosophy section.

Symbolic netnography represents the online experience and interaction of SCFC and people connected to football, which is at the core of this study. Online participant observation via netnography of the relevant websites and sources were used to gather rich insights into the behaviour and effects. Symbolic netnography is the most common type and it is the one adopted in this PhD study. Although this PhD study shares much in common with a digital netnography, its natural place is with symbolic netnography. Kozinets (2015, p.250) represented this type using the symbol of the Tree of Life. "From the Tree echoes the world of whispers, the millions of conversations containing images, video, texts, sounds, captures, retweets". It is from this 'pot pourri' of social exchanges that rich insights can be derived. The boundaries of this study and the blend of methods used are designed to derive data to answer the research questions from key conversations online.

Netnography originated with Kozinets from the marketing discipline but has also featured in a number of other disciplines such as IS. The application of netnography in IS was found by Baskerville and Myers (2015, p.17) to be innovative. They stated, "Most ethnographic research in information systems has been based on the traditional anthropological model of ethnography" ... "netnography is perhaps the most recent methodological innovation with respect to ethnography". Although its application in IS is relatively new, netnography has been used for twenty years in marketing research (Kozinets, 1997; Kozinets, 2015). Examples of netnography in IS were limited, but one example is Germonprez and Hovorka (2013). They used netnography to study the digitally enabled social network (DESN) Digg and highlighted the potential of "netnography and impressionist tales for contributing to the on-going pluralistic investigations of DESN and also inform research on engagement and community design and change" (p.525).

5.6. Blended methodology

There are three blended methods used as part of this netnography study. These are, participant observation, interviews and SNA. These qualitative methods were utilised in line with the standards of symbolic netnography.

The channels used for primary data collection and fieldwork in this study included:

- Twitter – SCFC account, fans, players and other relevant people
- Facebook - official and unofficial fans groups
- YouTube – SCFC have a dedicated channel, where fans and opposing fans also comment
- Club forums - SCFC have an unofficial forum and there are other rival club and league forums
- Club website
- Fan websites

Screenshots of key moments and relevant online conversations and observations were stored in a secure document, which formed an on-going diary of online participant observation. This is the method of recording and understanding what is happening for participant observation. The three methods of participant observation, SNA and interviews were used in conjunction with each other to inform and support data collection in this thesis. Mingers (2001, p.243) noted the strengths and challenges of using multiple methods. He stated “multimethod research is necessary to deal effectively with the full richness of the real world”. He continued, “A research study is not usually a single, discrete event but a process that typically proceeds through a number of phases”. Mingers stated that combining multiple methods is the best way for research to progress due to the diversity and richness of approaches.

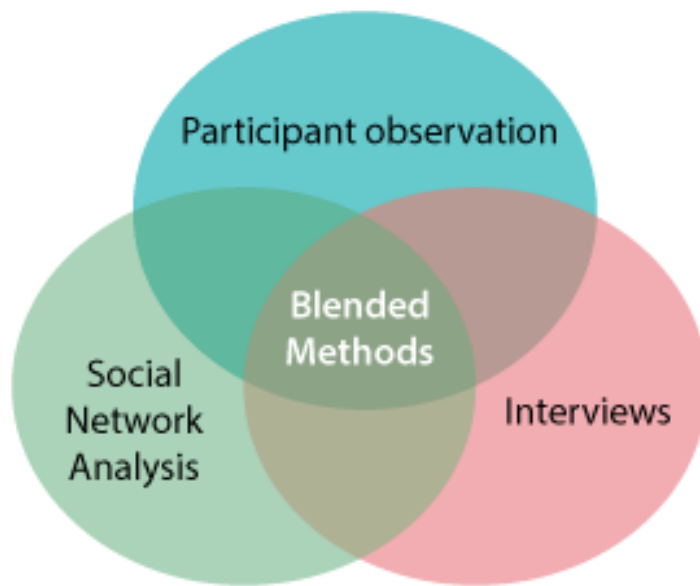


Figure 23 - The overlapping, blended methods of participant observation, SNA and interviews used in this study

The word ‘blended’ relates to the concept of combining different elements to gain positive results. For example, blended learning is the combination of face to face and distance learning technologies, combined to make a greater whole (Heinze and Procter, 2004; Finkbeiner, 2013). The phrases blended research or blended methods appear in the literature, but not frequently in the social sciences. The term ‘blended methods’ in this PhD is used in preference to the more traditional ‘mixed methods’ (Kaplan and Maxwell, 2005; Venkatesh et al., 2013). This use of the word blended better expresses the design involved in combining the individual qualitative methods. Whilst a mixture simply denotes a combination, a blend involves a combination that enhances the quality of the individual components. Thus, a blend of three methods de facto involves triangulation, whilst a mixture does not.

Mingers (2001, p.243) noted the strengths and challenges of using multiple methods research. He stated “multimethod research is necessary to deal effectively with the full richness of the real world”. He continued, “A research study is not usually a single, discrete event but a process that typically proceeds through a number of phases”. Mingers believed that combining multiple methods is the best way for research to progress due to the diversity and richness of approaches.

The phrase blended methods is seldom used in the literature, but it is appropriate to this thesis because of the nature of the way each are designed to work together, informing and improving the empirical data collection to provide greater insight. SNA can be used to

identify key influencers on social media and whom they are connected to. It also identified people who are less connected and where they are located. Their posts can be further analysed and this also highlighted other participants for analysis and interview. Interviews give insight to and from a particular SNA visualisation, which is further analysed qualitatively. The three qualitative methods were outlined earlier in this chapter.

This study makes use of multiple blended methods including Internet based research. Hine (2009, p.11) highlighted that “the internet also provides some intriguing possibilities for ethnographers to exploit based on the many traces of social activities that it preserves, in the form of web sites, message boards, hyperlinks, etc.”. These online resources are used to help to shape the study and explore the field from various angles. In this PhD, SNA is not only used to highlight key influencers and lines of communication but it is also used to identify participants for interview and participant observation. Interviews give insight to and from a particular SNA visualisation, which is further analysed qualitatively. One example is the use of SNA to identify in which countries fans live and their social media usernames. From here, accounts and conversations can be identified as part of participant observation and this can then identify people to interview. When interviewing a particular person, the researcher identified another fan for participant observation or interview that had previously not been identified using SNA. The blend however works in a multi-directional way. For example, an interview could reveal people to follow or interview, or the follow or interview could reveal people to observe or highlight within an SNA visualisation. Each of the three blended methods combines together and supports the others interchangeably.

5.6.1. Participant observation

The concept of observation and fieldwork is a fundamental part of ethnography (Saunders et al., 2012; Van Maanen, 2011). Participant observation requires the researcher to be “immersed in the day to day lives of the people” (Creswell, 2013, p.90). Creswell stated that ethnographers study “the meaning of the behaviour, the language, and the interaction among members of the culture sharing group”. Saunders (2009) highlighted that observations are often underused as data collection tools and will add a level of depth and richness to an individual’s research data. Saunders (2009, p.289) wrote, “that if a research question and objectives are concerned with what people do, an obvious way in which to discover this is to watch them do it”.

Saunders (2012, p.344) highlighted four types of participant observation

1. Complete participant – this role sees the researcher becoming a member of the studied group for the duration of the project and you do not reveal your identity as researcher
2. Complete observer – similarly, you do not reveal your identity, but in this case, you would not take part in the activities of the group
3. Observer as participant – primarily, you are observer rather than active participant and your purpose is known to those who are studied. This is a less problematic and more ethical approach, but does lose to some extent the emotional involvement of complete participation
4. Participant as observer – this role reveals your identity and has the researcher as an active participant. Participation may also be possible without taking on all attributes of members.

Saunders wrote that the choice of type would depend on the purpose of your research, research questions and also your status as a researcher including the time available. Pole and Hillyard (2016) stated that fieldwork could be active participation or passive participation or both. Participant observation involves being present and observing, but the level of participation depends on the situation as outlined by Saunders, Pole and Hillyard.

Kozinets (2015, p.66) described netnography as “participant-observational research based on online hanging out, download, reflection and connection”. He went on to say “It would be right, then, to see in a method section of an ethnography, a line stating that the method included participant observation as well as interviews, videography and netnography” (ibid, p.67). Netnography as a branch of ethnography also relies heavily on participant observation and interviews, but these would largely be online using whichever websites, social networks or digital channels are necessary to gather data.

Participant observation online is a critical part of this study, but like ethnography, netnography is also flexible and makes use of bricolage (Kozinets, 2015). This means in effect that some offline participant observation is also used in this PhD study where it is relevant, but a large quantity was derived online. In terms of Saunders four types of participation, this study is somewhere between participant as observer and observer as participant. The researcher is open and honest about his role as a researcher as opposed to becoming a true member of the community. Kozinets (2015, p.266) in particular recommended this strategy. He discussed this under the topic of ‘virtual versimilitude’

“understanding the worlds of other living beings, tasting and sharing the human experience itself”. In order to do this, he advocated that the “netnographer’s narrative must be persuasive, credible, convincing and believable. Versimilitude is achieved more by openness, honesty and being willing to share a personal side of yourself publicly in social media than it is by being fictitious and theoretically vicious. This truth and honesty must relate to what we conceive of as our collective brand” (p.267).

With this thesis, the researcher is not a genuine SCFC fan and it would have been unwise to pose as a fan covertly. Therefore, the researcher did not entirely take on the attributes of the community. Disingenuous or covert behaviour could have placed the study at risk in terms of the good will and relationships developed with the participants in this study. The advantages of remaining anonymous or deceiving SCFC fans and others are low and in fact would have posed great risk to the study and the relationship with participants. The researcher is open and honest about his status as per Kozinets position of ‘virtual versimilitude’. With this in mind, the researcher was a participant observer, present in the field, both in person and virtually including attending matches, interviewing people, following and occasionally posting via digital channels. He was primarily a passive participant, mainly observing and listening (Pole and Hillyard, 2016). He was not involved as a genuine SCFC fan. This study follows the ethical standards of AIOR and the guidelines of Boellstorff et al. (2012) and Kozinets (2015) for conducting ethnography online, they advocate doing no harm, openness and honesty. These ethical issues are further discussed below.

5.6.2. Interviews

“Interviews, along with observations and participant observation, form the core data collection activities of qualitative research” (Belk et al., 2012, p.31). According to Qu and Dumay (2011), research interviews are one of the most important qualitative techniques and are often used for ethnographic research. Interviews are a research technique to gather qualitative data by conversing with relevant people within the research study (Oates, 2006). Interviews are often used as part of a case study or ethnography as a way to gather rich information and are often used as part of a netnography (Kozinets, 2015).

Oates (2006), outlined three main types of interview

- Structured – Using pre-determined identical questions for each interviewee

- Semi-structured – Beginning with a set of themes, but some flexibility allowed to change the order or add additional questions depending on the flow of the conversation and allow the interviewee to introduce relevant themes
- Unstructured – The interviewer starts off with a topic and allows the interviewee to develop their own ideas and talk freely without interruption.

According to Oates, semi-structured and unstructured interviews are more suitable for discovery and structured interviews are geared towards checking. Semi-structured interviews can often provide a good balance and are the most popular type according to (Qu and Dumay, 2011, p.256). According to these authors, this popularity is because semi structured interviews are “flexible, accessible and intelligible and, more important, capable of disclosing important and often hidden facets of human and organizational behaviour”. Qu and Dumay highlighted that a skilful interviewer can adapt the order, pace and flow of a semi-structured interview in order to get the best responses from the interviewee.

There have been a number of challenges and criticisms of collecting data using interviews. Turner (2010) advised that it is easy for interviewees to get off topic, particularly if they misunderstand or do not want to answer the question. The interviewer must use effective follow up prompts and question reconstruction to ensure the questions are adequately answered (Turner, 2010; Creswell, 2013). Qu and Dumay (2011, p.240) outlined a number of criticisms that interviews have had over time including “problems of representation, the nature of language, the inseparability of researcher and knowledge, and the problems of writing”. Essentially, interviewer bias at the interview and writing up stage must be guarded against. Qu and Dumay (2011) highlighted that neutrality at all stages of the process and prolonged engagement in the field is essential. This enables the data to become “a mirror of reality because the interviewer begins to understand the context of the interviewees” (ibid. p.242).

Kozinets (2015) also discussed the role of interviews (online and offline) as part of netnography. Some authors such as Bruckman (2006, p.87) stated that online interviews are “of limited value”. She claimed that telephone or face-to-face interviews have far greater value. Kozinets disagreed with this perspective and noted that the rise of video call services such as Skype readdress the balance and criticism of the online interview and in fact are better than phone calls because you can also observe body language. Kozinets continued,

“even using chat or email for interviews can be valuable, if interpreted carefully” (p.60). Synchronous chat such as Twitter direct messages or email offer similar data to that of forum or social media posts, which are part of this study and netnography. The interview aspect however offers the ability for the researcher to ask for further information or clarification where it is needed. This can also be a good way to follow up on comments left online to seek further information. The skill and benefit is with the researcher and the qualitative interpretation and analysis.

For this PhD study, it was important to gather rich, qualitative, explorative insights through interviews. These were gathered from in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Interviews with SCFC staff, fans and communications managers of other football clubs enabled great insight to help to answer the research questions. True to netnography, some of these interviews were carried out through distance and online means such as Skype, telephone, email, Facebook and Twitter. Kozinets (2002, p.7) suggested that additional data gathering such as “online, real-time interviews” are a useful part of netnography.

A combination of face to face, telephone, Skype and social media interviews were conducted. Geographical barriers, time, availability and other factors decided how each interview was conducted. This bricolage approach was also adopted in the spirit of netnography. Interviews were transcribed, added to Nvivo and encoded with keywords and themes. Interviews conducted online through social media did not need to be transcribed, but they were coded in exactly the same way as the face-to-face and telephone interviews. At the end of the study, the final three interviews were conducted with football social media experts in order to test and verify the findings. This is further discussed in section 4.18 around verification. Nvivo and coding is further explored below in tools and data analysis.

5.6.3. Social Network Analysis (SNA)

The concept of analysing offline social networks with SNA has been part of social science for decades (Groeger and Buttle, 2014). SNA dates back to the 1930’s from graph theory and has been used to identify network structures that can influence different outcomes (Williams et al., 2015). With the growth of online social networks, digital tools for SNA have also grown. These tools date back to around 2000 with the development of “network.S.tools”. These were developed and used by the research community at Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh (Butts, 2008). Groeger and Buttle (2014) used SNA to better

understand the networks involved with word of mouth marketing. They stated that the discipline of marketing “has long ignored a network perspective” and that SNA can address this issue (Groeger and Buttle, 2014, p.1189).

Tools such as NodeXL were used in this study to analyse social media networks to create SNA diagrams. For example, Fuller et al. (2014) used SNA to gather data from online communities who are involved with innovation competitions and then used it for interpretive analysis. SNA is primarily known for quantitative research but can also be used for qualitative. “The social science approach to SNA attempts to develop a qualitative understanding of node and network properties” (Williams et al., 2015, p.1118). The nodes are usually individual people that make up the network. The network diagrams can also reveal different shapes, which can also reveal things about the network. SNA was therefore used to:

- “Identify bounded social networks for netnographers to engage with and investigate” (Kozinets, 2015. p.63).
- Find out how people connect with each other over time (Edwards, 2010)
- Explore weak ties between people (Granovetter, 1973)
- Identify “influential ones in a network” (Kozinets 2015, p.64)
- Social mapping to “understand relationships within a network” (Baskerville and Myers, 2015)
- Enable subjects to be framed for further qualitative investigation (Hepburn, 2011, p.179; Griffiths and Mclean, 2015).

SNA is used in this thesis to support the other techniques as a “means of supporting or adding to data collected by face-to-face methods they may make an important contribution to what is known about a particular field” (Pole and Hillyard, 2016, p.62). SNA gave a deeper understanding of the connections and flows of information and is complimentary to the collection of data through the other methods.

SNA evolved in the positivist tradition using quantitative metrics. In this interpretive study, SNA is used qualitatively (Williams et al., 2015). Behind each visualisation, there are numerical values. Where relevant, some numerical such as the number of social media followers has been included in this thesis. It is worth noting that the SNA process with tools such as NodeXL can generate additional numerical values including centrality and network

density scores. These numbers were not included in this research as it is the final SNA diagrams and the qualitative aspects of SNA as part of a blend which are most important to this study and its research questions. It is worth also noting that commercial SNA tools such as Mentionmapp and Followerwonk do not provide numerical values such as centrality or network density and these are also beyond the aims of this study.

A range of tools (see tools section) were used to draw out potential issues, create new contacts and add meaning and understanding to the observation and interaction. In some cases, the SNA diagrams were used to identify further people for interview or participant observation as explored in the findings chapter. Social capital theory is crucial to this study and its research questions. The method of SNA also has a strong connection to social capital (Lin, 1999; Widdop et al., 2014). SNA is a means of understanding the influence that actors have on each other and understanding the “structure and “form” of social relations” (Jarman et al., 2014).

5.7. Conceptual framework

A conceptual framework demonstrates how you structure the way you think about a research topic and the process (Oates, 2006). This also includes the way you think and tackle your research and your approach to analysing data. It also includes your adoption of particular theories. The conceptual model below demonstrates the research design and theoretical framework of this PhD research study, building on the earlier more basic conceptual model presented in the introduction.

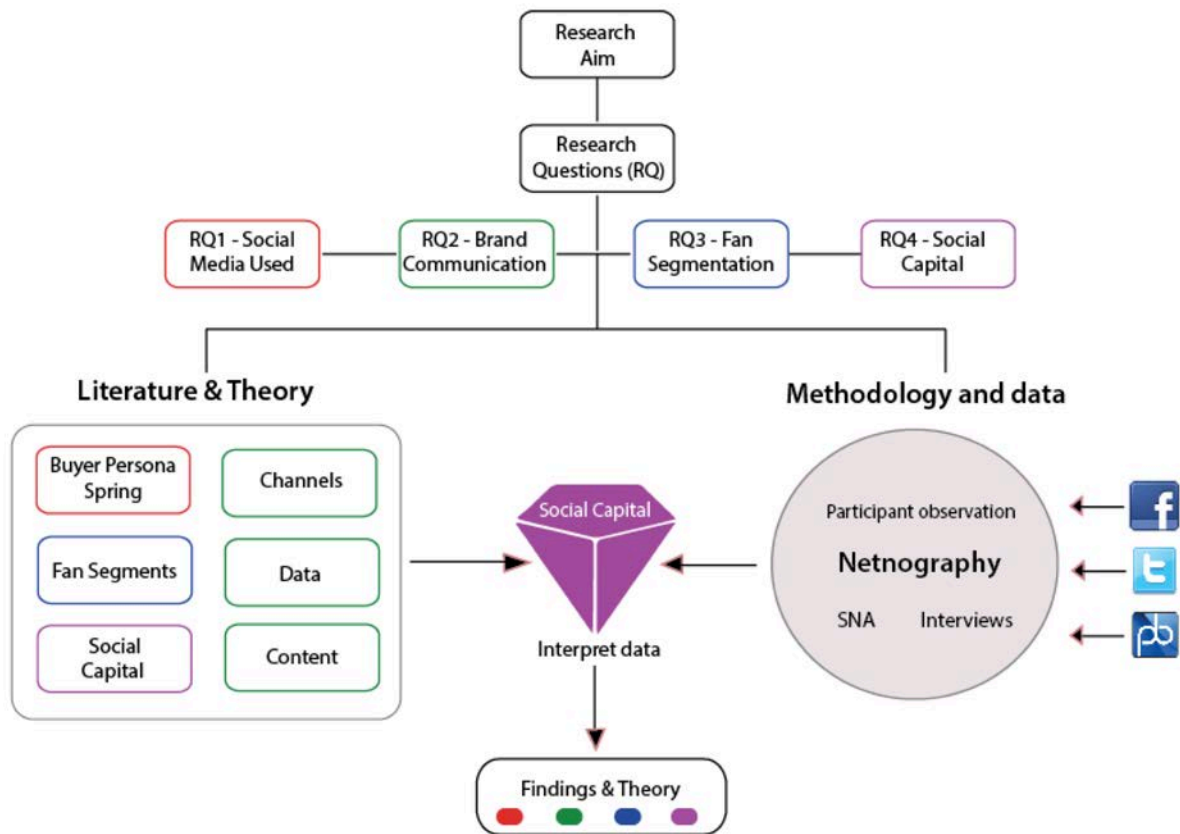


Figure 24 - Expanded conceptual model showing how the research aim, research questions, literature, methodology and theoretical framework of social capital lead to the findings in this study in more detail

This PhD study adopts an interpretivist philosophy using an inductive approach, where findings, results and ultimately theory emerge from the combination of the literature review and primary data collection. In terms of primary data collection, the study uses SNA, interviews and participant observation. This family of blended methods are encompassed within a netnography, which is the iterative-inductive study of people and culture online. The literature review (secondary research) of different relevant topics combines with the primary data from netnography. The literature was divided thematically against the buyer persona spring of channels, content and data. Social capital theory is used as a lens on the data and theoretical framework for the study. The data collected are triangulated and crystallised (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005). The theoretical framework provides a lens for qualitative interpretation of the data, deriving findings and results inductively in the interpretivist tradition.

5.8. Sampling techniques

When it comes to capturing empirical data, it is important to select a sampling frame and appropriate sampling techniques. The sampling frame is the entire set of people, events or

documents that could potentially be involved in the research (Oates, 2006). If research questions are based on a particular set of people, then the sampling frame is the complete membership list of this group (Saunders et al., 2012).

Once the sampling frame is determined, the sampling techniques can be chosen. Two key choices here are probability and non-probability sampling according to Oates. Probability relates to the fact that the researcher believes this set of people represents the wider sampling frame. Non-probability means that the researcher does not know if the group chosen for research is representative. Each person may have his or her own characteristics, which are not shared with the wider sampling frame. Non-probability may be used when it is unfeasible to use probability sampling due to time, cost or lack of information, but the final results can be much harder to generalise.

Whilst plans can change, Creswell (2013) noted that it is important to plan a sampling strategy as much as possible. Different authors outline different sampling techniques and strategies. Saunders et al. (2012) for example, outline five main sampling techniques, which are:

- Simple random
- Systematic random
- Stratified random
- Cluster
- Multi-stage

Saunders et al. (2012) provided a flow chart to select a probability sample. One key point from the flow chart is that if statistical inferences must not be made, this leads to non-probability sampling. Statistical inferences from quantitative methods are not important to this study and therefore non-probability sampling is appropriate. An example of a qualitative study that uses non-probability sampling is by Crawford et al. (2014) who used focus groups to assess the views of a new smartphone app. They stated that their study and comparable ones used non-probability techniques, but as their study included 68 people, it made it the largest study of its kind at that time. The scale of the extensive data collection through three blended methods in this study also adds additional credibility.

Creswell (2013, p.158) reproduced a typology of sampling strategies, originally from Miles and Huberman (1994). Some of the more pertinent ones are listed below:

- Maximum variation - a very popular strategy that involves finding the criteria that differentiate people and then choosing a sample of quite different people. The idea is to get a wide variety of opinions and perspectives, which is ideal in qualitative research.
- Critical cases – which permits local generalisation.
- Convenience cases – choosing a sample that can easily be accessed by the researcher. Whilst this approach can save time and money and effort, it may be at the expense of information and credibility
- Snowball or chain – identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich.

As statistical inference is not important to the questions in this PhD study, non-probability sampling was more relevant than probability. This PhD is an ethnography of SCFC, which means that the fans and other relevant people connected to this case form the sampling frame. It would be impossible to gather data from every single person connected, which would amount to a network of hundreds of thousands of social media followers. For this reason, maximum variation and the snowball sampling strategy were employed (Creswell, 2013). Snowball sampling was also used to tap into the relevant networks and evaluate the social capital within groups, delving into the case. As discussed in the introduction chapter, for this PhD study, it was important to have a variation of opinions from a range of ages, genders and connection types in order to gather a range of views. The two strategies combined help to cross the gaps between networks (bonding, bridging and linking social capital).

5.9. Digital Tools and data capture

Digital tools are important to this study in order to organise, capture and analyse data.

Atkinson (2015, p.42) suggested that a contemporary ethnography should be “multi-modal in its deployment of technologies”.

The key tools used in this study include:

- Microsoft (MS) Word (writing, interviews and netnography)
- Microsoft Excel (organisation and SNA)

- Mendeley (literature review and references)
- NodeXL and Gephi (Desktop SNA & visualisation)
- Mentionmapp and Followerwonk (Web based SNA & visualisation)
- Nvivo - CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis)
- Researcher blog (based on Wordpress).

5.9.1. Microsoft Word and Excel

MS Word was used for all written material including the transcription of interviews and gathering of data. Excel was used for organising interview data and was used with Node XL as the base programme (Node XL creates a new tab in Excel for SNA).

5.9.2. Desktop SNA tools - Node XL and Gephi

Desktop SNA tools are often used for academic studies as they usually offer powerful and complex, in depth data gathering analysis. These tools are usually downloaded to a computer desktop and often require more time to set up, learn and master. There are various tools that can be used for SNA, which can be intensive computationally (Butts, 2008). These tools can be used to produce data and visualisations of networks in order to “contextualise the position of a single actor and reveal aspects of a more complicated picture” (Jarman et al., 2014).

Node XL is a popular tool for conducting SNA to gather data from social media into an MS Excel spread sheet. It has been used for this purpose in many academic courses and studies (Hansen et al., 2011).

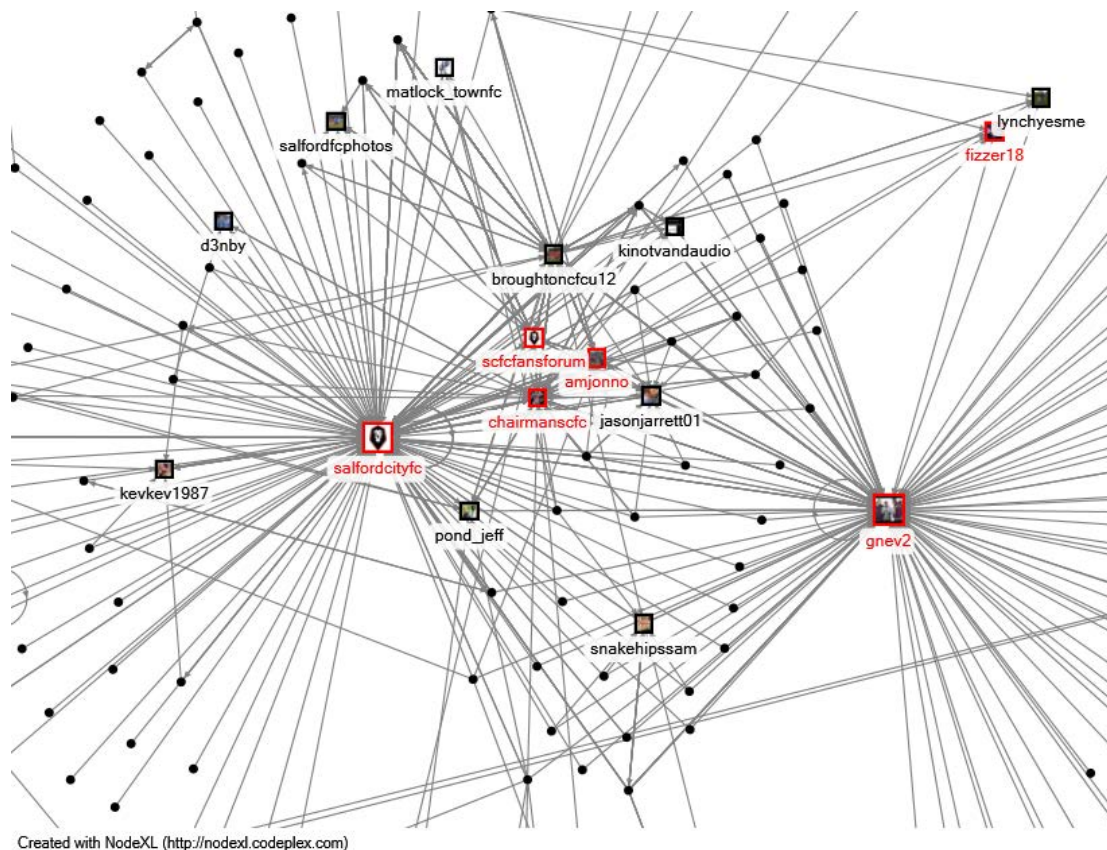


Figure 25 - A network map of SCFC Twitter followers using NodeXL.

Gephi is another desktop tool, which can be used to visualise social media data. Gephi is not as adept as NodeXL at gathering social media data, but the visualisation tools are more powerful, easier to use and clearer than Node XL. It is also possible to import data from NodeXL to Gephi to take advantage of the strengths of each programme and produce clearer visualisations. These were also useful for conference presentations as examples.



Figure 26 - A graphic produced using Gephi with Twitter data from Node XL, with overlaid Tweets as a demonstration of method presentation. The diagram highlights key interactions with Manchester United, FA Cup Factfile and celebrity Tim Burgess

5.9.3. Web based SNA tools

In addition to the desktop SNA tools, it was also necessary to use some web based SNA tools. These had different functionality to the desktop tools. In addition, these were much faster to use and could be used from any desktop computer through an Internet browser. An example is Mentionmapp, which was also used for SNA to quickly and easily visualise a Twitter account or Hashtag. The example below shows SCFC's Twitter network. This tool is very quick to operate and the visuals are simple and effective. The Mentionmapp diagrams show the five profiles mentioned most by the user at the centre. This is drawn from the previous two hundred Tweets posted and the two most used hashtags. If a hashtag is searched for, the diagram shows the five profiles that have used it most, and the next two most used hashtags in conjunction with it. The thickness of lines highlights the volume of Tweets

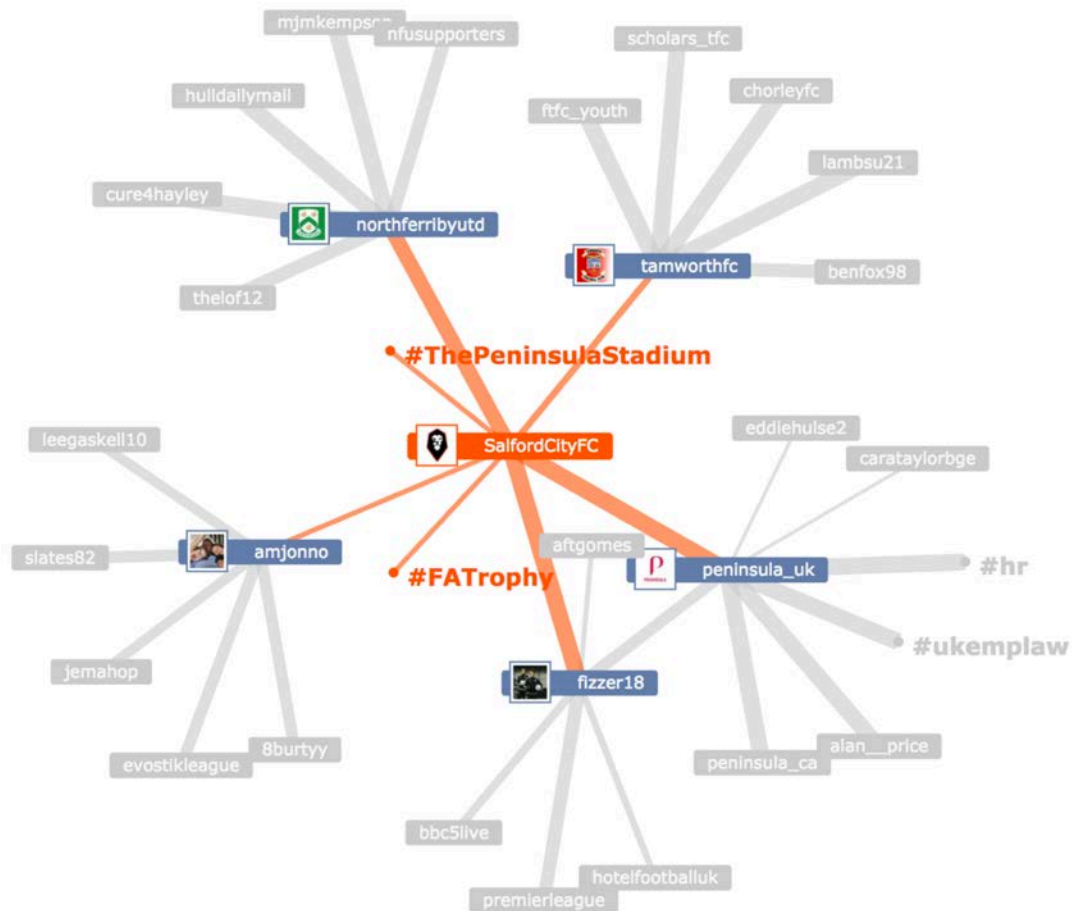


Figure 27 - An example of Mentionmapp SNA diagram of SCFC on Twitter. The thicker lines demonstrate a greater volume of Tweets

Another tool that was used to buttress SNA was Followerwonk. This tool has the capability to visualise Twitter networks geographically and compare different user accounts, which is not possible using NodeXL or Gephi. Followerwonk is used to understand where in the world potential fans are based and identify connections and new contacts. It is possible to further look at the content of Tweets from particular regions using Followerwonk.

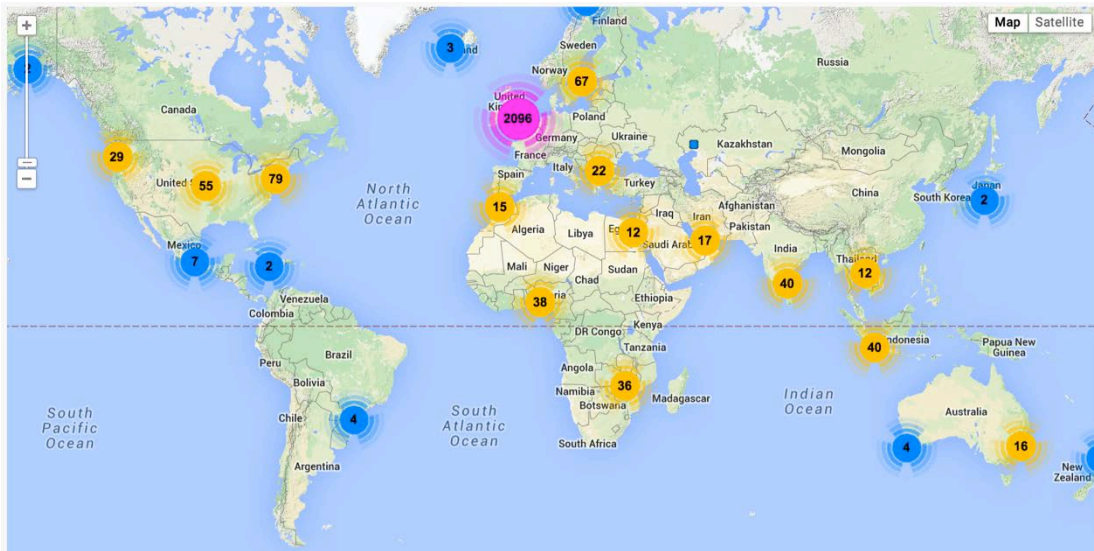


Figure 28 - Showing a global distribution of SCFC Twitter followers generated using Followerwonk. It shows the approximate the geographic location of up to 5,000 SCFC followers and creates an approximate map

5.9.4. Digital referencing software

This study used literature referencing software called Mendeley to help keep track of the papers, books and other materials used in this thesis. Mendeley proved to be an exceptional way to keep track of everything, with the laptop and mobile versions being an excellent way to read, annotate and refer to literature from any location or whilst the researcher was in different locations. It also enabled references to be organised and new and connected literature to be found and annotated. The literature search function was particularly useful for locating references from hundreds of previously read books, journals and other downloaded sources.

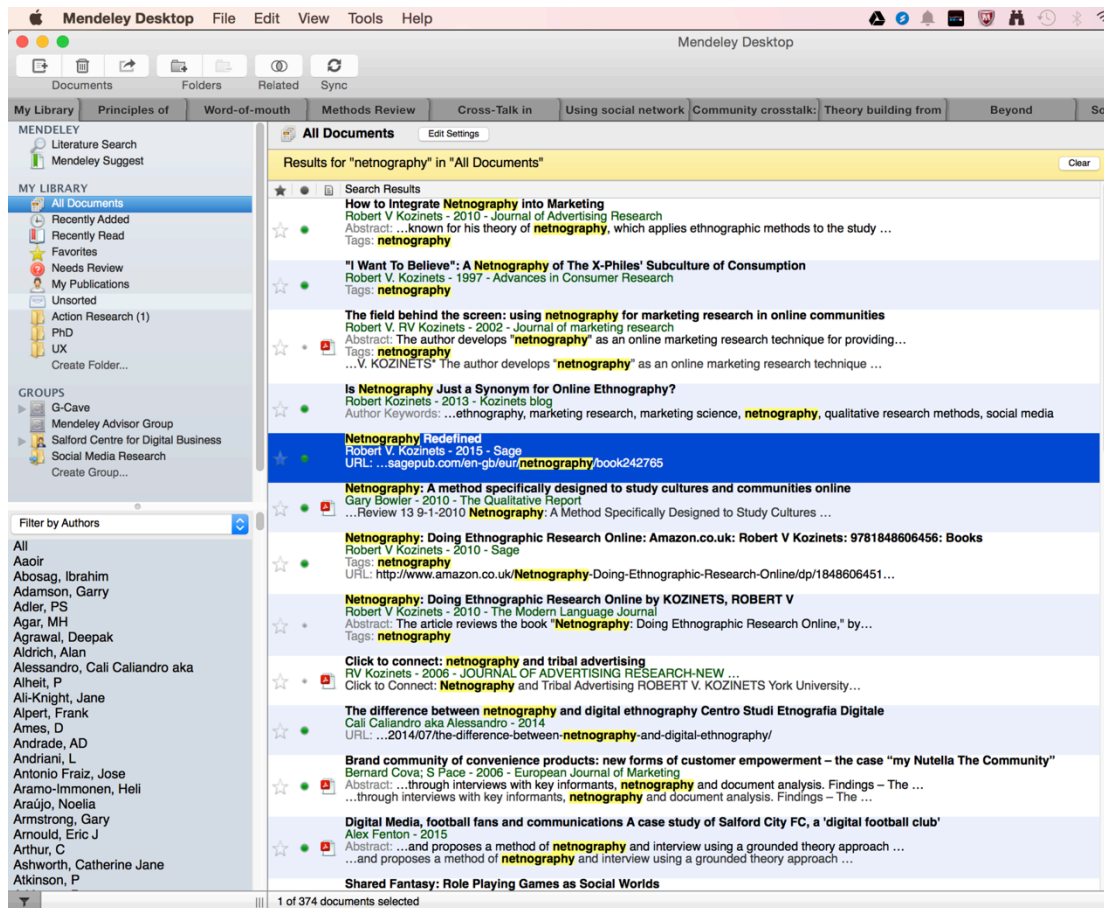


Figure 29 - Mendeley desktop showing a search for the word netnography

5.9.5. QSR NVIVO

QSR Nvivo is qualitative analysis software. This was used for the evaluation of the qualitative primary data in this study from the three blended methods. Because of the volume of data in this study, qualitative analysis software (CAQDAS) use was considered to be important (Richards, 2015). CAQDAS software is used in a wide range of qualitative studies, both academic and market research. It can be used to “make content analysis more manageable and ordered, and may facilitate new levels of analysis” (Gerbic and Stacey, 2005, p.48). All interviews in this study were transcribed, and relevant netnography data added to Nvivo and encoded with keywords and themes. This helped to make more sense of the rich data in order to shape the study and answer the research questions. Nvivo also includes functionality such as Ncapture, which allowed the downloading of data from web pages and directly from social media for further analysis.

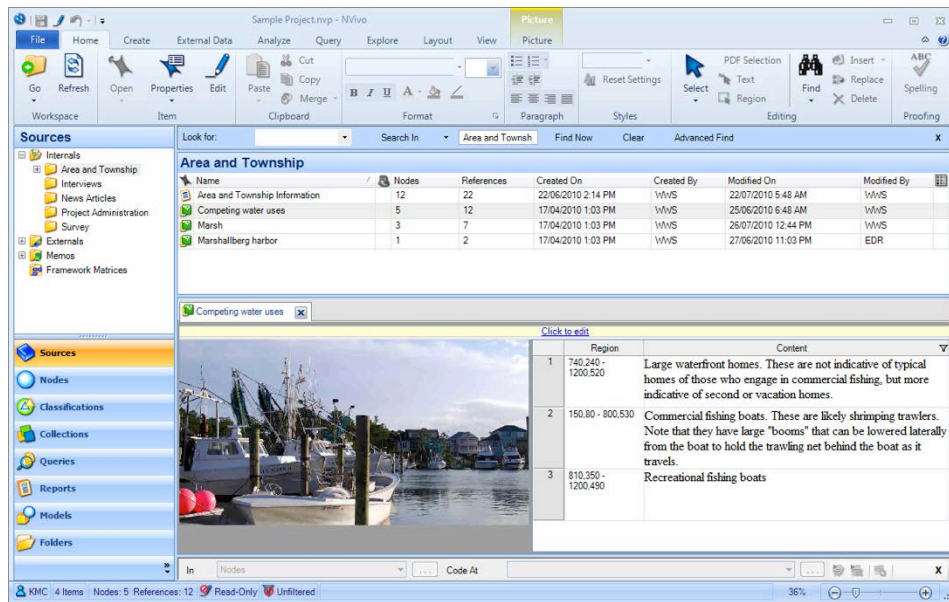


Figure 30 - QSR Nvivo, encoding interviews and other data

The use of Nvivo and CAQDAS is the subject of much debate within the literature. Kozinets (2015, p.222) for example, stated that it “allows much more flexibility in coding and takes an inductive, bottom up approach to the analysis of qualitative data”. Atkinson (2015) agreed with the potential usefulness of coding software for ethnography, but warned; “the combination of ‘coding and ‘computing’ has not been a particularly beneficial one” (cited Coffey et al. 1996). Atkinson claimed that the software itself is not entirely the problem, but the unimaginative use of it (ibid. p.60). This issue spans back to Atkinson’s general observation that some ethnographies use one-dimensional data from interviews without true participant observation and analysis of meaning. The “creation of complex relationships between ideas is imperative” (ibid p.61). Atkinson stated that for some students, CAQDAS can be seen as a ‘comfort blanket’ and it cannot automate the creative, careful process of the ethnographer. Atkinson gave a warning that CAQDAS does not excuse a lack of proper analysis and forming new concepts as opposed to simply publishing the data we find without a theoretical lens.

Atkinson and Hammersley (2007, p.154) highlighted the usefulness of CAQDAS in ethnography in order to search the data and for enabling complex analysis, particularly given the nature of interviewees who can flit between different topics. They noted that CAQDAS can be useful for theory building, but there are other ways. In terms of theory building, it could potentially lead researchers down a blind alley according to Atkinson and Hammersley. They also warned that the functions of CAQDAS are often under-utilised by researchers. For

example, it is possible to analyse image, video or social media data and not just textual data transcribed from interviews. Oates (2006) highlighted some of the advantages and disadvantages of using CAQDAS software, but concurred with other authors that whilst it can be helpful for data analysis, it cannot perform the analysis without the researcher.

5.9.6. Researcher blog

A researcher PhD blog was set up using Wordpress at the start of the study at alexfenton.co.uk. There are several studies about using blogs for data collection and dissemination. Blogs however can also be used by the researcher as a means to communicate, creating a dialogue and co-production between researcher and participant (Hookway, 2008). Chenail explored this idea for qualitative researchers, “Weblogs or blogs can provide qualitative researchers with a medium for expressing their thoughts and opinions on qualitative research methods and products as well as serving as the source of data for qualitative studies” (Chenail, 2011,p.1).

Figure 31 - Researcher blog at alexfenton.co.uk

Aside from providing a means to reflect and express thoughts, the blog provided:

- A place to store the information sheet and consent forms to make them more accessible to people online

- A place to disseminate new ideas and calls for people to get involved with the study Kozinets (2015) in particular advocates the use of a researcher blog for the support of netnography research
- The opportunity for participants to read about the findings of the study in an accessible way and for member checking of findings (Creswell, 2013). This is discussed in more detail below.

The blog proved to be a valuable way to disseminate this PhD research to staff, students, participants and others. It was also useful for sharing with others at conferences and other events. The blog was also useful in gaining feedback and several articles were re-published on peer reviewed websites such as The Football Collective, DigitalSport.co and The Conversation.

5.10. Validation and Evaluation

The words validity, reliability, credibility and dependability of research results are often used to assess the quality of research. Creswell (2013, p.243) suggested posing the questions on completion of a qualitative research study: “Is the account valid, and by whose standards?” and “How do we evaluate the quality of qualitative research?”. There is great debate in the literature on how best to approach these questions and validity in ethnography (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982) and netnography (Kozinets, 2015). Creswell (2013) synthesised eight different studies in the area of the validation of qualitative studies. Some authors use validation strategies which draw from quantitative validation techniques of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982). Some researchers argued that positivist and quantitative validation standards are not applicable to interpretive studies and qualitative methods. Ely et al (1991, p.95) stated, “The language of positivistic research is not congruent with or adequate to qualitative work”. Eisner (1991) made the point that credibility and dependability rather than validity are more relevant words for qualitative studies. In order to show credible results, a persuasive weight of evidence is required and an agreement between competent others is necessary (ibid).

5.10.1. Validation strategies

Creswell (2013) highlighted several validation strategies to evaluate and increase the accuracy of research. Five of these strategies are outlined below.

1. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation

Building trust with research participants over an extended period is important (Kozinets, 2015). Learning the culture and checking facts in order to draw out the salient information is also a crucial part of participant observation and increases credibility of findings (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982). Data was gathered for an extended period of time and three final interviews were conducted with football social media managers in order to test and verify the findings in this study.

2. Triangulation / Crystallisation

Some authors claim research validity by the use of triangulation. This is the process of bringing different data sources, methods and theories together to make new meaning and corroboration (Creswell, 2013). Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) proposed that the image of the triangle is too fixed, rigid and two-dimensional for research validation. Instead of triangulation as the central image for validation, they proposed that the image of crystallisation is more appropriate. Crystals act as prisms, reflecting externalities and refracting to create new colours and patterns in different directions, growing. This compares favourably with the analysis approach used in this thesis.

3. Clarifying researcher bias

In qualitative research, it is important that the values of the researcher are properly acknowledged. Taking into account any biases or assumptions that the researcher may have from the beginning is also important for valid and rigorous studies. The status or biases of the author were clarified at the beginning of this study and neutrality and an open mind were kept throughout.

4. Thick description

This weight of evidence can also be bolstered with the use of thick description (Geertz, 1973) to “make sure that the findings are transferable between the researcher and those being studied” (Creswell, 2013, p.246). Thick description has been discussed earlier in this chapter and was utilised as part of this study.

5. Peer review and external audit

Peer review requires a check of the research process at each stage from an individual who is close to the project. External audit is the process, which allows an external expert or

consultant to examine both the process and the product of the account to assess accuracy. The auditor should have no other connection to the project and evaluates if the data support the findings ultimately. Member checking allows the views of the participants to analyse the findings and interpretations of the study (Bowler, 2010). Creswell (2013, p.252) stated, “I do not take back to participants my transcripts or the raw data, but my preliminary analyses”. Bowler (2010, p.1274) reinforced this saying “the researcher should employ member checking by presenting some or all of the final research report’s findings to the people who have been studied in order to solicit their comments”. This is a strategy employed in this thesis by presenting on-going findings to interviewees, participants and others via the researchers PhD blog. In addition, writing blog posts, articles, papers, conference presentations and the PhD assessment process further allowed people to review and audit this study on an ongoing basis. The final three interviews with football social media managers added additional external audit and verification of the findings.

5.10.2. Data analysis

Miles and Huberman (1994, p.8) wrote about the interpretive approach to data analysis and stated that interpretivists are “no more detached from their objects of study than are their informants”. Even though they may not take on all of the attributes of the culture under study, they are temporarily members of that culture. This means that they are affected by their own judgements and interpretations of the data, which is often co-elaborated. Miles and Huberman advise the use of “pre-established instruments”. These instruments including research tools and design can help mitigate the analytic problem of separating external information from what the researcher has contributed when “decoding and encoding the words of their informants” (ibid).

An important aspect of using CAQDAS software is the coding of data, which is a fundamental part of qualitative data analysis (Creswell, 2013). The codes are generated by the researcher to find the important information and to create themes from the data. Creswell suggested for most qualitative studies, 25-30 categories, combined into six overall themes. This type of approach can also help inform the way that coding an analysis happens. Miles and Huberman (p.9) outlined a set of analytic methods for qualitative research which include:

- Assigning codes
- Noting reflections
- Sort and sift through this materials to identify relationships and themes

- Isolate patterns and processes for the next wave of data collection
- Find a small set of generalisations
- Confront these generalisations with a formalised body of knowledge of constructs and theories.

Creswell (p.208) suggested the template below for the coding of ethnographies.

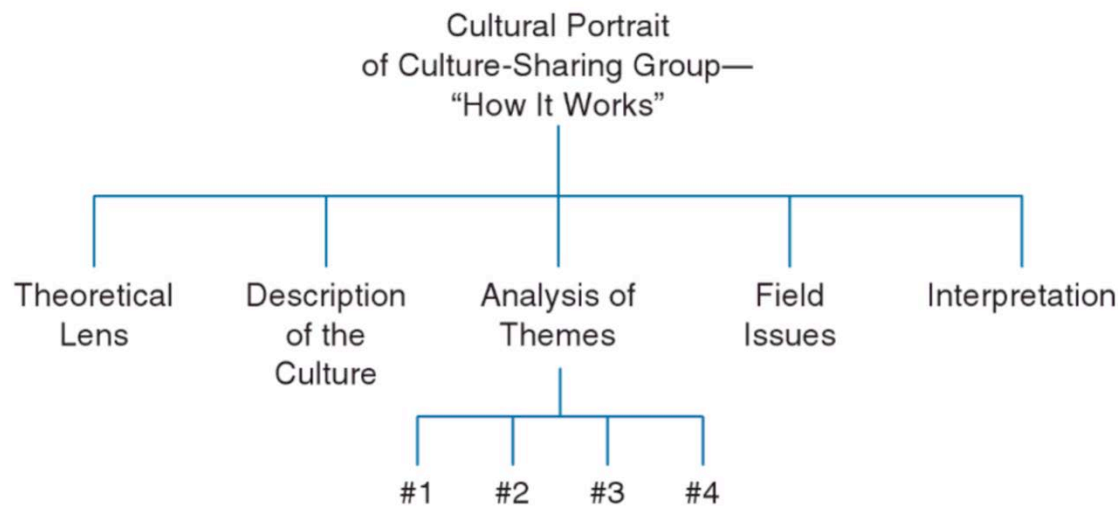


Figure 32 - Template for coding an ethnography (Creswell, 2013)

The five elements of theoretical lens, description of culture, analysis of different themes, field issues and interpretation are brought together in this study to describe how this particular culture of the SCFC online community works. In order to do this though, ethical standards and issues were also addressed.

5.11. Ethical Research Issues

Pole and Hillyard (2016, p.104) highlighted that there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to fieldwork and ethics. They stated “Taking the right decision will depend as much on the values of the fieldworker as it will on the particular circumstances of the research”. The general principle of ethical research is to do no harm (Kotler and Armstrong, 2013) and leave the reputation of social science intact (Pole and Hillyard, 2016, p.63).

Atkinson (2015) noted that the ethical standards for ethnography, like other methods, have been derived from biomedical research. Atkinson (p.174) stated, “Clearly, one would not want human subjects to participate in experiments or trials unwillingly”. Atkinson and Hammersley (2007, p.209) reinforced this point that ethnography is ultimately about the

production of new knowledge and that this should conform to ethical standards. Ultimately, the researcher is interacting with people in their natural settings and therefore this may have consequences for the people being studied.

A key area for ethical consideration is that of informed consent. In this PhD study, consent was sought and the data anonymised as per the ethical approval process at the University of Salford. In the history of ethnography, there have also been examples of ethnography where data collection is more covert. Covert participant observation is a fairly major deviation from this ethical baseline. There are a number of examples of this technique of covert interviews in academic studies and also journalism (Leigh, 2006). There is some disagreement on the issue of not revealing the identity of the researcher and the purpose of the study to some or all of the people being observed. On one hand, authors such as Bulmer (1982), suggested that this kind of research does harm and contravenes human rights. From another perspective, other authors argued that there is a time and a place for this in order to gain insight, which could not otherwise be gathered. For example, authors such as Calvey (2008, p.914), argued the case for covert research in the face of much opposition. He concluded his study by saying, “for me, the discourse on ethics trades on an exaggerated idea of the role and importance of the academic”. Atkinson and Hammersley (2007) also noted that there could be certain circumstances that may not be accessible for open research. There is a conflict in the literature in covert research, where some authors refute these grey areas. For example, a basic guiding principle for capturing qualitative interviews was outlined by Qu and Dumay (2011, p.253) “interviewees do not need to be informed about the full study, but they need to be informed about the interview process, the roles of the researchers (e.g. covert versus overt roles) and how the interview data will be used”.

The literature conflicts on this issue. Atkinson and Hammersley (2007) noted that the picture is complex, even when consent is obtained, they warned that once a researcher has built a rapport with informants, it may be possible that they effectively forget that they are being observed. They also found that generally, ethnographers do not always tell all participants everything about their research. There may be many reasons for this, firstly, the researcher may not know exactly what is involved themselves as they are immersed in the situation and formulating their research problem. Atkinson and Hammersley also stated that participants are often not overly interested in the research and too much information could also affect the way in which people respond naturally. This was the case with the informants in this PhD

study, who were usually interested in the blog post findings, but not full interview transcripts or a lengthy explanation of the research up front. This meant that the researcher blog had added importance for being able to share findings in an accessible way.

Atkinson (2015, p.178) also highlighted the dilemma of ethics forms, which require yes or no answers and because of this, the forms become “impossible to answer in good faith”. So whilst it is important to do no harm, ethics and ethnography is not a simple matter. Similarly, it is not easy when dealing with the online world, which comes with its own questions, standards and dilemmas. The position of this PhD study was to adhere to the principle of “do no harm” and use the authors experience in dealing with people online and offline to treat people fairly and justly. Respecting people’s wishes and limited time was also an important factor to do no harm and maintain a good rapport with the people who were part of this study.

In the online world, authors such as Kozinets and Boellstorff have written at length on ethical standards and guidelines for netnography and online research respectively. Netnography: Redefined (2015) takes stock of ethical issues for online ethnography and was refined over decades of research. Kozinets alluded to the complexity of this area by opening the ethics chapter with words from Annette Markham; “At least for the foreseeable future, researchers must operate flexibly to adapt to continual shifts in perceptions, unstable terms of service, radically distinctive national and cultural expectations for privacy and still steady growth of Internet use” (Markham, 2012).

This effectively sets the stall for this thesis and highlighted that researchers need to work flexibly around shifting requirements, terms and conditions and privacy settings of an ever growing and evolving online world. Kozinets highlighted that netnographers have a lot of ethical choices to make and therefore it is crucial to understand and keep up to date with this area. For this study, it was important to adopt and adhere to the ethical standards outlined in the table below. These key ethical standards are outlined by Boellstorff et al. (2012), which are also endorsed by netnography and Kozinets (2015).

| Ethical area | Description |
|---------------------|--|
| Principle of care | Taking good care of informants including allowing them to gain some kind of reward for participating in the research |
| Informed consent | Keeping informants informed about the nature and purpose of study. Being open about your research |
| Legal risk | Be aware of the legal implications of research and terms and conditions of online field sites |
| Anonymity | Do not reveal identities of informants or information that could lead to their identification |
| Deception | Avoid deliberately misleading people, spying or pretending you are someone else |
| Intimacy | Avoid intimate relationships with informants and always use integrity |
| Doing Good | Strive for a positive impact |
| Taking leave | Exiting the field gracefully by preparing your informants appropriately |
| Accurate portrayal | Making sure you give an accurate and sympathetic portrayal of informants in your research |

Figure 33 - Virtual world research ethical areas and guidelines based on Boellstorff et al. (2012)

Generally speaking, many of the same rules apply for real world or online ethnography, but there are some additional considerations for netnography. Kozinets (2015, p.146) noted for example that online, people have moved away from using pseudonyms. “In the Facebook and Twitter age, most people are using their ‘real name’ and with API links and cookies everywhere, it is a relatively simple matter to link the use of one name with another”. People are posting information to websites, which are publically accessible and often indexed by search engines. It is easier then to find where a quote was given online and who the original author was. API here refers to Application Protocol Interface, which is a way of third party software using social media logins and other data. Cookies are small text files which track and capture user data as they browse the Internet with their web browser.

The fact that the Internet works in this way creates something of an ethical dilemma because participants could potentially be identified, even if pseudonyms are used. Kozinets does not offer an easy answer to this ethical dilemma, but suggested that researchers should seek permission for any direct quotes used. The AIOR (Association of Internet Researchers) code adhered to in this study indicated that all quotes should be anonymised and if direct quotes are used, permission should be sought to use these, even from publically accessible websites (AIOR, 2012). This ultimately minimises harm and conforms to the guidelines listed above.

These are the standards adhered to in this research study. Care was taken in this study to treat people with respect, to do no harm and to comply with the AIOR guidelines.

In terms of ethics and written consent, the following processes were used for the three types of interview used in this study:

- Face to Face Interview – paper printed info sheet and ethical approval form (See appendix 1 and 2)
- Telephone interview – emailed info sheet and ethical approval form
- Twitter or Facebook interview – send a link to info sheet on research website and at the conclusion of the interview, ask in writing, "Would it be okay to quote you anonymously in my PhD thesis and research?" also "I would be happy to share my findings if interesting to you".

When asked, participants were never interested to read back the transcription of their interview, but were sometimes interested to read blog posts of the findings. They were also very happy to be quoted in the study in all cases. This maps to the point made earlier in the chapter by Creswell regarding the value of participants checking findings as opposed to transcripts or raw data. In this PhD study, participants were much happier to read the findings presented as a blog post and nobody was interested to read a transcript of their interview. It is also notable that some participants would prefer to be named as opposed to quoted anonymously. This is an interesting finding as the ethical approval process advocates anonymity, but informants in this study were questioning why it has to be anonymous.

Noting Kozinets comments and the standards of AIOR, using online methods to capture data does present some ethical questions. It should be approached in the spirit of doing no harm, whilst enabling agility and keeping the time of the interviewee to a minimum. This is also an important consideration when busy people are giving up their time for interview. It is worth noting also that the data captured was from adults over 18 and from non-vulnerable groups and the material was not controversial or inflammatory.

5.12. Blended methods implementation

The participants featured in this research come from a range of ages, disciplines, club loyalties and genders in order to provide as holistic a picture as possible to provide empirical evidence to each research question. The topic of the boundaries of this study and SCFC as a vehicle of this study were previously discussed. Some of the participants in this research were involved with SCFC and some were involved with other football clubs and relevant organisations. The rationale was to provide answers to the research questions from a variety of perspectives.

5.12.1. Participant observation

The data from participant observation is presented in the next chapter as illustrative examples to support other data and answer the research questions. The data presented includes screenshots from various social media channels including websites, forums, Twitter, Facebook and others. As discussed in the methodology chapter, these observations were taken from two years of regular and extensive participant observation and screenshots and annotations of key moments. This data was transferred to Nvivo and analysed using the same coding system as the other methods. It is worth noting that the sheer size of this file caused Nvivo some problems in terms of dealing with the data, which repeatedly crashed the software. Updating the software and persisting overcame these issues.

The identities of participants were disguised by the use of strategic cropping or blurring out of names, profile pictures and other information in order to keep the identity of the participants anonymous. The only exception to this is where the person is a public figure on a publically accessible website such as a football player or celebrity. These few examples remained as illustrative examples in the spirit of fair use in order to fully answer the research questions and to present an accurate portrait of the culture under study. Obscuring the identities of celebrities would have compromised the meaning and presentation of the data as an illustrative example. This ties with the earlier point around ethical standards and flexibility (Markham, 2012).

5.12.2. SNA

SNA diagrams from Twitter are also presented in the findings where relevant. SNA was used as part of the blend in order to identify the boundaries, participants and key influencers in this study. In some cases, the diagrams themselves are presented to support a specific point. It is notable that there were no research questions that were directly answered using SNA as a

single method, but the data was blended with the other two methods in order to improve the quality of the data presented overall. Usernames remained visible, but no other qualitative data was displayed relating to those users on the public and open network of Twitter. Data from SNA was coded in the same way as the other two methods. SNA was used as a foundation and a 'glue' to enable and support the other two methods. The type of research questions answered by SNA as a single method would be more related to digital netnography as discussed earlier. This was not the focus of the research questions used in this thesis, but SNA was still an important part of the blended methods strategy.

5.12.3. Interviews

There were a total of 35 interviews with 25 interviewees who were officially interviewed as participants for this study. Some of these participants were interviewed multiple times at varying intervals to ask new questions including what (if anything) had changed over time.

There were three primary phases of interviews at different parts of the study:

- Phase 1 in 2015 – initial interviews
- Phase 2 in 2016 – new and follow up interviews
- Phase 3 in 2017 – a final three verification interviews with social media and football brand managers / experts

The dates of interview varied depending on the phase of study and the availability of participants, so the timing was also fluid. In some cases, interviews conducted online spanned over several days and sometimes weeks.

All participants are outlined in the table below and were assigned an interview participant ID number in order to protect their anonymity as per the ethical guidelines adhered to in this study. The Participant ID is represented in the data as P1, P2 etc. The table below outlines the people interviewed and their roles, which is relevant information regarding their connection to the research whilst maintaining their anonymity. The interviewees were chosen because of their connection to football and social media and relevance to this study. All of these people are fans of football who use social media to communicate about football. Some use social media and website channels within their job role or voluntary role in order to communicate with fans and some are the fan recipients of this message locally or internationally.

The table indicates the number of interviews that occurred. The number depended on the availability of the interviewee and their importance to the study.

| Participant ID | Role | Number of interviews |
|-----------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| P1 | Football Social Media Officer, non league | 2 |
| P2 | Football Webmaster, non league | 1 |
| P3 | Football club Project Manager, non league | 1 |
| P4 | Director of Communication, Championship football club | 1 |
| P5 | FA communications official | 1 |
| P6 | Football Fan | 1 |
| P7 | Football Fan & social media volunteer, non league | 1 |
| P8 | SCFC Follower from the UK | 1 |
| P9 | SCFC Follower from India | 3 |
| P10 | Head of Communications of a non league football club | 1 |
| P11 | Football journalist and academic | 1 |
| P12 | Football Fan / forum user | 1 |
| P13 | Football Fan and photographer | 1 |
| P14 | Football social media officer | 3 |
| P15 | Social Media expert and football fan | 1 |
| P16 | Managing Director and social media expert | 1 |
| P17 | Manager of Digital Sports Communications company | 1 |
| P18 | Football social media officer | 2 |
| P19 | SCFC Fan from Venice, Italy | 2 |
| P20 | SCFC Follower from Florida, USA | 2 |
| P21 | SCFC Follower from Russia | 2 |
| P22 | Owner of SCFC | 2 |
| P23 | New current fan of SCFC | 1 |
| P24 | Founder of Digital Sport Company | 1 |
| P25 | Social media manager of a Premier League club | 1 |

Figure 34 - The interview participants, their participant (P) number, role with regard to this study and number of interviews conducted

5.13. Summary of methodology

This chapter discussed the methodology, philosophy and methods relevant to this study and how they were used. The research design was presented initially using an adapted form of Saunders research onion, demonstrating that this study is a netnography using qualitative data in the interpretivist tradition. The history of ethnography was considered and then implications for online ethnography and then netnography were discussed.

This thesis used the blended methods of interview, participant observation and SNA. These three were chosen to work together to be complimentary to collect data and provide a greater insight as outlined in the methods sections. The data was collected from SCFC fans and other relevant people connected to the study and SNA was used in a qualitative sense to identify key actors and to assess the flow and scale of networks and how people are connected. A number of relevant digital tools were used to organise, capture and analyse data. Nvivo was used to code this data for analysis, taking into account categories, themes and the theoretical framework of social capital used in this study. Validation and data analysis were considered and it was established that this study used crystallisation in order to analyse the data. A final round of interviews with social media managers was used to test and verify the findings to bolster the external audit and verification. The researcher's blog and external articles was established as a useful way to disseminate findings to participants for member checking and validation. Ethical issues were considered and the principle of doing no harm under the guidelines set out by Boellstorff et al. (2012) and AIOR were adopted for this study. Finally, the implementation of the three blended methods was discussed. Now the results from the three blended methods have been outlined, in the next chapter, the appropriate primary data is presented against each of the four research questions in turn.

6. Findings and Analysis

So far, the research questions, literature review and methodology have been presented and discussed for this PhD study. In this chapter, the empirical results and findings from the primary data of interview, SNA and online participant observation are presented in relation to the research questions. Each of the four research questions forms the structure of this chapter in order to present the data gathered from the blended methods.

The use of rich empirical evidence from a variety of sources is important in order to develop theory, according to Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007). In this chapter, this qualitative data is explored and presented (Richards, 2015). These findings are further discussed in relation to the literature and theory in the following discussion chapter. Where permission has been granted and ethical approval allows, relevant quotes, screenshots and diagrams are presented from the empirical evidence gathered. Identities have been disguised where possible in compliance with the ethical approval process.

6.1. Question 1 - How are social media being used by football clubs and their fans?

This section further breaks this question down to look at how clubs and fans are using social media officially or unofficially and across different clubs and locations. The study uses SCFC as a vehicle, but the findings extend beyond this case to answer the research question. The interviewees had differing views on which social media channels were being used by football clubs in their own experience. P22 commented on how SCFC are developing their digital strategy. “Our digital communications strategy is evolving by the day. We know where we want to be in the future but we have to get there incrementally, in tandem with the evolution of the club in all areas. The main focus to date has been on being as informative and engaging as possible with our fans”. P22 continued to discuss their social media plans, “In terms of new fans that we are attracting and want to attract, digital communications is obviously much more important”. The primary aim in the short term was for SCFC to use digital media to raise awareness locally to encourage and build a local fan base. They do however have one eye on the future and the growing international fan base that was increasing. This section evaluates which social media channels are being used by SCFC and other football clubs and fans and how these are being used.

6.1.1. Social media channels

Many of the interview participants commented on which social media channels football clubs are using. For example, P16 said “Twitter and Facebook are the most common platforms that I see football clubs engaging with” and P5 agreed, “Twitter, Facebook and we’ve recently joined Instagram and YouTube. I would say that’s on par with what football clubs are using at both amateur and professional level”. P17 has worked with a wide number of football clubs internationally and said “If it’s a British club, and it’s focussing on a British audience then the mainstream ones they would probably go in the order of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram but then you start to get into, if they’ve got the appetite for it SnapChat, and there are other possibilities that are smaller and more niche”. These niche platforms included “Tumblr, Pinterest, arguably Flickr for old school picture stuff, and then if you’re getting really niche, although I think it’s dropped off now”. At UK non-league level, clubs are also primarily using Facebook, Twitter and YouTube and some are increasingly experimenting with channels such as Instagram. The website club forum and website usually pre-dates social media channels.

In terms of how clubs use social media, P15 said that football clubs are using it to “promote, communicate and engage with all stakeholders”. P1 was a little more specific saying that they used it to “promote the games”. Using a combination of videos on YouTube and social media channels, they were able to show a wider audience that the standard of the football at non-league level was good and encourage more people to attend, as it was free marketing. P18 commented, “Social media allows you to reach out to all four corners of the globe”. They were at the time recording video clips and using social media to reach out to a worldwide audience.

6.1.2. Websites

The topic of football club websites came up many times in the data collected. For example, P13 said “Well, the website is a shop window, isn’t it?”. “We’re the number one ranking website because of the number of page views that we get”. This is demonstrated in the screenshot of the website below where the club rank is listed as number 1 (see top left of the diagram below).

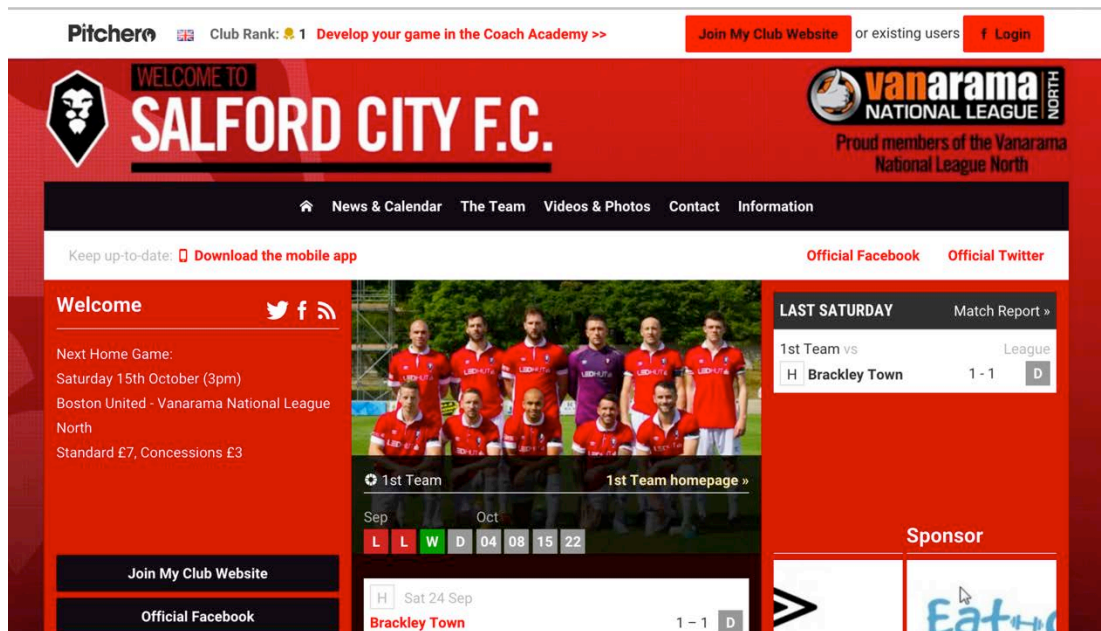


Figure 35 - SCFC Pitchero website showing Club Rank 1 as of 28/9/16

Salford and many other non-league clubs were at the time of writing using a website system designed for clubs called Pitchero. The graphic above shows how the official club website looks on this system in September 2016. At the top left is the Pitchero logo and next to that the club rank of 1. This means that SCFC had more page views than anyone else on this platform at this time. As of November 2016, over 20,000 Pitchero websites had been created for a variety of sports.

Pitchero offered the ability for a sports club website to be updated frequently using their own content management system. This is useful as P16 said, “Websites are generally quite static, with the exception of breaking news or blogs. A website needs to be easy to navigate, contain the information people are looking for, give them a purpose for visiting the site, a purpose for staying on the site and a reason to return”. “Many football clubs have old sites that haven’t been updated for years, are slow to load, not intuitive and don’t give any reason to return”. This highlights the value of having an up to date, easy to use website for football clubs.

Pitchero have started to add premium features such as online merchandise selling (e-commerce), better analytics, a custom web address, less adverts and a more flexible design of the website. There were mixed feelings about Pitchero. P13 said “the website is something that is not controlled by the club because it’s from the Pitchero which is sort of like all the league ones”. P3 elaborated, “even if we wanted to do an amazingly fantastic looking website, there are certain things you have to have in there. You’ve got to have your Evo-Stick

banner, you've gotta have this, you've gotta have that, so you're restricted somewhat". Having the flexibility to create a unique and eye catching website which is up to date and interactive was considered to be important.

There was much discussion at SCFC in particular around a new website which would give much more flexibility to be interactive and work with social media. P3 elaborated that there had been some delays around this and it was proving to be expensive, so the Pitchero site had remained. P15 said, "An effective online presence is absolutely essential in any type of business. Manchester City Football Club are an excellent example of a football club who just 'get it'! They have a great site, engaging social media presence and continually produce outstanding content for fans to engage with and share". This demonstrates the way in which an excellent website and social media should work together. P5 was a little more sceptical about the future of the football club website saying "I might just go back and visit that Twitter feed or I'll go and see if they've put a new video on their channel – for me, that's very strong. A website is great, I will occasionally look at it but it's taken a backseat I feel to these new digital platforms. That's my personal opinion and as more of these platforms become available I only see the gap between those growing". It will remain to be seen if this prediction will prove to be true or if websites will evolve and become more flexible and interactive with the boundaries between social media and club website blurring and becoming more integrated.

6.1.3. Official or unofficial?

In order to answer the question of how do clubs use social media, one key theme that arose from the primary data was that of official or unofficial use, which form part of the club and its brand. Social media can be classified as official (from the club) or unofficial (from the fans), although the lines can become blurred. This is explored in this section. For the primary data captured, the word official was used 63 times by 12 interviewees and unofficial was used 29 times by four interviewees. This is significant because these words were not part of the interview questions but arose from the interviewees. They also feature heavily in the observations from social media channels, so this was found to be an important theme relating to how digital media is used by football clubs and fans.

For example, P10 highlighted this in relation to SCFC "We have an official online forum that the club runs, and we also have an unofficial forum which has nothing to do with the club.

And so we have to keep an eye on both of those in terms of the reputation of the club. I mean there's more interaction taking place between our fans and the club on all sorts of different levels than probably, I would suggest, most clubs in the Championship and probably half the clubs in the Premiership". This highlighted the popularity of SCFC on social media. Many clubs were using official or unofficial channels to communicate with each other.

The idea of official and unofficial websites, forums and social media channels is something common to many football clubs and other high impact brands. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) introduced the concept of brand community and defined this as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand". This structured set of relations can often be complex. Many football clubs have brand communities where the admirers of the brand are the fans. The boundaries between official and unofficial, volunteer, employee and fan can often be blurred and this can also lead to complications in communication, rivalry, arguments and suspicion, which are part of the culture of brand communities including SCFC.



Figure 36 - Fan Facebook group showing a discussion around official or unofficial. The discussion ensues to avoid any issues with the club

The figure above is a demonstration of a fan that had set up a Facebook group and later renamed it to unofficial "to avoid any issues with the club". A debate ensues about the use of unofficial in the title – is it necessary or is it just consistency? This is just one example of where the boundaries between official and unofficial are often blurred. This can be observed

particularly when fan volunteers are also involved in an official or unofficial capacity. There is clearly some tension highlighted in the above example. Triangulating with the interview data, P1 gave an example reaction from a brand manager, “why have they got an unofficial Facebook page, they don’t need one, they have a forum for discussion”. P1 touches on this concept of the sometimes, fractious relationship between clubs and fans within a club relating to the use of digital media. For example, P1 was asked to close down the official forum due to comments about club staff, which the club felt were inappropriate or slanderous. “I told the admin of the unofficial forum I wasn’t happy with the comments, so I’ve refused to join it, but I have looked at it out of interest – and a lot of the comments have been more diplomatic since becoming unofficial, ironically”. This highlighted the tension between the official and unofficial brand communities.

P1 continued, “Had what they are writing now been on the other forum, it would still be open now. Perhaps they feel like that’s our forum family and we should respect each other”. The concept of family and respect are also important to the concept of the brand community. In all families there are sometimes disagreements and people who do not agree or a power struggle. There was also a disagreement between club and some fans over who owns which of the channels in a territorial sense. This also tied in with the concept of bonding and bridging capital, which is further elaborated in the discussion chapter.

When commenting about the unofficial channels P4 said, “from time to time the unofficial forum goes off on one, it’s really interesting actually”. The phrase ‘off on one’ refers to an argument or disagreement. This again highlights the online arguments but these are treated by P4, as on the whole, a positive thing as it further raises brand awareness of the club. So in terms of how clubs use social media, they provide channels for fans to engage and the fans also provide their own platforms for conversation and sharing media. Sometimes these conversations can be negative but clubs are generally tolerant of this. In certain cases, changes have to be made, switching things from official to unofficial.

Football social media manager P25 verified that similar tensions between unofficial and official social channels exists at their club. They said, “the club wants to keep control of as much of the information keeping it as official as possible, but you’re constantly fighting against a stream of content and this is social media and this is the way things are done and you can’t stop people making a lot of noise about stuff. We can’t tell them not to Tweet a

picture of a player who's not signed for us yet but who's going to, if they spotted him in the street, they've built up an audience". This point demonstrated both the tension between official and unofficial channels and also the social capital built up between some of the unofficial channels and fans whereby they could break news and rumours faster than the official channels. P24 verified this also saying that unofficial channels have "become more professional and a bit better [and clubs] realise the power of them. They can say things the club can't. The club always has to be positive and stick to certain ways, standard term of voice and standard things they can talk about, they're the source of official news, but they can't go into debates or rumours". This is interesting and relates to keeping the brand values through the voice and information shared on social media.

Unofficial channels such as the club forum were also used to leverage social capital to make gains such as paying for things as a group. The screenshot below demonstrates one example. When it was felt that the forum was established, other users of the forum were asked for a financial contribution towards a new fan flag to be used at games.

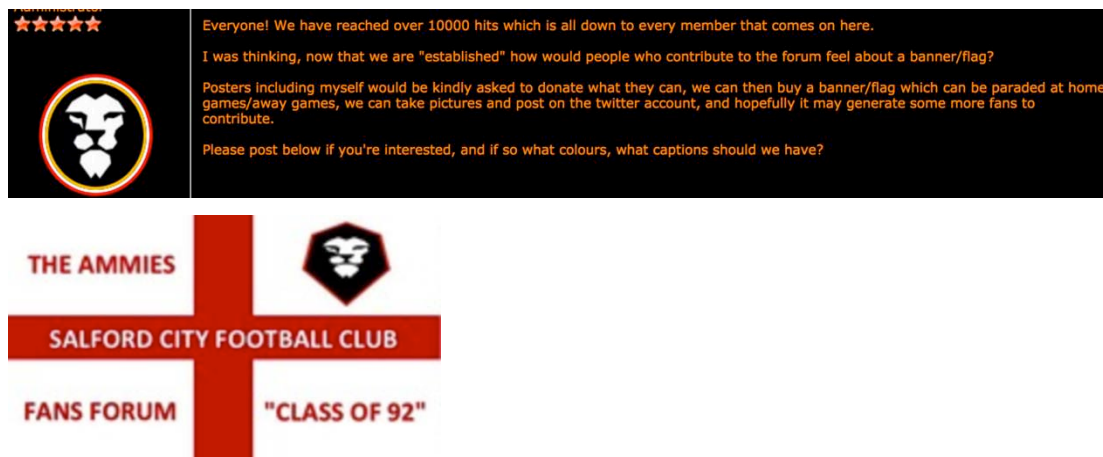


Figure 37 - Core fans on the forum ask other fans to contribute to a new flag

It is also notable that the flag also advertises the unofficial fans forum, even though it does not say unofficial on the flag. This unofficial brand is fused with the brand of SCFC and the England flag, which is a common ritual of English football fans. The forum is primarily used by core fans that physically attend matches but there are also a wider group of international fans that were following SCFC through other social media channels.

6.1.4. International fans

The word ‘international’ was used extensively in the interview data collected. It was used 39 times and by 6 of the interviewees. The concept of international fans emerged from the data as a key theme and has particular importance to this research question. P17 has significant experience in the social media that football clubs and fans use internationally. “If you’re in Eastern Europe then Twitter is of very little use to you at all”. “That’s actually also true in Germany. Facebook use is standard; that is going to get you the biggest audience. And that is true in most territories, except again if you go Eastern or Far East you start getting into VContact if it’s Russian related or Soviet related or indeed, by the time you’re out in China and other territories, you’re usually on Weibo or possibly Tencent; Line if it’s in Japan, so there are platforms that vary widely depending on the territory”. How clubs are using these platforms depends to an extent on the platform, the location and the target audience. Reinforcing this, P16 said, “Managed correctly, digital media should be hugely powerful for any football club – no matter how big or small – it just needs to be targeted correctly”.

Many football clubs have international fans and SCFC are an example of this. Non-league football clubs do not usually have such a large online following and this can be bolstered greatly by international followers. For example, the social platform VContact was set up by a Russian SCFC fan as an unofficial social media channel. There appears to be less opposition to this type of activity than the aforementioned discussion between fans and clubs when it comes to using established channels such as Facebook, Twitter and Forums. VContact is another type of digital social media channel, which is particularly popular in Europe and Russia in particular. The SCFC fans of Russia page is pictured below and it had 130 followers at the time. This compares to 31 followers of their Twitter account. This is interesting because VContact is not particularly a social media channel that English Football clubs or fans would generally use. It is a Russian platform and also popular in other European countries. It appears at that time that VContact was more popular with Russian SCFC fans than Twitter was.

The Salford fans of Russia on Twitter appear to be less of a problem to the club than the unofficial Twitter, Facebook and Forum which was set up by local fans. The unofficial Facebook page and forum had caused some arguments and mistrust, because of the particular circumstances involved. The SCFC fans of Russia were much less close to home and these fans were not known personally to the club. Russian SCFC fans and unofficial channels were

considered by some interviewees with interest, amusement and pride, but in no way was it considered a threat or negative thing for the club in the data collected.

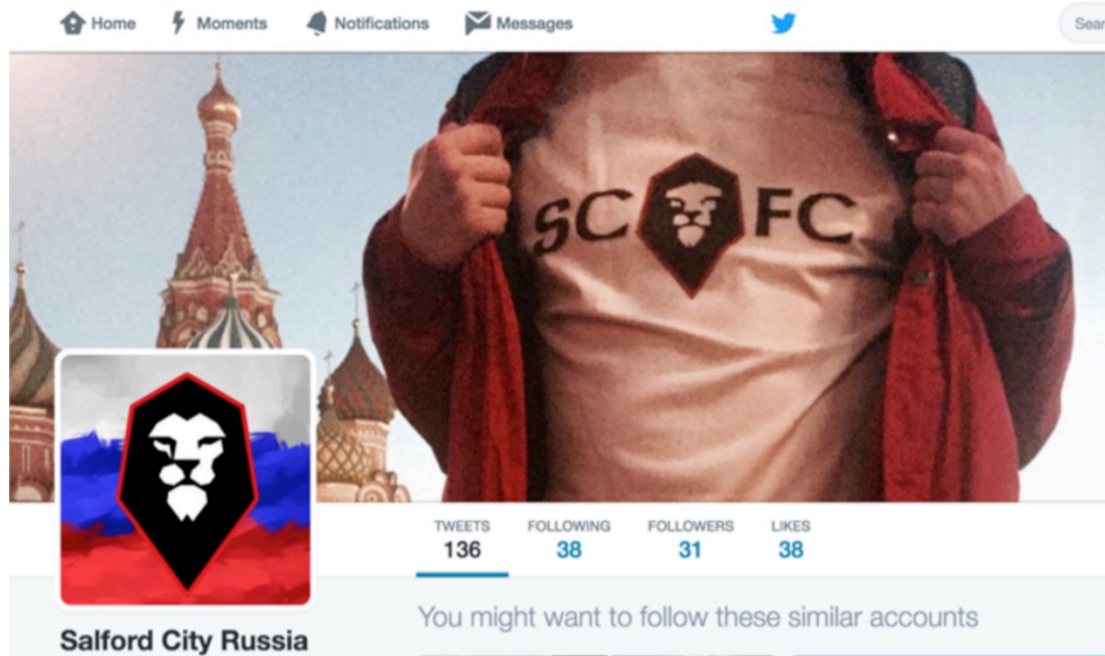


Figure 38 – Salford Fans of Russia Twitter page

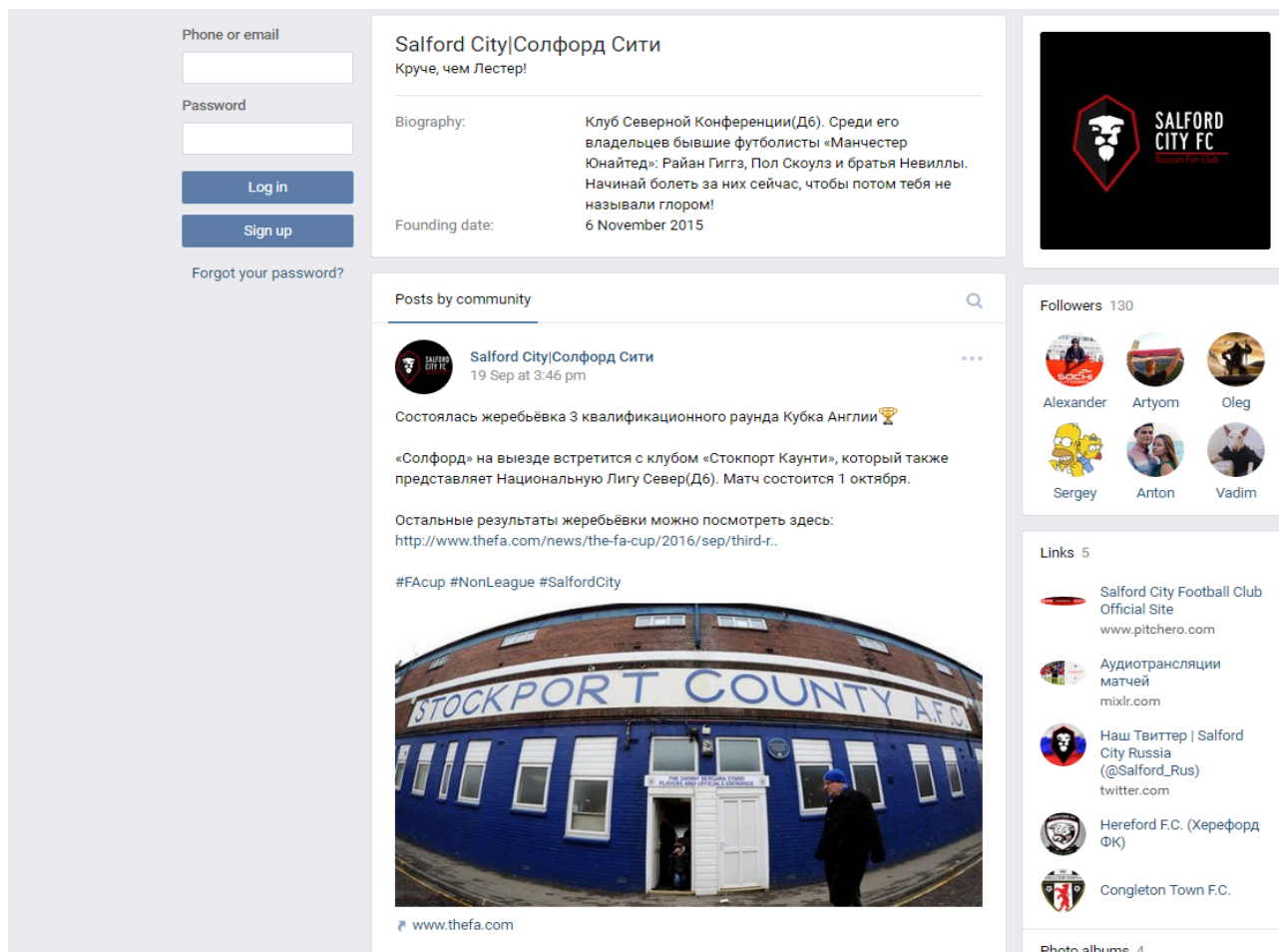


Figure 39 - Salford Fans of Russia VContact page

6.1.5. Regional fans

It is interesting to note that the fans who set up the SCFC unofficial Facebook, Twitter and Forum react in an interesting way when a new SCFC fan from the South of England asks if they can set up their own unofficial Facebook group. They write to the group asking to set up a SCFC appreciation page and are told that there already is one. This demonstrates how fans are sometimes using social media in a territorial way.



Figure 40 - Showing a Southern fan asking to set up a new Facebook page and a meme demonstrating that Salfordians are not Mancunians

An interesting debate unfolds then about whether a new group is needed for fans up and down the country rather than local fans. The Southern fan then makes a faux pas saying that fans are from “Mancunia” and is quickly corrected with a stream of comments and graphics outlining that Salford is distinct from Manchester. The Southern fan concludes with a comment as below.

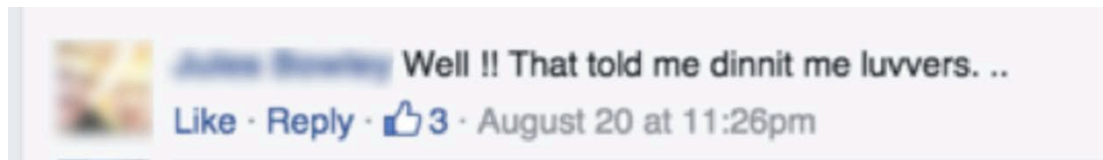


Figure 41 - Showing a Southern fan using regional language after being lambasted for using the word Mancunia to include Salford (a faux pas)

This demonstrates that fans can be territorial and that there are geographical differences and social capital factors involved. The re-iteration of the difference between Salford and Manchester is something that recurred in the online participant observation. Both cities are very close to each other and brands and identity associations sometimes become intertwined. Consider for example, the rebranding of The University of Salford, Manchester. To core SCFC fans, they proactively defend their identity as Salford fans on social media, rejecting the words Manchester or Mancunia. This is part of their brand association and identity reinforced through social media and debated with non-Salford or non-core fans. This will be further examined later in this chapter.

6.1.6. Question 1 summary

For question one, we can conclude from the primary data that UK football clubs at all levels are using primarily Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and a club website and forum. They are using this to communicate with fans and share digital media locally and beyond, creating brand communities. Clubs are using these channels to engage with fans by producing useful content and fans were also setting up their own channels and posting digital media content to fuel conversations. There are mixed views on how clubs are using websites and the effectiveness of a club website, particularly if it is not updated or interactive and it will remain to be seen how football club websites and social media will evolve, grow or decline. There are official and unofficial social media channels that make up the sometimes geographically dispersed brand community of a club.

There are differences internationally with fans and clubs from around the world with how different channels such as VContact are used. Finally, we have found that depending on their location and culture etc. we have seen how different fans want to start their own digital media channels and how this can sometimes cause conflict between fans and clubs and between fans in a territorial sense. Social capital between groups exists and a lack of it can also cause friction. This was seen to be less of an issue for fans from abroad setting up their own networks, but more of an issue for fans in the UK setting up their own official channels. We

have also seen that core fans use social media to reinforce and ring fence their identities using the example of the outsider notion that Salford is the same as Manchester. This concept is rejected by SCFC core fans on social media. This reinforces their identity as Salford fans, displaying ritualistic behaviour through social media.

6.2. Question 2 - How does social media influence brand communications of football clubs?

The subject of football clubs and brand was raised many times within the primary data collected. The hierarchy chart below demonstrates the Nvivo nodes relating to brand and the size of each box represents how many times each of these nodes was coded against the data. Because SCFC are a vehicle for this study, the “Profile of Salford” and the “Class of 92” nodes featured quite heavily in the results as would be expected. Tradition, reputation, history, brand communities and criticism of individuals were also prominently featured nodes. The word “brand” featured 110 times in the data, but this is also to be expected as this word also featured in the research questions. The graphic below produced from Nvivo, shows the frequency with which the data was coded on nodes related to brand. Football club brand, club identity, profile, reputation and Class of 92 all featured prominently. These topics are further explored in order to answer this research question in relation to digital media.

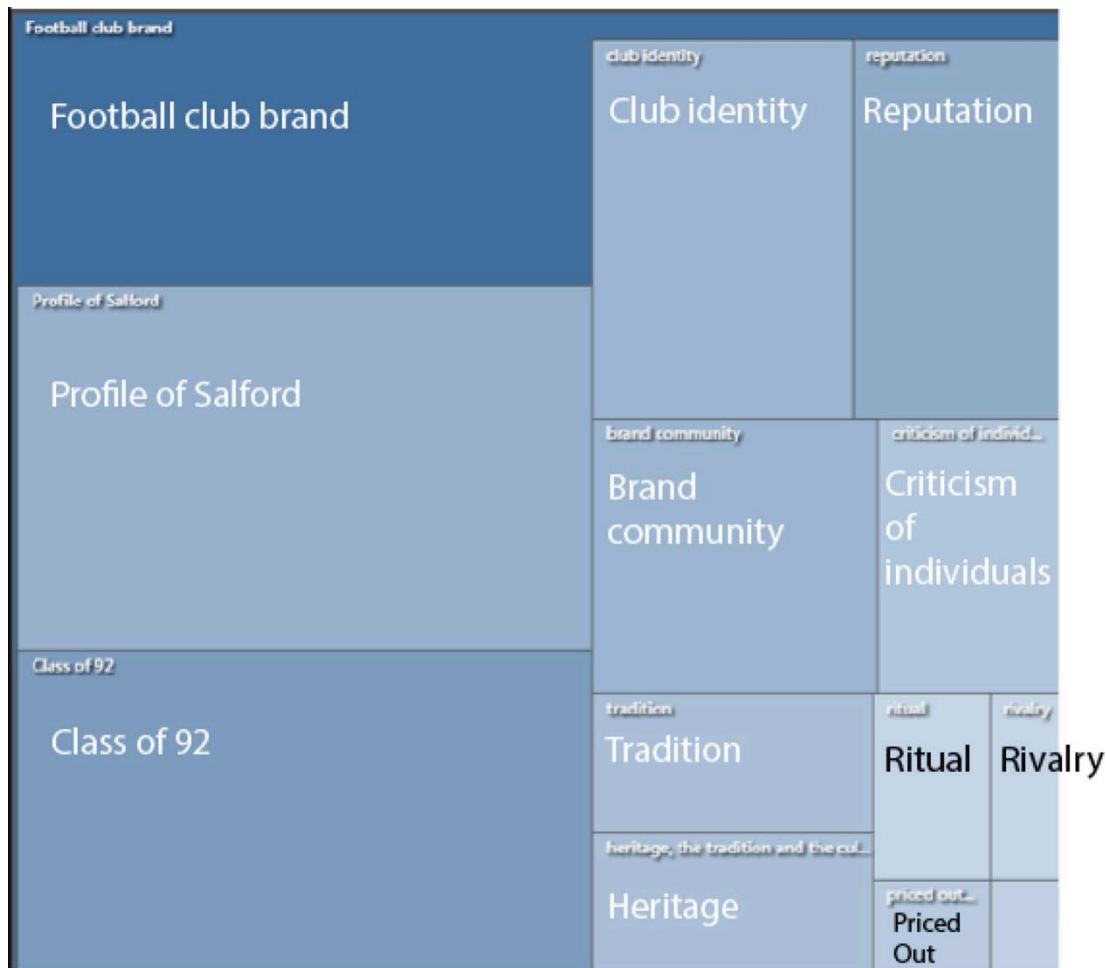


Figure 42 - Shows which were the most used codes relating to brand from the primary data in Nvivo (note that Nvivo does not support increasing font size, so the enlarged code text was added afterwards using Photoshop)

Digging in to the data itself, P7 commented, “I think through social media and what I do, we’re almost creating a brand in that respect”. They describe everything from on the field to off the field including the match day music, the programme and the social media channels to be of the same high professional standard. Everything associated with the club including its digital communications channels can be considered to be the brand communications of the club”. This demonstrates the holistic approach to brand as all encompassing. Brand is everything that a football fan experiences relating to the football club as highlighted in the literature.

Commenting on the digital channels and building brand affinity to create a unique selling point (USP) for football clubs, P5 said, “It’s probably that they are forward thinkers and cutting edge technology which is reliable time and time again so it’s how the clubs create that USP for their brand that people want to associate with and I’ve got those personal beliefs and values as well and so there’s almost an affinity straight away between the club and

themselves”. P5 sees social media as a core part of the clubs brand. Building on this, P5 said, “What could set clubs apart is how interactive they are on things such as Twitter”. The suggestion is that Twitter should be used to create a dialogue with fans, which also forms part of the brand and USP, reaching the buyer persona. “Digital media are able to take fans to a level that they haven’t experienced before. It’s enabled fans to become so much closer to a club. That can only be of benefit to clubs in terms of being able to grow their fan base and become successful”. This closeness for P5 is crucial to growing a fan base and it is the brand communications through digital media that is vital to this success. This resonates with the buyer persona spring, whereby social media is used to tighten the spring, bringing clubs and fans closer together.

This perspective is reinforced by P11 who said, “I think if Salford FC grow and the brand if they market the club correctly and the brand becomes more prominent, again, you might start to get out of towners popping along just to see what’s going on at Salford”. ‘Out of towners’ refers to people outside of Salford. P11 believes that digital media can be used for clubs to “reclaim that relationship with the fans”. “It’s appreciated, more again, by the global fans that feel a little bit disenfranchised they are apart from the club, so they use social media to connect with such and such a player, your local fans, home-grown fans, organic fans, are there largely for the football, they don’t buy into all the more cynical marketing promotion, that comes with football clubs”. Essentially, P11 suggested that the official brand communications of clubs may be most useful for the wider set or global fans but in terms of local, core fans, they may be more immune or cynical about the official brand communications of a club. They are ignoring the official channels in some cases and using social media to communicate with each other and creating their own unofficial channels, which can also be considered as part of the club brand communications.

P10 elaborated on the type of official communications that clubs use “we use those in order to share audio commentary, interviews, we have a regular unofficial podcast, we have a radio station, we have a television channel, and all of that is driven and shared and promoted using social media – primarily Facebook and Twitter”. Digital media content is produced and then communicated via digital channels such as a website or YouTube and shared on the key social media networks.

6.2.1. Digital communications and the celebrity

Gary Neville Retweeted

@GNev2 great day one happy dad 👍



← 42 350 ...

Figure 43 - Gary Neville poses for a picture that is posted to Twitter and Retweeted by him

Celebrities such as Gary Neville have several million followers on Twitter. As of 21/10/17 Gary had 3.8 million followers. This creates some interesting opportunities for digital media and brand communications. The photo above from Twitter is an example of taking a picture of a celebrity and posting a positive message. The Class of '92 often pose for such pictures with fans, which builds relationships and social media engagement. In the web 2.0 era, these kinds of pictures are easy for celebrities to pose for and are very easily instantly sharable via a smartphone and social media. Fans are very happy to share these, because it shows their support for the club and often generates lots of engagement in their own online social circles. The above Tweet for example, was Retweeted 42 times and liked 350 times, which is much higher than an average fan Tweet. Tweets coming directly from fans can also carry a powerful message within their personal networks.



Figure 44 - Gary Neville uses his strong Twitter following to encourage people to attend an SCFC match and a new fan responds to him personally

The above is an example of the kind of post that can be seen from an official club account. Because Gary Neville has so many followers, this generates a lot of Retweets and comments. Note the 'how much are tickets' response. This type of online question is important and will be discussed later in this chapter.

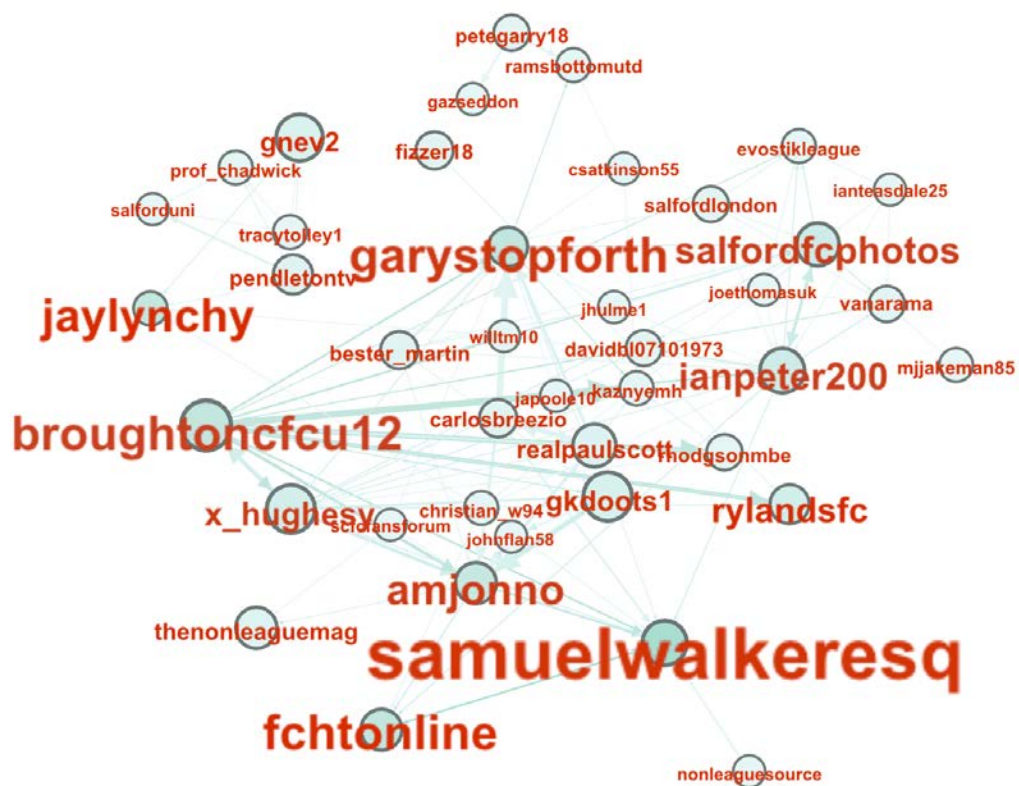


Figure 45 - Social Network Analysis of SCFC conversations on Twitter

The diagram above highlights some of the key influencers on Twitter related to SCFC brand communications. The lines demonstrate who is talking to whom. Rival clubs such as broughtonfcu12 feature here depending on which team the club is playing at the time that the data was collected. Twitter user prof_chadwick was tweeting about Salford Uni and Gary Neville, so these users form a temporary connection and cluster in this period. This is also true of former SCFC player Gaz Seddon, who had just moved to Ramsbottom United (see top of the diagram above). These clusters change over time depending on who is Tweeting. Some of the users shown in the above diagram such as Gary Neville (gnev2) and Phil Neville (fizzer18) are well known celebrities and some are less well known. The engagement between users can also form the brand communications of a club because these celebrities are connected to their respective clubs.

With the great reach of social media, there are also some difficulties with regard to online brand communications. P3 reflects on the concept of becoming an open access digital football club with the Class of '92 involved. "I suppose in terms of open access, we're very

protective and the lads have to be protective of their own brand, their own representation, everything else, so there is the risk there that you open this club and what I've found with Gary and people having Twitter – no matter what he does, people will always want to have a go". 'Have a go' in this case refers to people wanting to start an argument or criticise via social media. This concept and what this means for brand communications is further explored in the next section.

6.2.2. Trolls and club brand communications

The concept of people 'having a go', criticism and clashing on social media is a prominent feature of football club online interaction and is closely associated with a club and its brand. One fan commented on a club forum "An unfortunate consequence I think of our "new found" fame, expectations raised higher and the bigger the following the more "trolls" we attract, previous forums had fewer contributors and most were known to the others and most comments were measured, we seem to have attracted the "keyboard" warriors". This shows that the growth and success of social media channels and profile can also come with a growth of less positive communications. P18 concurred, "As brand awareness increases, so do the amount of people who are going to look for a fault or a weakness".

Whilst there are arguments and criticisms on club forums and social media, many of the people in this study pointed to Twitter as the place that has the most trolls. Twitter has most followers and is the most open, which leads to some positives and negatives. Discussing trolls, P18 said, "It really does tend to be Twitter. I think it's the effort of having to join the group, they don't really bother, whereas with Twitter it's too easy to just respond". P18 gave an additional explanation for this "with Twitter it's a bit more easy to be anonymous than it is on Facebook or YouTube because they're connected to real accounts". "You can have a blank profile, an egg profile picture, your username is nothing to do with you". "Because Salford have now got such a big brand presence there are more people out there who are looking to bring it down". This demonstrated the open nature of Twitter and one of the reasons why it may be subjected to more trolling than other channels.

One particular example of this was the SCFC Club Chairman who, like many members of the club from management to players, was using Twitter to communicate about the club. These communications therefore become part of the club brand communications. The account was called @ChairmanSCFC, so there is no doubt that this is an account that was affiliated with

the official club brand communications. In the following example, this can mean that digital media can have a negative effect on the brand communications of the club. As brand awareness of SCFC grew in the spotlight, there was a lot of negativity from fans from rival clubs about the fact that SCFC received so much TV coverage on the BBC in 2015 after the documentary and a successful FA Cup run.

The additional BBC coverage caused a clash of opinions online. In one particular example, the club chairman posted a controversial Tweet in response to a backlash from Twitter trolls and fans of rival clubs. Due to this backlash and the response of one of the owners (Gary Neville), she decided to delete her account (Draper, 2016). In another example, one of the players Jordan Hulme, became embroiled in another online argument with a journalist. These two incidents are documented in the book extract below.

On the morning after the Darlington defeat, Salford City club chairman Karen Baird is having breakfast when the phone call comes. It's Gary Neville, ringing from Valencia. There is an important issue to be discussed. It's not last night's result, however.

'Karen. Have you seen what Jordan's put on Twitter?'

Baird hasn't. It's 7am.

Jordan Hulme is the team's talented winger, 25 years old and outwardly full of confidence. The players have been especially annoyed with a Darlington journalist whom they perceive to be unnecessarily antagonistic. Hulme took the matter in hand, post match, via social media.

On the other end of the line, Gary Neville is continuing in his earnest fashion. 'It's not right, Karen,' he tells her.

After a five-minute conversation, Karen puts the phone down. Hulme is called; the tweet is deleted; an email is sent to the players instructing them on the dos and don'ts of social media.

'I do get it,' says Baird later. 'They're representing Salford and everything's a story.' But Baird herself has some history in this

department and had to delete her Twitter account earlier in the year. 'Gary told me off loads of times for putting things up. Between the stick I was getting from Darlington fans and Gary, I just thought it would be easier to come off it.'

Figure 46 - An extract from the *Class of 92: Out of Our League* book outlining two key SCFC social media incidents with the chairman and a player respectively (Draper, 2016)

Baird referred to “Everything’s a story”. This acknowledges the fact that SCFC have become higher profile since the take over of the Class of ’92. This increases both the online abuse directed towards the club and also amplifies public disagreements such as this on Twitter.

It is notable here that an email went out to the players in response to this incident (Draper, 2016). The Tweet she posted suggested that the Class of ‘92 had brought more publicity to semi-professional football than anyone before, ever. This comment led to hundreds of negative replies from various people on Twitter and other sites such as football forums. Some comments were violent and abusive from various people. This prompted her to delete her Twitter account as outlined above. A number of fans also defended her statement on Twitter.



Figure 47 - Negative Tweets to the BBC announcement that they will be showing another SCFC FA Cup game

The above comments are just a selection of the hundreds of people reacting to the fact that the BBC was televising SCFC again in the FA Cup. Many of these come from rival fans, criticising the Class of '92 or asking why their club is not featured.

The Class of '92 have certainly brought much publicity to non-league club SCFC online and offline but fans and journalists can quite quickly use controversy online. P11 said "It's very difficult, not just football clubs, but anyone that's a social media reporter, social media content manager, anyone that's running a social media feed you just need to sometimes take a step back and think before you post, just think and if you're unsure about something, don't post". "You can correct straight away, but with the right training, with clear social media guidelines and policy, which again is something that Salford City will need to think about. FC United are doing it quite well and are being as professional as they can". This statement was made before the incidents outlined above and it proved to be correct.

P1 gave an example of what a club critic might say, "Ah, you've just got money so you're not a proper non-league club any more', well, no we're not like an average non-league club but it's still run by volunteers and it's still the same volunteers that have always done it". Conflicting somewhat with this point, P16 said "Social media allows fans to be a true part of a football club, closer to breaking news, closer to the players, closer to their own community. Managed correctly, digital media should be hugely powerful for any football club – no matter how big or small – it just needs to be targeted correctly and the budget managed well". P1 commented, "I think the players need to learn that bit. If they Tweet something like, "Oh we smashed them today!" you're then inviting comments about you being disrespectful about another club so I think they've got to use that carefully".

In terms of the best way to deal with trolls to protect the club brand P18 suggested, "Ignore them. Particularly, don't respond through the club". P1 concurred, "If we get negative comments on Twitter, I generally ignore it as it has to be run as a professional account and I can't respond in the way I would from a personal account. Sometimes, I had someone say, £7 to watch that, what a rip off! So I wrote back, actually £7 is average, some grounds cost more. They were trying to have a go at the money making class of 92 – they replied and said 'Oh fair enough', I was re-educating!"

So when representing the club online brand communications, the interviewee suggested the best strategy is to ignore trolls, but occasionally get involved only if a record can be set straight. Personal accounts and unofficial online brand communications were seen to have more scope for responding. It was felt that with a personal account, people did not have to act as professionally as if they were officially representing the club's online brand communications.

6.2.3. Unofficial channels, personal accounts and brand communications

Core fans and those that manage unofficial channels often have strong views on the brand communications of the club that they support. The conversation on an unofficial Facebook page can also be classed as part of the brand communications as it is available for fans to read on social media.

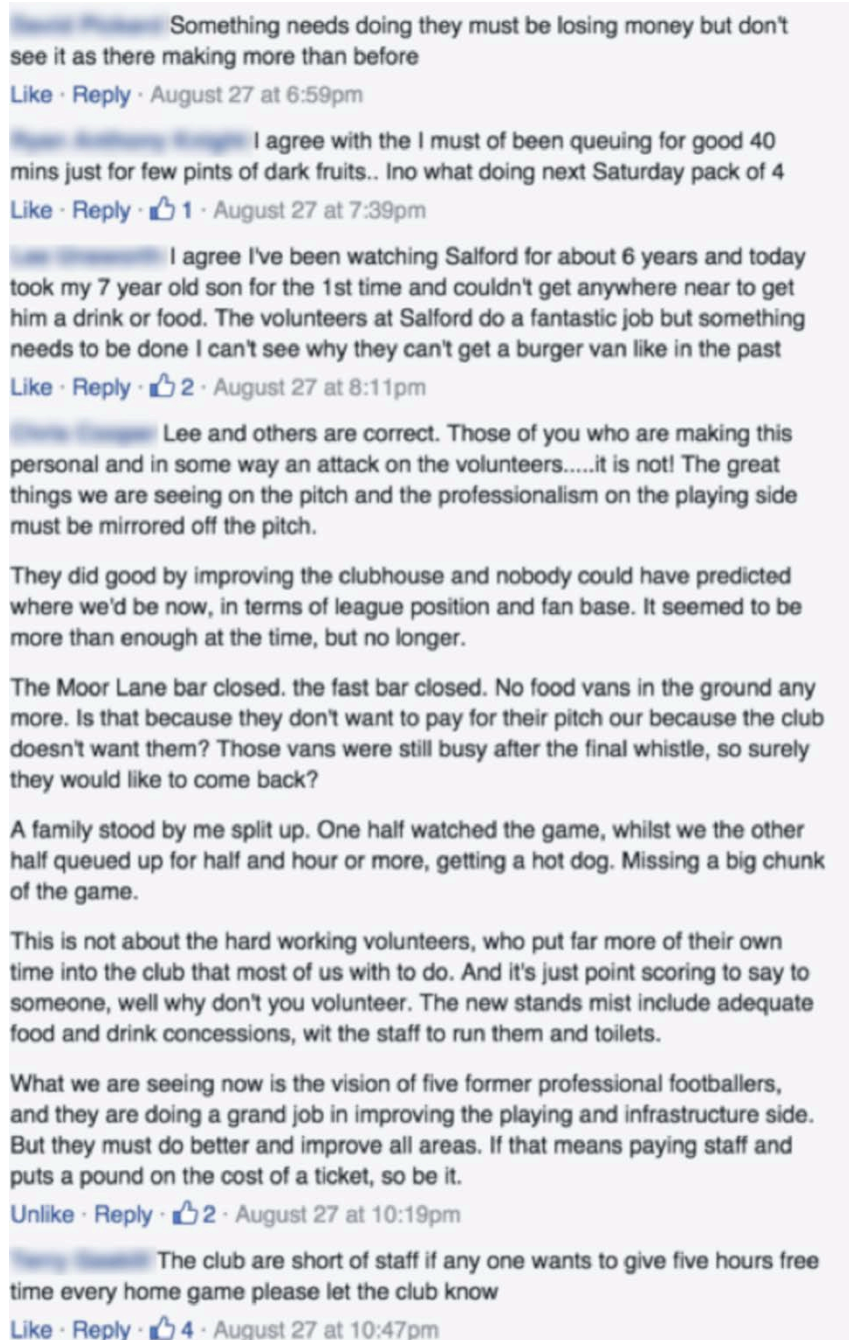


Figure 48 - Screen shot of a Facebook conversation complaining about aspects of the club including its marketing

The figure above demonstrates disgruntled fans discussing the running of the club. These comments are public and also become part of the club brand as we have seen. P6 is a supporter with strong views on the brand of the club he supports. “I think our marketing could be better. The pie and a pint night was poorly advertised. I know there were reasons for that and I'm not being critical, but we need to maximise those events. But I know the local press are lukewarm towards these things at times, so it won't be easy”. There are strong views made public online when fans feel things need putting right. There is also a tension between fans, volunteer fans and owners about whose responsibility it is to improve things.

6.2.4. Online rituals

Fan based brand communications about their own club can also be very positive. At SCFC there are several positive rituals evolving from online to offline and vice versa.

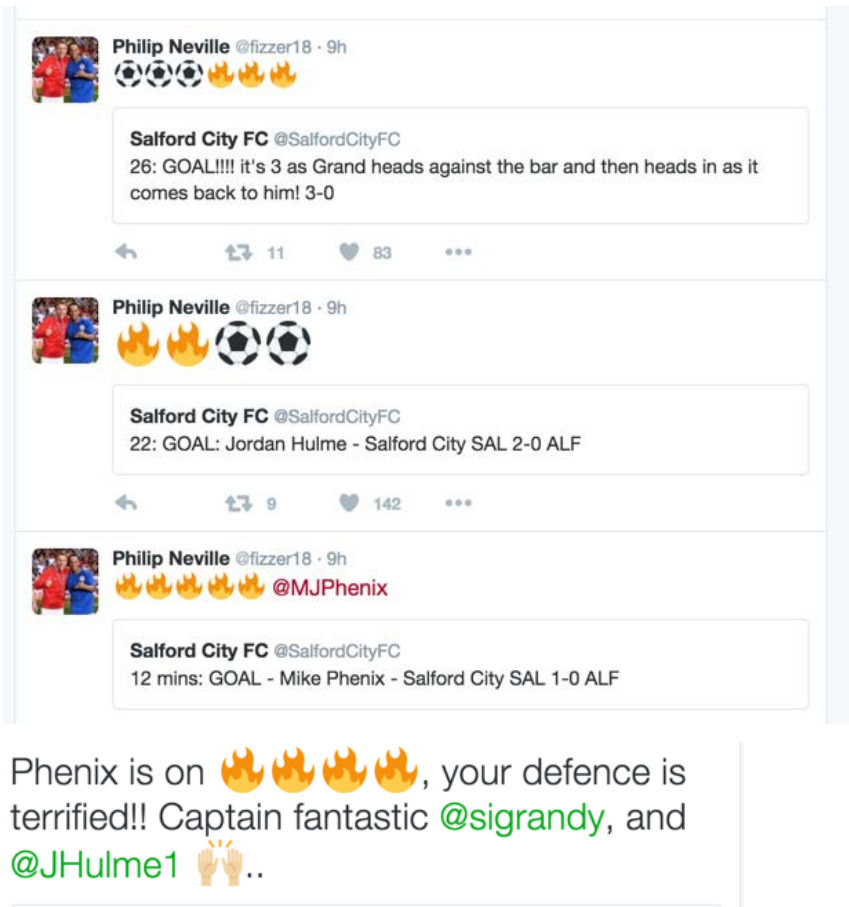


Figure 49 - Ritual forms between Phil Neville and a fan using the flame icon to represent SCFC player Mike Phenix

The above for example shows a ritual forming of the use of the flame icon when referring to SCFC striker Mike Phenix. This relates to the mythical bird the Phoenix, which bursts into flames. Rituals like this are often started by one person to another and then spreads to another person online, rather like a football chant ritual offline. Another example is a quote from Facebook about a club chant (fan song) that takes the online to the offline and says, “We have more Twitter followers than you”. The fact that SCFC have such a strong online following is a matter of pride for some fans.

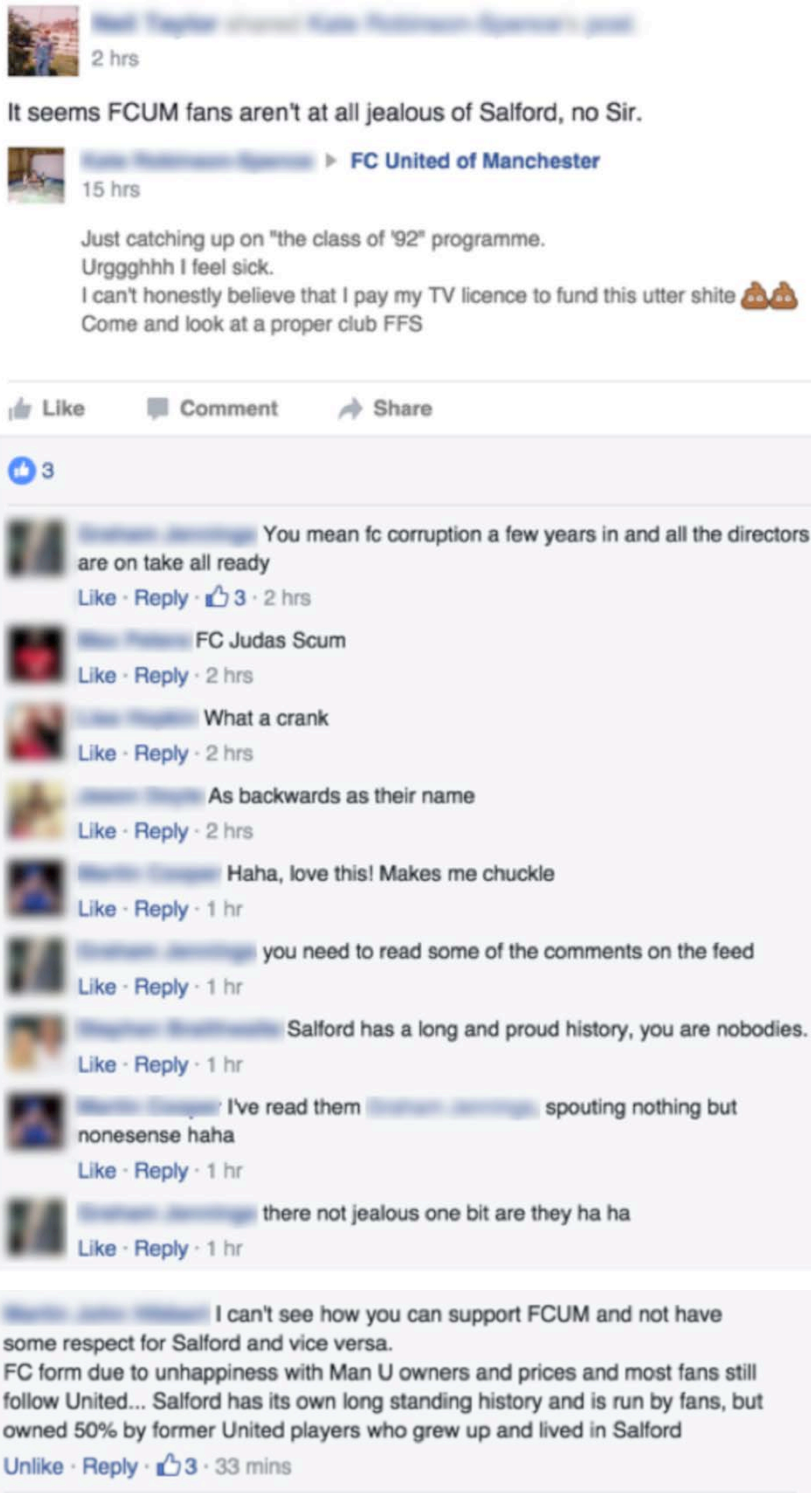


Figure 50 - Facebook conversation between SCFC fans in reaction to a negative post by an FC United fan

The above conversation demonstrates that rival fans often read and respond to each other and these posts can then be debated on the space of the club. Fans often express the love of their club by changing their avatar icons to their club badge or brand and making positive statements, which are then affirmed by other fans via, likes, emotions, shares, emoticons or

comments. History is also mentioned as a matter of pride. Having a long proud history as part of the brand is considered as a positive asset for supporters and club branding.



Figure 51 - SCFC fan posts positive comments about the club, which demonstrates positive social capital developing between fans and club

This rivalry with local clubs manifests quite regularly on social media and is part of football rituals on social media. In the below screenshot, FC United fans use Twitter to tell SCFC fans that they have a lack of fans and rituals. Their ritual song “Come on Salford” is mocked and then defended with the lemon symbol and then the success of their favourite club Manchester City in the Champions league is used. People are supporting more than one club, so the banter flits between club allegiances. The clubs are fused with their identities and the online banter between them is also a ritual. This banter existed long before social media, but it is now constantly persistent and always on rather than just in person or at the match etc. It is usually public and therefore becomes part of the club brand communications globally. This is a significant difference in the ‘hyperdigitalization’ of fans.

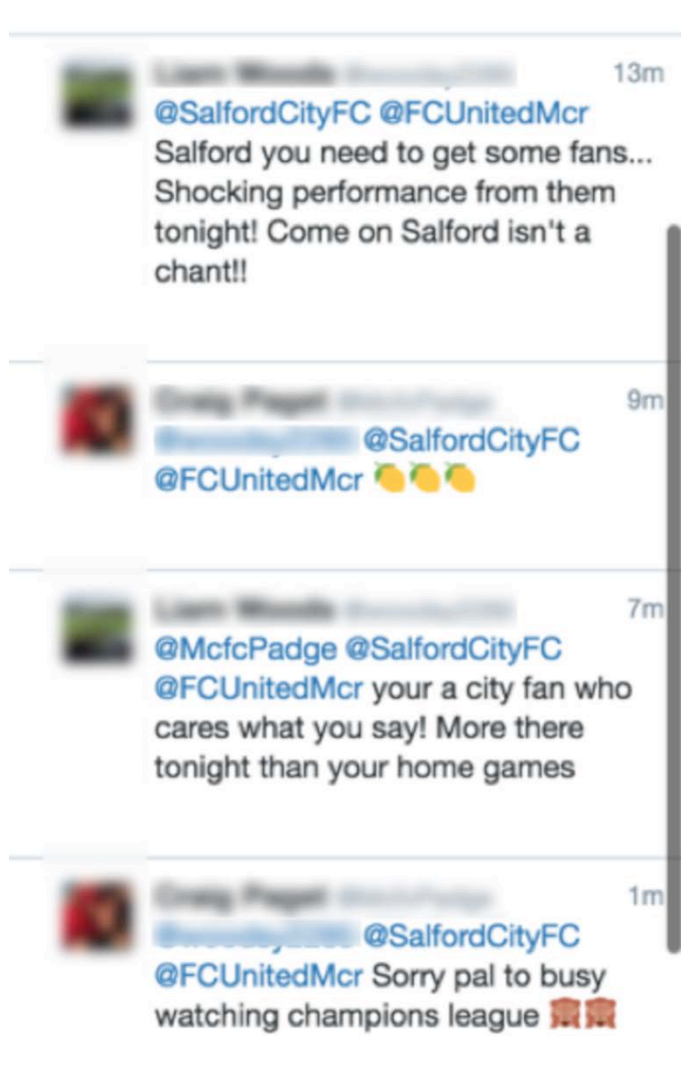


Figure 52 - A clash between SCFC and FC United fans on Twitter

Other rituals that feed into brand communications are things like fans sharing pictures of themselves in different locations in a club shirt. This is particularly popular on Facebook when people are on holiday. They will post a picture in their shirt and tag the location where they are - demonstrating their loyalty even when they are out of the area or country. It often accompanies a message explaining to other fans why they cannot make the game - showing their loyalty to their club in their absence whilst creating visual content which fellow fans of the same club respond positively to. This also spreads the brand further afield.



Robert White

Yesterday at 10:29pm

Can't make Tuesday's big game but flying the flag in LA



Like Comment Share

16



Robert White Come on fc United

Like · Reply · 16 hrs

Figure 53 - An SCFC fan posts a proud picture on holiday and a response from an FC United fan

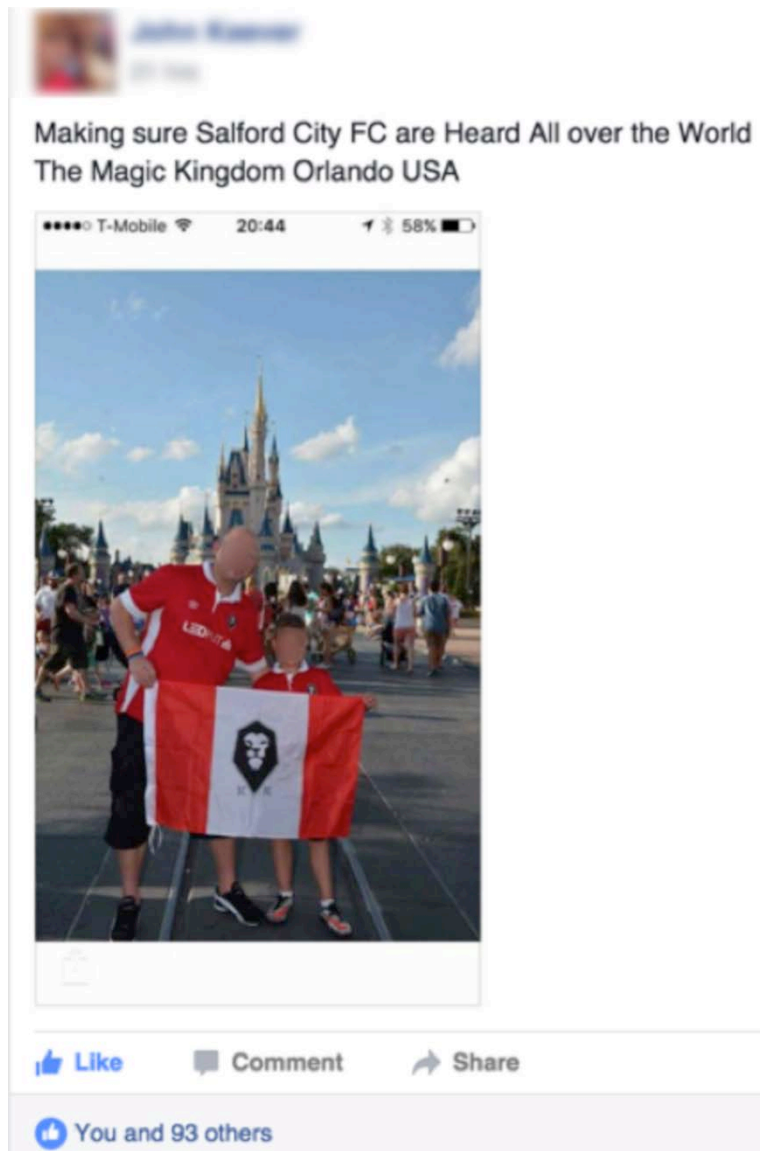


Figure 54 - A proud Salford fan and his son post a Facebook picture of the SCFC brand (shirts and flag) in a famous place on their holidays

6.2.5. Question 2 summary

With online brand communications, there were some differing views. Most people agreed that a club website and in particular social media channels such as Facebook and to a greater extent, Twitter were important for brand communications to spread the word about the club. Brand communications came from official channels and unofficial channels and the distinction was made between the two.

The findings demonstrated that official channels should be more professional and less provocative. Social media training and a clear policy should be used to improve club brand communications. Celebrities can be a powerful force in online brand communications,

increasing engagement with their own social media posts and allowing fans to photograph them and post to their own networks. The more social media followers there are, the more the ratio of negative social media posts can also go up. For SCFC, Twitter had the most followers and the most negative posts as it is an open, public network where people can say almost anything they like, sometimes anonymously. There are a percentage of trolls who use networks such as Twitter to be argumentative, negative or abusive to people, particularly those brands and people in the limelight. Football fans of opposing clubs can also be quite controversial online. Social media channels also open up opportunities for people to have their say in a positive or negative way. Public communications online form part of the brand communications of the club. The more public and visible this is, the more impact it has. Social media rituals exist online and these can carry offline into club chants. Social media have a large bearing on the brand communications of football clubs in the age of the hyperdigitalization of fans.

6.3. Question 3 - How can social media communications be managed according to fan segmentation?

This is a key question for football fan communications. P17 sums this up, “You very much have to think about this from a media perspective, so you always think about your audiences. One of the key things that social has the ability to do is fragment those audiences”. This question is aimed at unpicking this statement.

6.3.1. Segments of fans

In order to answer this question, it is first necessary to identify from the data captured what types of fan there are, taking into account that social media is also enabling new kinds of fan. From the primary data captured in this study, there was a range of different fan types identified as nodes whilst coding the data in Nvivo. These words arose from the data. The amount of sources and how many times these were mentioned (references) to each phrase can be seen below.

| Name | Sources | Referenc |
|------------------------|---------|----------|
| Football fan types | 6 | 10 |
| international fans | 19 | 74 |
| core fans | 11 | 53 |
| new fans | 13 | 44 |
| Current fans | 9 | 28 |
| fans of Premier league | 7 | 18 |
| local fans | 10 | 15 |
| follower | 9 | 15 |
| plastic fans | 4 | 11 |
| community | 7 | 10 |
| casual fans | 6 | 9 |

Figure 55 - Screenshot of Nvivo showing the top ten Football fan types nodes created and used for the primary data, ordered by quantity of references coded. International fans, core fans and new fans are three of the most coded nodes

The top 10 most referenced codes are displayed above. The codes for international fans, core fans, new fans and current fans were the four, which were used most in the coding of the data. “International fans” was the most coded phrase and as such is a key theme in this research. The words core fans, current fans and follower were also some of the most used in the primary data as outlined above. These also match with the three categories outlined in Kantar (2012) as outlined in the literature review 2.7.2. The words new fans, casual fans and plastic fans also have synergy with current or follower fans. These categories are linked to the length of time and loyalty level of fans. It is notable that there are lots of different ways that people described segments of fans. Loyalty and strength of connection played a significant role in the way people described fan segments with the data collected in this study.

The people interviewed and observed were from a range of backgrounds and affiliations, but the common factor was their connection to social media communities and football. In terms of segments, P17 suggested that fan groups could be broken down “ad infinitum”. P4 however, said, “a football fan should be seen as a loyal customer and that’s why football is different to any other business”. P10 agreed that “you can’t just categorise them in one sort of way, it’s about ‘how are these people finding out about us’”. P10 did outline a number of

groups that are treated differently such as a group of 3800 members who “get communicated with on a very regular basis, not just on social media (I mean they are on social media) but we write to those members by email usually, on average, about once a fortnight”. “Wider than that, we’ve probably got about 7,000 individuals – including the 3,800 members – on our database so we have a reasonable hinterland that broadly support the club”. “Moving over to social media it’s easy to click a ‘follow’, it’s easy to click a ‘like’, the key thing for us is about engagement”. This description outlined three distinct groups based on how engaged or close to the club they are. Although this person did not offer labels to these segments, the fact that there are again three segments described and categorised by levels of engagement and loyalty matches the findings described above.

Football club social media manager P25 concurred that they segmented fans based on their strength of connection. “You can put them in a hierarchy how they are connected and therefore how you converse with them and what message you put across and what platforms to use”. Again, engagement is seen as important and P25 is suggesting that a hierarchy of segments can be created based on connection strength, which is used as a way to communicate with different audiences.

6.3.2. Core fans, current fans and followers

There were also parallels with what other interviewees said, but they were less cautious about attaching labels to the segments. P1 commented, “There was an independent survey that defined fans in 3 groups and that’s the definition that we use - core fans, current fans and followers – I like that, it works for football quite well”. The concept of the most loyal fans is described in the data as ‘superfan’, ‘die hard’ but often ‘core fan’. Superfan and die-hard are also perhaps a smaller sub-set of the concept of the core fan. The core fan is described by P14 as fans “who have been with the club for a long time. There’s fans who have supported them for years and years and years” and by P18, “There’s a really good core of fans who go to every game, home and away, without fail. They’re the true fans who are from around the area”. P22 described this historical development of fans “The Club is almost 80 years old, it has a long standing history before we became involved and there is an established base of ‘hardcore’ fans who have been with the Club through thick and thin”. As a non-league club, this group are quite small, but they are growing. P18 also described three types of fans “you’ve got your cores, your interests, and the other ones in between”. Attendances of SCFC games example had grown from around 80 people in 2013/14 to an average attendance of

1498 on 09/11/16. This was also an 133.5% increase on the 2014/15 season (European football statistics, 2016). This growth is something that the Class of '92 were particularly proud of (Draper, 2016, p.329). He also observed that many of these people were also Manchester United or City fans but “we want to be their other team”.

Current fans or new fans were also used to describe a group of fans who were perhaps less engaged or less historically connected to the club and these tended to be more in number than the core fans. P10 described their largest group of fans that were not classed as members. This was much larger proportionately than the core member base described. P1 described this group of lesser-engaged fans as current fans. P1 said, “Current fans would say they are a fan of the club, but they don't go to every game. They might be fans of another club as well, so they'll come to some games, they might buy merchandise if you market it accurately at them – core fans will buy it anyway”. This conflicts with the earlier view by P11 that core fans could become cynical to marketing messages and merchandise, but there can also be difference between fans of different clubs in different leagues. For example, SCFC are a non-league club with a smaller amount of fans as opposed to a Premier League club. A club of a different size or location may support their club in a different way. In terms of SCFC and their strategy, P22 commented, “In terms of new fans that we are attracting and want to attract, digital communications is obviously much more important. We want to create something amazing at Salford City and we cannot do that in isolation. If we are to continue to grow, we need to share what we're doing with as many people as possible. This will form the basis of any communication strategy in the future”. This acknowledges the role of digital media in attracting new fans.

P1 identified a wider group of followers and commented, “If they are people showing an interest on this group and willing the club to do well, but supporting another team, my other employer would call them followers. The majority on Twitter are followers, they are interested, they're hoping we do well, they're watching the scores, if they were in the area, they would probably come to the game, they might buy a shirt to add to the collection, but it's not going to ruin their weekend if the club get beat”. P14 said, “Followers who aren't local to the club are going to use the digital platforms to engage and connect with the club because that's their only option. Whereas local fans can engage with the club both offline and online”.

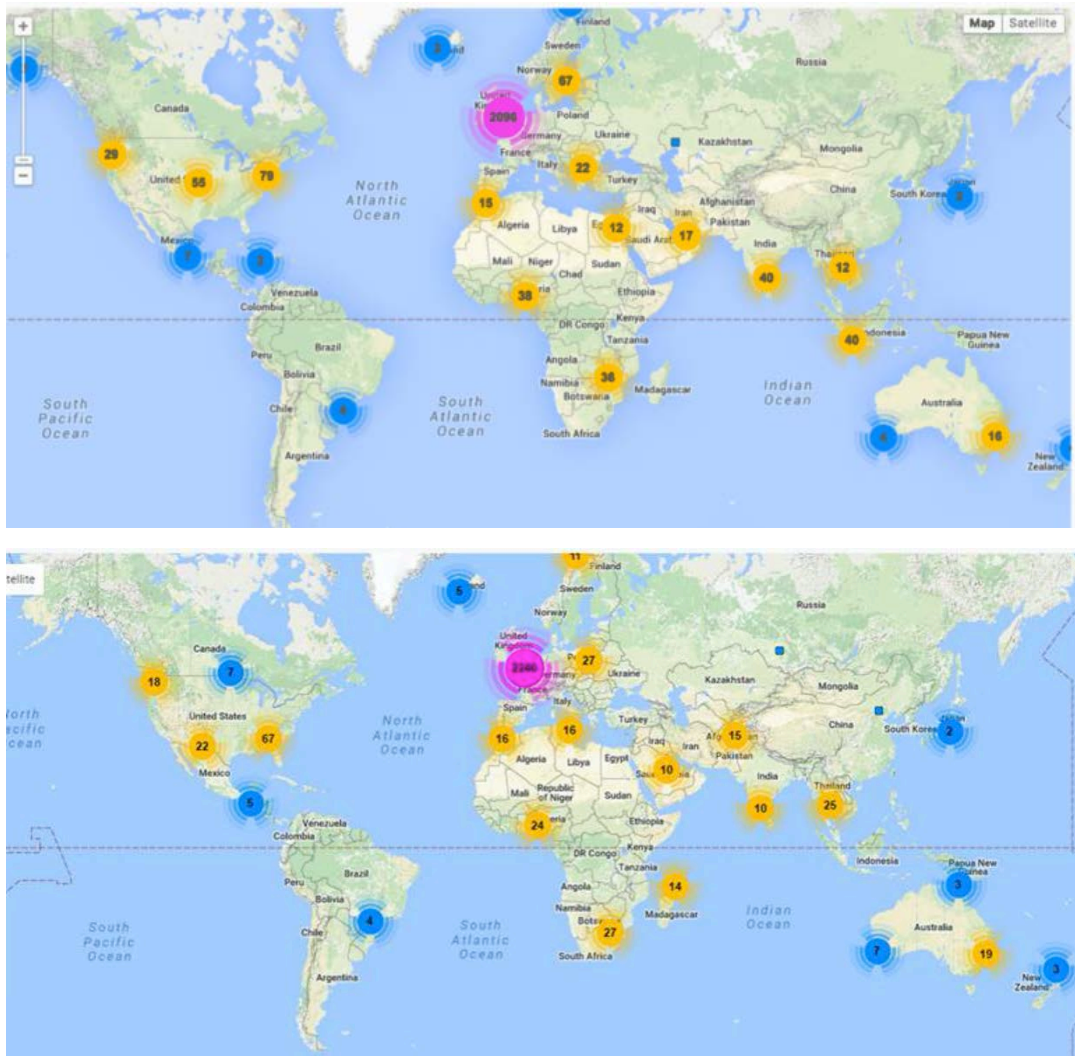


Figure 56 - Showing locations of SCFC Twitter followers in 2015 and 2017. This demonstrates that SCFC have Twitter followers in most parts of the world, but this global coverage is similar over the two years

| Geography | Watch time (minutes) 📉 ↓ | Views 📈 |
|----------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| United Kingdom | 1,681,155 (61%) | 549,141 (62%) |
| Indonesia | 295,043 (11%) | 87,379 (9.9%) |
| United States | 78,884 (2.9%) | 23,862 (2.7%) |
| Malaysia | 68,691 (2.5%) | 20,540 (2.3%) |
| Thailand | 42,030 (1.5%) | 11,855 (1.3%) |
| Singapore | 40,961 (1.5%) | 10,989 (1.2%) |
| Ireland | 40,943 (1.5%) | 14,238 (1.6%) |
| Australia | 40,076 (1.5%) | 11,625 (1.3%) |
| Tanzania | 29,204 (1.1%) | 7,706 (0.9%) |
| India | 26,974 (1.0%) | 7,402 (0.8%) |
| Nigeria | 24,873 (0.9%) | 6,353 (0.7%) |
| Kenya | 24,002 (0.9%) | 5,867 (0.7%) |
| Canada | 16,633 (0.6%) | 5,044 (0.6%) |
| Cambodia | 14,157 (0.5%) | 4,328 (0.5%) |
| Norway | 13,024 (0.5%) | 3,957 (0.4%) |
| Sweden | 12,885 (0.5%) | 4,924 (0.6%) |
| Spain | 12,713 (0.5%) | 4,131 (0.5%) |
| Germany | 12,536 (0.5%) | 4,425 (0.5%) |
| Hong Kong | 12,365 (0.4%) | 3,691 (0.4%) |
| Vietnam | 11,320 (0.4%) | 3,227 (0.4%) |

Figure 57 - A list of the top 20 countries watching SCFC's YouTube channel in January 2017. UK is top, followed by Indonesia and United States

SCFC had gained a significant number of Twitter followers from around the world. Using data visualisations such as the one above and SNA diagrams, international fans were identified; their social media posts studied and some were interviewed in more depth as discussed. The map visualisations above were generated from Followerwonk from SCFC's Twitter followers over a two-year period (2015 and 2017). No radical differences were found in the global split of fans over the two years, although the fan base had grown on Twitter, YouTube and other social media channels.

The amount of questions from new fans on social media had increased as the club has grown, P1 said, "People tweet, where do I buy tickets, so not only are they new fans, but they're also new to non-league football, otherwise they'd know that most non-league is pay on the turnstile, so they're new to non-league, which is brilliant! It's opening their eyes to a whole

new part of football, which is great and you quite often find, their eyes are open to it and they embrace it”. New fans were asking lots of questions on social media about the ground, prices, players and asking where they could buy shirts. Some of the ground and match questions were clearly from new local fans, but there were many others from international fans who wanted to support from afar. The below Tweet is from a SCFC fan who is also being asked lots of questions on social media by new fans. Fans do sometimes pitch in and answer questions posed by newer fans as part of the brand community. This is like a self-supporting system as it is sometimes impossible for the official volunteers and other account holders to answer all of the questions in a timely fashion. It is important to answer social media questions quickly and efficiently.



Figure 58 - A core fan remarks on Twitter about how many new fans are asking them about SCFC demonstrating the growing popularity of SCFC

The official SCFC account responded to a lot, but not all of the questions from new fans asking questions such as where to buy club shirts. Social media is providing a mechanism for communication and for people to help them climb the rungs of the ladder from social media follower, to current fan, to core fan. P25 verified this, talking about the value of reaching out to more weakly connected fans “You can encourage them, embrace them and nurture that relationship and turn them into a fan that tweets occasionally to a fan who thinks, I might come on a stadium tour off the back of that. It brings them up the rungs, reaching out to them in the first instance. May be an Indonesian fan, who likes every Premier League club, but none of them have communicated with them yet, if you’re the club that reaches out to them, you’ll be top of the list then because you made that effort to meet them”. This gives an example of football social media managers developing online social capital, but there were also examples of fans that were influenced by other fans to increase their social capital and the role of social media.

An example of this is from P23 who could be classed as a current fan who attends some games and follows on Facebook. His workmates now go to all of the games. He said “A guy from our work was on a video after a cup win so they all had a good laugh and he started following from there. Social media def [definitely] had an accident[al] influence on me. My

knowledge of big games etc. all came from there”. He continued to say that his workmates had moved to Salford from other cities, but the cheaper prices, family feel and social media had been influential in them now attending most games. They are on the road therefore to becoming season ticket holding core fans. About SCFC social media he said, “With the big clubs it felt like social media was a platform for them to make money. Salford’s was a lot more personal. People would always get replies from whoever ran the page. It made you feel part of the family”. This concept of family is a prevalent theme within the data and also relates to social capital and brand. Even though the social media and match attendances had grown, P23 still felt it had a personal, family feel, fostering new social capital. When a club grows rapidly such as SCFC, these questions and the funnel of new fans can be large. Social capital was woven in to his perceptions of the brand, which were important to him.

P1 commented, “I think the followers, you do then get people from further afield. So you’ll get a lot of those people who say “I’m following you from Dublin”, “I’m following you from”, they’re not likely to become regular match goers. But you will get people who say, ‘I’m coming over to Manchester, United are at home or City are at home on the Sunday, has Salford got a game on the Saturday?’ and then they’ll come. But this group are the ones who have gone from occasional to regular match goers, lots of examples of that”.

6.3.3. Fan types and communications

The findings showed that different segments of fans were associated with different types of communications and social media channels. For example, P1 said “a lot of the local people are tending to use Facebook over Twitter, because we’ve had it for a while and they stick with it. Updates are less in FB (Facebook). For match updates, local fans respond in Facebook. National and international definitely come from Twitter”. P18 said “I’d actually say that social media is more important for current [fans] and followers than it is for core fans because core fans, especially at a club this size, are usually involved to an extent in the club so they generally know what is going on anyway. Whereas current fans and followers, you sort of need to tell them a bit more about what’s going on”. “It’s still obviously vital for core fans, I mean they’re the ones you’re going to look after first and foremost but in this age of social media, it’s people who’ve got half an interest, I think particularly the ones who will be easier to capture in a way”. This suggestion highlighted different segments of fans and the fact that social media was an important tool for encouraging new fans to become core supporters.

P17 also commented on the value of segmenting fans “once you’ve got the core identity of who we are and who we’re not, you know stuff we will say and stuff we won’t say, then from that you can then start segmenting and that’s where your multiple voices are”. This statement highlighted the buyer persona identification. P17 continued to discuss the appropriate content for different buyer personas “So if I’m trying to encourage specifically new fans who are international, let’s say, who might have regularly heard about my club but might not know very much about it, then the content we do is going to be much more ‘this is our background’, ‘here is where we came from’, ‘this is what a new fan does’, and ‘let me introduce you to the players’.

As part of this study, some of these international fan types described by P17 were interviewed and this was contrasted with the views of communication managers. For example, P9 follows SCFC on Twitter only and said “I’m a staunch United supporter and a follower if not a fan of Salford City FC”. This is a similar story to the other international fans that were interviewed and evidence from online participant observation. International fans were often ardent supporters of larger clubs such as Manchester United and more weakly connected followers of other clubs such as SCFC. In the primary data collected, all of the international Salford followers were also Manchester United or Manchester City fans. Salford’s connection to the Class of ‘92 and therefore United was evident in these interviews, participant observation and the data gathered from SNA.

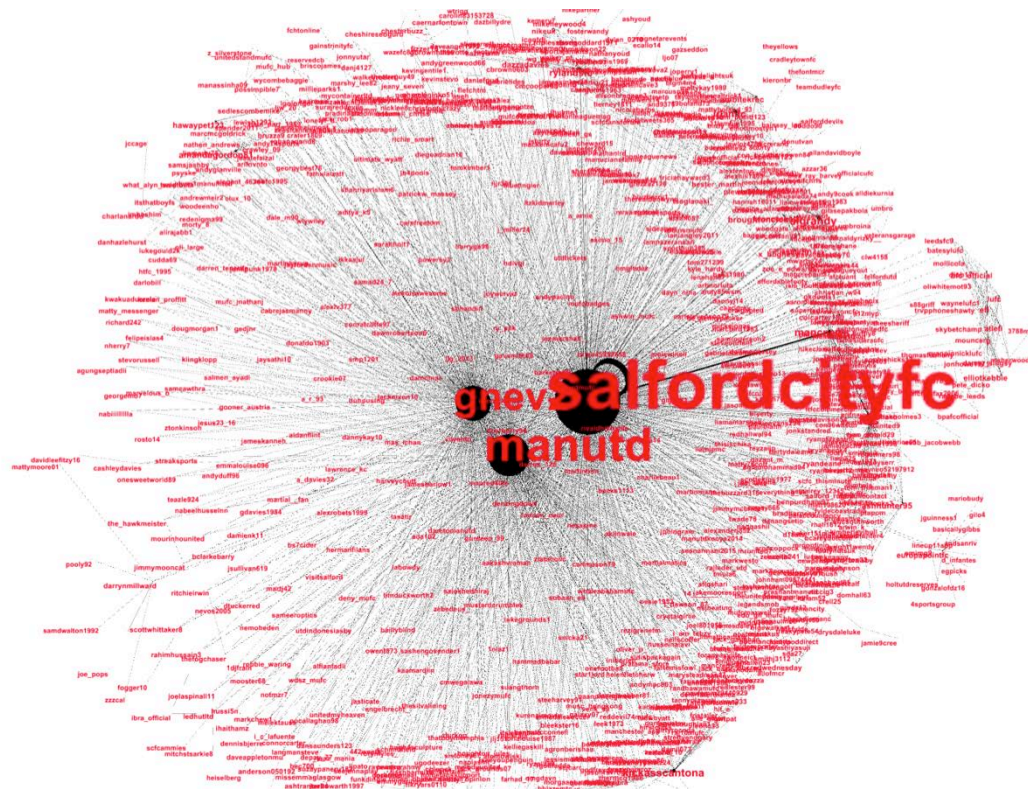


Figure 59 - SNA Diagram showing connection between brands Salford, Manchester United and Gary Neville

The above SNA diagram demonstrates the connections between these people and clubs. This is also reinforced by interview. P22 said, “we have a unique situation in that many of our fans will be fans of other football clubs, Utd., City for example”. Gary Neville (@gnev) and @manutd have many millions of followers from around the world. These international fans may not be able to get to games regularly, but they can be fiercely loyal, engaged, knowledgeable and passionate about their clubs. This ties in with P17 who reinforced this point in the context of social media and the use of different voices to appeal to those audiences “there are some fans who are domestic, who live near a club in the same city and have been a lifelong supporter, but their knowledge is actually pretty low, you know. But equally, you get the total opposite, you get somebody in Mumbai who is an insanely obsessive fan, because you always get those kinds of groups, and within those two extremes you need to find the different kinds of audiences. And social, one of the biggest benefits of it is that it gives you the ability to have multiple voices for multiple audiences”. So in fact, when it comes to fan communications, you could “segment your audience on the basis of knowledge and passion”. With clubs such as SCFC, most of the core fans are local, but they have created a large following on Facebook, YouTube and particularly Twitter. The owners of SCFC were very pleased with this and acknowledged the help of the University of Salford in this growth. However, P22 also said, “You can have as many followers as you like on

social media, but if you are not talking to them or vice versa, then the value of these numbers can be questioned”. SCFC were at the time communicating with new fans on social media that were asking questions such as “how much are tickets” and “where is the ground”. Meanwhile, the numbers of people attending matches and social media followers were going up. Social media in this case is helping to not only raise awareness, but also opens lines of communication, which is essential for growth.

In the future, if sponsorship deals increase, the fact that SCFC may have hundreds of thousands, or even millions of followers is another plus point for negotiations. Sponsorship has become a fundamental part of football. In Draper (2016, p.89), Paul Scholes was critical of this approach, “It’s all about sponsorship and money in England these days rather than football, rather than entertainment”. It seems that the Class of ‘92 and SCFC aimed to try and get ‘back to the heart of the game’ but of course, to meet their ambitions of bringing SCFC to the football league will require income and sponsorship deals are key to enable this.

Whilst the actual cash value of a lurker follower from India, Italy, USA or Russia etc. may currently be minimal on its own, it may have value in terms of sponsorship, broadcast rights and value to the brand. P17 said, “[if] they live in the Falklands or far flung or whatever, they’re never going to come to a game. But if you can build a relationship with them, maybe they’ll buy a shirt, maybe they’ll just become part of your audience and if you’ve got the audience, then you have the ability to monetise it through advertising and sponsorship”. P3 agreed with this sentiment saying, “I think they will be massively important if we crack the digital club side of things because in the long run, and again broadcast rights and red tape and everything else, if these people around the world can watch Salford City and can engage with them on the website and through apps then I think they would be massively important”. “I think the digital and the brand, definitely global spread is massively important”. Commenting on the difference between lesser connected fans locally and internationally consuming Premier League football, P24 said, “They used to get fans watching games in the Far East at 2-3 o’clock in the morning, large groups of people watching the games, the bars would stay open. They all bought shirts, I haven’t bought a shirt for years, my interaction is minimal. I would consider myself more of a fan than someone from Singapore because of my location”. This demonstrated that because P24 is geographically closer to a favourite club, this was significant his own perceptions of himself as a bigger fan than someone from abroad. The

bonding social capital between him and his friends and family in the area to the club meant that his perception was more closely connected to his club.

Other interviewees were a little more sceptical, for example P13 said, “it’s great that we can say we have 28k followers on Twitter – but how many of them actively take part? That is a question I would ask for all forms of social media in any business. As well as how can we engage them and get money out of them?”. This highlighted that whilst most people were positive about the value and benefit of social media followers, others were more sceptical and were more interested in immediate returns. This also maps to the question of whether social media followers are real and will be further discussed in the discussion chapter.

Other people saw social media as a long process. P18 believed that social media was having a positive effect on match attendances and believed that would continue to grow “the more people you’ve got following then you can attract more people to sponsor and advertise”. This ties in with the SCFC club owners perspective. P22 said, “Moving forward we want to understand more about our audience, why are they following us, where do they live, what do they want to see from us on social media, how do we make sure that they keep following, keep coming back, keep communicating. Once we understand the people following us, that’s where the value can be realised for all. We want to be able to have a meaningful relationship with our fans and for this to happen, we need to know who they are and why they are here”. These questions from the owners are pertinent to this thesis and its research questions and will be further explored in the following sections.

6.3.4. Fan types and changes over time

A number of the people were interviewed two or three times with six to twelve month gaps between each, this helped to address the idea of who fans are and why they are following over time. The international fans were interviewed a minimum of twice. This enabled the researcher to ask new questions and also ask what had changed since the previous interview with regard to their online behaviour with regard to SCFC. In all cases where this question was asked, the answer was that nothing had changed over the course of six to twelve months. Essentially, they were still following SCFC in the same way and had the same connection so could therefore be considered to be in the same fan group. In one case, P9 felt that his interest had waned since the initial excitement of the Class of ’92 take over. This is further explored in the next section.

As noted, the question arose from the SCFC owners regarding the international fans and followers. The fans interviewed were asked what kinds of things they would like to see on social media that would keep them coming back. There was a selection of suggestions from fans. P20 said, “Have players, managers, owners send them video messages via email, Twitter, etc. Use first name. Fans appreciate the recognition themselves. Live chats. When/if an international fan is able to attend a match the club can go a little further with some recognition. Most, if not all fans appreciate the recognition.” This shows the importance of interaction between fans through social media. P20 continued, “Perhaps recognize them on the club website....a club could have a tab on their club website that shows the picture of the fan and where internationally they are from”. P19 concurred with this, further demonstrating the importance of relationships and social capital between fans and the club, “Maybe a #askPlayer could be interesting!! Than more videos related to normal life in Salford connected with the football team just like the documentary on BBC!! Would be very interesting!! You can know better players and the community of Salford otherwise everything is limited to the football pitch and sometimes is very interesting knowing all the background!!” P9 concurred with this position “Interaction with supporters would be a big plus for us to keep coming back/ I think the owners can contribute too. By maybe showing a bit of a positive interaction with the supporters”. All three of these responses from international fans demonstrated that they wanted to feel more connected and see more interaction with the players and owners on social media. Use of social media video was also mentioned positively for engagement. The concept of building social capital through social media is further explored in the next section.

6.3.5. Question 3 summary

The interviews demonstrated that there are several types of fan. Some communications managers said that they do not segment fans, but most agreed that fans should be segmented based on loyalty and level of engagement. Three key segments were identified in the findings which are, core fan, current fan and follower. These three categories matched with Kantar, (2012). Core fans are the most passionate and most connected. Current fans are less connected and new fans are the weakly connected followers. In the case of SCFC, it was found generally that the lesser connected ‘followers’ tended to use Twitter, The ‘Current Fans’ were using Twitter and Facebook and ‘Core fans’ were using both of these and some were also using a club forum. Finally, it was found that a club that is growing such as SCFC

had an influx of new fans that were asking many questions, often via Twitter. Core fans were also getting involved in answering these questions. Social media in this case was proving to be an important mechanism for fan communications for the less connected new fan and was forming new connections and social capital. A large number of social media followers were also considered by all of the interviewees to be potentially useful for developing new fans and for potential sponsorship and broadcast rights. Finally, the SCFC owners were interested to know whom follower fans were on social media and what they were looking for from SCFC social media. The international fans interviewed in this study all responded similarly to say that they wanted to get to know the players and owners through more interaction on social media. This concept of the role of relationships and social capital is now explored in more depth.

6.4. Question 4 - What is the role of social capital in football online communities?

Social capital was used as a theoretical framework in this study and also as a distinct question in its own right to enable a thorough evaluation. There were 7 distinct sub-nodes created within the main node of social capital within Nvivo. The most coded node (the most popular one) was 'relationships matter' with 71 references across 15 sources.

6.4.1. Trust

As an attribute of social capital, themes relating to trust, friends and family and mistrust relating to football and online communities were seen as important by many interviewees. This was also a recurrent theme of the participant observation. An example of this is demonstrated in the Tweet below from a fan. Everyone 'making time' builds up trust and then this is expressed online through a public Tweet and retweeted.

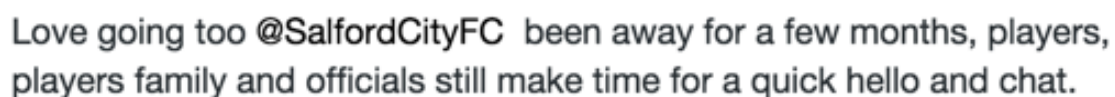


Figure 60 - A positive Tweet from an SCFC fan, which was also retweeted by the club

Trust and mistrust was a concept seen in several cases in the participant observation. There are two particular cases, which are worth noting. Firstly, an international fan who joined the SCFC Facebook group to ask about trials. Core fans responded negatively, accusing this person of being a fake account. They respond to say that their comments are painful. In this case, you can see that there is mistrust from a new international fan and the existing core fans. This was eventually diffused as the conversation went on and it became clear that they were genuine.

Its really painful that someone thinks my profile is fake and is telling me to leave the group. Guys whoever wishes me out of the group just give me a genuine reason and i will quit the group in good faith!!!!

👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share

Figure 61 - An international fan reacts after being shown mistrust when joining the Facebook group by core fans

The take over of SCFC by the Class of '92 was met with some scepticism from core fans. As time went on, core fans on the club forum began to demonstrate that even some cynical fans were beginning to believe that they had taken over the club for the right reasons and did genuinely care about the existing fans. Trust was developing and this was expressed and discussed through the unofficial club forum.

Core fans and bonding social capital

The growth of football clubs can pose challenges in terms of the existing core fans welcoming in new fans. Generally, this was perceived relatively positively by fans. This quote from P13 highlighted this issue, “when you’ve got a crowd of 70 people, so to speak, you virtually know everyone. Then all of a sudden you’ve got 300 people, you don’t necessarily know. And then you’ve got 1000 so to speak... that’s going to happen because the club is going to get bigger but a lot of people, in terms of the amateur football, a lot of people like that, in terms it’s a family”. This demonstrates the effect of bonding social capital (knowing everyone) to welcoming in new kinds of people on social media and offline. This also relates to bonding social capital relating to the concept of family as previously noted. P1 also highlighted the sudden influx of younger people, families and women where traditionally, fans had known each other and were primarily older, white males. “You’ve got families, you’ve got girls, young women, younger men, there was hardly any younger men, the only younger men at football was the team. There were no other younger male fans there and certainly there were no, and I mean NO other girls at all”.

This influx of new people could also lead to existing core fans feeling slightly threatened or marginalised online and offline. Social capital existed in a strong bond between the existing fans and this became threatened when there was an influx of new people who came from different backgrounds and were different kinds of people. Even though they were local people, they were new and different. We earlier explored the example of Southern fans entering SCFC Facebook groups and making cultural faux pas. These newer fans tended not

to use things like the club forum, which was used primarily by a small network of similar core fans that were often the longer term white male fans, which P1 referred to. P25 also highlighted that with the social media channels at their club, there were tensions between new and existing/core fans “we have the growing pains at the club, with existing fans, getting used to the fact we’re big and global and feeling like, they’re thinking the new fans are only here since we’ve been winning stuff and therefore they feel a bit of tension there”. This demonstrated that whilst linking capital and building up a new and international fan base was valuable for clubs, it did cause some scepticism between different groups of fans due to the changes and mistrust of new groups and cultural barriers. This also relates back to Putnam’s cyberbalkanisation concept of people in smaller groups interacting and the darker side of social capital as noted earlier. Social media were also seen as an enabler to build bridges and forge new social capital across geographical and cultural boundaries.

6.4.2. The influence of key players

Influential footballers and celebrities were found to have a positive effect on social capital online and offline. The effect of the relationship between fans and the Class of ‘92 for example was evident. On this subject, P3 said, “The lads have got huge pull in Asia, like in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore. They get swamped, mobbed when they go over there”. Also on a local level, “there are people, I only know of a few, who are now going down because of the lads being there, you know the lads have announced through Twitter that three of them will be there or one of them will be there, and that is bringing people”. P1 said that many people are following the Class of ‘92 on Twitter, but also the link between the BBC TV coverage and social media “if you didn’t follow Gary and Phil Neville you wouldn’t necessarily see what was going on. But with the BBC mentioning the club, and then players or ex-players from other clubs mentioning the club, you’re then bringing it to a new audience on social media, which has definitely helped”. The Class of ‘92 also agreed. Paul Scholes said “People who may not have heard of us [SCFC] before” and even people that did not like football were coming up and asking about the documentary and FA Cup run (Draper, 2016, p.325). “It captured the imagination”. Gary Neville also Tweeted, encouraging people to come to an SCFC game and have their picture taken with the FA Cup. Fans who take their picture with the FA Cup were also sharing this with their own friend networks on social media, which then reaches and has an influence on the key people and influencers within that network.

P1 also described the influence of the Class on '92 on Twitter for new and visiting fans who Tweet Gary Neville and say "Gary, are you coming today?" or Tweet and say, "Are any of the Class of '92 coming today?". So they'll like, it boosts up away attendances as well. We're usually one of the higher away attendances – not our fans, their fans hoping one of the Class of '92 are coming. So hopefully it's had a good knock on effect for a lot of people". To reinforce this, a comment from the club forum reads, "No matter what some people say or think, the Cof92 ARE a draw for kids and adults alike. At almost every away game, a fan from another posts a picture of his kid on social media with one of the Cof92 and an appreciative thank you to them". So while there is some scepticism about the involvement of the celebrity owners from some people, the Class of '92 had been generally well received and had encouraged more fans locally and internationally. This demonstrated that social capital could be built up and was influential to increase social media followers and interaction as seen in SCFC's growth of social media followers.

Discussing the point of the celebrity player, P14 said "Co92 are hugely influential to the club as they're well known across the world. With regard to [SCFC player] Gaz Seddon, a lot of people have engaged with the club as a result of seeing him on the documentary". Whilst some new fans may have tuned in because they are interested in the Class of '92, new fans also get to know new players such as Gaz Seddon initially through the documentary and then through social media channels such as Twitter. An interesting point to note is that social capital can be accumulated with a player, a club, or both. Sometimes, when the social capital is primarily with the player, the fan then can move their allegiance to the new club of the player. The Twitter post below is an example of this phenomenon in practise. A more weakly connected fan replied to the below comment saying that they wanted to watch Ramsbottom now that Gaz Seddon had moved there. Ramsbottom FC are a rival club to SCFC and responded to this fan comment on Twitter and invited the Gaz Seddon fan to become part of the #RammyFamily. From Ramsbottom's perspective, they can to some extent use the social capital and following that's been built up with his brand through the documentary and social media.



Figure 62 – A fan reacted to this post on Twitter when Gaz Seddon moved from SCFC to Ramsbottom FC

6.4.3. International fans and linking social capital

In the case of SCFC, they have acquired a lot of new fans on social media. Many of these new and international fans were using Twitter and had been influenced by the social capital connection between Manchester United and the Class of 92 and were therefore following SCFC. P20 for example expressed an interest in seeing more on social media behind the scenes of the club, building on the BBC documentary “Out of Their League”, which followed the players, owners and other people behind the club. The first episode was first aired on the BBC in the UK on 14 September 2016 but was available via iPlayer and on YouTube after this date. When asked what appealed about this to the international fan, they said, “Relationships. They are key to most every business”. Current fan P23 commented on the SCFC Facebook page, “You also come in to work and be asked if you saw such and such a post. Football fans are all about camaraderie so having that link to people is a good feeling. A few of the lads have met up with people at games that they have met through the Facebook page”.

The importance of relationships was a key factor mentioned by the interviewees with regard to social media. Those relationships were built up through interaction and getting to know others online. Knowing other supporters that were strongly connected to them (friends or

family) was particularly influential when it came to deciding whom to support and follow online for international fans. For example, fan P19 described how influential meeting a friendly person at a game was, “I think connection with [A core fan] was important (he also sent me a match programme when I got back to Italy), he made me feel real passion for Non-League football and for your local team”. However, P19 also said, “I don't think it's so important knowing other fan to be a great supporter. In my experience I feel a strong connection to the club because [it] is connected with a place I like to live in”. It was evident though that the small number of relationships that he made was important to him. He cited the story of a core fan who he met at the game and who explained the history of SCFC to him and this was a relationship that he continued online. He noted also the power of the Class of '92 abroad, “I think there are some Italians fan of English football in general who feel connected to Salford City just because they know that has been acquired by Giggs, Neville brothers etc”. Over time, P19 followed Salford from abroad but had watched the SCFC documentary on YouTube. Gaining an insight into the lives of the players and people associated with the club seemed to increase their connection and social capital to the club. To this end P19 said “You can know better players and the community of Salford otherwise everything is limited to the football pitch and sometimes is very interesting knowing all the background!!” Discussing social media and social capital, P20 agreed, saying that social media “has the potential to strengthen your relationship. Essentially it allows one to make friends w/o [without] physically meeting them.”

This connection to people, players and clubs can be established and strengthened online. Another international fan, P9 commented, “Knowing players personally isn't possible. So social media does it”. Reinforcing this point, another weakly connected international follower commented on how it made him feel to interact with other fans he didn't know on social media “I've found it appealing and/or exciting that ones you don't know 'like' a positive comment such as how you found me”. This comment also refers to the fact that the researcher found the interviewee through social media, which is also another positive connection to the club for this international fan and therefore increases social capital.

This is further demonstrated with comments such as this from P9 who described how he became a Manchester United fan from abroad “My father is a football fan and always liked to watch England play and especially David Beckham. So ManUtd fascinated him as well. I watched with him too”. The connection to his family, in this case his father is also notable.

With regard to social capital and social media, P9 also said, “The players seem closer than they are through the twitter feed. Constant media updates from the club always let me stay up to date with the Club. Salford FC is owned by our Legends, as you know. I came to know about Salford FC through @ManUtd (Manchester United). They are a Local club which can nurture talent at the grassroots of English football under the guidance of legends like Scholes and Giggs”. Another international fan (P20) said, “I’m a ManU fan and have been for years”.

This statement is typical of the international fans that often started supporting Manchester United and this led them to follow SCFC on Twitter. Note also that they use the @ symbol when referring to @ManUtd. This is interesting because the social capital built up between the online connection between this club now meant that the fan referred to them by their Twitter username as opposed to their official name or other shortened versions of that brand name. In this case, the brand had become interwoven with the Twitter username. The social capital between friends and family and the perceived connection to social media was also considered to be important by those interviewed. Some of the international fans were strongly connected with clubs such as Manchester United by following them through TV and social media. The use of the word ‘our’ in ‘our Legends’ also demonstrated the social capital bond that the fan felt to the Class of ’92, which is strengthened through social media. They found SCFC through their connection with @ManUtd. The use of the @ symbol demonstrates the connection forged through social media and brand associations. The brand name is fused with the Twitter username in the mind of the fan and their relationship with the club through social media.

Fans internationally have been following football clubs from a distance for decades, aided by global TV and press coverage. These distant fans may be highly loyal ‘superfans’, or may have a more passive interest and are weakly tied. If a fan is following a club on social media, it is a connection. This social capital connection can grow as the club grows. Social media interaction means that the individual can interact with the club, other fans or their friends, which can help to develop a stronger connection with the club. The more their connections discuss that club, the more the social media algorithms deliver more about it so that it dominates timelines, increasing the connection to the club. Over the course of the study, a second interview with P9 a year on highlighted that their interest in SCFC had waned, “Not much life on social media. I mean not many of my followers are Salford FC fans. So not many RTs (Retweets) come thru to my TL (timeline). I do follow them..but I’m not aware of

their schedule most of the time. They need a better image on social media. A bigger image”. Because none of their Twitter followers and friends were also following and discussing SCFC, the Twitter algorithm delivers less about SCFC to their timeline. The SNA diagram below illustrates the Twitter interactions of an international SCFC follower who is an avid Manchester United supporter. The primary interactions shown below are with Manchester United fans, players and hashtags. A further search on Twitter revealed that this follower had made some initial Tweets relating to SCFC in 2014/15, but then nothing for over two years. They are still following SCFC, but not interacting. The diagram below shows the SNA connections of an international Manchester United fan on Twitter who is also following SCFC. It demonstrates that the fan is using the Manchester United Hashtag and Tweeting another club, Real Madrid. It also illustrates that if there is no interaction with SCFC and its fans, then SCFC will effectively be drowned out of their Twitter timeline.

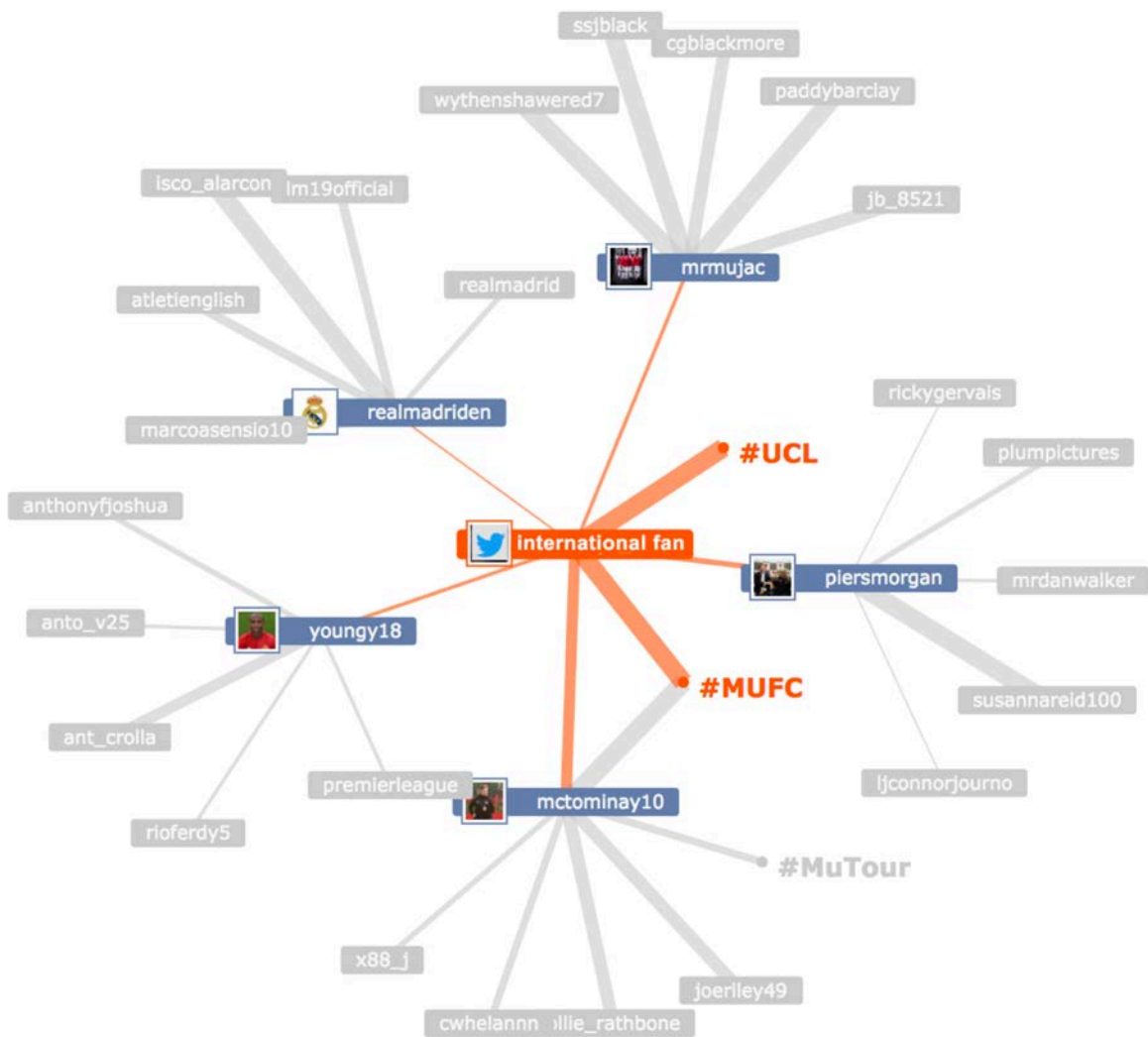


Figure 63 - Mentionmapp SNA diagram of the Twitter interactions of an international SCFC follower who supports Manchester United. The thicker lines show more conversations.

Essentially, if there was a lack of social capital, this was having an adverse affect on the visibility of the SCFC brand. P25 verified this saying, “If they want algorithms to give them what they want, they have to find their place, within the social capital and built up in order to build up and get what they want from the platforms”. P9 built on this from a fan perspective, “I would like to see frequent media updates from Salford city football club on twitter and Facebook maybe interaction with supporters would be a big plus for us to keep coming back. I think the owners can contribute too by maybe showing a bit of a positive interaction with the supporters”. In this case, P9 was feeling a lack of social capital and social media interactions and content. An increase in this would give more exposure to the SCFC brand and potentially strengthen his connection to the club.

P17 also discussed the importance of social capital to the social media algorithms “the way the algorithm works is, all systems have some kind of profiling or are working on it. On that basis, it’s important from the club’s perspective to have all those different types of people engaged because then the more people who are engaged the more it proves to the algorithm that there’s a distribution of net worth, that people are relevant and therefore it raises the profile”. “Unless you’re putting a lot of video and doing media spin behind it, basically your stuff is never going to get seen. And that’s obviously a problem. Connecting those fans up is also a good thing, because the more connected they are on social the more the system recognises the value and then rewards the club appropriately”. This also highlighted the connection between digital content and the algorithm and the connections this creates. P17 continued, “The relationships are essential. They call it social media for a reason”. Social media in this case are tightly bound with the social capital that existed around football clubs as brands. If there is no discussion and no connections, then the social media algorithms were showing less content.

Football social media manager P25 verified that reaching out to more weakly connected fans directly by commenting on their profile pictures was something that they wanted to do more of, but it would require more staff resource. “Going in there building strong relationships is something that I’m really keen to do. Building individual relationships will be super valuable with people, and resonates particularly at a new fan level”. P25 also outlined their plans to engage more lurkers by reaching out to them, “We’re going to look this season to be a little bit more inspired by the general election, knocking on doors, so rather than sitting back and expect fans to interact with our output, proactively go in there and give them individual

experiences, which harbour a more valuable relationship with the club. Deep down there are numbers and people in there and not just commodities and resource at your disposal as an audience”. This is an important point. Not only are they advocating engagement, but also reaching out directly to weakly connected fans. This resonates also with the views of the lurker fans interviewed.

6.4.4. Question 4 summary

With the data captured in this study, social capital was found to be an important factor for the success and growth of social media football communities. Like-minded, core fans often have a strong bond between them and the word family is often used to illustrate this. Many of the regular match attenders will know each other and are similar people from a similar place. When a club grows, this can lead to an influx of new fans online, which may be somewhat different to the core fans in terms of their race, gender or age. This can lead to some unease amongst core fans, but an increase in attendances is generally viewed as positive. The themes of trust and mistrust online were explored. Trust can be developed and discussed through social media channels and forums. Mistrust can be shown to club owners or new fans through these channels and content by core fans.

New fans can be attracted by the social capital between other more popular clubs and well known players or celebrities. Social media helped them to connect and develop trust with those people and brands (new fans and old). Social capital was also found to be important for the weakly connected fans locally and from other parts of the world. International fans thrive on following well known football clubs and players on social media and this helps to strengthen their connection with them and increase social capital.

If a club is not active on social media in terms of producing appropriate content for the fans and increasing their relationships with and between fans through interaction, then this will be a hindrance to the growth of their followers. The social media algorithms penalise club brands that do not build up social media capital. They reduce the amount of visible content for weakly connected fans that do not also interact with other fans of the same club brand. So essentially, if the fan does not find other fans of that club over time and increase their connection, then the club will become more invisible on social media. Social capital is therefore key to club brands and social media. If social capital and interaction is high, social media channels reward this and show more content through their algorithms, which could in

turn further increase visibility and increase the strength of the connection. Clubs were also interested in the idea of reaching out directly to more weakly connected fans and developing social capital with them so that they could potentially become more strongly connected. Fans build social capital with players, owners and clubs through social media. Their interactions strengthen their connection and brands become interwoven with social media.

6.5. Summary of findings

The table below synthesises the key findings for the four research questions using the empirical data from this study to produce results.

| Research Questions | Results |
|---|---|
| 1.How is social media being used by football clubs and their fans for branding? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UK football clubs at all levels are using primarily Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and a club website to communicate with fans and share digital media • Clubs are using these channels to engage with fans by producing useful content • Fans were also setting up their own channels and posting digital media content to fuel conversations • There are official and unofficial channels that make up the sometimes geographically dispersed brand community of a club • Depending on their location and culture, different fans want to start their own channels and this can sometimes cause conflict between fans and clubs and fans and fans in a territorial sense. |
| 2.How does social media influence brand communications of football clubs? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A club website and channels such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter were important for brand communications to spread the word about the club • Brand communications came from both official channels and unofficial channels • Celebrities are a powerful force in influencing online brand communications • The more social media followers there are, the more the ratio of negative social media posts can also rise • Twitter had the most followers and the most negative posts as it is an open, public network |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public communications online form part of the brand communications of the club. The more public and visible this is, the more impact it has • Social media rituals exist online and these can carry offline into club chants and vice versa • Social media have a large influence on the brand communications of football clubs. |
| <p>3. How can communications be managed according to fan segmentation?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fans can be segmented based on loyalty and level of engagement • Three key segments were identified from the data, core fan (strongly connected), current fan and follower (weakly connected) • Fan segmentation can help clubs to understand which channels and content different fans use and what type of content and approach to use • Social media provides a vital mechanism for managing fan communications for the lesser connected new fan • More strongly connected core fans also answered questions of new fans on social media • A large number of social media followers (including weakly connected fans) were considered to be very useful commercially in order to increase fans and sponsorship deals • Fans can make recommendations to clubs about the kinds of social media content and interactions that would further engage them • Clubs should take on board these recommendations and look at ways to be more interactive with weakly connected followers to strengthen relationships using social media. |

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| <p>4. What is the role of social capital in football online communities?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social capital is an important factor for the success and growth of online football communities • There can be a high presence of social capital between core fans and this can be strengthened through online communities • Family was identified as an important theme in the findings. It was referred to many times by different participants and users of social media as an influential factor for supporting a football club • New fans can be attracted globally by the social capital developed between other more popular clubs and well known players or celebrities through online communities • Social media algorithms penalise the weakly connected club brand • Clubs were interested in reaching out directly to more weakly connected fans in order to develop social capital and increase the strength of connection. |
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Figure 64 - Table showing the synthesis of the findings from primary data

7. Discussion

7.1. Introduction

So far, the relevant literature has been reviewed and the primary data findings have been presented. This discussion chapter brings these together using a crystallisation approach (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005) as described in the methodology chapter. This combination aims to illuminate whether the findings support or contradict the literature in order to develop theory.

7.1.1. Symbolic netnography

In the methodology chapter, it was highlighted that Robert Kozinets outlined four types of netnography (Kozinets, 2015, p.250). This thesis had a connection to digital netnography because of its use of tools and large social media datasets. Digital netnography however is more technical and computer assisted with the primary focus on the tools rather than the human roles. This thesis did use some technical tools such as NodeXL and Nvivo. However, it primarily used a human role to represent the interaction of a particular group online to seek principles and meanings. Therefore, its natural place is with symbolic netnography. Kozinets (ibid.) represented this type of netnography using the symbol of the Tree of Life. “From the Tree echoes the world of whispers, the millions of conversations containing images, video, texts, sounds, captures, retweets” (ibid. p.250). It is from this ‘pot pourri’ of social exchanges that rich insights are derived in this thesis.

7.1.2. Torch beam illumination

In terms of focus, the tree has many branches, leaves and potential directions. Therefore, in this study, the torch beam metaphor is introduced below in order to commence the discussion chapter and demonstrate the focus of this thesis. The aim of the study was to illuminate the answer to the research question and to create theory. It is also necessary to tighten the scope of the study to shine the light on a particular situation and timeframe from the billions of people and social media interactions on the Internet. The diagram shown below illustrates the torch beam, shining downwards from the research question, focussing this thesis to create theory. The beam illuminates the pathway of netnography and secondary data, focused by a theoretical framework of social capital as a lens on the data and influenced by the bodies of literature developed around the disciplines of digital marketing, IS and their combination.

How does social capital affect the social media communications of a football club brand?

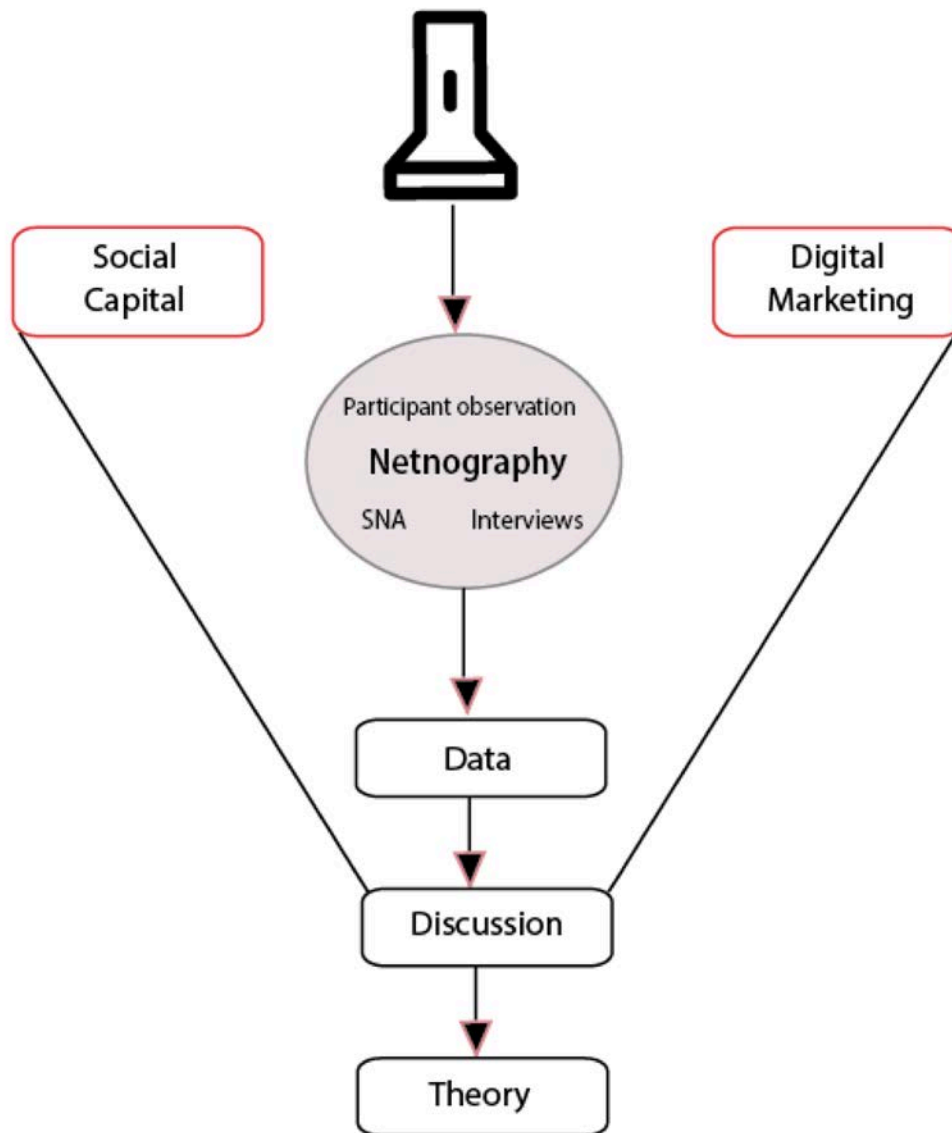


Figure 65 - Conceptual model showing the torch beam shining from the research question focus illumination on the study to create new theory.

As a metaphor for this interpretive study, crystallisation enabled multiple sources and approaches to shed light on the research questions to create theory. The torch beam is the source of this light, but also maintains focus when the crystal directs the beam in a myriad of potential directions. With any PhD, focus is key – the illumination must effectively answer the research question and create theory. The sub-research questions make up the overall research question in this thesis. The findings chapter presented the primary data against these four sub-research questions and from this, themes were drawn out in the summary through a

narrative and synthesis table. These themes were highlighted in the findings chapter and now feed into this discussion chapter, which blends the key literature with the findings.

7.1.3. The buyer persona spring and brand communications

In the literature review, it was highlighted that social media channels and content form a key part of the brand communications of football clubs. The buyer persona spring (Heinze et al, 2016) below was presented as a dynamic model to better understand the role of social media strategy to connect organisations to buyer personas. The buyer persona spring shows the buyer persona at one end of the spring and the organisation at the other end.

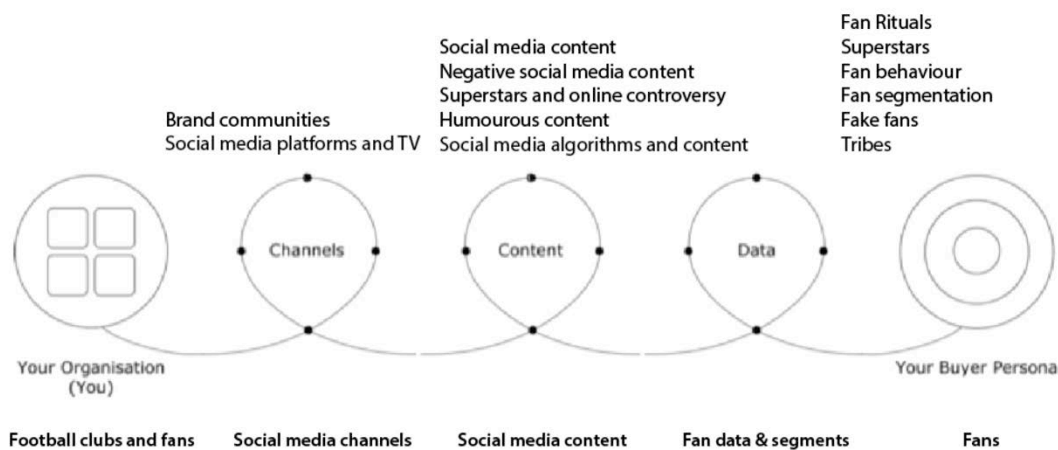


Figure 66 - The buyer persona spring altered for this thesis, adapted from Heinze et al (2016)

In the buyer persona spring application in this thesis, the organisations are football clubs and the buyer personas are fans. Social media, digital content, and the research data derived from the three interior coils of the spring (channels, content, data).

7.1.4. The buyer persona spring and social media football communities

Football clubs and their fans are using social media channels and producing digital content in order to create lasting relationships (Kuzma et al., 2014). In the literature review, social media was demonstrated as vital to the digital marketing of football clubs in order to reach their buyer personas (McCarthy et al., 2014; Heinze et al., 2016). The findings also demonstrated that social media and content is key to the brand communications of clubs. The primary data also concurred with this. P7 for example said, “Everything associated with the club including its digital communications channels can be considered to be the brand communications of the club”. P5 highlighted that interactivity using social media was fundamental to the unique selling points of clubs. The findings presented supported the use of

the buyer persona spring's channels, content and data as key elements for the digital marketing of football clubs.

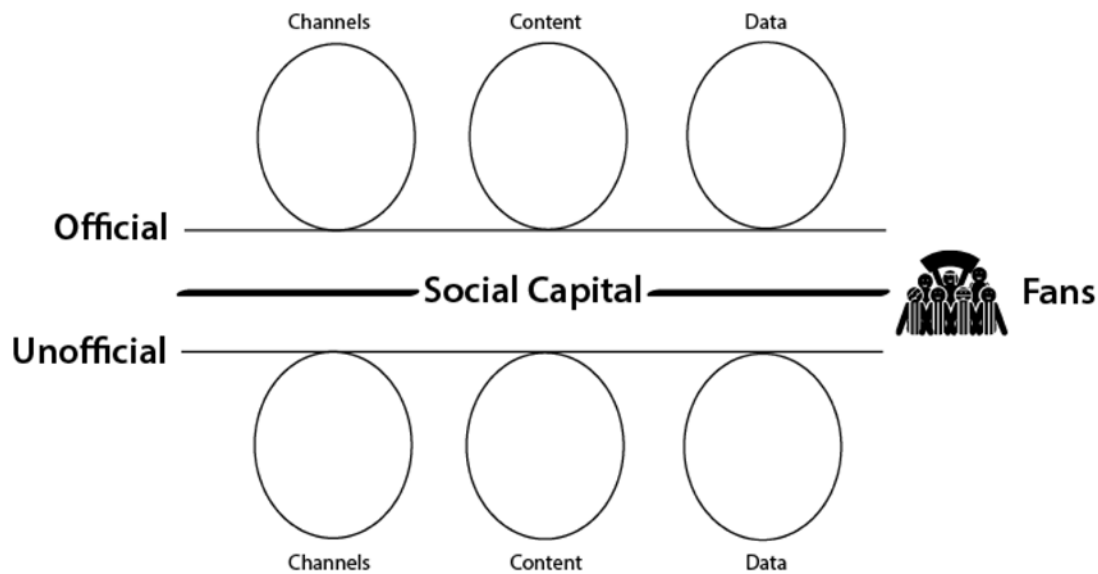


Figure 67 - The buyer persona spring further adapted for online football communities

The diagram above shows a further adapted version of the buyer persona spring, which includes official and unofficial brand communications using channels, content and data to reach fans. Both official and unofficial have the same goal to reach fans of different segments and both use social capital to underpin their digital and social media marketing efforts. Channels, content and data are highlighted as the three coils of the spring. These three were used in order to thematically structure the digital marketing literature review. It was found that these enable official and unofficial social media communications to become closer to fans through the development of social capital. The word ‘official’ in the diagram above refers to football clubs official media departments, which are affiliated or employed by the club. Social media also allows unofficial communications and in both cases, channels, content and data, underpinned by the development of social capital are used to reach fans effectively. The official and unofficial channels are further explored below.

7.2. Social media, smartphones and football

In the case of SCFC and many other football clubs, social media were fundamental to allow clubs and fans to interact online. It was highlighted in the findings that with the growth of smart phones and social media in the era of web 2.0, fans are able to consume and easily co-create digital content quickly by taking photographs, video and sharing content. Social media apps and smartphones also made easy for them to set up unofficial channels where they could

share and discuss this content. Before the social media channels of today, it was much more difficult to do this and it required more technical skills (Finkbeiner, 2013). The digital tools, increased broadband speeds and mobile connectivity that fans have today (Rainie and Wellman, 2012), enable them to become more networked and to create unofficial brand communications and interact with official communications. Fans are always connected through smartphone and social media apps and are hyperdigitalized (Lawrence and Crawford, 2018). Both primary and secondary sources concurred that fans are more networked and have more tools to be able to create and manage channels and content. Social media analytics also provide them with data, which can be used to inform the other parts of the buyer persona spring.

In the literature review, it was found that smartphones have fuelled a large increase in the usage of social media by football clubs and fans globally (McCarthy et al., 2014; Cave and Miller, 2015). Kuzma's observation in 2014 was that "most football clubs have some social media presence, such as the number of Facebook likes, Twitter tweets and YouTube videos" (Kuzma et al., 2014, p.728). Clubs and fans were also experimenting with new channels including image sharing channels such as Instagram and Pinterest (Helleu, 2017). Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) also found that Instagram was being used by football clubs to create communities. They found that these online communities were fostering belonging between fans and clubs. In the findings section 5.4, it was found that football clubs at all levels were using a club website and social media channels and content including text, image, video and other digital media. UK football clubs at all levels were using channels Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, club forums and a club website to communicate with fans and share digital media. It was found through interviewing communications managers that clubs were using newer channels such as Instagram. It was also found that clubs were experimenting with other channels and content. In the findings, P20 made it clear that the social media channels used by football clubs varied also depending on the country. This tied in with the buyer persona spring and the idea of choosing the right channels to connect with the buyer persona, informed by data as outlined in section 2.4.

7.2.1. Official and unofficial channels

In the literature review, it was highlighted by McLean and Wainwright (2009) and McCarthy et al. (2014) that there are official club websites and social media channels. There are also unofficial channels, which are set up for a variety of reasons by fans around the world. The

findings (section 5.4.3) presented some examples of these official and unofficial channels and the conflict this can cause, which concurred with the literature on this topic. In the literature review it was also presented that fans could be local, national or international (Kantar, 2012). This resonated with the findings section where unofficial channels are being used by local fans, regional and international channels such as ‘The Salford Fans of Russia’. Depending on their location and culture, different fans want to start their own social media channels and this could cause conflict between fans and clubs, and between fans of different segments in a territorial sense.

Both official and unofficial channels form the brand communications of the club brand, but the primary data demonstrated that it was the official accounts that generated the most social media interaction in this study. In the literature review, it was found that sports fans consume information about their team from unofficial fan-based followership, official team-based and mainstream media. Lewis et al. (2017) found that, “mainstream outlets were the most-frequently utilized by sports fans, followed closely by team-based accounts” (p.212). In the primary data findings, the unofficial groups were the least followed. Lewis et al highlighted that unofficial channels tend to be less followed because of the “perceived lack of a correlate to player-specific information and interaction” (p.122). The primary data also concurred with Lewis (2017) in that the official SCFC social media channels had more interaction and followers than the unofficial fan led channels. For example, the official SCFC Twitter channel had 109,000 followers in June 2017 and comparatively, the unofficial @scfcfansforum had 723. @Salford_City_FC was another unofficial channel, which had 907 followers.

The unofficial fan run sites and channels sometimes lacked the kind of information, professionalism and interaction with players that the wider fan base craved. In the findings section however, it was found that P24 and P25 highlighted that with larger clubs, the unofficial channels had started to become more popular and professional. These channels were able in some cases to talk about things that the clubs could not and to break news stories faster. This is an area that conflicted with the literature presented and findings from SCFC. It may be that as time goes on and SCFC grow, key influencers and unofficial channels will also grow in the same way, but in the period of study, this was not found to be the case. These online communities have changed the structure of communications, enabling more direct, timely communications (Miah, 2017).

7.2.2. Social media channels and disruption

In the literature review, the work of Rainie and Wellman (2012) and Castells (2010) demonstrated that through use of the Internet and social networks, society has changed. We have moved from the industrial age of small groups to that of the networked society and networked individualism. These changes are causing some disruptive effects. In (section 2.3), it was highlighted that social media are having disruptive effects on football clubs. Clubs were asking questions about how best to use social media channels, which were also considered to be disruptive by some clubs (section 5.6.3). Miah (2017, p.83) highlighted the ability of social media to change the structure of communication to allow more direct communications between sports clubs, brands and fans. This ties in with the primary data in this study where fans interacted directly with owners, players and other fans through official and unofficial channels (see section 5.4.3). P24 and P25 (section 5.6.3) both highlighted the disruptive effect that unofficial channels had on football club official brands. Fan led unofficial channels were becoming better followed, more professional and were able to break news and say things before the official accounts were able to. Social media channels and the changing behaviour of fans through digital technologies therefore was found to be causing disruption for football club brands.

7.2.3. TV and social media channels

The literature demonstrated that smartphones had radically changed media consumption (Rowles, 2017). It was also found that social media have been held responsible for disruption to the traditional TV consumption of football by distracting viewers from the game (Miah, 2017). There was also a decline in football viewing figures of the EPL and Champions League, with social media and changing fan behaviour cited as reasons for this (Lawrence and Crawford, 2018). The literature showed that this could potentially impact on lucrative TV rights deals in the future (Gibson, 2016). It was found in the literature review that this integration of sporting media consumption from TV to social media channels and the use of second and third screen viewing, will continue to alter the way in which people consume and enjoy football (Miah, 2017, p.240). The literature also presented some opposition to these changes. For example, the reservations of sports businessman Mark Cuban criticised the habit of second screen viewing.

In the findings, section 5.7.3 it was found that fans were extensively using social media and smartphones but TV had also had a positive effect on social media and fan support. P1 for

example, noted the benefits of the BBC SCFC documentary and then enhanced by the interactive nature of social media. After SCFC were on TV, social media allowed for the club and fans to be able to interact and speak to potential new fans. The Class of '92 often drew in new fans to then follow on social media. In the findings, it was also highlighted that on social media, international fans had cited this BBC coverage as a positive thing, strengthening their interest in SCFC. They were also consuming this TV content through channels such as YouTube and discussing through various social media channels. These televised events created high levels of emotional content. TV and video content therefore were found to be important, but the way in which TV is passively consumed in the past by fans was changing towards interactive, social media consumption.

7.2.4. Social media content

The introduction chapter (section 1.7) highlighted that football clubs are increasingly using digital content to help engage fans, create opportunity and stay ahead of the competition (Chadwick, 2009). In the literature review (section 2.7.2), it was found that football clubs are examples of brands with large volumes of highly engaged fans, which provides an increasing opportunity to engage with fans globally (McCarthy et al., 2014). This tied in with the findings and in particular, interviewees P16 and P18 as outlined in the findings section. P18 for example said, "Social media allows you to reach out to all four corners of the globe".

The primary data presented concurred that clubs were asking about how best to use social media content to improve their brands (see section 1.17). In the literature review, it was highlighted that Hudson et al (2015) found that this kind of content was important in creating positive brand perceptions and Araújo et al. (2014) found for football clubs, video and photographs got the highest level of social media interaction. The findings concurred with this position, showing that both the official and unofficial social media communications were using video and photographs extensively to engage people.

7.2.5. Social media video

In the literature section 2.3, the literature showed that social media video was an increasingly popular form of content for football clubs to engage with fans (McLaren, 2017). Parganas et al. (2017) found that football clubs were using YouTube and were also experimenting with live video streaming. In the findings chapter, there were a number of examples stating the importance of digital media video content. P1, P5 and P17 all mentioned YouTube video content as fundamentally important for engaging fans. For example, P1 said that their clubs

are “using a combination of videos on YouTube and social media channels”. In the findings, it was also notable that weakly connected fans also mentioned video as an important way for them to build a stronger connection to a club through social media. The primary data concurred with the literature, but at the time of this study, live video streaming was not something used by SCFC through participant observation or interview. SCFC were however sharing video clips on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram in order to engage their audience. Larger clubs were experimenting with live video streaming. McLaren (2017) recommended that clubs should have a YouTube channel rather than using Facebook for video as Facebook “is geared up for one-off interactions rather than community building”. This also tied in with the primary data in this study where SCFC were using both channels. Even some larger clubs like Manchester United did not have a YouTube channel at the time of writing.

7.2.6. Online controversy and brand communications

In the literature review section 2.6.2, an incident was described where ex-Manchester United player Rio Ferdinand was critical of current player Paul Pogba’s behaviour on social media and then retracted his comments saying that times had changed (Lovett, 2017). Ferdinand had over 8 million Twitter followers in 2017 and had a history of sometimes posting controversial and insulting Tweets (Wilson, 2014). These incidents also resonated with the findings, where SCFC players and staff were involved in negative social media incidents which were also described in Draper (2016). The literature also gave some other cases of celebrities who have done the same thing and created a story for fans.

The chairman of SCFC and player Hulme could be classed as micro celebrities because they were associated with The Class of ’92 and SCFC on social media and TV. The fact that they are associated with a macro celebrity such as Gary Neville and the Class of ’92 meant that negative incidents on social media could be amplified. Draper (2016) outlined that Neville was cautious about them damaging the reputation of SCFC and Class of ’92 through social media. SCFC is the brand that connects them together. In the literature, it was shown that deleting a controversial Tweet or account, even within seconds is no escape because journalists and others will take screenshots and respond. For players, fines and bans are then strongly enforced. Individuals such as Joey Barton increase their reach and personal brand gaining more followers because they are controversial. Clubs however want to reach their buyer persona by having a stronger brand image and therefore seek to prevent brand damage. As such, clubs increasingly issue social media policies, fines and rules for players. A

distinction can also be drawn between friendly banter and abusive posts from trolls, which can be vitriolic, and cause offence to individuals and weakness in the brand. Banter on social media can also be a positive thing for raising brand awareness and exposure. Given the large number of Retweets and Likes such Tweets can generate, brands can also use trolling and banter to their advantage to reach their buyer personas (Fenton and Chadwick, 2016).

7.2.7. Trolling and brand communications

The literature review demonstrated that football clubs continue to learn more about how to use these social media, avoid the pitfalls and maximise the potential to enhance their brands (Chadwick, 2009). Mckenna et al. (2016) highlighted that the growing Internet population, has also attracted an increasing number of trolls. These people attack other individuals and brands. A higher quantity of followers and higher brand exposure can also increase the amount of negative brand communications via social media (De Vries et al., 2012). This mapped to the findings, for example, P18 said, “As brand awareness increases, so do the amount of people who are going to look for a fault or a weakness”. In the ‘Class of ’92 Out of their League’ book where team manager Anthony Johnson said, “because of who the owners are. They want to see you fail” (Draper, 2016, p.13). Aside from the positive interactions and relationships within brand communications, there were also negatives. An SCFC forum comment read “An unfortunate consequence I think of our "new found" fame, expectations raised higher and the bigger the following the more "trolls" we attract”. This was also verified through participant observation online where people from rival clubs and trolls attacked the club and people associated with it. There were also internal attacks where for example, fans were calling for the club manager Phil Power to leave via the official club forum as Gary Neville observes in Draper (2016, p.147). These vitriolic attacks were deemed not appropriate for the club brand and so, the club closed down the official forum. Hayes and Carr (2015) found that organisations and PR professionals are increasingly trying to limit these negative communications by restricting negative comments whilst others accept this as part of the authenticity and transparency of communications. This concurs with the findings of this study where such negative incidents were tackled. For example, the closure of the SCFC forum, deleting of the chairman’s Twitter account and email sent round to players about social media conduct as outlined in the findings section 5.5.2. Trolling therefore is part of building a brand on social media.

7.2.8. Guardians of the brand

In their study of EPL clubs, McCarthy et al. (2014, p.192) found that, “all cases were slowly moving away from the lack of transparency in their dealings with fans, to a degree of openness”. Football clubs were concerned about control over posts, which could negatively affect the brand. McCarthy et al suggested that this is because clubs considered themselves as guardians of the brand and the primary data in this study also resonated with this position. For example, P7 referred to their club building a brand and P1 elaborated on the problem of negative online brand communications and how their club had to close down the official club forum for this reason. For SCFC, their Twitter channel compared to the other channels had the largest quantity of followers. The primary data from participant observation and interviews showed that this network also contained a large quantity of negative social media posts. This was particularly prevalent at times where brand exposure was high, such as when SCFC were picked by the BBC to screen two of their FA cup games as outlined in section 5.5.2. Hundreds of negative posts about SCFC surfaced on Twitter in particular. There were also a lot of positive posts about the club to balance this and it also increased SCFC’s social media following substantially. Negative posts were most prevalent on Twitter in comparison to other social networks because this was the most open public network and also had the most followers. These open digital communications and interactions (positive and negative) form part of the brand communications of the club. The primary data tied in with secondary to show that there is openness in the networks and the way in which fans deal with clubs and yet, clubs are still the guardians of the brand, intervening and dealing with some of the negative sides of social media with the time and resources they have.

7.2.9. Social media training

There were some specific cases in the findings section 5.5.2 where there was a backlash of negative social media posts along with the positive posts when SCFC were featured on TV. At non-league level, when budgets are very tight and most people are volunteers, the idea of social media training and guidelines could be difficult to execute. P11 said, “With the right training, with clear social media guidelines and policy [this is] something that Salford City will need to think about”. It could also be reactive, e.g. an incident happens and then something is done about it in response to that incident. This could be a simple email, a club social media policy or training. In the case of a non-league football club, players and staff are part time and usually have other jobs. Time and budgets therefore can be limited compared to the time and resources that larger clubs have. It was suggested from the primary and

secondary data that players and other club staff should receive social media training in order to help build the brand and limit the possibility of damaging it. It is necessary therefore to have the proper social media policies and training in place for players and club staff in order to positively build the brand.

7.2.10. Social media data and football

In the findings chapter 2.7, it was found that football clubs are using social media channels such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. These channels were used for brand communications and digital marketing. In order to effectively use these channels and content, it is also necessary to gather data from these channels. This data helps “teams gain an understanding of what various teams use and how it may help increase communications with fans” (Kuzma et al., 2014, p.728). This includes social media analytics (quantitative) data and also data gathered qualitatively through various routes including commercial and academic studies as explored in the literature review. Netnography was found to be an effective way of gathering and analysing qualitative data from online football communities. Gathering data gives insight to further improve the content and channels, which enables the spring to be pulled tighter, connecting the brand to the buyer persona.

7.2.11. Celebrity influence on digital media communications

Popular players and celebrities attracted interest from local and international fans on social media (Hoegle et al., 2014). The literature section 2.7.5 showed that celebrities could be a powerful force in influencing online brand communications. The use of social media enables fans to connect directly with celebrity players and owners, which was found to be an important feature for fans (Lewis et al., 2017). Hoegle et al. (2014) found that sporting superstars had a significant impact on fans and the ability to recruit and retain them. This mapped to the findings in this study as outlined in section, which concurred with the literature on the power of celebrities on social media. Section 5.7.3 showed that social capital built up through relationships was found to be an important feature connecting fans to these celebrities through social media. P17 reinforced this “The relationships are essential. They call it social media for a reason”. The connection with celebrities through social media was a very prominent theme in the primary data collected in this thesis. Some Manchester United fans around the world were also following SCFC on channels such as Twitter because of the Class of '92 connection. Section 5.7.3 of the findings showed that the relationships between the celebrity owners of SCFC and Manchester United were found to be a key factor in increasing online interaction and social media following.

The literature also showed that celebrities online could be micro, meso or macro celebrities depending on the scale of their following. Kozinets (2015, p.74) described that there are different levels of digital superstars from the lesser-known micro celebrities and the more established macro celebrities. A celebrity could also potentially be a key influencer. That is, if the right content is delivered at the right time on the right platform, this could influence the audience (Adams, 2011) and reach the buyer persona (Heinze et al., 2016). An influencer may be a celebrity but could also be a friend or family member (Adams, 2011). In both cases, the existence of social capital and trust would increase the chance of the message (digital content) being successfully received and potentially acted upon as outlined by Heinze and Adams.

The work of Kozinets (2015, p.74) and Adams (2011) also concurred with the findings in this study, which demonstrated the power of the key influencer online. People associated with SCFC had varying levels of social media followers and influence and were connected to a range of other people within the network. This concept was further illustrated using the SNA diagram below. The highlighted squares with the most connecting lines are the more influential people online. This includes Gary (gnev2) and Phil Neville (fizzer18). The diagram below also demonstrated that Gary was interacting more with people connected to SCFC including the club chairman (ChairmanSCFC) and team manager Anthony Johnson (amjonno).

may not have heard of us before and even people that did not like football were coming up and asking about the documentary and FA Cup run”. “It captured the imagination” (Draper, 2016, p.325). In the findings, P1 had also highlighted the influence of the Class on ‘92 on Twitter for new and visiting fans who Tweet Gary Neville and say” “Gary, are you coming today?” or Tweet and say, “Are any of the Class of ‘92 coming today?”. In the findings, other examples were presented such as that below from Gary Neville encouraging fans to attend the match.



Figure 69 - Gary Neville uses his strong Twitter following to encourage people to attend an SCFC match and a new fan responds to him personally

Both the primary and secondary data highlighted that the SCFC BBC documentary had been amplified globally through social media. In the findings, P1 noted that the quantity of social media followers and the match day attendances by new fans of SCFC had gone up. This was actively encouraged by the Class of '92, players and fans who were promoting and discussing the club with new fans and answering questions from new fans through social media. Gary Neville's Tweet for example asking people to come to the SCFC game and to get a picture with the FA Cup reached a significant number of potential new fans and triggered new conversations. Social media interaction therefore amplified the reach of the local and global appeal of the Class of '92, increasing reach and building relationships.



7.2.13. Online Rituals

The literature on ethnography, netnography and football communities showed that rituals are an important aspect of human behaviour online and offline. Kozinets (p.279) highlighted that “Advertisers and copywriters in particular would benefit from a culturally-grounded

understanding of the language, meanings, rituals, and practices of the consumer tribes with which advertising seeks to communicate”. This demonstrated the need for the better understanding of online rituals, which is also important data for football clubs in order to better understand fans. Successful brands are built by creating relationships with people and understanding behaviours and rituals is key to this. Kozinets outlined that the goal for digital marketers was to “form an emotional connection with him or her through the advertisement that could then be transferred to the brand” (ibid.). The primary data in this thesis concurred that within football communities, social media rituals existed. It is notable in these findings that rituals were found to carry offline into club chants and back online. An example on social media was a chant about a player (Mike Phenix) being ‘on fire’ and then the use on social media of a flame emoticon associated with the player. This ritual was used as a shared code of behaviour between club and fans. Another ritual highlighted in the findings was when Salford fans were referred to as Mancunians on Facebook. A number of fans rejected this and expressed this through social media posts and memes graphics. Fans also ritualistically posted pictures of themselves in Salford shirts to Facebook to demonstrate and spread their love of the SCFC brand around the world to enhance and defend their identity as Salford fans. Social media rituals exist and are transferable between online and offline. It is therefore important for brands to understand and engage with these rituals to build social capital with fans.

7.3. Social media & fan segmentation

Dividing fans into segments is useful to better understand the buyer persona (Heinze et al, 2016). They are helpful in order to improve communications using digital marketing (Ryan, 2017). Heinze et al., stated that buyer personas are key to the digital marketing efforts of a brand. This is because time and resource will not stretch to understanding every single individual in detail. Segmenting fans into smaller groups is therefore using data to better understand and connect with the different fan buyer personas. It is desirable therefore to segment fans (customers) so that they can be better understood and communicated with effectively. The fan segments of Core, Current and Follower identified in the literature review (Kantar, 2012) were found to have synergy with the primary data presented in this study. The buyer personas below were created by the researcher to further represent the three types of fan previously identified in section 2.7.2 through a combination of literature and findings.

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|  | <p>Name: Jim Foley</p> <p>Connection: Strong</p> <p>Fan type: Core</p> <p>Social capital: Bonding</p> <p>Location: Salford</p> <p>Gender: Male</p> <p>Occupation: Accountant</p> <p>Age: 43</p> <p>Supports: SCFC</p> <p>Follows: Every live match, Club Forum, Facebook, YouTube</p> <p>Needs: To know when the club are playing and to learn and discuss insider information and granular detail about the club. Match reports.</p> <p>Requirements: A club forum and up to date official and unofficial information from the club website, social media and fan channels</p> |
|  | <p>Name: Victoria Smith</p> <p>Connection: Medium</p> <p>Social capital: Bridging</p> <p>Fan type: Current</p> <p>Location: Manchester</p> <p>Gender: Female</p> <p>Occupation: Teacher</p> <p>Age: 34</p> <p>Supports: Manchester City and SCFC</p> <p>Follows: Some live matches, Club Twitter, Instagram, YouTube</p> <p>Needs: Video highlights, Twitter live updates, live & recorded matches, interaction with club and players</p> <p>Requirements: On demand content from the club through social media. Live match day updates through Twitter. Decent coverage on mainstream media</p> |


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|---|---|
|  | <p>Name: Sunil Das</p> <p>Connection: Weak</p> <p>Social Capital: Linking</p> <p>Fan type: Current</p> <p>Location: Bangalore</p> <p>Gender: Male</p> <p>Occupation: Student</p> <p>Age: 23</p> <p>Supports: Manchester United, Barcelona and SCFC</p> <p>Follows: No live matches, Twitter, YouTube</p> <p>Needs: Twitter updates, insider information, video, ability to interact with players and club</p> <p>Requirements: More digital content including video, aimed at understanding who is who at the club and more interaction with owners and players. Club, players and fans reaching out and connecting to them directly strengthening their connection</p> |
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Figure 70 – Table showing three example buyer personas that represent the three main categories of fans identified in this study

7.3.1. Ethnography and fan segmentation

So far, it has been explored how fan segmentation is important to digital marketing and some examples were presented of how fans could be segmented to create buyer personas. For ethnography, the idea of segmenting, mapping and creating taxonomies of the group under study is also an important way of understanding a culture (Chagnon, 1968; Atkinson, 2015). This enables a better understanding of the people in the group of study. For netnography also, Kozinets (2015, p.51) stated, “The comparison of taxonomic forms of human practice and their evolution so vital to ethnography, have also thus far been largely absent from netnographies”. Kozinets calls this a ‘sin of omission’ that he hoped would be rectified with new studies. The concept of categorisation and segmentation therefore, is important both to netnography and digital marketing in order to better understand a group of people including football fans. This thesis also contributes to this area by the inclusion of segments, SNA diagrams and buyer personas.

The literature review (section 5.6) showed that audience segmentation is important for organisations to understand which channels different fans use and what type of content and

approach to use (Heinze et al., 2016). It was found that fans could be segmented based on data and research. Data was also a fundamental part of the buyer persona spring. Fans can be segmented into categories based on loyalty and this was presented as an important factor to gain a better understanding of football clubs (Tapp, 2004). The primary data from football brand managers agreed with this position in that digital media is a vital mechanism for managing fan communications including the weakly connected new fan. P10 was cautious about segmenting fans but did outline a group of 3800 members who were communicated with regularly and then a larger group of 7000 people. These groups were much higher than the average match day attendance but gave an example of how clubs segmented fans.

7.3.2. Segmentation by loyalty

In the literature section 2.7.2, studies such as Tapp (2004) and Kantar (2012) studied football fans and divided these into segments based on loyalty and strength of connection to the club. In the findings, it was found that a football club brand manager P10 said that fans should not be segmented and should be treated as one group. However, the other brand managers interviewed from different clubs and the literature confirmed that there were groups of fans that made up their audience (buyer personas). The segmentation presented in the findings concurred that fans can be segmented by strength of connection as presented in the findings section. P25 for example said about their club fan base “You can put them in a hierarchy how they are connected and therefore how you converse with them and what message you put across and what platforms to use”. This concurred with the other findings and the literature. Therefore, segmentation is important to netnography and for football club social media communications. Fans can be split into three types based on loyalty and strength of connection to their clubs.

7.3.3. Core, Current and Follower fans

A key study which was mentioned by one of the football club brand managers and in the literature review was Kantar (2012). This study found that there were three types of fan, Core (strongly connected), Current (less connected) and Followers (weakly connected). This was based on the strength of connection to the club. Although different terms were used in the literature and in the primary data captured in this thesis, some club brand managers considered their audience in three groups based on the strength of connection or likelihood of attending matches. It was explored in findings section 5.6.1 how football brand managers were also using these three groups and the strength of connection as a way to segment fans. Football fans engage online globally through social media with clubs and players

demonstrating different levels of emotional involvement, commitment and sense of community. Both the primary and secondary data in this study highlighted that fans can be segmented based on the strength of connection and social capital type.

Kantar's study in 2012 found a significant number of lesser-connected Manchester United 'follower' fans from around the world. In the findings section, it was found that international fans were not always weakly connected. Football brand manager P17 for example stated that it was not always the case that international fans had a lower strength of connection. In the findings, it was found that there are international fans that are strongly connected to clubs abroad over time. For example, P9 described how he became a strong Manchester United fan from abroad "My father is a football fan and always liked to watch England play and especially David Beckham. So ManUtd fascinated him as well. I watched with him too". This also emphasises the connections to the players. It was also clear to see connections strengthen through social media. Fans who rarely or never make it to the physical games, can still purchase merchandise and closely follow the players and club through social media. This level of strength of connection from international fans to SCFC was not found with the primary data collected. A strong connection between international fan and club was however found with larger more established clubs. Clubs like Manchester United and Real Madrid for example have developed incredibly passionate and strongly connected fans globally.

7.3.4. Core fans supporting new fans online

Miah (2017, p.83) highlighted that "social media has the capacity to change the structure of communications to permit more direct, intimate conversations". This observation was also prevalent within the primary data in this study, both from participant observation and interviews as highlighted in section 5.5.1 where core fans were supporting new fans online about how to find the ground or how much tickets were. The social capital of 'the family' of core fans was found to be an important element in facilitating these communications. Some of these core fans had been following SCFC for decades and they were seen as important by the Class of '92 (Draper, 2016, p.120). With the resources the club has to support social media, it would not always be feasible for the club to respond to all questions and interactions in a timely fashion. Indeed, it was found that it was desirable for new fans to connect with existing fans, building social capital to become part of the non-league family. An example was presented where fans had attended matches, or simply interacted with other fans online that found this exciting and rewarding. P20 for example said about social media "it has the

potential to strengthen your relationship. Essentially it allows one to make friends w/o [without] physically meeting them”. Core fans were supporting new fans on social media and this concurred with the literature that highlighted the changing structure of communications. It also concurred that fans wanted to feel more connected to their clubs and players to create stronger relationships through social media.

7.3.5. Sponsorship deals and segmentation

In the literature review (section 3.13) it was highlighted that sponsorship has become a fundamental part of football and that being popular on social media was also important. The lesser connected segment of social media lurkers were also presented as important to the normal functioning and success of online groups (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000). This segment of lurkers were the majority of the audience and interacted very little or not at all with the online group. Having a large segment of social media lurkers around the world also presented commercial opportunities. The largest section of a fan base was the most weakly connected group called ‘followers’ (Kantar, 2012). In the findings, P22 said, “You can have as many followers as you like on social media, but if you are not talking to them or vice versa, then the value of these numbers can be questioned”. Lurkers were found to be important, but engaging with them and the other groups is vital to realise the value. P25 also commented on their strategy to reach one fan at a time, essentially building social capital between the club brand and lurkers. In the literature review, it was found that despite Manchester United not winning the Champions League or Premier League in 2016/17, they became the richest football club due to lucrative sponsorships and partnerships by leveraging the brand (Hobbs, 2017). It was found that the valuation also took into account media rights including popularity on social media. Social media content is therefore important to the commercial success of football club brands (McCarthy et al., 2014; Heinze et al., 2016). Kozinets, (2010, p.53) also highlighted that trust could be built online and weak ties could be strengthened, which could increase the likelihood of customers making a purchase through online commerce.

This tied in with the findings, for example, P16 said, “Managed correctly, digital media should be hugely powerful for any football club – no matter how big or small – it just needs to be targeted correctly”. Social media content and interactivity should therefore be used by football clubs to increase fan bases locally and globally. Targeting correctly also requires an understanding of fans through segmentation and the buyer persona spring. Building a strong,

global social media following was also found to be important in order to build global sponsorship and partnership deals. These deals could be struck to make a club more financially successful.

7.3.6. Learning from different online fan segments

In section 2.7.2 of the literature review, it was highlighted that football clubs should take on board the things that fans in different segments are saying online in order to strengthen their brands and remove brand weakness. Clubs should be constantly seeking ways to be more interactive with weakly connected followers to strengthen these relationships and foster social capital using digital media. In the literature review, the 1% rule of Internet culture (1-9-90) (Arthur, 2006) was also presented. This divided up Internet users into three groups, 90% Lurkers, 9% Contributors and 1% Creators. There are also three type of social capital identified in the literature review which were bonding, bridging and linking. In the primary data, it was found that football brand managers were also often segmenting fans into three segments based on their loyalty and connection to the club.

7.4. Social capital

Social capital was outlined in the introduction and literature review section as the theoretical framework for this thesis and was used as a lens on the data. In the literature review, it was also found that social capital was important in making online groups work. For example, Heinze et al. (2013) highlighted that social media users are enticed by the social capital built up with the online group. This point on social capital and core fans is important in order to better understand the findings on unofficial channels. The findings presented a group of core fans that had set up unofficial channels for SCFC. It was also found that fans from other parts of the UK and international fans were also setting up their own social media channels. The people that set these up wanted to create their own groups, which fostered their own social capital within their own groups (for example, the SCFC fans of Russia).

7.4.1. Types of social capital

In the literature review, the concepts of bonding and bridging social capital were presented. Bonding was presented as “links among people who are similar in ethnicity, age, social class, etc.” (Helliwell and Putnam, 2004, p.1437). Bridging social capital was presented as “links that cut across various lines of social cleavage” (Helliwell and Putnam, 2004, p.1437). Linking capital was defined as “distant ties such as loose friendships and workmates (Woolcock, 2001). In the findings, section 5.6.2 that the most loyal and strongly connected

fans were described as core fans. In the case of SCFC, these fans were generally based locally to the club in Salford and nearby areas. P1 highlighted this group of core fans and P18 said “There’s a really good core of fans who go to every game, home and away, without fail”. The three types of social capital in the literature, matched with the three types of Internet user and three types of fan. This connection is further explored later in this chapter.

7.4.2. Leveraging gains through social capital

Section 3 reviewed the relevant literature on social capital. The works of authors such as Woolcock (2001), Putnam (2001) and Bourdieu (1986) described how social capital could be accumulated and leveraged to make gains. These gains could also come in the shape of gifts through products, services or money as noted by (Skågeby, 2010). This also concurred with the findings in this study. For example - once there was sufficient social capital developed by fans on the SCFC forum, the forum administrator was able to make financial requests of the users to support specific causes. The social capital accrued between members of the SCFC club forum was leveraged to pay for things such as a new supporters flag. Adams (2011) highlighted that the Internet and marketing had been reinvented towards relationships between connected groups of friends and relatives. Authors such as Hemming (2011), Bauernschuster et al. (2014) and Lin (1999) found that online groups were shown to foster and increase social capital. Bourdieu (1986) highlighted that social capital was indispensable in attracting new clients and creating durable networks. In this study, Bourdieu was referring to individuals and maintaining the status quo and position of the elite. Bourdieu’s findings are still important and relevant to football clubs today. The benefits of social capital were less tangible than financial capital but were important for progression of individuals and groups (Dodd, 2016).

7.4.3. The importance of trust

In the findings chapter, it was found that trust and relationships could be built online. Social media could help to build and strengthen these relationships and build social capital. In the literature, it was found that trust was a key enabler for a functional society (Putnam, 2001) and also to online communities and digital marketing (Heinze et al., 2013; Ryan, 2017). In the participant observation and interviews, several cases were found where social media channels were being used to develop trust. Social capital was observed being built up between new fans, core fans and their club. It also illustrated the social capital that existed around players, owners and other bigger clubs leading to more interaction with the SCFC channels. There were also some challenges to this growth highlighted including negative

social media posts with rival fans and also some scepticism and mistrust towards new fans from existing / core fans. This also resonated with the concept of the darker side of social capital (Field, 2008). Despite these challenges to the club brand, the social capital developed from clubs and owners was found to be building a larger fan base for SCFC. The club were increasing the number of people attending matches and their social media following had increased. This also included significant numbers of more weakly connected lurkers (section 5.6.2).

7.4.4. Bonding social capital and family

In the literature review, bonding social capital was presented as “relations between family members, close friends, and neighbours, the latter to more distant friends, associates, and colleagues” (Woolcock, 2001, p.10). The connection with relatives and parents and the social capital within SCFC core fans is a strong theme in the Class of '92 book (Draper, 2016). Family plays an important part of football online and offline. In the findings (section 5.7), it was also demonstrated that there is a high presence of bonding social capital between core fans and this was also strengthened through online communities. The SCFC core fans ‘family’ were typically from the local area and were from a similar background (Draper, 2016). This concurs with the literature on bonding social capital as they were from the same area and often had a strong connection to the club as part of the family. In some cases, core fans were physically related or as a metaphorical family where bonding social capital typically exists (Woolcock, 2001).

Paul Adams’ book *Grouped* (2011) emphasised the strong influence that people’s family and close friends on social media had. This resonates with an example from the primary data findings of fans that take their picture with the FA Cup and share this with their friends on social media as outlined in section 5.7.2. The close networks of people have a strong influence on people within that network. This close and immediate network is highly influential and may be made up of close friends or physical family members. The word family also presented itself many times in the primary data for this study. Family sometimes meant peoples blood relatives, but also people’s close friends. It was also used to refer to fans of SCFC and even non-league football was also referred to as the ‘non-league family’. Adams highlighted these strong relationships and online connections are as key to influencing people to change behaviours or to adopt new things including brands. This included supporting SCFC through social media and physically attending matches. The thesis

has explored in some depth the power of this community of people fuelled by social capital. Football club brands should embrace and foster the bonding social capital between the family of core fans.

7.4.5. Co-creation and social capital

In the literature review, Tiago & Veríssimo (2014) recommended that brands should connect and converse with their fan base online and actively encourage co-creation. Co-creation also includes fan created groups, digital media and channels. Co-creation and unofficial groups were presented as a positive thing for football club brands, but McLean & Wainwright (2009) found that football club brand managers were sometimes unhappy about fans setting up unofficial groups. From the primary data, a number of instances were found which supported this point. Instances were presented in the findings where both club and fans were unhappy about new online groups being created. In the findings, it was found that core fans could sometimes feel unhappy about welcoming new social media members and new online groups. In the findings, P1 discussed the sudden influx of younger people, families and women “You’ve got families, you’ve got girls, young women, younger men, there was hardly any younger men, the only younger men at football was the team. There were no other younger male fans there and certainly there were no, and I mean NO other girls at all”. This influx of new people could also lead to existing core fans feeling slightly threatened or marginalised online and offline. The example below was presented from a new fan from outside the region asking to set up a new group and being told there was one already. An interesting debate unfolded where the new fan was criticised for calling Salford ‘Mancunia’.



Figure 71 - Showing a Southern fan asking to set up a new Facebook page

The above also demonstrated a clash between the ideas of fans from different parts of the UK (North and South) in a territorial sense. In the findings it was also found that there was some uncertainty from the management of SCFC about new social media groups being set up. For example, new groups of fans in their own cliques where social capital and connection strength was less were seen as something of a threat. Conflict was identified between local SCFC fans and the official club brand communications when it came to setting up new fan

led social media channels. The bonding social capital developed between core fans also was presented in the findings as a positive force with core fans helping newer fans online. For example, new fans were asking questions such as how much are tickets and core fans were responding. Social media therefore enables fans to set up new channels and to co-create content. This can lead to conflict between different groups, but is part of the disruptive nature of social media and changing behaviours of networked fans.

7.4.6. Changing behaviour of fans

Hattenstone (2017) highlighted that “As Web 2.0 became defined by user-generated content and the growth of social media, so has football”. This does not account for the large groups of followers that are not generating this content or discussing matches or interacting. The literature in section 2.5.3 also highlighted that fans are turning their attentions away from TV, away from expensive season tickets and more towards digital gaming and social media (Hattenstone, 2017; Miah, 2017). Social media was cited by EPL Chief Richard Scudamore as one of the biggest threats to football by (ibid.). The literature showed how football TV viewing figures were starting to decline as TV watching habits have changed (see section 2.5.3). Younger people in particular are using second and third screen viewing using smartphones and social media. Broadcasters and football clubs are trying to adapt to these changing behaviours. In the case of clubs like SCFC, FC United and Hashtag United (section 3.15), social media are being utilised to engage a wider fan base. The findings demonstrated that fans online might never attend matches, may never buy a shirt or provide revenue in the traditional way. Social media manager P25 verified that a new strategy for their club was to reach out directly to lurkers. This strategy of building one fan at a time could be resource intensive, but vital to building up social capital and converting lurkers to more strongly connected fans who may then become more loyal to the brand. Fan behaviour is changing, with a global fan base emerging through social media channels, fuelled by social media content and interaction and football clubs must learn to adapt to these changing behaviours and global audiences.

7.4.7. Network closure and social capital

In the literature review (section 3.4), Coleman found that networks should be closed in order to foster social capital. Lin disagreed with this position and stated “I believe that the necessity for network density or closure for the utility of social capital is not necessary or realistic” (Lin, 1999, p.34). Lin highlighted that networks do not have to be closed in order to foster social capital. It was found in the primary data that social networks such as Twitter were very

open and Facebook groups and forums were also usually open to anyone that wanted to join them. Interaction and relationships were prospering in these groups as presented in the findings. The Tweet below for example, demonstrated the display of social capital through an open social media channel of Twitter. This comment was read and responded to by other fans, creating new bonds.

Love going too @SalfordCityFC been away for a few months, players, players family and officials still make time for a quick hello and chat.

Figure 72 - A Tweet from an SCFC fan, which was also retweeted by the club

The primary data in this study therefore supported Lin's position that online networks do not need to be closed in order to support the development and utility of social capital. Lin's point that networks should be more open to foster social capital was supported by the primary data and Coleman's position that networks should be closed was not supported by the primary data.

7.4.8. Are lurkers real?

At SCFC, an interesting scenario had developed where they have a very large quantity of social media lurkers from around the world. These lurkers were generally following SCFC, but not interacting very much or at all with the brand. Because this group are relatively silent, the question was raised whether these people are real. With online users, they could be actual people or fake accounts and if they are not fake accounts, then if they are not interacting, do they have any real value? In fact, if they just make up a large number on a screen and have no value, then are they real at all? In the findings (section 5.6.2), data was presented from lurkers from around the world who were connected with and interviewed. It was found that they are indeed real people, who are absorbing and consuming information about SCFC. In many cases, they are strong fans of other clubs locally and internationally who are involved heavily with fan groups and discussions online. A typical lurker was outlined in the buyer personas in section 6.3. This fan type was first and foremost an avid core supporter of a larger club such as Manchester United and then a weakly connected lurker of SCFC. The literature and findings concurred that these weakly connected follower fans are real and their business value lies in PR, sponsorship and the potential to convert lurkers to followers to core fans over time.

7.4.9. The value of lurkers

In the findings chapter, the views of lurker fans were presented including the views of P25. The findings showed that lurkers should be engaged with personally, naming them my name, getting owners, players and other fans talking to them and creating more content which can engage them through the digital channels that they inhabit. By identifying the lurker buyer persona and giving he or she what they like and building social capital, this can increase the engagement. In the findings P22 said, “You can have as many followers as you like on social media, but if you are not talking to them or vice versa, then the value of these numbers can be questioned”. Weakly connected international fan P20 highlighted that fans love the connection between players and the recognition that they are real “Most, if not all fans appreciate the recognition”. P9 stated, “Interaction with supporters would be a big plus for us to keep coming back/ I think the owners can contribute too. By maybe showing a bit of a positive interaction with the supporters”. The literature connected with the findings to show that weak ties and linking social capital can be built up between fans and football fans globally. For example, the lurker fans interviewed who outlined the importance of relationships on social media and the social media manager P25 who highlighted the importance of reaching out to lurker fans. Football clubs should therefore reach out to lurkers, engage the wider audience using social media and leverage the benefits of this wider audience.

7.4.10. Cyberbalkanisation and social capital

The primary data findings demonstrated that social capital was built up between SCFC followers, the Class of '92 and Manchester United. The adoption of social media was identified as a way to build relationships with fans globally. Putnam introduced the term ‘cyberbalkanisation’ to refer to online communities that were divided into specialised groups (Putnam, 2001). He saw this divide as a potential threat to social capital growth and cross fertilisation between groups to create new linking social capital. The primary data in this study demonstrated that people were engaging with open networks such as Twitter and that social capital was being fostered. It was also found that open social networks such as Twitter and YouTube have also developed and football clubs use these extensively. Whilst there were specialised communities, ultimately, the open networks and the official SCFC accounts were the most popular with fans. Ultimately, football clubs should embrace and encourage open social media networks to foster social capital with a wider group of fans. While there are some challenges with more open networks in terms of conflict and trolling, the overall impact

is a wider reach of the brand. This includes more social media followers and increased positive interaction, spreading into more social networks and influencers.

7.4.11. Social media algorithms

In the literature review, it was found that the social media algorithms are updated to deliver relevant content to people's timelines (Gillespie, 2014). Because of this, some authors found that social media were causing an echo chamber effect because their algorithms are delivering the content that people want, they "optimise automatically around the content you best respond to" (Dakin, 2016). This also relates to the darker side of social capital (Field, 2008) and as above, cyber-balkanisation (Putnam, 2001) and closed networks (Coleman, 1988) as discussed in section 3.5.

Essentially, online bonding social capital could be built up which keeps people within their own groups, speaking to the same people and the algorithms delivering similar content creating an echo chamber effect. In the findings, data was found to support that the social media algorithms behave in this way and this creates risks for football club brands. For example, P17 stated "it's important from the club's perspective to have all those different types of people engaged because then the more people who are engaged the more it proves to the algorithm that there's a distribution of net worth". In the findings, there was also an example of an international SCFC follower P9 whose interest had waned over time. To explain their dwindling interest, they said, "Not much life on social media. I mean not many of my followers are Salford FC fans. So not many RTs (Retweets) come thru to my TL (timeline)". The Twitter algorithm was therefore delivering less about SCFC to their timeline due to a lack of social capital and this was having an adverse affect on the visibility of the SCFC brand. The consequence of the algorithmic echo chamber effect was displaying more Manchester United content and drowning out SCFC content. P17 and P9 suggested that a greater quantity of engaging digital content and more fans interacting with this content would give football clubs more visibility and increase online social capital. In the findings, P25 also verified this connection to building up social capital and visibility in the social media channels. The primary and secondary data in this thesis showed that football clubs should produce the right digital content on the correct channels to reach their buyer personas and increase online social capital (Heinze et al., 2016). If they do not or cannot do this, the social media algorithms will further hinder their ability to reach them, drowning them out.

7.4.12. Social capital and algorithms

Social media algorithms therefore penalise the weakly connected club brand. This means that if people are not interacting with digital content and discussing a brand with the club or other fans, then they will become even more invisible on social media. As an example, the core Manchester United fan who sets up her own YouTube channel, discusses games with her friends within her own social media group, will then be offered more content related to Manchester United. The algorithms are designed to deliver relevant content to keep people engaged. So, for the lesser-connected SCFC fan, his timeline may be crowded out with Manchester United content, as this is his favourite team because of the social capital built up around this brand with his friends. SCFC digital content becomes crowded out and he loses some interest as he is not exposed to or engaged with the brand. In order to counter this, the engagement and interactivity with lurkers and production of digital content aimed at engaging with this group is particularly critical to increase brand visibility (Heinze et al, 2016). The primary and secondary data in this study showed that online social capital was found to be necessary to keep fan segments engaged and increase the strength of their connection to the brand. Within the primary data it was also observed that fans started off as fans of other clubs and ended up with SCFC as their favourite club. Social media channels and content therefore have a role to play in this transition and increasing global reach. Football clubs should reach out directly to fans through social media to engage with and listen to them in order to create and sustain social capital. For lurker fan engagement, this includes building linking social capital with groups from unlike backgrounds globally.

7.4.13. Lurkers and linking capital

In the literature review, it was found that lurkers were the largest part of an online group and were the most weakly connected. A connection was found between the lurkers and linking social capital through the primary and secondary data. This wider group of lurkers are more weakly connected and may be based in other geographical locations and contexts. The literature presented three types of social capital, Internet user types and three types of fan in terms of the group size and strength of connection. In the findings section 2.7.2, it was found that football brand managers were also often segmenting fans in three groups based on their strength of connection to the club. For example P1 had been influenced by Kantar's study of fans and also defined fans in these three groups "that's the definition that we use - core fans, current fans and followers – I like that, it works for football quite well". P18 discussed 'core

fans'. P10 also described three groups of fans also based on the strength of connection to the club.

In the literature review, it was found that linking social capital can connect people across disparate backgrounds (Woolcock, 2001). This includes different people of different ages, genders, locations and cultural backgrounds to extend to anyone around the world. The literature also presented that social media is enabling the development of linking social capital (Tsatsou and Zhao, 2016) and that weak ties are important (Granovetter, 1973). The primary data concurred with this. The findings showed that, players, owners and other connected organisations also helped to reach more people online. The findings explored the example of SCFC obtaining large numbers of Twitter followers based on their associations with Manchester United and the Class of '92. Other media such as TV and books also help to develop this fan base. It is the interactive social media that allows the interaction between clubs, owners, players and fans and increase of social capital through social media connection and communication. It was found for example comments from international lurkers who were following SCFC online. International football fan P9 for example, stated, "I'm a staunch United supporter and a follower if not a fan of Salford City FC". Other international fans that were interviewed demonstrated similar views in terms of their strength of connection. Attracting fans of other clubs to follow them on social media is a positive step and larger numbers of social media followers are a positive signal to potential sponsors. Aside from the numbers, football clubs should attempt to engage and interact with lurker fans, listening and producing appropriate content on the correct social media channels, utilising linking social capital.

7.4.14. Conceptual model of fan segmentation

A connection was found between the outlined fan segments (Kantar, 2012), the three types of Internet user (Arthur, 2006; Nielsen, 2006) and the three types of social capital (Woolcock, 2001). The model was further tested through primary data collection with football brand managers through interview. The brand managers interviewed found that the model matched their understanding of fan segments. Whilst definitions varied, clubs were segmenting fans based on their strength of connection to the club. It was developed as a way to understand online football communities, fan segments and buyer personas.

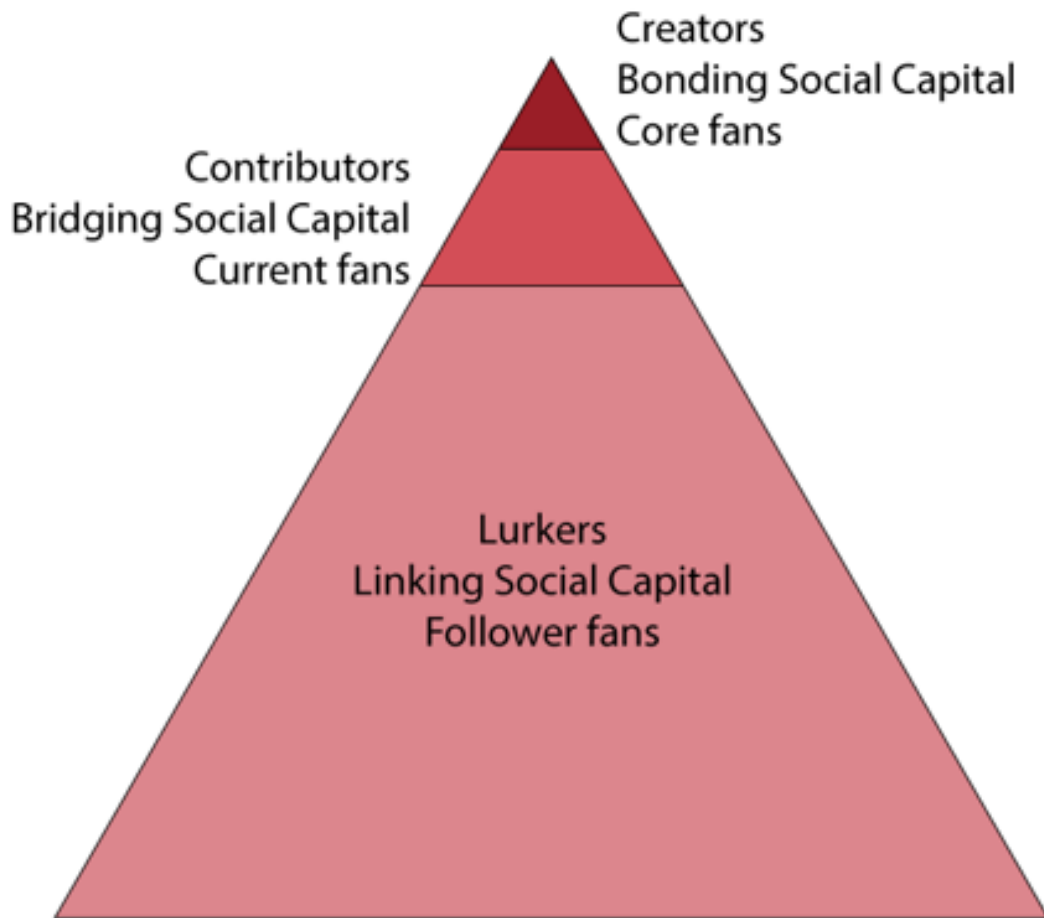


Figure 73 - Conceptual model showing relative proportions of fans, comparison with fan types, Internet user types and social capital types

The primary and secondary data in this study were used to create the model above for football club fan engagement. The model was also presented and discussed in the three final interviews with social media and sport experts. Although the exact labels for fans varied between interviewees, the three interviews validated the model as appropriate for football and social media.

The model shows the interconnection between the three types of social capital identified in the literature review and the three types of Internet user type as stated in section 2.7.2. These groups were found to exist within the communities of SCFC. Social capital and these connected groups within communities is key to the theoretical framework and lens on the data of this thesis. Football clubs can segment fans based on this model, which also takes into account the social capital of fans. It represents that the wider fan base is more weakly connected, but with segmentation and the use of channels, content and data, social capital and strength of connection can be increased (Heinze et al., 2016). In order to strengthen their

brands, clubs should strive to produce the appropriate social media content and create social capital through interactions with fans of different segments.

Clubs should therefore create stronger connections over time to create more engaged and loyal hyper digitalized fans. More strongly connected fans become positive brand advocates for the club. Fans interacting and creating digital content creates a positive sign for the social media algorithms, leading to additional interaction and brand exposure, which is also a positive sign for sponsors.

7.5. Summary

The discussion chapter brought together the literature with the findings to create new insight and theory. It was found that social media content and channels are being increasingly used by football clubs to engage fans and build their brands. Clubs were primarily using YouTube or Facebook for sharing video content. Clubs and fans are creating digital channels and content which all forms part of the brand. The open nature of social media channels can be disruptive for brands and this needs careful management. Emotive digital content and celebrity can be effective in influencing brand communications and the rise of smartphones in the networked era enables fans to easily contribute new content. Trolling and online rituals also form part of brand communications. This means that careful brand management through process, policy and training for those involved required for brand communications to strengthen brands.

Creating buyer personas, segmenting fans and using the buyer persona spring can be used to better understand and connect to the fans. Fans can be segmented based on the strength of connection, Internet user and social capital type. It is not always the case that international fans have a lower strength of connection, but this tended to be the case for SCFC. With bigger UK clubs with a stronger international following, international fans could be strongly connected. Core fans were sometimes helping new fans by interacting and answering questions online and this fan segmentation phenomenon is helpful for brands. The more weakly connected lurkers were real people and have value to football clubs in terms of building the brand and sponsorship. Some tensions were found between new fans and existing fans, such as P25 who highlighted that there was some scepticism between groups. Online social capital can be built up and can influence brands and individuals and this was generally a positive force for club brands.

The darker side of social capital could also be seen through a social media echo chamber effect, trolling and internal arguments over online channels. Production of relevant content and associating with influential brands and celebrities was also encouraging people to follow the smaller/newer brand through social capital association. This study found that lurkers are real people and online social capital helped to build up this group. Encouraging interaction between fans to build social capital was found to be effective in encouraging more weakly connected fans to interact with the brand. In the literature review, it was found that rewarding and encouraging lurkers and the development of social capital was important to get lurkers to become posters (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Sun et al., 2014). Building up social capital in this way is possible through creation of appropriate digital media and interactions. Without this, the social media algorithms crowd brands out of timelines for more weakly connected fans that become disengaged. This tied in with the findings presented in section 5.7.3. P24 and P25 outlined their thoughts on reaching out to lurkers in order to build social capital to allow people to strengthen their interaction and connection to the club. Without this, lurkers could remain weakly connected or lose interest as discussed in section 5.6.4. Social media algorithms also drown out weaker connections between brand and fan. That is, if there is more interaction, the algorithms will display more content and less if there is less interaction. Building social capital between fans and clubs therefore can help raise visibility in social media.

Social capital has a significant effect on the brand communications and digital marketing of football clubs official and unofficial communications. In order to reach fans online, a strong understanding of the fans is required through data and experience. From there, it is necessary to choose the right social media channels and produce relevant content to reach them supported by the data. The official or unofficial channels can also reach out directly to lurkers and engage them, although this could become resource intensive. It is necessary to segment fans and create buyer personas based on research and data in order to bring the club closer to the fans and increase connections. It is also important to allow fans to create their own digital channels and content and use digital marketing to connect with fans. Social capital is therefore the glue that sticks together groups of fans through the ups and downs of the life of a football fan. Social capital exists most strongly through bonding with core fans. These fans can become advocates of the brand and help less connected fans to become more connected.

The positive social media interactions between clubs and fans can build social capital, strengthening connections and brand perceptions of fan and clubs.

Online social capital can also be transferred from larger brands and celebrities, enhancing brand awareness by association. Football club staff and players can engage personally with fans including lurkers, but they should be given the right training and support to do so. Increasing social capital in this way and producing the right content on the right channels also helps the lesser connected lurker follower fans to stay engaged or become more strongly connected. Increasing and engaging this large group is important for continued success of the club and future sponsorship deals, where popularity on social media is increasingly important. Ultimately, without positive social capital, brand communications would be meaningless and digital marketing would be futile. The darker side of social capital manifests through the echo chamber effect, cyber balkanization and trolling. This can be managed by adhering to the principles of the buyer persona spring and fostering and encouraging positive social capital.

A connection was found between social capital, Internet user type and fan type to create three segments. A model was presented to help to demonstrate the link between these types. This contributed to the understanding of the symbiotic relationship between social media, fans and social capital. It is important therefore for clubs and fans to increase social capital through social media to allow fans to move up the pyramid to become more connected to the brand.

8. Conclusion

8.1. How well were the aims met?

The aim of this PhD was to discover how social media are used within a UK football club and the role of social capital and brand communications in digital marketing. The research problem outlined in section 1.10 highlighted key gaps in the literature within sports, social media and social capital research. From a managerial perspective, sports clubs were asking questions about the nature of social media and fan engagement. This PhD used primary and secondary data to understand how social media channels and content are used within a UK football club and the role of social capital in digital marketing and brand communications. This aim was met by gathering empirical data from this netnography based on SCFC as the primary vehicle for the study. The primary data gathered included the blended methods of participant observation, interviews and SNA. This blend, underpinned by an interpretive philosophy, was effective in casting the net further to evaluate this topic. This allowed the study to be focussed enough to shed light on the research question and create theory. Social capital proved to be an important aspect and the consideration of bonding, bridging and linking capital found parallels with the concept of segmentation of fans to identify and narrow down the buyer personas. These were key to digital and social media marketing and implementation of the buyer persona spring. The literature advocated the concept of segmenting audiences to reach the buyer persona of fans.

The study also aimed to understand the ways in which football clubs and fans evolve their online engagement, contributing to the digital marketing literature from both an academic and practical perspective. Fans were central to this study and as such formed a significant part of the data collection (both primary and secondary). Both the official and unofficial social media channels and content were studied in order to see how fans were evolving their engagement over the course of the study. Despite some challenges and disagreements, fans were increasingly using their smartphones and web 2.0 to positively engage and this was evaluated in some depth. Overall, the aims of this thesis were met through extensive primary and secondary data collection and crystallisation, underpinned by a theoretical framework of social capital.

8.1.1. Generalising – the implications for other organisations

This study considered the implications of this research to other organisations with loyal fans. It was considered to what extent the findings in this study were generalisable. The approach was to include a consideration of other literature outside of football and sports and the key marketing and IS literature. In terms of primary data and findings, SCFC was used as a vehicle for the study, but other people including brand managers for other football clubs were also interviewed and literature from outside of SCFC was also part of the thesis. During and at the end of the study, the PhD findings were presented to brand managers within football for discussion, verification and generalisation purposes. Therefore, the crystallised findings of this study can be applied to the management of football club brands more widely. Insights can also be drawn for brand managers, particularly with brands with a significant social media following. A question remains whether studying SCFC meant that the findings were applicable to larger or different kinds of clubs. SCFC proved to be an excellent bridge between a smaller and a larger club as the club contained elements of both. They were a non-league club, with less resources than a larger club and yet, they developed the kind of social media following and interaction driven by celebrity which was comparable with that of a much larger club. The research questions and models developed in this study were designed and tested in order to be applicable to other organisations and the data collection was also designed in this way.

Brand managers and academics will find this research useful in order to better understand their own organisations buyer personas, taking into account social media interaction. It will form another piece of the complex picture of understanding social media and digital marketing in organisations and the role of social capital. It is therefore possible to use the findings and theory from this study to apply to other sports clubs or brands with a significant social media following. The model produced is based on social capital and Internet user type. The model can be adapted to other market sectors where loyalty and strength of connection is a feature of the audience. Therefore, the findings from this study can be applied and compared for brands with global social media followings in particular.

8.2. Key contributions

This thesis contributes to the literature on digital marketing and social capital. Aside from this thesis, this wider research also enabled other publications. This included chapters in a digital marketing book, a chapter in a new football management book and several articles for

different peer reviewed publications. Over the course of this thesis, a significant contribution was made in terms of dissemination. This was made additionally through blog posts, presentations, teaching, articles, podcasts and practical contributions, consumed by students, academics and practitioners. This dissemination enabled contributions from this research to digital marketing, social media and social capital. In academic terms, the completed thesis in itself is a contribution to these, but in terms of impact, the other media described reached more people and created the most discussion.

This research was inspired by a range of studies including McLean and Wainwright (2009, p.202) who highlighted that more research was needed to uncover specific strategies to engage sports fans. McCarthy et al. (2014, p.3) also highlighted the “considerable scope for enhanced understanding of the way in which fans, members and customers will evolve their engagement with brands through social media over the next few years”. This thesis contributed to the literature in this area, rising to these calls. It contributes to the understanding of the benefits and challenges of digital marketing using social media for football clubs underpinned by social capital theory.

8.2.1. Social capital contribution

A key contribution from this study was to increase the understanding of social capital theory as applied to digital marketing. To date, few studies have adopted social capital as a theoretical framework for the study of social media or sports business. This research contributes to the understanding of the ways in which sports brands and fans interact and build social capital online. Studies on the relationship between social media, sports and social capital were lacking in the literature and this study contributes to this gap. Social capital was found to be a key enabler for football club brands to engage fans through social media. The study contributes to social capital theory in finding that social capital could be increased online. The findings contrast with other studies such as (Putnam, 2001), who outlined a decline in social capital and speculated that online interaction could lead to cyberbalkanisation. It was found that with the openness of social networks, trolling and online arguments did occur between individuals and groups. There were however many cases of positive interactions between fans to balance this. This encouraged a larger, engaged social media fan base fuelled by positive social capital. The thesis presented a model for the application of social capital theory as a way to better understand and engage online fans.

This study contributes to theory and demonstrated that social capital is an important lens to better understand social media interaction and sports fans in order to engage with them more effectively. Furthermore, bonding, bridging and linking capital were found to have synergy with fan types and Internet user types in order to contribute to the development of the fan segmentation model shown in section 6.4.14, which can be used to better understand supporters of a brand. This thesis found that social capital could and should be developed through online communities, supporting the findings of previous studies in other disciplines.

Bonding social capital was connected closely to core fans. These core fans considered themselves to be a family and this is significant when it comes to understanding the buyer persona through social capital. For the wider group of followers, linking social capital was being created through social media. This enables football clubs to reach out and talk to people from around the world. International fans are looking to belong and the goal of football clubs is to build social capital using social media to interact with them to join the family. This is particularly important in the age of social media algorithms, which can drown out more weakly connected brands.

8.2.2. The value of lurkers

This thesis breaks new ground by using netnography to interact with football fan lurkers from around the world. Football clubs are wrestling with questions around the use and maximisation of social media and lurkers and this study provides both practical and managerial contributions in this important area. This research provides implications for other organisations with loyal fans and highlights the key role of lurker fans as real people who have great value to football clubs. The findings were further tested with football social media managers and therefore have wider, important implications for practise. Lurkers are real people and can be engaged directly by clubs through social media. This increases their connection to a club and also enhances the sponsorship and partnership opportunities of the club. It is important therefore for football clubs to create and maintain the correct social media channels, content and data in order to reach the buyer persona of lurker followers. There is considerable scope for research based on social media data in order to better understand this quiet but significant group. Football clubs should use this data and build linking social capital by reaching out directly to these fans through social media.

8.2.3. Methodological contribution

The combination of the three blended methods used as part of a netnography contributes to the literature on netnography. This combination utilised three qualitative methods that worked together to support each other. Whilst it is common to combine participant observation and interview as part of a netnography, the addition of qualitative SNA to support a blended approach presents a methodological contribution. SNA was used in this study to identify influencers for further participant observation or interview using an interpretive approach. SNA can also shed light on network shapes of groups and individuals to better understand the segments of fans at a macro or micro level. From the three methods, the data gathered from interviews was the most targeted in order to answer the research questions. Because of the nature of this interpretive study however, the data gathered from SNA and participant observation and the blend between the three was very valuable in deriving rich insights. This blend of methods is also an important data source for brands to understand more about their audiences. Data is a fundamental aspect of the buyer persona spring used to create a social media strategy.

An interpretivist philosophy worked well for this study, as it was inductive and exploratory, gathering data and iterating over a longer period. This approach allowed answers and theory to be derived from the data and to explore the complexity of human meaning. Whilst this approach can sometimes lead off on other interesting pathways, the torch beam analogy brought focus to the study. The flexible approach in this research also gave the study more agility than other approaches. In section 4.6 the philosophical contribution of Klein and Myers (1999) outlined a set of principles for conducting interpretive studies. They highlighted that this approach is not about finding truth, but exploring social relations in order to create deep insights. This thesis explored these relations between people, whilst adopting the interpretivist tradition. It therefore contributes to the body of literature exploring online social relations from this perspective, and as such was able to create deep insights. It did this by utilising the hermeneutic circle (principle 1). Iterating between different parts and making meaning from the rich data collected from the blended methods over two years. Each of the seven principles was taken into account and this is underpinned by principle one, which is a fundamental part of all of the other principles. Although interpretivists are sceptical of proving truth or untruth, principle 4 is 'Abstraction and Generalisation'. As highlighted, the findings from this thesis were further tested in order to create further abstraction and synthesis to make a further contribution and to create mid-range theory.

8.2.4. Managerial recommendations

This thesis was conducted at an important time for football clubs, when social media channels, content and data were highly popular and prevalent for fan engagement. Aside from an academic contribution, it is important that this study made a contribution to practise and in particular, digital marketing for brand managers. In the case of SCFC, P22 said, “We want to understand more about our audience, why are they following us, where do they live, what do they want to see from us on social media, how do we make sure that they keep following, keep coming back, keep communicating. Once we understand the people following us, that's where value can be realised for all”. This research gave significant insight into these important questions and created a platform for the value of social media to be realised.

This thesis provided a practical example of utilising the buyer persona spring within sports business, underpinned by the role of social capital to understand the audience. It was found that brand managers should segment their fan bases based on strength of connection in order to better understand their buyer personas. It was also found that segmenting fans based on their connection to the brand and taking into account the social capital that exists between fans and club was important. Social capital has a significant effect on digital marketing and is therefore an important part of the buyer persona spring. Social capital should be taken into account by brand managers in order to better understand fans, choose the right social media channels and produce relevant digital content and campaigns to reach them supported by data. It is necessary to segment fans and create buyer personas based on research and data in order to bring the club closer to the fans and increase connections. Fans should also be supported and encouraged to create their own digital channels and content as co-creators. Fans can also say and do things unofficially that official brands cannot and this should be embraced and supported by clubs. Building social capital with these influential fans is therefore important in order to grow and positively affect the brand.

Once fans are segmented and social capital is taken into account, brands can start to think more carefully about pulling their fans of different segments closer to them using the buyer persona spring. This includes a careful consideration of the segment of weakly connected follower lurker fans, which are usually by far the largest segment. These fans are real and have value including showing potential to become more connected and committed over time. They also have value in terms of sponsorship deals and partnerships. Sponsors are still attracted by the quantity and quality of a fan base, so therefore, large numbers of social media

followers have value for these partnerships. A number of suggestions were made by lurker fans in this study about the type of social media content and interactions that would engage them. A bigger digital presence can be created through the right digital content, which increases social capital between fans, players and club. Behind the scenes, #askplayer and engaging and including fans using video and other digital content and campaigns were things suggested by lurker fans. This should include the macro and micro celebrities interacting with fans of all segments online supported by the right training and guidelines. An interaction with the club and the development of social capital can live long in the mind of fans and foster a greater connection over time.

Thinking more about social media campaigns which aim to increase social capital of fans is therefore important. The social capital of influential celebrities can also be utilised to increase connection to a brand. Reaching out directly to fans by brands through social media can also tap into the social capital that exists between people and their immediate friends, bridging networks. Adams (2011) in particular noted the strong influence that close friends and family have on each other when using social media. Fanning the spark of fandom into new groups can help social capital to grow and spread in new areas and personal networks. An important goal is for social media fan groups to foster and sustain new fans in different parts of the world through linking, bridging and ultimately bonding social capital. Engaging lurkers through linking social capital via the buyer persona spring is recommended. Ultimately, by applying theory and speaking to and observing fans locally and from around the world, a better understanding was obtained of fans and their needs in order to reach them. This is a significant step forward to further realising the value of social media for brands.

8.3. Limitations

This PhD had its limitations. Whilst precautions were taken to remain objective and crystallise multiple sources and accounts, this study primarily used the interpretation of a single ethnographer. The selection of the literature and primary data used could have been different if other researchers were involved with their own experience and interpretation. A common limitation cited of ethnographical studies is that they are focussed on a specific group. In the case of this netnography, it used SCFC as a vehicle for the study. Whilst the literature and primary data extended beyond SCFC, the data had its limits. Additional data from more clubs and informants could have broadened the scope and therefore generalisation of results. The findings of this study therefore should be further tested and compared by other

researchers in different situations. This could include other football clubs in different positions in the league, other countries and even different sports. Results could be compared, contrasted and further generalisation could occur. This also provides opportunities for further research. The darker side of social capital with a critical philosophy as opposed to the brighter side of social capital and interpretivism would potentially have yielded different results and illuminated another side of the situation.

Ethnographical approaches use primarily single cases and use qualitative data collection. Whilst the data collection was as extensive as possible given the single researcher and timeframe, it would always be possible to collect more data. Equally, the application of additional methods or quantitative data collection through other techniques and tools could potentially create deeper insights for the study. For example, the application of digital netnography, data analysis and survey may have yielded additional data to support or conflict with the findings in this study.

8.4. Further research

This study of social media over the course of several years saw a number of changes in the landscape. Within football and sports, new digital media technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality, eSports, holograms, bots and new smartphone apps gained prominence over the period of study. It was important to keep the torch beam focused on social media, whilst keeping an eye on new literature and digital media developments. New developments and other gaps spotted in the literature were noted for potential future research. At the time of writing, there is considerable scope for further research as larger football clubs adopt new digital channels for fan engagement including, but not limited to, the ones listed above (Hattenstone, 2017; Miah, 2017). It may be some years before clubs are able to take full advantage of these newer channels, data and content and this was also beyond the scope of this thesis. Similarly, there are new and emerging social media channels, which feature less in academic studies. For example, SCFC and other clubs adopted Instagram part way through this study. Instagram is not a new social network, but organisations did not use it as much as other channels at the time of writing and there are less research studies associated with it. This is also true of channels such as YouTube.

8.4.1. Social media ambush marketing

The topic of trolling and ambush between brands is another potential topic for further study. Ambush marketing on social media can be undertaken by unofficial (non-sponsoring) brands. For example, brands which have not officially paid for advertising or sponsorship. It is possible for these brands to use creative and lower cost techniques to muscle into the online spotlight. The literature on ambush marketing is well developed, but less so with the disruptive effects of social media. The growth of social media channels though, provides new outlets for brands to creatively get themselves noticed whilst staying within advertising and sponsor guidelines. One such instance is the use of trolling and banter between brands. There is considerable scope to evaluate the impact and meaning of brands that engage in trolling other brands and also digital ambush marketing. Sporting brands and events with global and engaged audiences provide fertile ground for such studies of social media ambush marketing.

8.4.2. Co-creation and financial impact

Further research could also be conducted to investigate the balance between encouraging new fans to co-create on social media and the effect of bonding social capital. In this thesis, it was found that fans from around the world were coming from new and disparate groups, for example Southern England or Russia. There is scope to conduct further research into the impact of fan created content and channels. This could include quantitative measurements to find how many groups are created and the content interaction vs. the official brand channels. Quantitative methods also lend themselves to measuring financial impacts and calculating return on investment. Monetary values could be placed on the efforts of clubs and fans that create social media channels and content. Return on investment of time and money from social media is an important area for future research.

8.4.3. Social media influencer and social capital scale development

Kozinets (2015, p.74) described the rise of people with a significant social media following. He described the most followed digital superstars as macro celebrities. In this study, the macro digital celebrity label could be applied to people such as Gary Neville. Other celebrities with a smaller digital following such as players Gaz Seddon and manager Anthony Johnson could be described as micro celebrities. Kozinets suggested that future research could focus on developing a scale and more detailed descriptions of the different levels of the online celebrity. There could also be scope for using social capital and SNA to inform the development of such a scale. This provides interesting potential for future quantitative and qualitative research. In terms of social capital, authors such as Dodd, (2016, p.305) called for

more research on social capital for the benefit of PR professionals and organisations. She wrote, “Future analyses should also focus on intangible resources as they are related to one another or serve to impact one another (are exchanged for an increase/decrease in one another) as well as the extent to which each contributes to organizational advantages, specifically tangible resources”. This could also apply to the monitoring of specific marketing campaigns, which are aimed at utilising or growing social capital. A scale for campaigns or organisations as well as individuals could be developed.

8.4.4. Changing behaviours on social media and sports

Reichert Smith and Sanderson (2015, p.356) called for “examination of the effect athletes becoming more personal on social media has on fans”. Whilst this thesis did take this into consideration through participant observation and SNA, there could be considerable scope for depth interviews with sports people (particularly digital macro celebrities) and fans to gain further insight into this interaction and the role of social capital. Gibbs (2013) suggested that future research could be conducted on the way social media has changed celebrity and entertainment culture and the impact of second and third screen viewing. Research focusing specifically on younger fans such as Millennials who are consuming sports in new ways provides a wealth of opportunity for digital marketing and e-commerce research (Smith, 2012).

8.4.5. Methodology and future research

There is also considerable scope for studies using SNA as a single method or as a combined method. This could help to answer questions such as who are the key influencers, comparing network shapes and analysis of communication flows. Using SNA to measure and compare different brands and individuals in new circumstances and new networks would provide a multitude of new research opportunities. Discussing the future research potential of SNA and mixing methods, Andriani et al. (2010) suggested “there is no ‘one best way’ of integrating quantitative and qualitative methods in SNA. As such, there is both a great deal of innovation in existing research designs, and a lot more room for methodological development in the future”. SNA is able to visualise the wealth of social media data and has synergy with social capital theory (Widdop et al., 2014). The SNA and social media analysis tools are developing and as such, more data insight from social media channels and content will be possible in the future. This opens up further research opportunities to further consider the data aspects of the buyer persona spring and to enhance the use and contribution of netnography. In particular, digital netnography offers an exciting path for future research, where researchers and

organisations work together to develop the tools and solutions of the future. Future studies could blend SNA more closely and utilise more data from social media using a range of innovative academic and practitioner tools. A digital netnography would be an appropriate approach for this and to utilise more quantitative social media data, blended with the qualitative data to create new insights.

8.5. Reflections on my role as researcher

This final section switches to the first person in order to outline the final reflections of the researcher in order to conclude the study and connect with the researcher motivations and values section in the introduction.

When I began the PhD, I started avidly reading and consuming everything about SCFC online as a lurker through social media. I thought that it would be important to attend some games in person also to get a feel for the club, the ground and the fans, capturing photographs, stories and experiences as I went. As a football fan, I was also intrigued to see and hear what SCFC were doing in the flesh as well as online to add another perspective. This was interesting to me, because I was walking in the shoes of a new, follower fan / lurker. I had few connections to SCFC in that, I only knew a couple of people that went to matches and they attended with their own friends and family in their own groups. They had built up their own social capital with the non-league family online and offline. I took along my own friends and relatives to the matches, who were also interested to see what SCFC were about and they also wanted to help me out. I wanted to attend the match with someone I knew quite well, who I had a connection with. This is the way I had always experienced attending football matches. The idea of attending a match on my own was not appealing as I felt this would be a lonely and unnatural experience.

Like other followers, I consumed SCFC's progress through social media as something of a solo activity. I occasionally made a post such as posting photographs of the matches or contributing to a new flag for fans. I bought a book of SCFC photographs from a photographer fan. I reacted to social media posts such as Gary Neville's Tweet, which read 'come and have your picture taken with the FA Cup'. I was able to experience what it was like to be a lurker and new follower of SCFC through social media.



Figure 74 – Picture with the FA Cup at an SCFC game, which was posted to social media

In 2018, the club have had a stellar rise with a new stadium built, success on the field and a lucrative new sponsorship deal. This means that the club has now been able to go professional and has employed a full time social media team rather than relying on part time volunteers. This research has tracked this journey from the start and followed the growth of SCFC on social media. As the partnership between SCFC and Salford University began to reduce, I found it increasingly tricky and in some cases impossible to get interviews with key people at the club. Because the social capital had dwindled between the University partnership and SCFC, people did not feel obliged to take time out of their very busy lives to speak to a stranger from the University. Trying to run a football club whilst holding down various other jobs and commitments is an incredibly time consuming and demanding task and I could not blame people for not having time for an interview. It was very useful to be able to use participant observation online and secondary sources such as the BBC Documentary and book ‘Out of their League’ (Draper, 2016) to fill in some of the gaps in my knowledge. These ethnographical works focussed on the lives of the players, owners and others associated with the club. Even through these third party accounts and stories, it was still possible to see the role of social media to an extent, which also aided understanding.

Between all of these sources, I managed to get all of the information I needed. What I found interesting though was that at the top of the chain of command of SCFC, it was harder to gain access to interviews and answers. For communications managers of the various clubs I interviewed, I felt that they opened up more, but in some cases, I wondered if I was getting the full picture or the official party line. I suppose part of the role of a manager or communications manager is that they may be more inclined to present the more positive, official picture. When it came to interviewing fans and others, I felt that I was getting a less abridged and unedited picture – they were incredibly frank, positive and critical in some cases. The co-operation and help I received from everyone involved in this research from local to international fans, the club and digital communication managers was incredibly impressive. Busy people were generous with their time to speak to a relative stranger on sometimes multiple occasions. I was bowled over by the generosity and social capital developed as part of this study. For that, I have to massively thank everyone that contributed to this study.

Of all of the people that I connected with on my journey, some of the people that I communicated with the most were in fact international lurker fans. I met and interviewed a wide variety of brilliant and interesting people in person and online. I spoke to lurkers from around the world who were following SCFC via Twitter but not really interacting much with the club. I found them to be really easy to approach and speak to via social media. Even though our only contact was through social media and direct messages, I had rich and interesting conversations with them, sometimes over an extended period of time. Perhaps, for me as an individual, researcher and lurker, this was the group I found most resonance with and developed social capital with these individuals. I was also experiencing first hand what they were experiencing – I was following SCFC on social media, but I also found that my interest as a fan had dwindled somewhat over time after the initial excitement. The interest in the research never faded though and opportunities arose to write, speak and be interviewed about my PhD. I followed Kozinets advice to start a blog (see appendix 9.3) and this proved to be an excellent way to just simply get things written down that were in my head, reflect and also to disseminate what I was learning. It was good also to share this with fellow researchers, participants in the study and others in the industry. I was able to turn these into more formal articles for the Football Collective, DigitalSport.co and The Conversation through the connections and relationships developed as part of the project. People that I

interviewed were not interested in reading transcripts, but there were more interested to read about what I had found through my blog posts and articles.

Social capital matters online and offline and the two are interlinked. We are influenced by what our friends and family do, where they go and what they ask us to do. It is completely possible to support a football club via social media when you do not know any other fans. What is harder is to become a more dedicated follower or core fan without developing those personal connections and increasing social capital. People involved in this study told me how important the relationships were to them online and that social media is called social for a reason. Equally, attending a football match is also a social experience supported by the concept of family (peer group). People attend matches or do not attend based on the movements of their peer group and the social capital developed. There is no doubt that social media can help to attract new fans and increase the connection to a club, but ultimately, without social capital, it is difficult to sustain or increase that connection through good and bad times.

Finally, Kozinets (2015) outlined the use of poetry to further describe and illustrate the findings of netnography. In this spirit, the following passage illustrates this netnography of social media, social capital and football communities.

United legends and friends are joined from the lion city.
An unlikely union brings fears and hope to the Ammies.
The digital spotlight shines, casting its crystal light to the corners of the world.
Tribes form followers, rituals, allegiances and foes.
Through the smallest screens, fans and clubs are linked around the globe.
Real fans united rise through the core of the beautiful game.

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10. Appendix

10.1. PhD information sheet



Social Media, football fans and communications

Researcher: Alex Fenton

a.fenton@salford.ac.uk 0161 2954127

Dear Sir / Madam,

I would like to ask you to participate in the data collection for my PhD study at the University of Salford on Salford City FC.

I hope better to understand the following issues:

- How does Salford City Football Club (SCFC) use digital media to achieve its objectives
- How do SCFC fans interact with other fans and the club via social media and what is the impact?

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately 30 minutes in length to take place by arrangement.

You may decide not to answer some of the interview questions if you wish. You may also decide to withdraw from this study at any time by advising the researcher interviewing you using the contact details at the start of this document. If you notify me of your withdrawal, all identifiable data will be destroyed.

I may ask for clarification of issues raised in the interview some time after it has taken place, but you will not be obliged in any way to clarify or participate further.

The information you provide is confidential, except that with your permission, anonymised quotes may be used. If you request confidentiality, beyond anonymised quotes, information you provide will be treated only as a source of background information, alongside literature-based research and interviews with others.

Your name or any other personal identifying information will not appear in any publications resulting from this study; neither will there be anything to identify you.

The information gained from this interview will only be used for the above objectives, will not be used for any other purpose and will not be recorded in excess of what is required for the research.

Even though the study findings will be published in conferences and journals, only the researcher will have access to the interview data itself. There are no known or anticipated risks to you as a participant in this study.

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information please ask me before, during, or after the interview.

Yours Sincerely,

Alex Fenton

Lecturer in Digital Business

10.2. Interview consent form



Interview Consent Form / Consent Withdrawal

Digital Media, football fans and communications

Researcher: Alex Fenton, a.fenton@salford.ac.uk , 0161 2954127

Please Initial Box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, **without giving reason**.
3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.
4. I agree to the interview being audio recorded
5. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications
6. I agree to take part in the above study.

Please complete Section A or B at any one time - Thank you.

Section A. Consent Form:

| | | |
|----------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Name of Participant | Date | Signature |
| _____Alex Fenton _____ | _____ | _____ |
| Name of Researcher | Date | Signature |

Signed consent form will be stored securely by the researcher.

Section B. Consent Withdrawal:

I withdraw my consent to participate in research outlined above. By signing below I agree that any information given by me will not be used for the above research purpose.

| Name of Participant | Date | Signature |
|---------------------|------|-----------|
|---------------------|------|-----------|

10.3. Researcher Blog and other articles

The screenshots below show the researcher blog set up to attract research participants and disseminate findings in a shortened/accessible way. A number of these articles were re-published on DigitalSport.co, The Football Collective and The Conversation as shown below.

The screenshot displays a website for Alex Fenton, a lecturer in digital business at the University of Salford. The page features a dark header with the name 'ALEX FENTON' and the tagline 'DIGITAL BUSINESS AND RESEARCH'. Navigation links include 'HOME', 'ABOUT ALEX FENTON', 'BLOG', 'CV RESUME', 'PHD FOOTBALL & DIGITAL MEDIA' (highlighted in red), and 'CONTACT'. Social media icons for Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google+ are visible in the top right.


PhD football & digital media

Are you interested in football and digital media?

I am a lecturer in digital business at the University of Salford and I am currently undertaking a PhD in digital marketing, football and social media. I am researching the effects of digital media on UK football and fans, using Salford City FC as a vehicle for my study. I am looking at the wider effects of digital platforms and content on UK football clubs and fans.

An important aspect of my study is speaking to people that are interested in football, digital and social media. If you would like to speak to me about this or be interviewed as part of this study, I would love to hear from you. I have included more information below for participants in this study.

Participating in this football and social media study




The network diagram illustrates a complex web of connections between various entities, likely representing the digital and social media landscape. It features numerous nodes (represented by small icons) interconnected by a dense network of lines, suggesting a highly interconnected system.

RECENT POSTS

- Campervan trip around Belgium, Holland and Germany
- Vangollen Festival 2017 – VW Vans, Music, Extreme Sports and Hot Air Balloons!
- Sports brands and social media
- A Day in the Life of a Salford Uni Academic
- Did Blackburn Rovers fans send a digital flare to India via Man Utd?

ALEX FENTON

Alex Fenton is a lecturer in digital business and award winning digital developer and trainer, running courses at [MediaCityUK, University of Salford](#). This site is devoted to...



Social Media, Digital tech and football in the modern age



Social Media, Digital tech and football in the modern age

Posted on September 11, 2016 by Alex Fenton

As part of my research into football and digital culture, through articles, blogs, comments online and interviews, these various phrases arose to describe lesser connected football fans: bandwagon jumpers, plastic fans, armchair supporters, glory hunters, not a real fan, fair weather fans, flaneurs, part-timers, light attenders, casuals, followers and many others that I am sure you have heard before.

The truth of the matter is that football and its support is changing and disruptive digital technologies are playing a significant part in this change. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube in particular are enabling new kinds of fan. They are opening up a world where it is possible to support multiple clubs from wherever and whenever you like, diversifying choices.

Once over, people grew up in a town or city and they adopted whichever sporting club their friends and family supported and that was more or less it for life. Whilst people had a passing interest in other clubs in other parts of the world – following them from out of town was difficult. Whilst the local clubs for local people is still very much alive – people now have a vast choice of international options for who and how to support a football club. Global TV rights of course, still play a major part in this.

One example of this is the Italian World cup in 1990. English stars Paul Gascoigne, Paul Ince, David Platt had a great tournament and were signed up by clubs in Italy's Serie A. It was then possible to watch Serie A and the English stars on TV in England, opening up a whole new world of possibility. Suddenly, people in England were buying and wearing Italian football shirts and following the league from a distance. The social capital of Gascoigne and co. matched up with significant media coverage suddenly meant that kids now had a Juventus



0

RECENT POSTS

Campervan trip around Belgium, Holland and Germany

Vangollen Festival 2017 – VW Vans, Music, Extreme Sports and Hot Air Balloons!

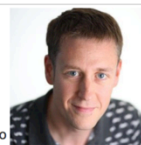
Sports brands and social media

A Day in the Life of a Salford Uni Academic

Did Blackburn Rovers fans send a digital flare to India via Man Utd?

ALEX FENTON

Alex Fenton is a lecturer in digital business and award winning digital developer and trainer, running courses at [MediaCityUK](#), [University of Salford](#). This site is devoted to digital technology for Learning, Teaching, marketing and fun!. [Read More..](#)

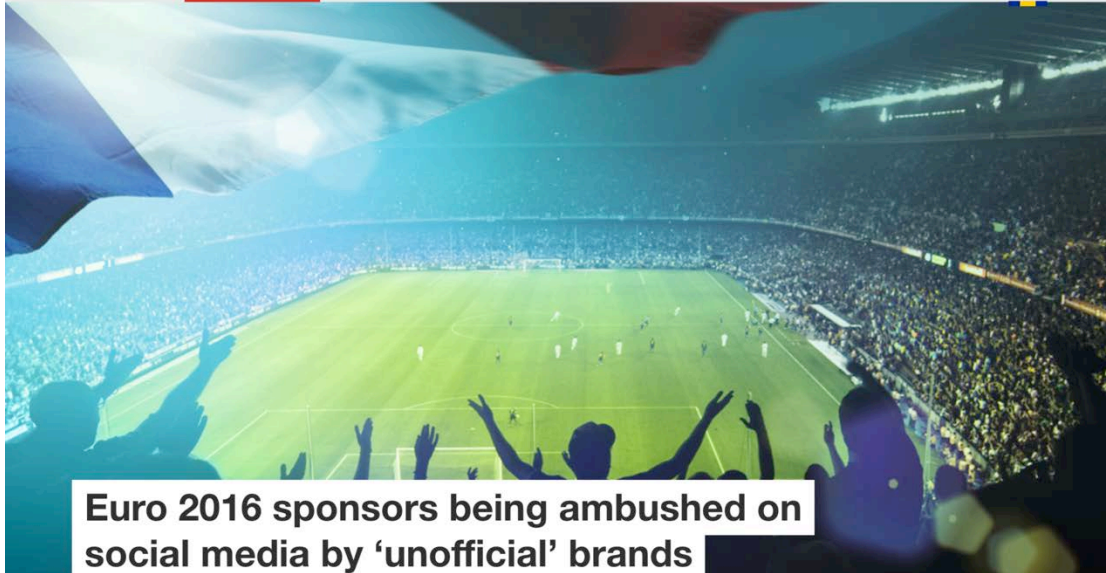


@ALEXFENTON TWEETS

Tweets by [@alexfenton](#)

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