

## Chapter x.x

# Supporter engagement through social media: A case study of Liverpool Football Club

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### 1. Introduction

Since the launch of the first recognisable social network in 1997, SixDegrees.com<sup>3</sup>, the proliferation of social media has brought about significant change in how people use the Internet<sup>4</sup>, such that commentators are suggesting an ‘immense transformation’ of the ‘media landscape’ has now taken place<sup>56</sup>. Referred to as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0<sup>78</sup>”, social media is comprised of “highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content [UGC]”<sup>9</sup>. Whether they be collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), blogs and micro blogs (e.g., Twitter), content communities (e.g., YouTube), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft) or virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life)<sup>10</sup>, UGC provide the basis upon which the majority of these social media platforms operate<sup>11</sup>. For example, microblogging site Twitter, one of ‘largest players’ in social media<sup>12</sup>, enables users to create short communications, limited to 140 characters and referred to as ‘tweets’, “that are published to the user’s stream of updates which can be followed and subsequently ‘unfollowed’ by

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<sup>3</sup> BOYD D. M., ELLISON N. B., Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13, 210–230, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> HENNIG-THURAU T., MALTHOUSE E.C., FRIEGE C., GENSLER S., LOBSCHAT L., RANGASWAMY A., SKIERA B., The impact of new media on customer relationships, *Journal of Service Research*, 13(3), 311–330, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> MANGOLD W.G., FAULDS D.J., Social media: the new hybrid element of the promotion mix, *Business Horizons*, 52(4), 357–365, 2009

<sup>6</sup> WALLACE L, WILSON J., MILOCH K., Sporting Facebook: A content analysis of NCAA organizational sport pages and Big 12 Conference Athletic Department pages, *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 4, 422–444, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> KAPLAN A. M., HAENLEIN M., Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media, *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59–68, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> BERTHON P. R., PITT L. F., PLANGGER K., SHAPIRO D., Marketing meets Web 2.0, social media, and creative consumers: Implications for international marketing strategy, *Business Horizons*, 55(3), 261–271, 2012

<sup>9</sup> KIETZMANN J. H., HERMKENS K., MCCARTHY I. P., SILVESTRE B. S., Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media, *Business Horizons*, 54(3), 241–251, 2010

<sup>10</sup> KAPLAN A. M., HAENLEIN M., Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media, *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59–68, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> DART J., New media, professional sport and political economy, *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 38(6), 528–547, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p.531

others”<sup>13</sup>. Alternatively, a social network, which often has more functionality, like Facebook for example, allows users to create and update profiles, to post and share text comments, photos and videos, to exchange private messages, and, alerts users as to when other connections update their profiles, and post and share their own content. According to Boyd and Ellison, what makes these social media platforms unique, “is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks” (i.e. a user’s lists of connections)<sup>14</sup>. Since their introduction, social media sites have become well established and now maintain universal appeal, especially among younger Internet users<sup>15</sup>, in what is an increasingly connected online world. For example, Twitter averaged 236 million monthly active global users during the last quarter of 2014<sup>16</sup>; Facebook averaged almost 1.4 billion in the same period<sup>17</sup>. For many users, social media habits have become integrated into ‘daily practices’<sup>18</sup>, and the number of people communicating via social media has long since overtaken the number communicating via email<sup>19</sup>: “Consumers of all ages interact with [social media] content on mobile devices, PCs, kiosks, at home, at play, at events, at work, on holiday or when travelling – in just about any situation – in much greater, and ever increasing numbers than before”<sup>20</sup>.

Having not just increased the number of ways in which users can communicate with each other, social media also facilitates direct and indirect communication between users and organisations, the latter of which maintain social media pages and profiles for their brands, services and products<sup>21</sup>. Thus social media comprises, according to Baird and Parasnis, “enormous potential for companies to get closer to customers and, by doing so, facilitate increased revenue, cost reduction and efficiencies”<sup>22</sup>. In this respect, and when considered in the context of the social experience and tribal characteristics of football spectatorship<sup>23242526</sup>,

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<sup>13</sup> PRICE J., FARRINGTON N., HALL L., Changing the game? The impact of Twitter on relationships between football clubs, supporters and the sports media, *Soccer & Society*, 14(4), 446–461, 2013: p. 448

<sup>14</sup> BOYD D. M., ELLISON N. B., Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13, 210–230, 2008: p.211

<sup>15</sup> KAPLAN A. M., HAENLEIN M., Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media, *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59–68, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.statista.com/statistics/282087/number-of-monthly-active-twitter-users/> - Titre d’une page Internet paru sur statista.com. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/> - Titre d’une page Internet paru sur statista.com. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

<sup>18</sup> BOYD D. M., ELLISON N. B., Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13, 210–230, 2008

<sup>19</sup> PRONSCHINSKE M., GROZA M. D., WALKER M., Attracting Facebook “fans”: The importance of authenticity and engagement as a social networking strategy for professional sport teams, *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 21(4), 221–231, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> WOODCOCK N., GREEN A., STARKEY M., Social CRM as a business strategy, *Journal of Database Marketing & Customer Strategy Management*, 18(1), 50–64, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> ZWICK, D. & DIETERLE, O. The [e-]business of sport sponsorship. In, J. M. Amis, T. B. Cornwell (eds.), *Global Sport Sponsorship*. New York: Berg, 127-146, 2005

<sup>22</sup> BAIRD, C. H., PARASNIS, G., From social media to social customer relationship management. *Strategy & Leadership*, 39(5), 30–37, 2011: p.30

<sup>23</sup> DART J., New media, professional sport and political economy, *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 38(6), 528-547, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> DE KNOP P., HOYNG J., *De Functies en Betekenissen van Sport*. Tilburg: Tilburg University Press., 1998.

<sup>25</sup> DIONSIO P., LEAL C., MOUTINHO L., Fandom affiliation and tribal behaviour: A sports marketing application, *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 11(1), 17–39, 2008

for professional football clubs that appropriately engage with social media, it offers the potential to “build meaningful relationships [with supporters] through opportunities for communication, interaction, and value”<sup>27</sup>. Thus with the widespread popularity of social media, its potential for worldwide dissemination of messages (resulting in the potential to raise awareness of a club), the considerable volume of UGC it produces, and its potential to develop ‘meaningful relationships’<sup>28</sup>, professional football clubs (and, more generally, other sports teams) are engaging with a variety of social media platforms ‘in new and innovative fashions’<sup>29</sup> aimed at strengthening connections with the existing supporter-base and expanding it further. Given the possibilities that social media offers then, and its relatively low costs<sup>30</sup>, it is now regarded as a key marketing communication tool for professional football clubs<sup>31</sup>.

The literature base pertaining to marketing, social media and professional football clubs is growing<sup>32</sup>. In 2014, McCarthy and colleagues<sup>33</sup> published a research paper which aimed to explore the challenges and opportunities involved in managing brand presence and supporter relationships through social media engagement for professional football clubs in the UK. The authors adopted a multiple case study approach, combining desk research and semi-structured interviews, and focusing on two clubs each from the 2010/2011 EPL (Bolton Wanderers and Newcastle United) and the 2010/2011 Football League Championship (FLCH) (Leeds United and Nottingham Forest). Thematic analysis of the collected data resulted in the identification of three main issues relating to club social media use (control of conversation, fan engagement, and commercialisation) and four key perceived benefits (content, interaction, community, and revenue generation). Building upon the findings of this piece of research then, the aim of this chapter is to explore the social media strategy of Liverpool Football Club [LFC] utilising the same methods employed by McCarthy et al. (2014)<sup>34</sup>.

### *Encadré 1 Palmarès et bref historique de Liverpool Football Club*

Liverpool Football Club is one of two professional football clubs based in the Northwest English coastal city of Liverpool (the other being Everton Football Club). The collective

<sup>26</sup> TAPP A., CLOWES J., From “carefree casuals” to “professional wanderers”: Segmentation possibilities for football supporters, *European Journal of Marketing*, 36(11/12), 1248-1269, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> WILLIAMS J., CHINN S.J., Meeting relationship-marketing goals through social media: A conceptual model for sport marketers, *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 3, 422-437, 2010: p. 436

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> CORNISH A. N., LARKIN B., Social media’s changing legal landscape provides cautionary tales of “Pinterest” to sport marketers, *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 23(1), 47–49, 2014: p.47.

<sup>30</sup> MICHAELIDOU N., SIAMAGKA N. T., CHRISTODOULIDES G., Usage, barriers and measurement of social media marketing: An exploratory investigation of small and medium B2B brands, *Industrial Marketing Management*, 40, 1153–1159, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> ARGAN M., ARGAN M. T., KÖSE H., GÖKCE S., E-CRM applications of soccer teams as a strategic tool: a content analysis of English Premier League and Turkish Super League, *Journal of Sport Management Research*, 4, 1–11, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> E.g. ARGAN, ARGAN, KÖSE, ET AL., 2013; CLELAND, 2013; CORNISH & LARKIN, 2014; DART, 2012; EAGLEMAN, 2013; PRICE, FARRINGTON & HALL, 2013; PRONSCHINSKE, GROZA, & WALKER, 2012

<sup>33</sup> MCCARTHY J., ROWLEY J., ASHWORTH C. J., PIOCH, E. Managing brand presence through social media: the case of UK football clubs, *Internet Research*, 24, 181–204, 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Data was collected through desk research and a semi-structured interview with a responsible individual from LFCs digital media team. Thematic analysis was conducted on the data collected.

achievements of these two clubs render the city one of the most successful in English football<sup>35</sup>, and ‘among the most famous in the European game’<sup>36</sup>. Liverpool F.C., the more successful of the two clubs, since being founded in 1892, have amassed eighteen league championships, seven FA Cups and eight League Cups in domestic English competitions. In addition to this relatively impressive domestic record, Liverpool F.C. are the most successful English club to have participated in European competitions, having won five European Cups, three UEFA Cups and three UEFA Super Cups. The club’s most recent European Cup triumph – a UEFA Champions League victory against Italian club A.C. Milan in 2005, who they beat on penalties having come back from being 3–0 down at half-time – resulted in the club being awarded the trophy permanently and receiving the *UEFA Badge of Honour* for multiple winners of the competition<sup>37</sup> ; a privilege bestowed to only three other clubs throughout Europe: Réal Madrid, A.C. Milan and Bayern Munich. Yet despite such an illustrious history, the pinnacle of which is considered to have come between 1975 and 1990 when the club dominated English football, winning eleven of their eighteen league championships and four of their five European Cups, Liverpool have not won a league championship since 1990 when the top division in England was then known as the Football League First Division; that is, the club have yet to win an English Premier League title since the competition’s inception in 1992 (they have been runners-up in the competition on three occasions – 2001/02, 2008/09 and 2013/14).

#### *Encadré 2 Fiche signalétique de Liverpool Football Club*

Owner: Fenway Sports Group, USA (John Henry is the principal owner)  
 Chairman: Tom Werner  
 Number of season-ticket holders: 24,500<sup>38</sup> (Anfield capacity: 45,522)  
 Number of followers on Facebook: 24+ million<sup>39</sup>  
 Average number of spectators per game: 44,671<sup>40 41</sup> (98%)  
 Club revenue: €264,234,000<sup>42 43</sup>

<sup>35</sup> As of January 2015, the collective achievements of clubs in London (13 in the EPL/Football League divisions) equate to 65 trophies from the following competitions: league championships (First Division/EPL), FA Cups, League Cups, European Cups/Champions League, UEFA Cups/EUROPA League and the UEFA Super Cup. The collective achievements of Liverpool F.C. and Everton F.C (the only two clubs in the city of Liverpool) equate to 58 trophies garnered from the same competitions.

<sup>36</sup> RICHARDSON K., ROOKWOOD J., Partnerships, provision and product: examining the modern football in the community programme – a case study on Everton Football Club, *Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies*, 2(1),161-174, 2008: p. 163)

<sup>37</sup> “Subject to a licence being granted by UEFA, multiple winners of the UEFA Champions League (three consecutive times or a minimum of five times) may wear a multiple-winner badge on the free zone of the left shirt sleeve which should be placed above the UEFA Respect badge...” (UEFA, *Regulations of the UEFA Champions League 2012 – 2015 Cycle. 2014-1015 Season*. Nyon: UEFA., 2014, p.32).

<sup>38</sup> Approx. for EPL season 2014 / 2015 (Pearce, 2014)

<sup>39</sup> Correct in January 2015

<sup>40</sup> EPL season 2013/2014

<sup>41</sup> Fifth highest for EPL season 2013/2014 behind Man. Utd. (75,207), Arsenal (59,487), Newcastle Utd. (50,395) and Man. City (47,080) (SOURCE)

<sup>42</sup> THE LIVERPOOL FOOTBALL CLUB AND ATHLETIC GROUND LIMITED, *The Liverpool Football Club and Athletic Ground Limited - Directors’ Report and Financial Statements*. Liverpool: The Liverpool Football Club and Athletic Ground Limited, 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Converted at a rate of £1 = €1.28 (correct in January 2015)

Revenue breakdown: Matchday (22%), broadcasting (31%), commercial (47%), other operating income (<1.0%), grants (<1.0%)

Club expenses: €22,275,000

Total number of partners / sponsors: 21

Name of partners in 2014: Standard Chartered (banking and financial services, main club sponsor), Warrior (sporting goods, kit supplier), Garuda Indonesia (airline, official training kit sponsor), Carlsberg (beverages, official partner), Vitality Health Life (insurance, official partner), Vauxhall (automotive, official partner), Dunkin' Donuts (food and beverage, official partner), Thomas Cook Sport (hospitality and tourism, official partner), Subway (restaurants, official partner), Gatorade (sports drinks, official partner), Jack Wolfskin (outdoor clothing & camping equipment, official partner), MBNA (banking and financial services, official partner), Maxxis (tire manufacturers, official partner), Barbados Tourism Marketing Inc. (hospitality and tourism, official partner), EA Sports (video games, official partner), Konica Minolta (electronics, official partner), InstaForex (financial services, official partner), Honda (automotive, regional marketing partner - Thailand), MONO Group (digital media, regional marketing partner - Thailand), Xolo (smartphone manufacturer, regional marketing partner - India) and Courts (retail, regional marketing partner - Malaysia & Singapore)<sup>44</sup>

Sources : THE LIVERPOOL FOOTBALL CLUB AND ATHLETIC GROUND LIMITED, *The Liverpool Football Club and Athletic Ground Limited - Directors' Report and Financial Statements*. Liverpool: The Liverpool Football Club and Athletic Ground Limited, 2013. <http://www.liverpoolfc.com/corporate/partners> - Titre d'une page Internet paru sur liverpoolfc.com. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

### Encadré 3 Présentation de Fernando Maisonnave

Fernando Maisonnave: digital engagement co-ordinator, in post since October 2014

A LFC case study offers a valuable addendum to the research undertaken by McCarthy et al. (2014) in light of the club's size, history of success, and domestic and international support<sup>45</sup>. LFC can indeed be considered a much 'larger' club, in many respects, than any of the case study clubs investigated by McCarthy et al. (2014)<sup>46</sup>. For example, of those case studies, LFC's nearest competitor in terms of scale, Newcastle United (NUFC), generated less than half the revenue of LFC in the 2012/2013 EPL season (NUFC €11.9m/ LFC €240.6m<sup>47</sup>). The club have also won significantly fewer honours than LFC over the course of their relative histories (refer to *table 1*) – NUFC's last major honour was won in a FA Cup victory in 1955. From a marketing-industry perspective, NUFC are ranked 19 places lower than LFC in the 2014 *Brand Finance*<sup>®</sup> *Football 50*<sup>48</sup> (NUFC ranked 27<sup>th</sup> with a brand value of

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.liverpoolfc.com/corporate/partners> - Titre d'une page Internet paru sur liverpoolfc.com. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

<sup>45</sup> ROOKWOOD J., MILLWARD P., We all dream of a team of Carraghers: comparing "local" and Texan Liverpool fans' talk, *Sport in Society*, 14, 37–52, 2011

<sup>46</sup> "[I]n terms of attendance at matches, size of fan base and revenue" (McCarthy et al., 2014: p. 188).

<sup>47</sup> DELOITTE SPORTS BUSINESS GROUP, *All To Play For: Football Money League*. Manchester / London: Deloitte LLP, 2014.

<sup>48</sup> "[P]ublished by Brand Finance plc [the Football 50] is the only study to analyse and rank the top 50 most valuable football clubs by brand value" (Brand Finance, 2014: p.2).

€75m / LFC ranked 8<sup>th</sup> with a brand value of €345m<sup>49</sup>). Only in terms of live spectatorship might NUFC be considered larger than LFC with an average attendance for the 2013/2014 EPL season of 50,395<sup>50</sup> (96.2% of St. James' Park's capacity of 52,404) compared with LFC's average attendance of 44,671<sup>51</sup> (98.1% of Anfield's capacity of 45,522). However, these figures should be considered within the context of Anfield's limited capacity compared to its major rivals<sup>52</sup>, and compared to relative and existing demand for tickets – for example, LFC's official waiting list for season tickets was reported to contain more than 70,000 people in 2011<sup>53</sup>. Long been considered by the club to be an inhibiting factor in its overall development<sup>54</sup>, in December 2014 work began on increasing the capacity of Anfield to around 54,000, with the expansion due to be completed in the summer of 2016<sup>5556</sup>. Spectatorship aside, and perhaps the most important consideration in terms of the focus of this chapter and the McCarthy et al. (2014) research, is the comparison between the clubs' relative number of connections on social media platforms: LFC's is significantly greater than NUFC, with the former currently maintaining a following of approximately 24 million followers on Facebook<sup>57</sup> and 4.3 million followers of its UK & Ireland Twitter account alone<sup>58</sup> (excluding 21 international accounts) compared with the latter's approximately 1.5 million followers on Facebook<sup>59</sup> and 546,000 followers on Twitter<sup>60</sup>.

*Table 1 LFC's major club honours compared to the case study clubs of McCarthy et al's (2014) research*

<sup>49</sup> BRAND FINANCE, *Brand Finance® Football 50*. London: Brand Finance, 2014.

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.worldfootball.net/attendance/eng-premier-league-2013-2014/1/> - Données issues de le page Internet «Premier League 2013/2014 - Attendance - Home matches», parue dans worldfootball.net. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.worldfootball.net/attendance/eng-premier-league-2013-2014/1/> - Données issues de le page Internet «Premier League 2013/2014 - Attendance - Home matches», parue dans worldfootball.net. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

<sup>52</sup> At the time of writing, Anfield is the sixth largest stadium in England (not including Wembley) behind Old Trafford, 75,635; Emirates Stadium, 60,272; St. James' Park, 52,405; Stadium of Light, 49,000; and, City of Manchester Stadium (a.k.a. Etihad Stadium), 46,708

<sup>53</sup> Liverpool Football Club (2011). Latest news - Season Ticket waiting list. *Liverpool Football Club Official Club Website* [online]. Available at: <http://www.liverpoolfc.com/news/latest-news/season-ticket-waiting-list> (accessed 14th January 2015).

<sup>54</sup> "We [the club] have said consistently that if Liverpool is to continue to compete at the very top level of the game then future expansion [of Anfield] is an absolute necessity" (LFC Press Release cited in BBC News, 2000).

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/dec/04/liverpool-new-main-stand-anfield-corporate-seats> - Données issues de l'article «Liverpool defend rise in corporate seats in new £114m Anfield main stand», rédigé par Andy Hunter et parue dans theguardian.com, le 4 decembre 2014. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/sep/23/liverpool-granted-planning-permission-for-phase-one-of-anfield-redevelopment> - Données issues de l'article «Liverpool granted planning permission for phase one of Anfield redevelopment», rédigé par Andy Hunter et parue dans theguardian.com, le 23 septembre 2014. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/LiverpoolFC> - Profil officiel de Liverpool FC sur Facebook. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

<sup>58</sup> <http://twitter.com/LFC> - Profil officiel de Liverpool FC sur Twitter. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/newcastleunited> - Profil officiel de Newcastle United FC sur Facebook. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

<sup>60</sup> <http://twitter.com/NUFC> - Profil officiel de Newcastle United FC sur Twitter. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

| Club              | League Titles | FA Cups   | League Cups | European Cups / Champions League | UEFA Cups / EUROPA League | UEFA Super Cup | Total     |
|-------------------|---------------|-----------|-------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------|-----------|
| Liverpool         | 18            | 7         | 8           | 5                                | 3                         | 3              | 44        |
| <i>Total</i>      | <i>18</i>     | <i>7</i>  | <i>8</i>    | <i>5</i>                         | <i>3</i>                  | <i>3</i>       | <i>44</i> |
| Newcastle United  | 4             | 6         | 0           | 0                                | 0                         | 0              | 10        |
| Nottingham Forest | 1             | 2         | 4           | 2                                | 0                         | 1              | 10        |
| Bolton Wanderers  | 0             | 4         | 0           | 0                                | 0                         | 0              | 4         |
| Leeds United      | 3             | 1         | 1           | 0                                | 0                         | 0              | 5         |
| <i>Total</i>      | <i>8</i>      | <i>13</i> | <i>5</i>    | <i>2</i>                         | <i>0</i>                  | <i>1</i>       | <i>29</i> |

Beyond these direct comparisons between LFC and the McCarthy et al. (2014) case study clubs, and further alluding to its stature in English and European football, LFC were, until recently, part of the ‘Big Four’ or ‘Sky Four’, referring to a period of dominance in the EPL throughout the 2000s maintained alongside Arsenal F.C. (AFC), Chelsea F.C. (CFC) and Manchester United (MUFC)<sup>6162</sup> – LFC finished outside the top quartet in the EPL only twice between the 1999–2000 and 2008–09 seasons. The club was also ‘a member of the transnational, commercially orientated (now defunct) pressure group G14’<sup>63</sup>, which operated between 2000 and 2008 before being replaced by the more inclusive European Club Association. With that in mind then, one of the objectives of this chapter, which, as stated, builds on the research of McCarthy and colleagues (2014), is to offer insight into the issues relating to social media strategy facing LFC, a club whose “long-standing worldwide status as a successful and glamorous football club”<sup>64</sup>, offers the potential to present some unique challenges and opportunities in how social media is managed, in the case of engaging with the club’s large domestic and international following online. Given the remit of this publication, and the fact that the literature pertaining to the area has been very recently reviewed in the McCarthy et al. (2014) publication, the remainder of this chapter is thus split into following sections. The first section will outline the development of social media at LFC, and discuss the evolution of the roles and responsibilities involved in its management. The second section of this chapter will present the findings of the LFC case study using the McCarthy et al. (2014) publication to inform the structure of these discussions: it will discuss the main issues relating to club social media use, those being control of conversation, fan engagement, and commercialisation. It will also expand on the work of McCarthy et al. (2014) by discussing

<sup>61</sup> BERLIN, P., Money, money, money: The English Premier League. In R. Steen, J. Novick and H. Richards (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Football*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 121-135, 2013.

<sup>62</sup> BODET G., CHANAVAT N., Building global football brand equity: Lessons from the Chinese market, *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 22(1), 55-66, 2010.

<sup>63</sup> ROOKWOOD J., MILLWARD P., We all dream of a team of Carraghers: comparing “local” and Texan Liverpool fans’ talk, *Sport in Society*, 14, 37–52, 2011: p.40

<sup>64</sup> *ibid*: p.40

issues related to measuring the impact of social media engagement. The final section will summarise the key findings of the case study.

## **2. LFC's Social Media Strategy**

### ***a. Developing Responsible Roles***

Somewhat supporting the assertion then that football clubs in the UK were sluggish in fully engaging with supporters via meaningful social media activity<sup>65</sup>, the installation of relevant positions within the organisational structure of LFC, responsible for social media is a relatively recent development. With that in mind, such roles, and their constituent responsibilities, are constantly evolving. The role of *Digital Engagement Co-Ordinator* [DEC] for example, that is, the role of the interviewee of this case study, was first appointed at LFC in October 2014. The responsibilities of the role preceding its creation, however, the *Online Communities Manager* [OCM], developed and expanded as the increased resource demands resulting from meaningfully engaging with the club's domestic and global fan base online increased with proliferation of social media use<sup>66</sup>. First appointed in January 2014, the OCM was initially responsible for maintaining and moderating the online forums and message boards that were part of the club's official website. This role then quickly evolved to include promoting campaigns (domestic/international and commercial) and producing content for the club's official social media outlets. With the need then to assess the impact of such online campaigns and content, both for the club primarily, but also for the club's commercial partners, the DEC role was developed to include such responsibilities, and those of the OCM role it replaced. The role, in its current state then, is comprised of the following responsibilities:

- Contributing to the club's domestic-oriented social media output (including the including the creation of targeted social media strategies, content and campaigns)
- Managing and supporting teams to assist with the delivery of international online fan engagement via social media platforms
- Supporting the press office and retail departments in delivering digital content related to player interviews, kit launches and merchandise, events featuring club 'legends' and other press-related engagements
- Moderating the club's official website forums and other fan areas of [www.liverpoolfc.com](http://www.liverpoolfc.com).
- Delivering the digital requirements of the club's commercial partners
- Researching and analysing data pertaining to the club's digital performance

The DEC works alongside a Website and Social Media team and an International Development team located within the club's Digital Media Department. While the former is responsible for the club's primary social media outlets based in the UK and Ireland market, the latter is responsible for the club's international social media channels. Although the DEC,

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<sup>65</sup> MCCARTHY J., ROWLEY J., ASHWORTH C. J., PIOCH, E. Managing brand presence through social media: the case of UK football clubs, *Internet Research*, 24, 181–204, 2014.

<sup>66</sup> HENNIG-THURAU T., MALTHOUSE E.C., FRIEGE C., GENSLER S., LOBSCHAT L., RANGASWAMY A., SKIERA B., The impact of new media on customer relationships, *Journal of Service Research*, Vol. 13 No. 3, pp. 311-330, 2010



Website and Social Media team and International Development team currently work largely independently of one another and report directly to the club's Digital Media Officer, further exemplifying what is a continually evolving environment<sup>67</sup>, a Social Media Manager will soon be installed into the club's organisational hierarchy, directly above the DEC, consolidating the strategic and managerial responsibilities of social media engagement. While the DEC is not directly responsible for any employees from a management perspective, there are a team of 'volunteer consultants' who report to the DEC. Volunteer consultants are supporters of the club (a requirement) who primarily fulfil two roles. First, these individuals are responsible for running the club's international social media sites (translating relevant content from the club's main social media outlets, generating and posting unique content, and moderating comments and replies to posts). These fans report both to the DEC and the head of the International Development team. Second, another team of volunteer fans, who report to solely to the DEC, are responsible for moderating the club's official online fan forums and message boards; an issue that will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

### ***b. Career Profile***

Liverpool Football Club's current DEC is a Brazilian national. Graduating with Bachelor's degree in Computer Science in 2004, the DEC was then employed in the IT departments of an international steel producer (as an IT Executive) and of a financial services provider (as Senior IT Officer) – both based in Brazil – for nearly eight years following graduation. Alongside this employment the DEC graduated with a Master's degree in Business Administration and Management in 2007, and later, a Postgraduate Diploma in Football Management and Sports Studies in 2012. It was the latter that led to the DEC then moving to the UK in 2012 to study on the University of Liverpool's *Football Industries MBA* (FIMBA). Delivered by the University's *Football Industry Group* (FIG<sup>68</sup>) and partnered with The Football Association (and to a lesser extent, UEFA), this postgraduate degree focuses on the business of football, and promoting professionalism and professional development in the industry<sup>69</sup>. It was the highest-ranked football-specific Master's course in SportBusiness International's postgraduate sports course rankings of 2013<sup>70</sup>, in which it placed 13<sup>th</sup> overall in the top 25 sport management courses from universities around the world, in what according to the publication, is "the industry's only authoritative ranking of the sector of sports management education"<sup>71</sup>. As part of the FIMBA, the DEC engaged in an informal placement with LFC which involved assisting the club with making some initial steps in engaging with the club's international online fan base. During this placement, the DEC was able to draw on previous experience and skills amassed during an extensive education and employment background in IT and 'digital systems', alongside fluency in Portuguese, Spanish and English.

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<sup>67</sup> PRICE J., FARRINGTON N., HALL L., Changing the game? The impact of Twitter on relationships between football clubs, supporters and the sports media, *Soccer & Society*, 14(4), 446–461, 2013

<sup>68</sup> <http://www.liv.ac.uk/management/football/> - «The Football Industry Group (FIG) - University of Liverpool Management School», parue dans liv.ac.uk. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.liv.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/taught/football-industries-mba/overview/> - Titre d'une page Internet paru sur liv.ac.uk. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

<sup>70</sup> SPORTBUSINESS INTERNATIONAL, University Challenge. Sport Business International's 2013 Postgraduate Sports Course Rankings, *SportBusiness International*, 189, 78-100, 2013.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid*, 2013: p. 80

What it offered the DEC, alongside the FIMBA, was an opportunity of professional experience in the football industry. Upon graduating in 2013, the DEC then took up more formal, full-time employment with LFC as a team leader and contributor for the club's Brazilian and Portuguese social media channels. It was this role then led to the appointment as OCM, and then in turn to the interviewee's current role as DEC for LFC.

### ***c. Social Media Portfolio***

Although LFC's official UK and Ireland-based Facebook and Twitter accounts were established at the beginning of 2009, the club's international social media programme wasn't formally launched until November 2012. Prior to this, the club generally only utilised social media to engage in domestic UK & Ireland-based markets, and (by-default) English-speaking countries (with the exception being a Brazilian/Portuguese-based official Twitter account launched in July 2011, and managed by the interviewee). The primary aim of this new international programme was, and still remains, to better engage with the large numbers of club supporters based in countries outside of the United Kingdom and Ireland: "... to open a conversation with international fans [...] in their own language" (interview). At present, in addition to Liverpool F.C.'s official UK and Ireland-based social media accounts (Twitter, Facebook, Sports Yapper, Pintrest, Fancred, Google+ and Instagram), the club also maintain 40 official internationally-oriented accounts on various social media sites (refer to *table 2*) the majority of which post and create content in the language from where the account originates, and/or the geographical market the account is aimed at. There are currently (aside from the domestic accounts mentioned above): 21 Twitter accounts, 12 Facebook accounts, two Instagram accounts, an account with Russian social network site VK (widely regarded as a "Russian Facebook"<sup>72</sup>), and accounts with Chinese social networking sites Sino Weibo (which combines functionality from multiple social media platforms), Tencent Weibo (akin to Twitter) and Weixin (a mobile text and voice messaging communication service). It is also worth noting that aside from these main (front-facing) domestic and international social media accounts, there are sub-departments and elements from within the LFC company structure that maintain their own official Twitter accounts. For example, @LFC\_Help, the club's customer service department (7,000 followers); @MightyRed\_LFC, the club's mascot (7,500 followers); @LFC\_PR, the club's public relations team (10,200 followers); @LFCFoundation, the charitable arm of the club (28,600 followers); and, @LFCTV, the official account of the club's TV channel (196,000 followers). Although it is very possible (and likely) that many supporters maintain multiple accounts across various social media platforms<sup>7374</sup>, each individual 'Follow' or 'Like' represents one point of contact, with the

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<sup>72</sup> E.g. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2013/aug/02/vk-russian-facebook-edward-snowden-nsa> - Données issues de l'article «Edward Snowden: Pass Notes - VK: the 'Russian Facebook' that has offered Edward Snowden a job», parue dans theguardian.com, le 2 août 2013. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

<sup>73</sup> This could mean, for example, supporters following the club both via their own Facebook and Twitter accounts. It might also be possible that supporters follow various language-based accounts within one social network platform; for example, following the UK & Ireland-based and the France-based Twitter accounts.

<sup>74</sup> [http://pewinternet.Org/~media/Files/Reports/2013/Social%20Networking%202013\\_PDF.pdf](http://pewinternet.Org/~media/Files/Reports/2013/Social%20Networking%202013_PDF.pdf) - Données issues de l'article «Social Media Update 2013», rédigé par Maeve Duggan & Aaron Smith et parue dans pewinternet.org, le 30 décembre 2013. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

resulting figure then, across all of the club’s main social media accounts, equalling almost 40,000,000 points of contact to manage (refer to table 2).

*Table 2 – LFC’s main accounts held on social media platforms and current number of ‘followers’ (rounded off to the nearest 100)*

| <b>Regions, Countries &amp; Languages</b>             | <b>Official Twitter account</b> | <b>Official Facebook page</b>                       | <b>Official Instagram</b> | <b>Other</b>  |
|---|---------------------------------|---|---------------------------|---|
| Arabic <sup>2</sup>                                   | ✓ 79,200                        | ✓   |                           |   |
| Australia and New Zealand <sup>1</sup>                | ✓ 24,400                        | ✓   |                           |   |
| Bangladesh <sup>2</sup>                               | ✓ 11,000                        | ✓   |                           |   |
| Brazil and Portugal <sup>2</sup>                      | ✓ 24,000                        | ✓   | ✓ 1,200                   |   |
| China <sup>2</sup>                                    |                                 |   |                           | ✓ Sina Weibo (2,229,500), Tencent Weibo (1,037,000) and Weixin (no data)          |
| France <sup>2</sup>                                   | ✓ 17,000                        |   |                           |   |
| Finland <sup>2</sup>                                  | ✓ 2,100                         |   |                           |   |
| Greece <sup>2</sup>                                   | ✓ 3,100                         |   |                           |   |
| India <sup>1</sup>                                    | ✓ 61,600                        | ✓   |                           |   |
| Indonesia <sup>2</sup>                                | ✓ 130,000                       | ✓   |                           |   |
| Italy <sup>2</sup>                                    | ✓ 2,700                         |   |                           |   |
| Japan <sup>2</sup>                                    |                                 | ✓   |                           |   |
| Malaysia <sup>2</sup>                                 | ✓ 16,200                        |   |                           |   |
| Norway <sup>2</sup>                                   | ✓ 6,600                         |   |                           |   |
| Pakistan <sup>1</sup>                                 | ✓ 7,900                         |   |                           |   |
| Poland <sup>2</sup>                                   | ✓ 3,200                         |   |                           |   |
| Russian <sup>2</sup>                                  |                                 |   |                           | ✓ VK (49,800)   |
| Spanish <sup>2</sup>                                  | ✓ 39,700                        | ✓   |                           |   |
| South Africa <sup>2</sup>                             | ✓ 18,300                        |   |                           |   |
| South Korea <sup>1</sup>                              | ✓ 6,600                         | ✓   |                           |   |
| Thailand <sup>2</sup>                                 | ✓ 62,700                        | ✓   | ✓ 12,300                  |   |
| Turkey <sup>2</sup>                                   | ✓ 24,600                        |   |                           |   |
| UK & Ireland  | ✓ 4,240,000                     | ✓   | ✓ 1,300,000               | ✓ Sports Yapper (600), Pintrest (1,170,400), Fancred (3,300), Google+ (4,205,400) |
| USA <sup>1</sup>                                      | ✓ 57,000                        |   |                           |   |
| Vietnam <sup>2</sup>                                  |                                 | ✓   |                           |   |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>21 4,837,900</b>             | <b>12 24,953,400</b>                                | <b>3 1,313,500</b>        | <b>4 8,696,000</b>  |
| <sup>1</sup> International account (English language) |                                 | <sup>2</sup> International account (local language) |                           |   |

### 3. Social Media Strategy Issues

In the following section, the perceptions of LFC regarding the issues and challenges associated with utilising social media to engage with the club’s supporter base are outlined.

#### a. Control of Conversation

Supporting the findings of McCarthy et al.’s research, in which the case study clubs were “concerned about the control of conversations associated with the club, and also,

ultimately in the brand identity and image”<sup>75</sup>, LFC are similarly concerned with such control on official social media channels. An important consideration, however, is, as discussed, that communication concerning the club has now ceased to be produced by football clubs exclusively, but is increasingly produced by fans through UGC on social media platforms<sup>76</sup>. It is necessary, therefore, to distinguish between the issues concerning the control of conversations from the perspective of club-created social media output (brand identity) and that of the fans through UGC (brand image). For LFC, club-created social media output is wide-ranging. It comprises, but is not limited to the following: match previews and reviews, match-day squad announcements, live match updates, transfer and contract announcements, behind-the-scenes insights, general club announcement and club press releases, interactive polls and votes (e.g. *figure 1*), interviews with playing and non-playing staff, details of competitions, offers on club merchandise, content delivered on behalf of commercial partners, links to the club’s other social media platforms, details regarding pre-season friendly tours, and the occasional comment on football-related events in the media. Content, in the form of posts, updates and/or shares, combines text, images, videos, interactive elements and hyperlinks; with supporters usually free to comment and respond directly to any and all of this content. In terms of the control of conversation, club generated content is, as much as is possible, aligned with the club’s values, tradition and history, similar to the findings of McCarthy et al. (2014). However, genuine opportunities to incorporate these elements in to communications are less frequent than one might initially anticipate. With a high proportion of the club’s social media content, at present, relating to events in and around match days – e.g. live in-game, minute-by-minute updates, match day squad announcements etc –, combined with the nature of social media, i.e. communication of short and concise informative messages, for posts such as that presented below (*figure 2*) it is not always possible for communications to convey club’s values, tradition and history. Wherever it is possible though, the club attempt to communicate via social media platforms in a way that is dignified, inclusive, and engenders fans’ perceptions that they are all part of the ‘LFC family’ (interviewee). This is a key strategic aim of LFC’s approach to social media – that they are regarded as a ‘family club’ (interviewee). But not in the traditional sense that the club is ‘family friendly’ – i.e. welcoming to women or children –, which, as a side note, it is generally considered to be anyway<sup>77</sup>, but more so in the sense of communicating to the club’s supporters, wherever they are located around the world, that they are all part of the ‘LFC family’:

“Everyone is welcome, regardless of [...] race, religion, [...] gender and everything else. [...] [W]e try to make fans feel like they are a part of the [LFC] family” (interviewee).

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<sup>75</sup> MCCARTHY J., ROWLEY J., ASHWORTH C. J., PIOCH, E. Managing brand presence through social media: the case of UK football clubs, *Internet Research*, 24, 181–204, 2014: p.191

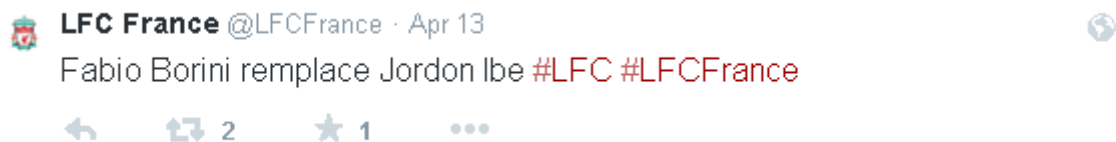
<sup>76</sup> BRUHN M., SCHOENMUELLER V., SCHÄFER D. B., Are social media replacing traditional media in terms of brand equity creation? *Management Research Review*, 35(9), 770–790, 2012

<sup>77</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/jul/19/football-clubs-on-the-ball> - Données issues de l’article «Which football clubs are the most family friendly?», rédigé par Mike Herd et parue dans theguardian.com, le 19 juillet 2013. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

**Figure 1** – Interactive poll from LFC’s official Facebook account exploring supporter associations, 6 September 2012



**Figure 2** – Example of an in-game live update tweet, 13 April 2015



Given that this is, by now, a relatively well-established social media strategy<sup>78</sup>, it is not surprising then that the biggest challenge in terms of control of conversation isn’t so much club-created communications, but similar to the findings of McCarthy et al. (2014), it is in the supporter responses to social media posts and their online discussions on official forums; it is in the UGC.

Unlike the four case study clubs in the McCarthy et al. (2014) paper, LFC have formally allocated resources within the club’s structure to monitor UGC across their portfolio of social media. However, it is possible that, in the years since McCarthy et al. (2014) actually conducted their research (2010), the case study clubs have since installed relevant roles with similar or scaled-down versions to that of LFC. Yet for LFC, even with their considerable resources, the club concede that it is “nearly impossible to moderate 100% of what’s posted [online]” (interview), such is the volume of UGC that club-generated communication can instigate<sup>79</sup>. One club-generated post on Facebook, for example, can prompt hundreds, if not thousands of reply comments from individual Facebook users (both supporters and non-supporters), which in turn can prompt more reply comments from other users, thus exposing a snowball-effect-nature of social media communication. It is the club’s moderators, predominantly comprising the aforementioned volunteer consultants, who have the job of deciding on the types of user comments that are inappropriate for publication on the club’s

<sup>78</sup> For example, a search on Twitter of #LFCFamily presents many thousands of user-generated tweets that contain this term.

<sup>79</sup> BRUHN M., SCHOENMUELLER V., SCHÄFER D. B., Are social media replacing traditional media in terms of brand equity creation? *Management Research Review*, 35(9), 770–790, 2012

numerous official online channels. Areas of responsibility, in terms of moderation for the club, include: the online forums and comments sections of the official LFC website; a dedicated area of the website which documents club supporters' online social media activity, entitled #theKOP<sup>80</sup>; and, the messages, comments and replies on posts on official social media channels. In terms of openness, LFC maintain that social media engagement should allow "fans total freedom to say what they want to say" (interview), while concurrently attempting to remain congruous with the values, history and traditions of the club. What this mainly involves is the removing of UGC from official online spaces which is considered overtly abusive, insulting, discriminatory, objectionable or contains inappropriate language. Although definitive numbers were not available, the interviewee speculated, anecdotally, that between 10% and 15% of messages and comments which are reviewed by moderators across the social media portfolio are removed. Supplementing this official club moderation, there is also the option for fans to report comments they deem inappropriate to moderators, who then decide whether any action is required.

It is important to highlight at this point that LFC maintain that they do not remove comments that are merely regarded as negative or unfavourable towards any aspect of the club or its staff, as long as they are appropriately toned (i.e. not overtly abusive, insulting, etc.), and there was no evidence to suggest that such censorship had occurred; although such evidence is regarded as difficult to obtain<sup>81</sup>. But the number of messages that did require action from moderators was very much affected by the team's on-pitch performance; i.e., when LFC win and the supporters are happy, posts and comments tend to be, overall, more positive than when the team lose (especially if they have lost more often than not over a number of matches) when a higher proportion of comments and posts tended to express dissatisfaction with the performance of the team, individual players and/or non-playing staff in *inappropriate* ways. During these times, supporters even resort to inappropriately expressing dissatisfaction with, and posting abuse at one another; such UGC is also usually removed. For negative and unfavourable content that is not removed, it is worth referring to the literature here, according to which, social media specialists 'have attained near-consensus' that the 'most appropriate method' of handling such content is 'to attempt to respond in as positive a manner as possible'<sup>82</sup>. However, there are two immediately apparent problems with LFC attempting to adopt such a strategy. Firstly, as mentioned above, even with relatively substantial resources available to LFC, the club are unable to read every individual user-generated message, comment and reply posted across the club's social media portfolio. Secondly, the question of how the club responds to certain negative and unfavourable comments can be somewhat complicated. For example, a negative post concerning an element of customer service that a user has experienced would be relatively simple to respond to (so long as it is seen by the club), compared to, say, a negative comment concerning the performance of the team in a particular game. It is just not possible, or even practical, to respond to negative or unfavourable UGC relating to performance, and just like the research

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<sup>80</sup> <http://www.liverpoolfc.com/fans/thekop/thekop-home> - Titre d'une page Internet paru sur liverpoolfc.com. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

<sup>81</sup> DEKAY S. H., How large companies react to negative Facebook comments, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 17(3), 289–299, 2012.

<sup>82</sup> DEKAY S. H., How large companies react to negative Facebook comments, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 17(3), 289–299, 2012.

conducted by McCarthy et al. “in order to tap into the passion of fans”, the club recognise that “it is necessary to accept that views expressed by fans will not always be what the club wants to hear”<sup>83</sup>.

### ***b. Fan Engagement***

Contrary to the research conducted by McCarthy et al., who found that among their case study clubs “there was no real effort to know the customer [fan]” through social media engagement (2014: p. 192), LFC have attempted to address this issue, in the context of their worldwide fanbase, through the launch of their international social media programme; the belief here being that supporters respond more positively to content that tailored specifically to them<sup>84</sup>. Principally, this involves engaging fans in their own language (e.g. the @LFCFrance Twitter account), but going beyond just directly translating UK-oriented content from the club’s main social media channels. For example, but proving an exception to this general rule of international accounts publishing in the local language, the @LFCIndia Twitter account publishes Tweets in English, yet illustrates instead some alternative ways in which the club engages with specific supporter groups via social media. For example, marking occasions that are relevant to international supporters (e.g. commemorating local holidays; see *figure 3*), advising followers on venues that broadcast games (*figure 4*) or ‘celebrating’ non-football-related sporting achievements (e.g. cricket), and thus attempting to engage with the fanbase through their country’s more popular interests (e.g. cricket is the national sport in India). Quite simply, the idea here was “to start a conversation with [Indian-based supporters], and try to find other ways of reaching them, not always speaking about football, but other matters that are relevant to the people” (interview). International football fixtures and competitions also offer opportunities for the club to communicate uniquely relevant content via international social media channels. For example, during the 2014 FIFA World Cup, there were numerous official LFC social media accounts based in those countries represented in the competition (e.g. Brazil, France, Spain, United States, etc.). Thus the club was able to produce specifically-tailored World Cup content for these countries’ supporters and their teams (for example, see *figure 5*); an undertaking that is made easier by a competing nation containing an LFC club player – for example, Mamadou Sakho and the French national team (for example, see *figure 6*). Practicalities and specific examples aside, overall what this social media strategy facilitates, primarily, is the formation of country- and/or language-specific online communities whereby the aim is to engender a greater sense of belonging to, and increase supporter identification with LFC:

“One of the main objectives of launching international social media is to make these fans feel part of the club, feel part of the family... having a voice, and [...] bringing their ideas or their insight in to the club. [...] [T]he perception of the club, sometimes is a bit different depending on the country..., but as a whole, [from our perspective] the fans feel LFC as a family club” (interviewee).

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<sup>83</sup> MCCARTHY J., ROWLEY J., ASHWORTH C. J., PIOCH, E. Managing brand presence through social media: the case of UK football clubs, *Internet Research*, 24, 181–204, 2014.

<sup>84</sup> WOODCOCK N., GREEN A., STARKEY M., Social CRM as a business strategy, *Journal of Database Marketing & Customer Strategy Management*, 18(1), 50–64, 2011.

**Figure 3** - @LFCIndia Tweet concerning Independence day in India, 14 August 2014



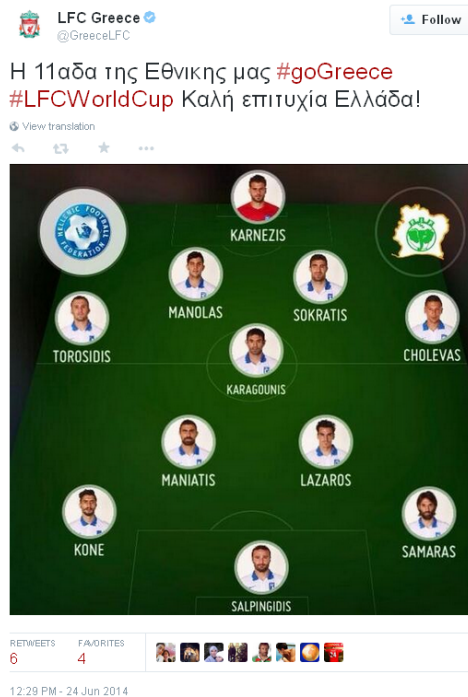
Source: <http://twitter.com/LFCIndia>

**Figure 4** – Tweets and posts advising supporters where they can watch LFC games



Source <http://twitter.com/LFCIndia> (top) / <http://www.facebook.com/IndiaLFC/> (bottom)

**Figure 5** - @GreeceLFC announces to fans the squad for their 2014WC game against Côte d'Ivoire



Source: <http://twitter.com/GreeceLFC>

**Figure 6** - @LFCFrance tweet mentioning Mamadou Sakho and the French national team



Source: <http://twitter.com/LFCFrance>



With reference then to the club's domestic supporter-base, there are challenges with engaging those fans via social media platforms who, geographically, are located closest to LFC. This potentially may result these fans having "lived alongside the club for many, many years, so they know what is happening with the club. [...] They [are more likely to] go to matches" (interviewee). There is, however, an appreciation that these fans may feel like they've been "put aside" in favour of the club concentrating on growing their international fanbase:

"It is a challenge indeed, it is [...]. [W]e don't want to make local fans feel put aside, because these fans are core to the club: they live in the city, they've been... growing and living with Liverpool all of their lives. [...] We see, unfortunately, [...] local fans complaining sometimes about Liverpool trying to reach fans worldwide [...] It's tricky because... all of them are Liverpool fans and we want them [all] to feel part of the family. So maybe, we're trying to reach international fans because it's harder for them to feel part of the club, to feel part of the [LFC] family. They aren't here, they aren't in Liverpool, they can't go to Anfield to watch matches so... maybe that's the reason we're trying harder to reach them and why we're focussing a bit more on them than our local fans. But that doesn't mean we don't value our local fans. We do value them, we know they are core to the club, it's just [...] tricky sometimes..." (interviewee).

Some of the comments contained within this quote are consistent with the findings of Bridgewater<sup>85</sup> (2010), who suggests that supporters located closest a club's home ground often consider themselves 'better' or more 'loyal' than those who are located further away<sup>86</sup>. Thus presently, a major concern and challenge for LFC is engaging the local fan base in such a way that is mindful of these findings, and of supporter views, without compromising the effectiveness of the club's international social media programme. The research of Garcia<sup>87</sup> may offer some guidance here on working to overcome this challenge. Having interviewed marketing executives from the R al Madrid Football Club, the author describes how, when developing their online marketing strategy, positive relationships with fans are cultivated with the club through relying on, and responding to fan feedback. The danger here is that if LFC fails to engage sufficiently with their locally-based fans, then they will instead turn to alternative unofficial sites to satisfy their communication needs<sup>88</sup>; a concern that was similarly raised in the findings of the McCarthy et al.'s (2014) research.

### ***c. Commercialisation***

Another increasingly important strategic objective for LFC is that the club effectively supports its commercial partners via its social media output. A challenge here is presented in the fact that commercial partners are, in general, making increasing demands of clubs in reference to communicating their brands via social media; indeed, promotion of an

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<sup>85</sup> BRIDGEWATER S., *Football Brands*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan., 2010.

<sup>86</sup> ROOKWOOD J., MILLWARD P., We all dream of a team of Carraghers: comparing "local" and Texan Liverpool fans' talk, *Sport in Society*, 14, 37–52, 2011

<sup>87</sup> GARCIA C., R al Madrid Football Club: Applying a relationship-management model to a sport organization in Spain, *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 4, 284–299, 2011.

<sup>88</sup> BOYD D., GOLDER, S., LOTAN, G. Tweet, tweet, retweet: conversational aspects of retweeting on Twitter. Document pr sent    la *Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS)*, 5-8 janvier, Kauai: The Grand Hyatt Kauai Resort & Spa, 2010.

organisation, or its products and services, on official club social media platforms is something that commercial partners are regularly trying to leverage when they enter into relationships with clubs. The challenge then is that the relationship between fans and the club is not perceived as being overly commercialised. Thus, similar to the findings of McCarthy et al., LFC are very much aware that fans ‘may consider social media as their space (private or public)’<sup>89</sup> (2014: p.194), and consequently the danger, from the club’s perspective, is that in over-commercialising users’ ‘space’, the relationship with fans is adversely affected. Furthermore, highlighting an issue that was not uncovered in the McCarthy et al. (2014) research, LFC are also attuned to the fact that certain social media platforms allow users as young as 13 years old to register for accounts, and consequently this is a consideration in how social media communications, that advertise partners services and products, are toned: “[W]e have to be careful [...] because we have children and youngsters [who engage with LFC’s social media]... [we] try to be careful with what is posted” (interviewee). This is a particularly important consideration when posting social media content on behalf of the club’s commercial partners whose products and services are not be suitable for under 18s (for example, gambling companies). Such content, then, needs to sufficiently meet the requirements of the partner, while at the same time, not unduly seen to be encouraging those who are too young – “but that’s one of our challenges at the moment” (interviewee).

#### ***d. Assessing Social Media Impact***

An issue that wasn’t raised in the McCarthy et al. (2014) research is related to assessing the impact of social media engagement. Though a potential reason for this may lie in the relative adolescence of the case study clubs’ social media strategies when McCarthy et al. (2014) conducted their research (2010), coupled with the limited resources that these clubs allocated to its management. For LFC, however, assessing the impact of their social media engagement is firmly rooted within the club’s social media strategy, supported by formally allocated staffing resources. Yet while that may be the case, the club do admit that formal performance indicator measures are far from fully developed. Currently, social media performance is quantitatively measured on post views, LIKES, comments and shares in relation to the 24M fans the club has on Facebook. For example, the proportion of post LIKES against number of views it gets provides LFC with some insight into how club-generated content is being received. LFC also continually, and quantitatively evaluates its own social media performance against what it considers to be the club’s main competitors (in a social media sense). In the UK, these are considered to be ‘biggest clubs’ in the EPL: Arsenal FC (41.8M Facebook fans)<sup>90</sup>, Chelsea FC (41.8M)<sup>91</sup>, Manchester City FC (18.8M)<sup>92</sup> and Manchester United FC (64.5M)<sup>93</sup>. Everton FC (2.0M)<sup>94</sup> are also considered a competitor, but

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<sup>89</sup> MCCARTHY J., ROWLEY J., ASHWORTH C. J., PIOCH, E. Managing brand presence through social media: the case of UK football clubs, *Internet Research*, 24, 181–204, 2014: p.194

<sup>90</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/Arsenal> - Profil officiel de Arsenal FC sur Facebook. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

<sup>91</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/ChelseaFC> - Profil officiel de Chelsea FC sur Facebook. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015.

<sup>92</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/mcfcofficial> - Profil officiel de Manchester City FC sur Facebook. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015

<sup>93</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/manchesterunited> - Profil officiel de Manchester United FC sur Facebook. Dernier accès le 15 février 2015

more from a regionally-geographic perspective. Reflective then of LFC's global thinking in terms of its social media strategy, the club also regard Barcelona FC (82.7M)<sup>95</sup> and R al Madrid FC (81.7M)<sup>96</sup> as competitors. The DEC described how the club "try to benchmark [social media] performance against what these other teams are doing and how they are engaging fans on social media" (interviewee). This might involve, for example, comparing how fans respond to club-generated content on the LFC Facebook page, the R al Madrid Facebook page, and the Barcelona FC Facebook page on a specific match day. The ultimate aim being to ascertain the type of content that fans respond more positively to, and thus determine whether any improving adjustments can be made to the club's own content, based on what these other teams are posting and how their respective fans react. This might relate to the visual configuration and presentation of new content, and the utilisation of 'creative ideas' for its posting. What the club are not currently doing is qualitatively scrutinising the types of comments and replies that fans are posting in response to club-generated content to gauge their views and opinions. Although UGC is reviewed by the club's moderators (the DEC and volunteer consultants) the reason for doing so is, as stated, to ensure that it maintains an appropriate tone (i.e. is not abusive, insulting, discriminatory, etc.). But this is a lot less time-consuming than examining UGC to determine whether it is positively or negatively-oriented, or can be qualitatively themed. Doing so might also require further training and skills development for volunteer consultants, who may not be familiar with, for example, content analysis. Yet although these challenges exist, LFC regards the incorporation of qualitative approaches to assessing social media impact as 'the next step' in developing their formal performance indicator measures; at the time of the interview, they were just unsure (or potentially unwilling to discuss) how they were going to enact this.

#### 4. Conclusion

Social media then – and, more broadly, the development of new media technologies (for example, mobile communications and the live streaming of football matches) – have changed the manner in which professional sport is produced, marketed, delivered and consumed<sup>9798</sup>. The result, Cleland proposes, is that "the creation of multiple platforms on the Internet has allowed for more "active" football fans [...] to engage in everyday asynchronous discussions"<sup>99</sup>. Such discussions – a large proportion of which are conducted via social media platforms – combined with prospect that social media offers in terms of fans being able to communicate directly with clubs, have "transformed [fans] from mere content consumers into

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<sup>94</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/Everton> - Profil officiel de Everton FC sur Facebook. Dernier acc s le 15 f vrier 2015.

<sup>95</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/fcbarcelona> - Profil officiel de FC Barcelona sur Facebook. Dernier acc s le 15 f vrier 2015

<sup>96</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/RealMadrid> - Profil officiel de R al Madrid FC sur Facebook. Dernier acc s le 15 f vrier 2015.

<sup>97</sup> DART J., New media, professional sport and political economy, *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 38(6), 528-547, 2012.

<sup>98</sup> SANTOMIER J., New media, branding and global sports sponsorship, *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship*, 10(1), 15–29, 2008.

<sup>99</sup> CLELAND J., Racism, football fans, and online message boards: How social media has added a new dimension to racist discourse in English football, *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 38(5), 415–431, 2014: p. 246

content producers”<sup>100101</sup>. As a result of the shift in communications concerning clubs, from what traditional media offered fans (one-way communication from the club to the supporter via TV, press releases, etc) to what social media offers (two-way communication between fans and the club via multiple online platforms) the “[t]he power has been taken from those in marketing and public relations by the individuals and communities that create, share, and consume blogs, tweets, Facebook entries, movies, pictures, and so forth”<sup>102</sup>. The purpose of this chapter then was to explore elements of the social media strategy of LFC – a club who maintain a “long-standing worldwide status as a successful and glamorous football club”<sup>103</sup> – and highlight some of the issues relating to club social media use in attempting to develop meaningful relationships with supporters. The findings of this research provide insights for football clubs in responding to the challenges and opportunities posed by social media. It is worth highlighting, however, that interpreting these insights, one has to be mindful that social media output (in terms of content) and performance (in terms of positive engagement) is markedly influenced by the performance of the team. Thus, on occasion, it’s not about innovative new approaches to engaging with fans, or producing creative content, but merely “staying in line with what is happening on the pitch” (interviewee). Sometimes, fans can respond negatively to posts that are not ‘in sync’ with their feelings, particularly when the team is not winning. Thus implementing ‘innovative’ ideas when the team is losing is usually met with a larger degree of opposition ‘as a way of compensating for what is happening on the pitch’ (interviewee). Thus, even when the team is winning, new and creative ideas for social media need to be introduced gradually, and they are best introduced when there is “momentum on the pitch” (interviewee).

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<sup>100</sup> BERTHON P. R., PITT L. F., PLANGGER K., SHAPIRO D., Marketing meets Web 2.0, social media, and creative consumers: Implications for international marketing strategy, *Business Horizons*, 55(3), 261–271, 2012: p.263

<sup>101</sup> FUCHS C., *Social Networking Sites and the Surveillance Society*. Salzberg: Unified Theory of Information., 2009

<sup>102</sup> KIETZMANN J. H., HERMKENS K., MCCARTHY I. P., SILVESTRE B. S., Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media, *Business Horizons*, 54(3), 241–251, 2010.

<sup>103</sup> ROOKWOOD J., MILLWARD P., We all dream of a team of Carraghers: comparing “local” and Texan Liverpool fans’ talk, *Sport in Society*, 14, 37–52, 2011: p.40

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