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**Football in the context of China: exploring the social  
media strategy and fan experiences**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor  
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**Centre for Cultural Policy Research**

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## Abstract

In recent decades, with the development of economy, sports, and particularly football, have received constant attention and have developed rapidly in China. The development and growing maturity of social media have accelerated this process, which has further expanded the size of the football market in China. However, in the academic domain, limited attention has been paid to the development of Chinese social media platforms, particularly in relation to sport branding issues. Research into social media strategy and fan experience in the Chinese context still remain in its infancy. To address these gaps, the research aims fulfilled by this thesis exploring how social media was used by professional sport brands related to branding purposes, and how sport fans were motivated to use social media.

To achieve these objectives, qualitative interviews and quantitative content analysis were employed. Five clubs, three European and two Chinese clubs, were selected as the target samples. Ten club communication managers and twenty-five loyal fans were interviewed. 2144 social media posts were collected and examined by content analysis.

The research results find that visual content, including Image and Video, are the most popular post types. The trend towards greater use of Video over recent years, will make this increasingly important in the future. The first team related content still constitutes the core information posted by clubs, but other content with non-product-related attributes also plays an important role in enhancing fan engagement and identification. The research into fan experience reveals that fans are primarily motivated by informational needs, but would like to access more professional, exclusive, and high-quality content. Moreover, Weibo is found to be an appropriate platform for information dissemination and information seeking, which supports the conclusions of previous research. These findings extend the knowledge of sports branding and marketing, fan research and social media study, particularly in the context of China. The research also has practical implications for professionals responsible for social media branding in the Chinese market.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Research background

Recent years have witnessed a rapid growth in social media use, particularly in China. According to the statistical report from the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC, 2021) up to June 2021, the number of Chinese netizens reached 1.011 billion, and the number of people using instant messaging applications reached 983 million, which accounted for 97.3% of all netizens. Sina Weibo is one of the largest social media networks in China with a user base of nearly 500 million in 2021 which is predicted to grow to 557 million by 2025 (Statista, 2021).

Social media provides numerous opportunities for brand management and other commercial activities due to its ability to engage brands directly with consumers, particularly sports brands (Kabadayi & Price, 2014; Achen, 2017; Abeza et al., 2017; Holt, 2016; Khajeheian & Ebrahimi, 2021; Kohli et al., 2018; Swani et al., 2019). Social media enables sport organizations to engage with fans and maintain a close relationship even in off-season periods (Achen et al., 2020). Such engagement provides brands with the opportunity to listen to fans and manage their brand image and thereby contribute to improving their brand equity (Filo et al., 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Many scholars focus on how sports organisations can achieve their goals by managing their online presence and developing a proactive social media strategy. For example, Wang (2020) examined how NBA teams use Twitter communication tools such as hashtags to foster engagement. Gladden and Funk (2002), Parganas et al. (2015), and Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) analysed social media posts on different platforms and identified the relationships between key brand attributes and fan engagement. Achen (2016) further investigated how fan engagement on Facebook contributes to relationship quality and consumer behaviour.

Given its massive user base, Weibo provides the ideal platform for sports organisations to expand brand awareness and attract fans. The official Weibo report (Sina Weibo, 2017) revealed that there are nearly 50 million users following sport-related content on Weibo, and 350 million users are pan-sports users. Looking at the huge sports market in China, scholars have also been seeking in the past few years to explore how

clubs manage their brands and build relationships with their Chinese sports fans (Kaplan & Langdon, 2012; Bodet & Chanavat, 2010; Sullivan et al., 2019; Li & Feng, 2021; Chu, 2021). For example, by addressing the transformation and recent reforms within the sports industry, Chu (2021) explored the political influences of domestic policy on sport from a general standpoint. They described the Chinese government's sport-support policy as the national ambition, which means such policy will provide numerous opportunities for sports organisations and the market, supported by Chadwick (2015). From an empirical perspective, Bodet and Chanavat (2010) conducted a study to identify the determinate factors required to build brand equity in the Chinese market. Considering the significance of Weibo and the Chinese market, this raises the question of what the role of Weibo related to sport branding. In other words, it is about how can Weibo be used by professional sport clubs to build relationships with fans. This research therefore aims to specifically explore the social media use of professional football clubs in relation to how different social media content impact on fan responses and build club-fan relationships.

In sport and media research, it is crucial to understand the needs and gratifications that audiences (also fans) wish to seek (Keller, 2008). Both scholars and professionals are keen to know what kinds of content audiences/fans appreciate most and what factors can motivate fans to use the media. Scholars have already conducted some research into these areas. Bodet et al. (2019) surveyed 1160 Chinese football fans of Premier League clubs which revealed a number of brand attraction factors and found that Chinese fans are significantly attracted by sporting and game-related content. From the cultural perspective, Tsai and Men (2017) compared the engagement mechanisms between China fans and the fans from the USA. Billings et al. (2019) explored and examined the uses and gratifications of sports fans of the U.S and China across four different social networks, demonstrating that the self-expression of fans appears to be the central factor driving Chinese fan behaviour. However, although it is important and necessary to understand the links and factors between fan motivation and social media use, the majority of studies take a quantitative approach such as survey or content analysis to researching these behaviours, while few studies have employed qualitative methods to deeply explore the fans' motivations on social media use and their preferences regarding the different types of content. Therefore, this study sets out to investigate the motivations of Chinese sports fans and their experiences when using the Chinese social media platform Weibo, particularly in relation to professional sport content.

## **1.2 Rationale and the research gap**

This research expands the knowledge base relating to several existing theories and research areas, including social media strategy, social media branding, relationship marketing and audience research by addressing relevant research gaps.

First, it is evident that the dominant body of literature about social media management and branding, particularly in relation to sport branding, is mainly focused on the Western context and based on Western network services such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat (Parganas et al., 2015; Billings et al., 2017; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). Therefore, scholars have increasingly called for further research to be carried out into additional networks, and in different countries to further expand the knowledge base and document the changes in the social media environment (McCarthy et al., 2014; Achen et al., 2020). Although some studies have investigated the social media aspects in sports branding (McCarthy et al., 2014; Parganas et al., 2015), there is a general paucity of literature explicitly investigating the social media use of sports brands on Chinese social media platforms. One of the main aims of this research therefore seeks to explore the social media strategy of football brands from European and Chinese clubs to further contribute to the understanding of how sports organisations manage their social media contents for branding purposes.

In addition, given the importance of understanding fans and their motives for using social media and consuming football related content, it seems promising to explore the motivations and gratifications of sports fans. Similarly, much of the existing literature is restricted to the research context of Twitter users or users of other Western networks; Chinese social media users, particularly sports fans have received little attention in the past (Zhang & Pentina, 2012; Gao & Feng, 2016). Hence, an empirical study that explores the Chinese fan experiences based on U&G theory is needed and serves as another primary goal for this research.

From a methodological perspective, this research aims to provide empirical implications for the media and communication discipline, especially in relation to the sport and branding study, by adopting mixed research

methods. To date, most studies of social media management and sport management have mainly employed quantitative content analysis as the analytic tool. Although this method enables researchers to study broader samples (Shen & Bissell, 2013; Alboqami et al., 2015), it has been criticised as less effective in revealing in depth information (Riffe et al., 2019). Thus, qualitative research methods are also needed within sports media research to reveal deeper insights into social media content management and fan engagement strategy. As Parganas et al. (2015) and Achen (2020) suggested, qualitative research with sport management professionals could contribute to the literature revealing more insights into how clubs manage their content and overall branding strategy. However, only a limited number of studies have been based on qualitative methods. It thus provides partial warrants for this research to qualitatively explore how football clubs use social media.

The majority of studies tend to explore the social media strategy of sport brands through the analysis of social media pages. There is little research exploring the opinions and views of sports management professionals such as media managers or executives. By talking to the communication managers of sports organisations, this research aims to reveal deeper insights into social media content strategy and engagement strategy and further explore the implications from both the theoretical and managerial perspectives (McCarthy et al., 2014). Finally, to fill the research gap identified above, this research aims to conduct mixed research methods that combines quantitative content analysis for examining social media content use (content strategy) of clubs and responses (interactions), with qualitative interviews that will examine the professional in-depth opinions of club communication managers. The combined methods and following findings of this research may contribute further practical implications for social media research and sport organizations.

Moreover, this research advances the literature on Uses and Gratification theory by revealing the ideas and opinions of sport fans through qualitative interviews. In a similar way to social media research, U&G related literature mainly seeks to identify fan experiences and behaviours by using quantitative methods, such as survey and content analysis (Smock et al., 2011; Annamalai et al., 2021). There is an absence of qualitative approaches in the U&G literature. Given the importance of qualitative U&G research, as Leung and Zhang (2016) and Perks and Turner (2019) have discussed, qualitative methods should be seen as the first step in

U&G literature due to their ability to uncover new emergent gratifications. In the context of China and sports fans, this study aims to employ qualitative interviews to reveal more insights into the social media consumption of football fans, which could further contribute to the literature in this important research area.

### **1.3 Research aims and research questions**

By addressing the rationale and background above, this research is firmly located within the Media and Communication Studies field of research. Its focus is on media sport and branding related research, primarily to examine how social media was used by professional sport brands related to branding purposes, and how sport fans were motivated to use social media. In order to achieve these aims, the research is conducted with the intention to:

1. Develop an understanding of the social media content strategy of football clubs, in the context of China and Weibo.
2. Explore the influences of different kinds of content on social media responses and provide insights for social media research discipline and sports organisations regarding online content management.
3. Develop an understanding of how football clubs use social media for further engaging with fans, explore the approaches used to enhance fan engagement besides social media content, and provide the theoretical implications for sport communication research and the practical intelligence regarding consumer engagement for brands.
4. Identify the preferences of Chinese fans in relation to social media content, identify the motivations for social media use and football content consumption, and contribute to audience research and understanding of the specific features of Chinese fans.

Based on the objectives, three central research questions and several auxiliary questions are developed as follows:

1. How do football clubs manage social media content for branding purposes?
  - 1.1 What are the overall branding objectives of football clubs regarding the use of Sina Weibo?
  - 1.2 How do clubs use different types of posts (e.g., text, image, video) and how well do these post types

influence fan engagement?

1.3 How do clubs manage different types of content (e.g., club history, player news) and how does the content type influence fan engagement?

1.4 What are the differences between European and Chinese clubs with regards their social media content strategies?

2. How do football clubs use social media to encourage fan engagement?

2.1 Are there any approaches in addition to information provision used to attract and engage with fans? If there are, what are those approaches, and how do clubs use Weibo to implement them?

2.2 What are the differences between European and Chinese clubs with regards their social media fan engagement strategies?

3. How do fans interact with the clubs they support?

3.1 What are the motivations for Chinese fans to use Weibo and consume sports content?

3.2 What types of social media post do fans prefer to respond to?

3.3 What types of content do fans prefer to respond to?

3.4 What gratifications do fans seek in consuming the sports content?

## **1.4 Scope of the research**

The primary aim of this research is to explore how social media is used by sport brands, specifically speaking, the social media strategy of European and Chinese football clubs and the experiences (gratifications and motivations) of Chinese fans on social media use. Thus, specific definitions of relevant terms must be noted in advance of further research.

First, by investigating the social media posts, this research explores how football clubs manage their online content on Weibo and the influence of different content types on fan interactions. The term ‘content strategy’ will be adopted to describe this research objective (Annamalai et al., 2021). In this research, content strategy refers to a deliberate strategy adopted by football clubs that is designed to proliferate fan interactions and

responses by arranging different categories of content. Thus, it is only used to describe how managers use content and mainly analyses the social media pages of clubs.

Second, the research also sets out to explore how clubs actively contact fans or design online content and activities to encourage fan engagement. Most literature on fan engagement focusses on the investigation of social media content, while little research has been conducted into how clubs design their fan engagement strategies, particularly those approaches that go beyond repurposing and disseminating the official page content. This study develops the term ‘engagement strategy’ to focus solely on this perspective. When conducting the qualitative interviews with brand managers, the term engagement strategy is mainly used to describe how clubs design their strategy to encourage the engagement of fans. It is more about the organisational-led activities of clubs such as discussion forums, special topics, and direct interaction with fans, rather than arrangement of content.

Third, since the study addresses the research gap regarding Chinese sports fans’ experiences of using social media and consuming sports-related information, it is necessary to explain the term ‘fan experience’. In this research, the fan experience refers to three major aspects related to fans’ use of social media, namely: their content preferences, their gratifications, and the motivations behind their social media use and football information consumption. Moreover, as this study also aims to explore the relationship between organizational social media use and fan engagement, there is a need to clarify the definition of ‘fan engagement’. Commonly, customer engagement refers to those transactional behaviours that can contribute to the financial income (Huettermanna et al., 2019). However, in the areas of sport and social media, fan engagement is defined as fans’ non-transactional behaviours (Annamalai et al., 2021), such as content consumption behaviour (viewing) and contribution behaviour (liking, commenting, and sharing), according to the research of Vale and Fernandes (2018). In this study, fan engagement is used to describe fans’ online contribution behaviours, including interaction with clubs and other behaviours that could contribute to the club-fan relationship.



## **1.5 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis comprises seven chapters and is followed by appendix parts containing figures and charts. As presented above, Chapter One introduces the background and rationale for this research and sets out the relevant research questions. In the following six chapters, the theoretical backgrounds, methods, findings, discussion, and conclusion will be presented and summarised as follows.

Chapter Two draws together the theoretical dimensions of the research to review the literature relating to social media, sports branding, fan research and other relevant theories and studies, particularly in the context of China. It firstly reviews the development of sports media relationships from a historical perspective, which provides a basic understanding of how sport relies on the influence of media and how media uses sports to attract audiences. Then, the development and impacts of social media on sports are presented to understand the sport-media nexus in the contemporary setting. In addition, literature on sports branding especially social media sports branding, is further addressed to better understand the role of social media in sport marketing and brand practice. Finally, the review of fan research and relevant theories such as uses and gratification theory is presented, for understanding what are the differences between audience and fan, and how fans usually be motivated to consume sport information on social media. Taken as a whole, this chapter seeks to provide a comprehensive conceptual framework to understand sports social media branding and the relationship between clubs and fans.

Chapter Three addresses the methodology employed for this study. It introduces the methods that are used in this research. The pros and cons of different research methods, and their justification are described to better understand how and why mixed research methods (including quantitative content analysis and qualitative interview) are adopted in this study. Then, the details and design of the field work are provided, including the selection of samples, the design of content analysis categories, and other issues such as potential ethical problems.

Chapter Four offers and analyses the empirical data provided by social media managers of football clubs. It presents the interview materials from 25 social media managers and discusses the responses to the

research questions on how football clubs manage their social media content and how do they design their content strategy. In addition, the content of the club Weibo home page is also analysed to present a quantitative understanding of what types of social media post and content are most valued and how they are used by clubs.

Chapter Five further analyses the interview data from the social media managers by focusing on the engagement strategy of clubs. It aims to explore which approaches managers use to build relationships with fans and how they encourage fan engagement. By analysing the qualitative data, this chapter reveals several important findings and then make contribution to the literature.

The analysis of the Weibo posts interactions and interviews with fans are presented in Chapter Six. First, it analyses the quantitative content analysis data and identifies the content types and post types that fans interact with most to understand better the features and preferences of Chinese fans. Then, the qualitative interview data is discussed and analysed to reveal the uses and gratifications of fans. Although most motivations and gratifications are found to be consistent with those of fans from other regions in previous studies, several relatively new motivations are identified, which provide further insights for fan research in China.

In the final chapter (Chapter Seven), the main research findings and discussion points are summarised to answer the research questions and objectives. Areas of consistency and conflict with previous studies are also discussed to develop a comprehensive understanding of club branding strategy and fan experience. Then, the research contributions and implications from both theoretical and managerial perspectives are considered, providing new insights for researchers and professionals. Finally, the limitations of the research are identified and suggestions made regarding opportunities for future researchers, which may help them further optimise relevant research and contribute to the research area.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive literature review of football media relationships and fan experiences. It attempts to provide the contextual background and a framework from three main perspectives: 1) football industry development and its relationship with social media; 2) football brands' social media branding; and 3) fans' motivations and gratifications, corresponding to the three main sections in this chapter.

In the first section, the literature relating to football globalisation, football in China, social media, and football social media relationship is introduced. It aims to present recent studies in this area and, more importantly, to provide a basic understanding of the role of social media in football development. In the second section, the theoretical backgrounds to sports branding and social media branding are reviewed to further explore how football clubs use social media. Finally, it introduces online community and two fan-angle-based theories (Uses and gratifications theory; Social identity theory) focusing on fan experiences, particularly those relevant to the context of Chinese fans. After the literature review is complete, a clear understanding of relevant theoretical concepts and backgrounds should be formed; and the reasons how and why this study has been undertaken should be explained, and corresponding concepts in the context of China should be understood.

### **2.1 The media sports nexus: developing football through social media**

In their early study, Boyle and Haynes (2004, p.7) stated: "Today it is difficult to imagine football without television or a television schedule bereft of football." Football and media cannot leave each other alone, and in recent years the media football industry has expanded to a huge scale. In this section, literature relating to the development of the football industry, the media sports relationship, and more importantly, the sports and social media nexus is reviewed.

### **2.1.1 The football industry: globalisation and football in China**

As one of the most popular sports and spectator sports, football plays vital and multiple roles in society. As Dobson et al. (2001, p. xi) mentioned, “Football’s importance is not only economic but also social and cultural.” In terms of economics, it is widely known that football as an industry can generate large amounts of value. For example, in 2008, the Premier League generated £1,930 million in income, while the figure was only £150 million in 1991 before the league was founded (Szymanski, 2010, p. xii). As for its social significance, Wagg (1984) thoroughly introduces the social importance of football in British culture, including social topics such as football managers, hooliganism, and engagement with the media. Focusing on the cultural aspect, scholars such as Tomlinson et al. (2003) have already explored football as a kind of cultural phenomenon. For example, Pyta (2006) introduces the cultural role of football from different perspectives, such as the symbolic power of football, national identity, gender differences, and fandom.

As the football industry has matured, it is unavoidable that organisations wish to expand into the overseas market or become global. Sports clubs evolved into international corporations and aimed to develop a global brand (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2004). After witnessing the commercial success of Manchester United, more and more European football clubs started to join the competition for the foreign market (Hill & Vincent, 2006). Scholars in recent years have assigned significant interests in different aspects of football globalisation, such as the role of football in diplomacy (Schrag, 2011); the branding strategy of football clubs (Chanavat & Bodet, 2009); the role of football as national soft power (Connell, 2018); national identity and football fan culture (Gibbons, 2016); and the media coverage and football internationalisation (Ginesta et al., 2020).

The expansion into foreign markets has encouraged more clubs to plan and launch their businesses in China, and scholars have also focussed on football in China and the Chinese market (Bodet & Chanavat, 2010; Connell, 2018; Gong, 2019). As one of the largest countries, with the largest population and one of the largest global economies, China has a fast-growing sports market and huge fan base. Since 1993, when China introduced a number of important economic reforms, the football and sports market has been reformed several times and started on the road to commercialisation and professionalisation (Hong &

Zhouxiang, 2013). In recent years, the market has experienced rapid growth. For example, during the 2014-2015 season, the China Super League, the domestic top tier football league, spent £81m on player and coach transfers; a level of spend only bested by the EPL (English Premier League) (Connell, 2018). In addition, the fan base also increased greatly with the help of social media (Li et al., 2018). For example, the number of followers of Manchester United on Weibo, the largest Chinese-oriented social media platform, reached 10 million in 2021. Other famous clubs such as Barcelona, Real Madrid, Bayern Munich have also gained millions of followers in China.

Another important background influence on football in China is its political system. In their study, Ma and Kurscheidt (2020) discuss the differences between football commercialisation and professionalisation in China compared to Western countries. They revealed that under the socialist economic system, the commercialisation and professionalisation of football are bound in a politically led logic. This means that Chinese football clubs and markets are often shaped by political factors. For instance, many clubs are owned by the Provincial Sports Bureau, and the football market is influenced by national reform policies. In such a context, the political attitudes towards the football industry can be important to the development of sports organisations. In recent years, the country has regarded football as playing a vital role in national development. As Tao (2017) pointed out, the Chinese government regards the sports industry as one of the critical elements of their 'Five year plan' and the 'Belt and Road' strategy. In addition, the Chinese government has started to pay more attention to cultural soft power, and football has gained more support from government stimulation policies and has received large investments than in the past (Connell, 2018). It means that football and the sports market in China is likely to receive more and more attention and support from fans and government in the future, highlighting the importance of relevant research.

Furthermore, the cultural influences also cannot be ignored. In their comparative study of Chinese and US social media sports fans, Billings et al. (2019) suggest that China has a very different sports culture compared to the US. The collectivist culture background influence how people use social media for sport consumption and gratification sought. Thus, in this research, the exploration of how social media is used in the context of China, or on Chinese social media platforms, is highlighted.

### 2.1.2 Media football relationship

Kinkema and Harris (2002) suggest that the research about mass media and sports mainly focuses on three major facets: the production of information, the contents of texts, and the interactions between audience and media. The following paragraphs will generally introduce the media sports relationship from these three aspects to provide a comprehensive review of the literature: production and medium, contents, and fans.

#### *Production and medium*

Following the argument of Kinkema and Harris (2002), analysing the production of sports media relationships involves establishing the political and economic context and technical process. Although professional sports did not establish a close relationship, or as Cleland (2009) described in the early years ‘an interdependence relationship with media’, media has always been vital to sports. For example, going way back to the early 1800s, cricket reports were serialised in *The Lady’s Magazine* (Boyle, 2009, p.21). In terms of football, Crolley and Hand (2013, pp.1-7) suggest that the press plays a role in reporting matches and provides lots of quality content such as comment and analysis; it enhances the identity of fans and contributes to the form of football cultures. The three common types of publishing sports material of print media, are the specialised sports sections in newspapers, the sports papers and magazines, and the magazines published by sports clubs and associations (Beck & Bosshart, 2003). Compared to the commodified football and media nexus, the print media maintains a close cooperation with football. As Nicholson (2007, pp.20-21) concluded, press and sports organisations use each other to increase revenues, “They did this through associating their respective ‘products’, rather than engaging in an overtly commercial relationship.”

Entering the TV era, there have been many pioneering studies (Whannel, 1992, 2009; Boyle, 2009; Kinkema & Harris, 2002; Rowe, 2003) that explore the role of television production and its contribution to football. As Boyle and Haynes (2004) state: “Today it is difficult to imagine football without television or a television schedule bereft of football.” The media football industry has developed to a considerable scale nowadays. For example, the European TV channels spent 3.9 billion euros on football broadcasting services

and rights, accounting for 70% of total sports broadcasting (5.5 billion euros) (Andreff & Bourg, 2006). The high degree of commodification raises many issues such as monopolisation; however, it also opens lots of new revenue streams such as broadcasting rights, sponsorship, and advertising (Cleland, 2009; Kinkema & Harris, 2002). As Whannel (1992, p.1) argue, the battle for broadcasting rights drives media organisations to offer high-quality content in the process of production. In addition, the innovation of technology contributes a lot to the development of sports and television. For instance, broader coverage, slow motion replay, statistics, and virtual overlays have become common conventions of sports broadcasting driven by the requirements of markets and audiences (Boyle, 2009, p.72; Whannel, 2009). Television has also enabled the transformation of local sports to transnational and global sports (Whannel, 2009).

In recent decades, new media (including Web, blog, and social media) have pushed football and media nexus into a new stage and attracted significant attention from scholars (Boyle & Haynes, 2004; Millward, 2011; Clavio, 2011; McCarthy et al., 2014; Price et al., 2013). Clubs and organisations which largely invest in new media to enlarge their influence, generate greater revenues and grow into global brands, for instance, the EPL (Millward, 2011, pp.24-25). In addition, the Internet means the broadcasting of football matches is not solely restricted to television, and an increasing number of people watch football on the Web through their personal computer (Millward, 2011, p.9). In the digital media era, interactivity becomes the core service for media and sports organisations since “the desire to provide content that transcends the linear reception of analogue television into a more dynamic, active participation of the user” (Boyle & Haynes, 2004, p.141). The technology provides clubs with greater opportunities to manage their brand and directly connect with fans. For instance, studies have shown how football clubs use social media for brand presence management (McCarthy et al., 2014); how clubs use Twitter to maintain and improve their relationships with fans (Price et al., 2013), and how clubs change their organisational structure and ownership in response to the new club-media relationship (Cleland, 2009). Additionally, users play a more vital role than ever, which is not only about their role as sports consumers but also relates to the change in how they consume. Scholars have shown the importance of user-generated content (Butler & Sagas, 2008; McCarthy, 2014; Kian & Zimmerman, 2012). Sports journalists even consider themselves as social media users to produce sports-related content for self-promotion and being the key opinion leader (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010). These studies highlight the importance of football social media research, which will be reviewed further in the

following sections.

### *Contents*

In the early years, due to the limitation of the medium, sports media contents were mainly disseminated in the form of sports text. Journalists use text to describe, comment, interpret, and analyse sports matches to people not present at the pitch, to explain the reasons for specific incidents, and to provide exclusive information (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012. pp. 125-126). By delivering messages, sports text fosters the way that audiences view sports, see the world, and influence the ideology of people consciously and unconsciously (Nicholson, 2007. p.94).

With the development of broadcasting technology, television has become the most important medium in the football media relationship. The form of content is no longer restricted to text. Visual and vivid contents delivered through television provide audiences with new experiences. For instance, Real (2011) listed the main reasons why the combination of television and sports is so attractive, such as the images, the movement, the sound, the liveness, and the intimacy. Those factors amplify the nature of sports as physical activity and transfer it onto the screen for audiences. Furthermore, television sports content keeps evolving based on technological upgrades. High-speed cameras, slow-motion replay, and analytical digital maps, and other newer technologies bring more and more aesthetic excitement to sports fans (Whannel, 2009).

However, due to the competition over commercial rights, television contents such as videos and live streams are usually exclusively owned by a few media companies or sports organisations, with high barriers to access. This model is regarded as broadcast 'scarcity' by Hutchins and Rowe (2009). Contrary to this 'scarcity', the prevalence of social networks brings richer content, lowering barriers to content access and reducing cost, which is called 'Digital Plenitude' (ibid). In the social media era, content is no longer fully controlled by companies or organisations. Users can choose to view any contents they like (Millward, 2011; Clavio, 2011; McCarthy et al., 2014; Price et al., 2013). In addition, an important feature of social media is that fans can create their own content, which is named 'user-generated content' (UGC). A large number of empirical and theoretical studies have noted the significant role of UGC (White & Cheung, 2015; Kim &



Song, 2018; Kim & Johnson, 2016), for example, how UGC influences branding outcomes (Kim & Johnson, 2016). Furthermore, the integration of multiple types of content on social media (such as text, image, video) has attracted much attention from scholars in relation to the social media content strategy (Annamalai et al., 2021; Aichner, 2019; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Tafesse, 2016; Alboqami et al., 2015; de Vries et al., 2012). As a vehicle for branding, social media plays a vital role in attracting engagements and finally contributes to sports clubs' financial benefits (Aichner, 2019). Specific content strategies can help clubs to encourage a higher volume of interactions such as likes, comments and shares and further improve their brand performance. For example, Annamalai et al., (2021) found that the social interactive contents could generate the most of interactions while the remunerative contents receive least responses from fans. Through investigating the fan engagement of NBA teams, Achen et al., (2020) suggested that player or personnel posts attract the most fan engagements. Such underpinnings highlight the importance of investigating the social media content management in this research, and provide heuristics for understanding the fan behaviours and motivations on social media engagement.

### *Fans*

What has been well known to media and sports researchers is the crucial role of audiences, whether in terms of the economic or cultural aspects or different mediums. The book edited by Nightingale (2011) provides a comprehensive review of studies about audience media relationships. Focusing on the economic sphere, Napoli (2003) explores the marketplace of the audience and introduces the relationship between audiences and the media market from newspaper, television and networks. In relation to the cultural aspect, early studies about viewing motives on TV (Gantz, 1981; Wenner & Gantz, 1995); gratification and motive study about social TV of Hwang and Lim (2015); football identification research and media use (Phua, 2010; Jones, 1998) all provide relevant experiences and case studies.

Sports fans cannot entirely be equated with audiences; the fan is usually considered as a person that is obsessed and enthusiastic about sports, and displays a great passion for what they love (Crawford, 2004, p.19; Boyle, 2009, p.184). As the commodification of football increases, fans play a fundamental role as consumers in the media industry, whether they are reading newspapers, listening to the radio, or watching TV (Sandvoss, 2004, pp.17-18). However, to define a fan one needs to consider factors about their

consumption of sports, their identity, memories, and social interactions (Crawford, 2004, p.4). In their seminal book Crawford (2004) profoundly introduces the fan and fandom community and their relationship with media. With the development of media technology, football fans nowadays are changing their role from passive receivers to attenders and even producers of content (Crawford, 2004, pp. 135-145). Numerous studies have shown the importance of fan-generated content on the Internet (Lewis, 2002, pp.191-233; McCarthy, 2014; Sandvoss, 2004, pp.13-44). As Fiske (1992) mentioned: “Fans, in particular, are active producers and users of such cultural capital and, at the level of fan organisation, begin to reproduce equivalents of the formal institutions of official culture.”

### **2.1.3 Opportunities and connections: football and social media**

From what has been set out in the previous section, it is clear that today football has close engagement with social media. The prevalence of new communication technology such as the Internet and social media has largely reshaped the media landscape (Hutchins & Rowe, 2009); key issues around media, particularly sports and media, have been raised in recent years. For example, the customer relationship strategy has been adjusted by marketers due to the two-way communication model of social media (Achen, 2017); in addition, online video, online match streaming services and downloading technology are restructuring the broadcasting channels for sports organisations and content broadcasters (Hutchins & Rowe, 2009). The football-social media nexus has impacts on different aspects of football media relationships such as content providers, football marketing and branding, news production and fans’ experiences. For example, it is well known that sports brands invest heavily in the practices of online engagement; professional clubs regard social media as one of their key marketing strategies; brands and clubs increase their interaction with fans via social media (Filo et al., 2015). Compared with the previous section, this section takes a further step, to introduce and discuss key issues around content providers (sports organisations) and social media such as the definition and basic image of social media, the role of sports organisations in supporting this trend, and relevant studies around football and social media.

#### *Defining social media*

Social media is no longer new, but there is still a need to define it and review its development. In 1979, Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis established the Usenet, a worldwide system that provided a place for Internet users to post public messages. Then, in 1998, Bruce and Susan Abelson created '*Open Diary*', an early example of social networking, which allowed people to share their diaries, create their favourite list and comment on others' posts which became the foundation for social media platforms today. In 2003 and 2004, with the development of high-speed Internet, the creation of MySpace and Facebook brought the concept of 'social media' to the world and gradually became familiar to us (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Many scholars have tried to define the concept of social media. In their book, Fuchs (2017, pp.35-37) summarised several definitions that are proposed by different scholars. For example, Shirky (2008, p.20) defines social media as the tools for sharing, co-operating and taking collective action. Van Dijck (2013, p.4) regarded social media as the user-centred platform which can facilitate community communication and build an ecosystem of the network. However, this research tends to agree with the definition of Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), which is based on the introduction and analysis of Web 2.0 and User Generated Content (UGC). As they stated, social media is the Internet service that based on Web 2.0 and enable users to exchange and communicate with their content.

At present there are several types of social media websites: "blogs (e.g., WordPress, Blogspot, Tumblr), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Diaspora, VK), microblogs (e.g., Twitter, Weibo), wikis (e.g., Wikipedia) and content sharing sites (e.g. YouTube, Flickr, Instagram)" (Fuchs,2017, pp.185-186). The next paragraphs introduce two main microblogging sites that are focused in this research: Twitter and Sina Weibo and their relationship with football.

### *Twitter and football/sports*

Twitter is one of the largest social media platforms in the world. Specifically speaking, it is defined as a microblogging social network due to its 280 characters limit. According to Statista (2019) data, in the first quarter of 2019, Twitter had 330 million monthly active users worldwide. The microblogging platform provides several basic services: follow/unfollow, comment, retweet, @ and # hashtag. *Follow/unfollow* allows users to follow or unfollow any users; once users follow/unfollow others, it means they can/cannot

see the update of contents from others. *Comment* allows users to express their opinions under others' tweets. *Retweet* means to re-post other users' tweets. The '@' stands for the address of other identified users in a tweet, and the '#' (hashtag) includes tweets around specific topics (Kwak et al., 2010).

With the development of Twitter, the large user base and instant messaging attracted attention from marketing professionals. Companies, organisations, and individuals increasingly use Twitter for marketing, branding, and advertising. For example, Greer and Ferguson (2011) showed how local television sites use Twitter for promotion to attract audiences; Burton and Soboleva (2011) analysed 12 accounts from 6 organisations in the US and Australia and explored their interactive strategies using Twitter; Berthon et al., (2012) from an international marketing perspective to illustrate the functions and meanings of Twitter. Football clubs and organisations also value the new opportunities that Twitter brings. There are a number of sports/football media scholars who pay attention to the role of Twitter in relation to the development of the sports industry. For instance, scholars such as Hopkins (2013), Sheffer & Schultz (2010), Sanderson (2014), Gibbs and Haynes (2013) and Hambrick et al. (2015) provide analyses of sports and Twitter issues from the perspectives of clubs, content providers and athletes. Those studies cover a variety of aspects including marketing, football clubs' Twitter interaction strategy, athletes' self-branding and sports journalism in the context of Twitter.

In addition, Twitter also brings new viewing experiences for sports fans. Numbers of scholars have shown how the microblogging service improves users' gratification and satisfaction, especially in the area of sports (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Clavio & Kian, 2010; Gibbs et al., 2014; Mahan III, 2011; Smith & Smith, 2012). For example, the research of Gibbs et al. (2014) clearly illustrated the relationship between the use of Twitter by clubs and users' gratification. Smith and Smith (2012) show that the Twitter hashtag encourages more users to engage in the discussion of sports and greatly enhances fans' sense of identification with their favourite teams.

### *Sina Weibo and football/sports*

Sina Weibo is a China microblogging platform. The Chinese word 'Wei 微' (micro) 'Bo 博' (blog) means

microblog. This platform is the largest social media site in China and is often called the Chinese version of Twitter (Chen et al., 2013). In 2017, Sina Weibo had 340 million active monthly users, and nearly half of these users accessed the site daily, which means that the user numbers have overtaken Twitter, which was estimated to have 328 million monthly active users in the same period (BBC, 2017). Although Weibo has many similar functions to Twitter, such as follow/unfollow, comment, hashtag and @, it also has several important differences. For example, the comparative study of two microblogging sites from Chen et al. (2011) reveals that 1) Twitter is international, but Weibo only serves Chinese-speaking areas, 2) Twitter is a more open platform, but Weibo moderators tend to add features themselves. 3) Weibo has higher “pageviews per user and time on site per user” than Twitter. In addition, Weibo allows users to tweet multiple types of content compared to Twitter, such as music, emoticons, long articles, and movie/book reviews. For users, those functions can “facilitate their professional development, fulfil emotional needs, reciprocate by helping other users with advice and information, enhance their social status, express oneself, and interact with the site and other users” (Zhang & Pentina, 2012).

As a region-specific social media platform, Weibo has received less attention from scholars than Twitter during the past decade, particularly with regards sports-related issues. However, with the development of the Chinese sports market, an increasing number of studies about Weibo and its relationship with sports have emerged. These studies provide excellent insights further understanding the platform and its influences on sports. For instance, Billings et al. (2019) compared the differences of function and fan behaviours among four social media platforms from the US and China (Facebook, Twitter vs WeChat, Weibo). They identified different fan activities on these platforms which contribute greatly to uses and gratifications research. They found that Weibo has a stronger the ability in arousal and performs better in habitual use among sports fans. The influence of the collectivist cultural background in China also suggests positive behavioural intent among fans, which is significantly different from American fans. Li et al. (2018) also investigated the consumption patterns by comparing Twitter and Weibo. They found that Weibo sports fans are motivated by the following desires: seeking information, entertainment, escape, and passing time. However, studies about how sports organisations manage their engagement strategy on Weibo are still scant, highlighting the importance of exploring this topic in this research.

#### **2.1.4 The role of the content provider, sports organisations and social media**

As introduced earlier, the sports media nexus has experienced a long-term development, from print media (newspaper, magazines) to radio and television to today's social media era. During the process, the role of sports content providers has adapted and even changed. In their book, *Sports and The Media*, Nicholson (2007, p.20) reviewed the evolutionary history of the sports media nexus and observed that sports and media from the early stage of the nineteenth century throughout the whole of the twentieth century had already built a corporate relationship. Media groups took the role of content provider: providing sports information to audiences for circulation and to generate advertising revenues and patronages (ibid). Regular matches and popular sports events became a huge source of reports and stories for print media (Boyle, 2009, p.24).

If the relationship between print media and sports can be described as Nicholson (2007, p.21) concluded to be of 'mutual benefit', then the sports industry was largely dominated by the television industry. A number of scholars have discussed the battle for broadcasting rights among media companies (Whannel, 1992; Boyle & Haynes, 2004; Helland, 2007). The normalisation of television in audiences' homes and the high commodification of sports made the broadcasting rights much more valuable. Sports also value the opportunity that television brings to attract many more sponsors and increase revenues (Whannel, 2009). Therefore, television becomes increasingly powerful when they own more and more broadcasting rights. In addition, their ability to represent the game and create stars gives them great influence over sports contests, and television becomes "the central driver of a more global mediated culture" in an increasingly mediated age (Boyle & Haynes, 2004, pp 16-17).

However, in the era of social media, the role of the content provider is greatly changed. The features of social media, such as the fast speed of distribution, wide-coverage, and accessibility to individuals, provides much convenience for clubs. Scholars such as Boyle and Haynes (2004) and Price et al. (2013) have discussed how clubs seek to control the content by themselves. As Price et al. (2013) noted, nearly all clubs have one or many media and communication specialists; clubs routinely ask footballers to be photographed, filmed and interviewed and control the flow of information through their websites. In addition, football clubs have even begun to establish their own multimedia platforms. For example, Real Madrid club uses

Real Madrid TV, RealMadrid.com, and their official Facebook and Twitter accounts to broadcast exclusive content (García, 2011). Furthermore, the emergence of UGC and citizen journalism also challenges media organisations' traditional role as content providers. Online news and mobile news have changed the ecosystem for news distribution and offer more prospects for the future (Lazaroiu, 2014). In short words, social media provides opportunities for users or audiences to be contacted directly. Therefore, the function of intermediaries (media organisations) is weakening, and clubs are taking on the role of the content provider (Jakubowicz, 2009).

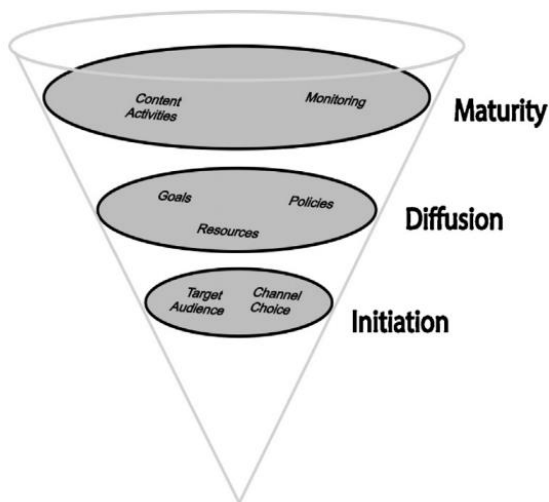
This transformation means that sports organisations now occupy the dominant position in media sports relationships and suggests that clubs now have more opportunity and greater freedom to design their own media strategies that will contribute to their own revenues. As a result, the question of how organisations utilise social media has become a popular topic among sports and media scholars and has drawn much attention. For example, by employing quantitative methods, Parganas et al. (2015) and Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) examined how football clubs design their content strategies and promote their brand attributes on Facebook and Instagram. Recently, Achen et al. (2020) compared the differences between the Twitter and Facebook strategies of sports organisations which provided further valuable insights. In addition, some scholars have further focused on evaluating social media strategies. For example, Effing and Spil (2016) developed a 'strategy cone' framework to evaluate the effectiveness of social media strategies. They defined three levels of social media maturity and seven key elements to the evaluation tool. The cone has three stages/levels: Initiation, Diffusion and Maturity. The seven key elements are addressed in each of the three levels: Target audience; Channel choice; Goals; Resources; Policies; Monitoring, and Content activities. Table 1 explains the definition of the seven elements:

**Table 1: Elements and definitions of the social strategy cone framework (Effing and Stil, 2016)**

<i>Elements</i>	<i>Definitions</i>
Target audience	The target population that companies wish to cover
Channel choice	Social media channels or platforms within the target population
Goals	Business goals, aims and objectives
Resources	The quality and authenticity of the message, and other resources such as paid advertising program
Policies	Governance over communication, management of contents and other activities to avoid gossip, harassing or other negative

Monitoring	messages. Continuous listening and communicating with consumers and stakeholders to carefully evaluate the progress and potential change
Content activities	A clear plan of online activities such as campaigns and projects that provides organisations with practical meanings.

The seven elements are addressed in three different levels of maturity, as the cone shows:



**Figure 1: The social strategy cone (Effing and Stil, 2016)**

Such an evaluation tool provides professionals with a comprehensive overview that enables them to monitor and manage their social media strategy. This could also be an important tool for researchers to understand further the various elements and factors that inform a social media strategy.

However, the utilizing of social media is not always beneficial to sport organizations. For example, at an early stage, by conducting the interview with football clubs’ communication managers, McCarthy et al. (2014) which revealed clubs’ general concerns around the use of social media, such as the concern about control of discourse. Wendt and Young (2011) also suggested that the misuse of social media may result in the reputational risk for sport organizations. By interviewing the employees of Australia sport organizations, O’Shea and Alonso (2013) also addressed several concerns of professionals which including the concern of human resources in social media management and reputation management.

Considering these studies were conducted almost a decade ago, the need for examine how sport clubs



manage the social media in nowadays was raised. Such underpinnings also highlight the importance of further exploring the opinions of professionals, which provide partial warrant for this research.

### **2.1.5 Summary**

This section discussed sports and media development from a historical perspective and identified the role of social media and sports organisations today. It enhances the understanding of sports media relationships and provides relevant theoretical backgrounds. In the next section, issues relating to sports branding (specifically how sports organisations utilise social media for branding purposes), social media strategy, and relationship marketing will be reviewed. In so doing, it should provide important insights and processes that will inform this research into online sports strategies on Chinese social media.

## **2.2 The use of social media for branding**

This section discussed the relevant literature around the relationship between football/sports branding and social media. A number of scholars have stated the importance and significance of branding to the profitability of an organisation (Hansen & Christensen, 2003; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Holt & Holt, 2004). As introduced in previous sections, with the development of the commodification of football in the last century, football has grown into a highly profitable industry. A branding strategy is vital to sports organisations today since a strong brand identity can convey and express a great deal of important information to its fans such as value, identity and consciousness (Jankovic & Jaksic-Stojanovic, 2019). In addition, sports branding has developed over many years and changed with the development of new technology such as social media. Scholars such as Hardy et al. (2012) have pointed out that sports brands have a long history of investing in new markets and new technology. Thus, this section focuses on sports branding through social media to understand better the relationship between sports organisations, social media, and fans. In reviewing the literature, it aims to provide the theoretical framework and background for the exploration sports organisations' social media strategies from the branding perspective.

### **2.2.1 Brands and branding: equity, image, association, and attribute**

The Oxford Dictionary defines 'brand' as: "A type of product manufactured by a particular company under a particular name" (Oxford, 2019). However, some scholars have more extended definitions of 'brand'. Visually speaking, brands can be described as the combination of a name, a logo, a signature, multiple colours, and other graphic elements (Blackett, 2004). Functionally, for example, Percy (2003) proposes that the nature of a brand is to embody information about something, to trigger a positive memory and association about something or someone such as a company, a football club or a politician. Scholars such as Keller and Lehmann (2006) suggest that brand is built on the product itself, it plays the role of a marketer for companies and a guide for customers since it "can simplify choice, promise a particular quality level, reduce risk, and/or engender trust".

In terms of branding, it is a concept that describes the process of promoting a brand, which is more related to the action rather than symbolic compared to 'brand'. For example, as Rowley (1997) mentioned, branding is the process by which a company communicates with its customers and encourages them to feel positive about the company's image. Scholars such as Bastos and Levy (2012) have demonstrated the connection between the narrative of 'burning' and 'branding', which can be understood as a mechanism for impressing information on the consumers. However, branding is not just about establishing a name or good reputation for companies; it is more about building a long-term state of mind by managing proper marketing and branding strategies (Dumitriu, 2012).

Inside the study of branding, there are several important concepts: brand equity, brand image, brand association and brand attribute. Brand equity can be seen as the 'added value' attached to the product that comes from the brand (Farquhar, 1989; Percy, 2003). For example, as Farquhar (1989) stated in their early study, the product provides functional benefits to its producer, but the meaning or information that a brand represents can add value beyond the original function. Brand equity can provide value for both customers and companies. It enhances the efficiency of shopping and choice, providing customers with an efficient information process and many benefits for firms; it makes companies more competitive in the global market, and helps them survive longer (Tuominen, 1999). Brand equity can be viewed from two aspects according to the nature of business: the financial-based and consumer-based. Financial-based brand equity represents the cash flow from the product due to its brand influence, and consumer-based equity represents the brand's

value to consumers (Aaker, 1996; Biscaia et al., 2013). Sports organisations are regarded as one of the most representative consumer-based businesses since the viewing experience of a match, as the core product of sports brands, is an intangible product that also relies on support from fans.

In their pioneering study, Keller (1993) provided a comprehensive and thorough explanation of brand equity and knowledge. He proposed the customer-based brand equity model and suggested that brand knowledge, which consists of brand image and brand awareness, is vital in creating and improving brand equity. As he noted: “High levels of brand awareness and a positive brand image should increase the probability of brand choice, as well as produce greater consumer (and retailer) loyalty and decrease vulnerability to competitive marketing action” (Keller, 1993). For brand image, Keller defines this as the perceptions reflected in consumers' minds by the brand associations. Brand association refers to the information nodes that can evoke and arouse the memory and perception of consumers towards a brand. It consists of three main parts: brand attributes, brand benefits and brand attitudes. Brand attributes refer to the conceptions of consumers that can characterise a product. It is related to “what a consumer thinks the product or service is or has and what is involved with its purchase or consumption” (Keller, 1993). Brand attributes consist of two main categories: product-related attributes (PRA) and non-product-related attributes (NPRA). PRA refers to the ingredients that are directly related to the product. For example, in this research, anything related to the core service (the football matches) can be regarded as PRA for sports brands, such as the players, coaches, or on-pitch performances. NPRA refers to the external attributes of the product or service (Keller, 1993), which are not directly related to the product or service itself. In the case of sports, objects or information that have no relation to the on-pitch performance can all be considered NPRA, such as the stadium, history of the club, management structure or the sale of the jersey. Based on the definition of Keller (1993), many researchers link the brand attribute with social media contents to examine the relationship between attributes and fan engagement. For example, Parganas et al., (2015) found that product-related attributes can predict higher level of fan engagement. Such underpinnings provide guidance for this research in terms of exploring how professional football clubs manage their social media contents.

Sports branding has a long history. Hardy et al. (2012) have traced sports branding back to the sixteenth century when Hieronymus Mercurialis (1530-1606) published a guide book (*De arte gymnastica*) which

discussed the therapeutic benefits of healthy exercises and sports such as boxing and ball games. In the seventeenth century, “British writers had begun to catalogue and sort many of the folk games” (ibid). These activities can be seen as the early stage of sports branding. In modern society, with the growth of the commercialisation of sports, sports brands are naturally regarded as a product in sports marketing research (Meenaghan & O’Sullivan, 1999).

Since essential branding tasks such as communicating with stakeholders, impressing consumers, and building positive images of products or businesses are vital to companies or organisations, the engagement between branding and media can be regarded as a ‘necessary’ process. Scholars who focus on the relationship between branding and media have discussed extensively topics relating to branding and newspapers (Machin & Niblock, 2008); branding on television (Johnson, 2012), and the most popular dimension among scholars in recent years, branding and social media (Santomier, 2008; Yan, 2011; Marwick, 2013). Further discussions regarding branding and social media are introduced in the following paragraphs.

### **2.2.2 Branding in the social media age**

Online branding already appeared in the early stages of the World Wide Web, and the Web provided greater exposure for brands in the global market and more choices regarding their media strategy (Yan, 2001). Then, the social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter provided even more opportunities for companies. Many scholars have explored the significance of social media branding for organisations (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012; Page, 2012; Jansen et al., 2009). As Yan mentioned in their study in 2011, Facebook initially aimed to connect friends and others, but the convenient exchange of information quickly revealed its commercial potential to connect organisations and consumers. In addition, Twitter, one of the most popular microblogging sites can also promote online branding for firms. For example, in their research, Jansen et al. (2009) have shown that as Twitter plays a significant role in the process of ‘Word of Mouth’, it influences customers’ brand perceptions and their purchasing decisions since customers “increasingly use these communication technologies for trusted sources of information, insights, and opinions”.

In addition, Holt (2016) proposes a new concept, 'cultural branding', which means a branding strategy that engages with social media and cultural discourse. Holt explained that through the use of social media, cultural branding could target consumer communities, promote cultural recognition, and diffuse new ideology. The process provides organisations with the opportunity to take a leading position in a mass-market due to the wide diffusion of ideology and the targeting of communities on social media. For example, Jack Daniel's Tennessee whiskey used the story and cultural recognition of American frontiersmen to promote the masculinity of whiskey and "quickly became the aspirational whiskey among urban upper-middle-class men" (ibid). Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) also propose that organisations can improve their performance through storytelling and diffusing new ideology to social media users. The conceptualisation of the brand and the story that is conveyed can help consumers construct their identity around the brand.

For sports clubs, the basic features of a brand, such as a name, logo, design, and colour, need to be recognisable if they are to represent the identity of clubs to fans (Jankovic & Jaksic-Stojanovic, 2019). One well-known example of brand recognition is the success of Manchester United in its business. This shows the importance of branding since Manchester United may not be the most successful football club in the world, but it is definitely the most recognisable club, making it one of the wealthiest sports clubs (ibid). In addition, Holt (2007) reveals several features which can enhance brand equity by taking the example of UEFA (the Union of European Football Associations). According to Holt, factors including images, symbols, brands and icons play a vital role in constructing the UEFA brand and the competition and its promotion in the global market.

Such underpinnings above reflect the importance of deigning an effective social media strategy. As Christodoulides (2009) asserts, technology significantly changes branding strategy of organizations. The core of branding in the social media age is to facilitate conversations between the brand with customers. It is widely known that the sports industry invests a lot in branding. The prevalence of social media offers the sports industry greater convenience in terms of directly engaging with consumers, which makes sports an ideal business in the social media context (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010). Carlson and O'Cass (2012) showed that the multichannel operation through the seamless integration between offline and online channels has the ability to optimise consumers' experiences, strengthen organisations' brand image and

enhance the loyalty of the consumer community. For sports organisations, such as service-based firms, the adoption of social media branding and multichannel branding helps organisations to acknowledge consumers that are “less pliant” (Harris & Ogbonna, 2008).

Furthermore, the interactivity of social media creates new opportunities of branding, such as the “user-generated branding” (Burmam, 2010; Burmam & Arnhold, 2009; Geurin, 2017). This concept means “... the strategic and operative management of brand-related user-generated content (UGC) to achieve brand goals” (Burmam & Arnhold, 2009, p.66). In other words, user generated branding refers to the brand-related information that is created by ordinary users on social media. The brand messages can be texts, pictures, videos and any other types of information. They can also be complaints, ratings, promotions, discussions and so on, which can be distributed on websites, social media platforms and mobile apps (Burmam, 2010). Geurin (2017) has shown that user-generated branding has overwhelmingly positive outcomes for the circulation of branding messages and engagement with consumers. Geurin (ibid) examined the user-generated brand-related content of six sports brands on Instagram and found that users prefer to contribute content since UGC is often more popular than official brand-created content.

### **2.2.3 Relationship marketing and customer experiences**

The two-way communication of social media provides greater convenience for the relationship marketing of content providers. Relationship marketing is based on the notion that there is a relationship between consumers and service providers which exists “on top of the value of products and/or services that are exchanged” (Grönroos, 2004). The main objective of relationship marketing is, through communication and continuous interaction, to earn the favour and enhance customer loyalty, and thus build a firm consumer relationship (Berry, 1995; Grönroos, 2000). Inside the relationship marketing, service marketing plays a vital role because marketers have to compete on service when facing the product homogeneity (Grönroos, 2004). Moreover, service consumption is a process consumption that needs effective communication and interaction (ibid). Social media features, such as two-way communication, open platform, and direct access to consumers, make it the ideal relation-building tool for marketers (Achen, 2017).

For sports and relationship marketing, as opposed to normal short-term goods transactions, sports organisations usually need to establish long-term relationships with stakeholders, which means that a clear relationship marketing strategy can be vital to the sports industry (Bee & Kahie, 2006). Researchers who focus on the sports marketing dimension, such as Williams and Chinn (2010), have shown how social media can meet the goals of sports marketers in relationship marketing and have demonstrated its potential to improve relationships. For example, in today's market, sports organisations or content providers can directly access the data of consumers on social media, such as views and attitudes; organisations can directly engage the dialogue with consumers; and the effectiveness of social media saves both money and time for organisations (Abeza et al., 2013). In their research, Abeza et al. (2017) focus on clubs from four major leagues in the United States. Then they found that social media meets all the seven identified opportunities for relationship marketing. In addition, they also mentioned other functions of social media that extend beyond the simple communication function. As they stated (*ibid*), by using social media, teams can not only provide news, updates, and highlights, but also other appealing information to fans such as behind-the-scenes videos.

The discussion above has certain managerial implications for sports managers. Many scholars suggest that sports managers should develop social media as a relationship marketing tool to build a positive relationship with consumers (Abeza et al., 2013; Bee & Kahie, 2006; H. Tsiotsou, 2013). As H. Tsiotsou (2013) notes, fans' loyalty plays a vital role in the development of sports clubs. Enhancing the loyalty of fans through social media may directly influence the attendance of games and the wider financial performance of clubs. In addition, Achen (2017) discusses the opportunities for content co-creation with fans. For example, "...asking fans to post user-generated content on the teams' pages, such as pictures of them in team merchandise and interesting parts of the world". Furthermore, H. Tsiotsou (2013) also points out that, in order to promote stronger loyalty amongst fans, the combination strategies of branding and relationship marketing should be considered by sports managers. Branding can enhance the brand's image and improve financial stability and viability. Such a review of literature also contributes to understanding the research interests of this study about how football clubs develop their social media strategies.

The discussion of relationship marketing has also draws the attention of scholars interested in customer

experiences. Researchers have shown the importance of customer experience, especially in experience industries such as media and football (Verhoef et al., 2007; Berry et al., 2002; Meyer & Schwager, 2007). According to Meyer and Schwager (2007), customer experience is the response that customers have to the communication with companies. It includes many aspects that companies offer, such as customer services, packaging, delivery, advertising, and ease of use. Verhoef et al. (2009) argue that customer experience “involves the customer’s cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical responses to the retailer”, and they propose two key elements that can influence the customer experience: social environment, branding and interaction. As they (2009) state, customer experience is not influenced by the interactions that happen in the store alone. Multichannel service is also vital for businesses. Gentile et al. (2007) conclude that positive experiences can drive a positive connection between businesses and consumers and enhance brand loyalty.

The book edited by Sundbo and Sørensen (2013) – *Handbook on the experience economy* provides a thorough introduction and analysis of the experience economy. As they state, “experience economy concerns activities carried out in the public and private sectors that focus on fulfilling peoples’ need for experiences”. As one of the most important areas of activity in contemporary society, sports is not only a service industry but also an important experience industry since it provides unique experiences for consumers (Nilsen & Dale, 2013). In addition to the improvement of brand loyalty, the positive experience of consumers can provide the basis for higher pricing and increased sales (Sundbo & Sørensen, 2013). In the era of the Internet and social media, the improved efficiency of interaction has led to the online space becoming the fastest-growing experience area, which in turn triggers the new round of competition between experience organisations, which are typically sports organisations.

However, concerns about relationship marketing were also raised by managers. Abeza et al. (2019) investigated 26 sport organization communication managers to explore their ideas towards relationship marketing challenges. Seven main challenges were found which including the change management (hard to deal with the fast change of social media), operational change (hard to balance speed, creativity and accuracy), actionable data, lack of control, influential opinion leaders, conflict of interests and anonymity. Earlier research McCarthy et al., (2014) also revealed the general concerns of managers towards social



media use. The control of discourse and shift of power were mainly identified. Furthermore, facing with the dynamic change of social media and increasing different types of platforms, managers also worried about the sufficiency of human resources in managing social media platforms (Dixon et al., 2015). This highlighted the importance of further examining the role of social media for sport relationship marketing.

#### **2.2.4 Empirical studies of sports branding**

Previous sections have theoretically introduced the meaning and importance of sports branding, particularly in the social media age. It is therefore important to review some empirical studies of sports social media branding that directly address the research interests of this study.

In recent years, a number of scholars successfully examined and adapted the brand equity of model of Keller (1993). In their study, Gladden and Funk (2002) developed a model, the Team Association Model (TAM) to test the brand associations of a sports team. Their model successfully supported the theoretical assertions of Keller (1993) regarding brand associations and adopted them in the sports context. Then, based on the pioneering study of Gladden and Funk (2002), Bauer et al. (2008) further developed the TAM. They designed a tight structure that effectively revealed the relationship between the components of brand image. Their study also demonstrated the positive influence of brand image on fan loyalty, highlighting the importance of brand image for sports organisations. Following the scholars above, Parganas et al. (2015) focus their attention on how sports organisations utilise social media for branding purposes and further explore the social media contents of football clubs based on the conceptualisation of brand attributes of Keller (1993) and how those contents influence fan engagement. Their study shows that researchers can employ the TAM to investigate issues around brand associations, and that sports organisations can use social media and Keller's assertions to design their content strategy.

Recently the study of Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) further extended the research of Parganas et al. (2015) on different social media platforms. By assigning the Instagram posts into brand attributes and conducting the qualitative analysis of fan comments, they demonstrated the different effects of PRA and NPRA on attracting fan engagement and identified the behaviour patterns of fan interactions. Their study provided

support for the model of Gladden and Funk (2002) for analysing brand associations, the assertions of Keller (1993) on brand image and brand attributes, and the model of Parganas et al. (2015) for employing brand attributes to examine the efficiency of social media contents on fan engagement. Those studies provide both the theoretical framework and practical methods for this research to explore the social media branding content strategies of sports organisations in the context of China and Weibo.

### **2.2.5 Summary**

This section reviewed literature surrounding branding and its relationship with sports, social media, and consumers. Studies about branding and relationship marketing establish a bridge for understanding the relationship between sports organisations' social media strategy and fan experiences. The following section will review literature on the most important part of the media sports nexus – fans, to address the research interests of fan experiences (preferences, gratifications, and motivations).

### **2.3 Sports fans and fan experiences**

Researchers have shown the importance of fan experiences in the media sports nexus (Whannel, 2002; Crawford, 2004; Nightingale, 2011). As Boyle (2009, p.184) stated, no matter in what forms, the people who consume sports are always the centre of the sports industry. In order to understand fans and their consumption better, this section introduces three main theories: Uses and Gratification theory (U&G), fan identity and social identity theory and sports consumption motives. The U&G is a common approach to explore both fans' social and psychological needs regarding how and why they choose certain media platforms and seek out specific information (Billings et al., 2017; Li et al., 2018). The social identity theory is used to posit individuals' self-concept and how individuals seek to join social groups, it is about defining one's external group affiliation (Boyle, 2007; Doyle et al., 2017). As for consumption motives, this plays an important role in creating co-creation value and inspiring consumers "to provide firms with the raw material for relationship creation, expansion and maintenance" (Stavros et al., 2014). In addition, relevant studies of fans in the context of China will also be introduced, and empirical research will be reviewed to

provide a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical backgrounds of this research.

### **2.3.1 Defining fans and fandom**

The continuing development of technology, entertainment and culture makes fandom a more commonplace concept and attracts much attention from scholars (Gray et al., 2017; Wann et al., 2001; Sandvoss, 2004). Early researchers such as Fiske (1992) define fandom as a common part of popular culture and usually associated with dominant cultural forms and values such as music, film, comics, and entertainment idols. However, fans are different from regular audiences. Fans play the role of ‘consumers’ in most circumstances, no matter whether they read newspapers, listen to the radio, or watch TV (Sandvoss, 2004, pp.17-18). In addition, fans are much more obsessed with what they love than normal audiences (Crawford, 2004, p.19). For example, according to Tarver (2017, pp.8-10), the ‘real’ fans are particularly loyal to what they love and tend to be distinguished from non-fans through their practices such as speech, style of dress and capital collections (e.g., books, records, clothes, posters, etc.).

In terms of sports fans, in their book, Wann et al. (2001) provides a thorough definition of sports fans, the roles that sports fans play and their importance to sports and society. However, although researchers such as Reysen and Branscombe (2010) have revealed that sports fans have many psychological similarities compared to fans with other interests, sports fans play a unique role in other areas of society such as cultural and economic. For example, Sandvoss (2004, pp.13-44) shows the significance of football fans by locating football fandom within the consumption landscape. In addition, Kolyperas et al. (2019) reveal the different roles of sports fans in value co-creation, as they state: “Fans evaluate, redefine and reposition value propositions in different sports settings”. As for cultural and social dimensions, sports fans own a strong sense of fan identity and team identity, which could influence their consumption practices and other behaviours (NAGHI-POUR GIVI, 2018; Sandvoss, 2004, p.44). For instance, the identification levels of sports fans, as well as their attitudes, have a large impact on their patterns of media consumption (Phua, 2010). Furthermore, sports fans’ culture in some countries can even represent the national identity. In their book Gibbons (2016) discusses the relationship between football fan culture and English national identity and concludes that:

“Underlying the ubiquitous display of the St George’s Cross were also examples of the priority afforded to English club football which itself has become a symbol of the impact of globalisation and European integration, rather than evidence of an emotional attachment to England.”

### **2.3.2 Understanding Chinese fans**

In recent decades, the fast-growing economy and increasing levels of purchasing power in east Asia, particularly in China, has drawn much attention from sports organisations in Europe (Desbordes, 2007). Naturally, a number of scholars began to focus their research on Chinese social media users and identify the user features on social media consumption, such as the consumption patterns, preferences, motives, uses, and gratifications. For instance, the study by Gao and Feng (2016) compared the differences between SNS users and microblog users and found that information seeking, entertainment, and self-expression were the main motives for microblog use, whereas SNS is primarily used for social interaction. An earlier study by Zhang and Pentina (2012) suggested that Chinese microblog (Weibo) users have various reasons for using the platform. These not only included the most common information needs for social interaction, but also for fulfilling emotional needs, developing professional skills, and enhancing their social status. From the cultural perspective, Tsai and Men (2017) compared the differences between Chinese and US SNS users and suggested that Chinese users tend to be more closely bonded and communicate in kinder and more friendly tones due to the influence of the Chinese collectivist culture.

Focusing on sports fans only, scholars have identified several basic features of Chinese sports fans. For example, in their early study, Bodet and Chanavat (2010) explored Chinese fans’ perception of the brand equity of European football clubs. Although they only conducted a small sample qualitative study with twelve fans, their research provided some useful general information for international sports brands in terms of the Chinese fan image. Then, in a later study with other researchers (Bodet et al., 2020), they conducted a large sample survey research with 1160 Chinese sports fans to explore the brand attraction factors of sports brands. The results suggest that organisation-induced factors serve as the most significant attraction factors for Chinese fans, which means that fans tend to engage with and be attracted by the official attribute

on social media. Furthermore, the research of Sullivan et al. (2021) recently explored the features of Chinese football fans from a cultural perspective. The researchers found that Chinese fans tend to follow a football team due to their social expression and identity, and they are largely influenced by their education and cultural backgrounds. Although these studies only provide a glimpse of Chinese fans, they enhance the understanding of the population and could be useful when conducting research relevant to this study.

### **2.3.3 Social identity and fans**

Social identity theory aims to explain the relationship between individuals and social groups. It is defined as “part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). Ashforth and Mael (1989) point out that self-concept in social identity theory is “comprised of a personal identity encompassing idiosyncratic characteristics”, and social identity includes those group classifications. In social identity theory, individuals can rename or classify themselves according to the social categories, such as age, gender or organisation members. This process is called self-categorisation or identification (Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). The identification process forms one’s individual identity and categorises people who have similar knowledge and backgrounds into the same social groups (Stets & Burke, 2000).

In terms of sports, football fans’ identification is not new for identity and sports researchers. Sports fans, as the group of individuals who support the same teams, usually correlate their social identity and self-esteem with the team they love (Cialdini et al., 1979). Researchers have found meaningful implications in terms of this correlation. For example, the early research of Wann and Branscombe (1990) has shown that the degree of sports fans’ identification is positively relevant to their feeling and support for their teams, even towards fans who support the same team with them. In their study, Murrell and Dietz (1992) explored the relationship between team support and fan identification. They also found that the group identification of sports fans predicts the fan support of teams, including attendance and other aspects. The correspondence between sports fans’ identification and their support behaviour supports Stets & Burke’s (2000) argument about social identity. As they mentioned, a social identity means identification with a certain group, and

makes the people stand with the group's perspective.

In sports media studies, social identity also plays an important role. Scholars such as Harwood (1999) have found that audiences' social identification can influence their media consumption choices since people tend to choose mediums or media platforms that can bolster their identification. Importantly, there is a mutual relationship between media use and fan identification. The choice of media platforms has a significant impact on fans' identification with teams since fans can use media to achieve and maintain their positive identification (Phua, 2010). In recent years, the emergence of social media has provided opportunities for fans to actively acquire information and interact with teams and athletes, which could further enhance their team identification (Sanderson, 2013). For example, Smith and Smith's (2012) research on the Twitter hashtag use in relation to fan-athlete engagement and information collection by fans and content producers reveals that the involvement of athletes and fans on social media improves the identification of fans with their teams.

#### **2.3.4 Uses and Gratification Theory**

The Uses and Gratification (U&G) theory is a common approach in mass communication studies that mainly focuses on the gratification that attracts audiences to media and content that "satisfy their social and psychological needs" (Katz, Haas & Gurevitch, 1973). U&G theory argues that audiences are active communicators who aim to actively seek what they need by choosing certain content, tunnels and media platforms, where the media plays the role of content providers to provide people with what they want or gratification (Perse & Courtright, 1993; Katz, Haas & Gurevitch, 1973). U&G theory can also be used to explore the psychological motives of audiences for media consumption (Kang & Atkin, 1999). Although there are many different types of interpersonal media consumption motives, Rubin, Perse, and Barbato (1988) conclude six main motives for media use: pleasure/entertainment, affection, inclusion/social contact, escape, relaxation, and control.

U&G theory has a long history. For example, as Blumler (1979) suggests, it came to the fore during the late 1950s and early 1960s to explore the "short term effects" of audiences' exposure to mass media. In addition,

the U&G theory has developed a lot over time. For instance, the study of Ruggiero (2000) provides a historical introduction to the development process of U&G theory from the 1950s to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

U&G is a diachronic theory. It covers different eras and multiple mediums, including newspapers, radio, television and the Internet (ibid). In recent years, researchers have explored the application of U&G theory to the Internet and social media (Smock et al., 2011; Tanrikulu & Erdur-Baker, 2019; Choi et al., 2016). Lampe et al. (2010) show that the U&G theory allows researchers to explore the motivations of users consuming social media and the Internet. By focusing on Facebook, Bumgarner (2007) explains how to utilise U&G theory to explore the needs and gratification of social media users. Choi et al. (2016) reveal the implications of social media marketing by applying the U&G theory to hotel fan pages on Facebook. In their earlier study, Smock et al. (2011) further illustrated that the motivations for social media use could predict the user's features.

The utilisation of U&G theory on social media platforms attracts considerable attention from sports fan researchers. For example, based on the U&G theory, Clavio and Kian (2010) focus on the gratification and needs of fans who follow female athletes and find that fans are interested in being fans or emotional consumers. In Clavio and Walsh (2014), the scholars examined the college sports fans in relation to Twitter and Facebook and revealed: "dimensions of gratification for social media use include content creation as an identifiable factor." In addition, the U&G theory can be quite useful in researching the activities of fans since it is important to know how different platforms fulfil the needs of audiences (Billings et al., 2017). Compared to other media and communication mediums, social media platforms provide individuals with the interactivity that traditional media cannot offer, which become the new gratifications that users aim to seek (Quan-Haase, 2010). Thus, there is a need to extend the understanding of gratifications regarding on different platforms, which thus provide support for this study in terms of the aim of exploring uses and gratifications of Chinese sport fans on Weibo using.

In media study, U&G researchers in recent years have identified several primary motivations for media and social media consumption:

*Information seeking:* The term refers to the informational need of media users. Individuals use media or social media to find the information or knowledge they need, such as sports match information, the daily lives of players or news. The term was first proposed in the early study of Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) about internet use motivation and later adopted by a number of U&G scholars (Whiting & Williams, 2013; Vale & Fernandes, 2018; Billings et al., 2017).

*Social interaction:* The term relates to the need to interact and establish a connection with peers to gain a sense of belonging within a community (Baldus et., 2015). For example, in the case of sports-related information, fans usually wish to communicate with other fans who support the same team or join the established fan groups.

*Entertainment:* On the scale of Papacharissi and Rubin (2000), they define entertainment as the need for joyfulness. For instance, in the sports context, some fans may seek tidbits of personal information about players for entertainment.

*Empowerment:* The term refers to the motivation to become an opinion leader to express their voice (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). For example, some sports fans like to analyse matches or talk about the effects of player transfers, etc.

*Passing time:* Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) used this term in their study to express the idea that some people may use the Internet with no greater intention than to occupy their time.

*Brand love:* This is a common phenomenon among sports fans since it represents strong feeling (Albert et al., 2009). The term is usually associated with the high levels of fanship (Vale & Fernandes, 2018).

*Remuneration:* Sometimes, social media users may engage with the brand for rewards such as give-away gifts, monetary or other offerings (Baldus et., 2015). In the case of sports, some team accounts post reward draw content to attract fans for interaction and discussion.

Such underpinnings provide the guidance for understanding the social media use and motivations of sport fans. However, although the motivations above could cover wide range of situations, U&G, as a dynamic



theory, it kept evolving with the development of social media technology and developed multiple types of motives (Sundar & Limperos, 2013; Vale & Fernandes, 2018). In recent years, an increasing volume of cross-national studies were conducted to examine the U&G in other social media platforms. For example, Billings et al., (2019) investigated the gratification and motivations of Chinese and USA sport fans towards four different social media platforms, and identified multiple types of motivations. By examining the impacts of content strategy on user gratification, Gao and Feng (2016) identified five dimensions of gratifications of Chinese SNS users. Considering that social media users usually vary due to the differences of platforms or cultural backgrounds, scholars have called to extend the research of gratifications beyond the Western platforms such as Twitter and Facebook (Billings et al., 2019). Therefore, this is an useful justification for this thesis in exploring the U&G of Chinese sport fans.

### **2.3.5 Motives of sports consumption and media use**

Motivation represents the active internal psychological process that arouses, directs and leads to real-life behaviour (Funk et al., 2009). It “reflects an internal desire to take a pathway because it provides opportunities to satisfy needs and receive benefits from acquisition” (ibid). In the sports and psychological sphere, scholars have paid considerable attention to the motives for sports consumption. For example, Harris (1973) suggests that sports events can fulfil individuals' social or psychological needs by providing and reinforcing their pleasure. That is one of the crucial reasons that sports attract fans. The study of Wenner and Gantz (1989) on audience experiences with sports on television reveals that fans of different sports items have different motives for sports consumption. Wann's (1995) research suggests that sports consumption motives are different based on gender in varying areas such as entertainment, economics, aesthetics and group affiliation. In addition, as mentioned previously, identification plays an important role in relation to sports consumption motives. For instance, Funk et al. (2001) revealed that team identification has a high level correlation with the interest and consumption motivation in team sporting events.

The scales describing sports fan motivation are worth mentioning in sports consumption and motives study. The Motivation Scale for Sports Consumption (MSSC) is regarded as an accurate and reliable scale to explore the motives for sports fan consumption (Trail & James, 2001a). In recent decades, the MSSC has

been developed by many scholars. For example, Wann (1995) developed the Sports Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS) to explore fan motives by proposing eight underlying motivational factors: “eustress, self-esteem benefits, escape, entertainment, economic factors, aesthetic qualities, group affiliation, and family needs” (Trail & James, 2001b). In addition, other scholars such as Milne and McDonald (1999) further developed the scale by proposing twelve motives for sports fan consumption.

In recent years, many scholars have conducted research into examining the relationship between engagement and online sports consumption. As discussed above, the Internet and social media provide fans with opportunities to actively seek information and to interact with others. In the early part of the Internet era, Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) predicted five general motives for using the Internet: interpersonal utility, passing time, information seeking, convenience, and entertainment. Then, Filo and Funk (2005) “took a first step in this direction by examining the relationship between sports attendance motives and Internet content” (Seo & Green, 2008). Additionally, an increasing number of studies in recent years focus on the role of social media and sports consumption (Clavio, 2008; Clavio & Kian, 2010; Boehmer, 2016; Li et al., 2018). For example, Boehmer (2016) investigates college students’ use of Twitter for sports information consumption and found that although television is still the primary distribution platform, social media use keeps increasing due to its interactivity.

In recent years, increasing attention was paid to the motivation of social media consumption of Chinese fans. For example, Li et al. (2018) compared the motivations for using two social media platforms - Twitter and Sina Weibo - and revealed that different sports consumption motives predominate on different social media platforms. Billings et al., (2019) investigated the relationship between fan engagements and uses and gratifications, by comparing the data of four different social media platforms from China and the US. They identified the different features of four platforms and Chinese and US fans. However, there is still a general paucity of understanding the Chinese sport fans in terms of their gratifications and motivations on social media use (Tsai and Men, 2017), which provide further warrant for this doctoral research.

### **2.3.6 Summary**

To sum up, this section reviewed the literature about Chinese fans, fan identity, Uses and Gratification theory and motivations in the context of social media use. Social media users can be motivated to use it for various reasons. Understanding the gratifications and motives of users is vital for brands and professionals if they wish to increase the connections and engagements with their consumers (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Such theoretical discussion provides a framework to explore the fan experiences further.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

The literature reviewed in this chapter provides the basic framework and knowledge base to understand the relationships between sports clubs, sports branding, and fan experiences. This chapter reviews literature around three sections of this research: Content providers and social media; Football branding and social media; Sports fans and fan experiences.

Generally speaking, social media affects the landscape of the media sports world. The effective interaction of social media not only provides users and fans with opportunities to engage directly with clubs and athletes but also enhances the relationship marketing and branding of clubs and organisations. The role of the content provider is no longer dominated by the traditional media. Sports clubs control more information and establish a firm relationship with fans through social media. Not only does this change the role content providers, but also the role of fans. The role of ‘recipient’ is gradually transferred to ‘distributor’ and ‘producer’. For example, UGC has been shown to significantly impact sports clubs’ branding and marketing strategies. Therefore, in the social media era, fan experiences using social media to consume sports are more important than ever. Research theories such as U&G, social identity and motivation, which aim to explore fans’ sports consumption behaviour, must take into account the context of social media and sports consumption if they are to explore the intricacies of fan experiences today.

By reviewing the literature above, this chapter also aims to identify research gaps that need to be filled:

### **Social media strategies of European football clubs on Chinese platforms**

Current studies of football clubs' social media use and strategies mainly focus on Western social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Few studies explore the football social media strategies on Chinese platforms, although China has a large sports market and a huge number of social media users. As reviewed in this chapter, China has a different sports culture and social media environment compared to Western countries. Research into social media strategies in China can provide insights to better understand this unique market.

### **Football fan experiences in China**

Although many scholars focus on the globalisation of football, researchers such as Putra (2019) and Gibbons (2011) have shown the importance and variety of local football fans,. In China, sports fans have their own culture which is different to that in Western counties, and the Chinese sports fan culture is less well explored so far. The fact that China has its own social media platform Sina Weibo, rather than Twitter or Facebook, also increases its uniqueness in terms of media sports research and sports fans, especially with regards the Chinese fan experiences, including motives, identity and gratification. Therefore, Chinese football fans are a less-studied group worthy of further research.

### **Integrated study of content providers, branding and fans**

The majority of studies into fan experiences explore the fans perspective but ignore the influences of content providers and social media strategies. This project aims to apply multiple approaches by following a vertical structure 'content provider – branding – fans' to explore the fan experiences and integrated relationship between clubs and fans.

The next chapter will discuss the research methodology for this thesis. Related methods for exploring sports club strategies, branding and fan experiences are also considered.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This chapter sets out to describe the research methods and research design used in this project. Firstly, it introduces the decision-making process of choosing relevant research methods in this research by addressing the reviewed literatures. Then, it explains the rationale for choosing approaches and the detail of preliminary planning. Third, the research design is presented, including the fieldwork design details such as the sample selection, the content analysis coding process, and the interview question list.

### **3.1 The implementation of mixed research methods**

This thesis aims to explore and answer three main research questions: How do football clubs manage social media content for branding purposes? How do football clubs use social media to encourage fan engagement? How do fans interact with the clubs they support? Based on these research questions, it is necessary to choose the appropriate research methods.

In media studies, two main kinds of research employed are positivist research and interpretivist research. Positivist research concerns the usage and effects of media. It emphasises quantitative approaches, which “are deemed to be best achieved through survey and experimental methodologies” (Gunter, 2000, p.22). In contrast, interpretivist perspectives place more emphasis on qualitative approaches, which aim to explore and enlarge the understanding of how people interact with media and their values and standards.

When I reviewed literatures related to this research topic, previous scholars indicated the effectiveness of employing quantitative content analysis in exploring the social media strategy and fan experiences (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Annamalai et al., 2021). Content analysis is one of the most important and basic research methods for communication and messages research (Krippendorff, 2012, P.403; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Davies and Mosdell (2006) describe content analysis as “a systematic and objective analysis of any particular text, whether a newspaper article, a book, a television clip or an advert.” In social media research, content analysis enables researchers to systematically collect and classify the online content

(Annamalai et al., 2021; Wang, 2020). Such features provide me the opportunity to categorize and understand the social media content strategy. In addition, Riff et al. (2014, pp.3-5) stated that content analysis can “identify important relationships among the contents qualities examined”. Thus, in this research, content analysis further aligned with my research interests in examining the relationship between contents and fan responses.

However, the limitation of quantitative methods on the lack of ability in revealing deep insights was also suggested by scholars (Goertzen, 2017; Taylor & Kent, 2010). This study aims to not only explore the content strategy of football clubs, but also investigate the engagement strategy and deep experiences of fans. In order to obtain the in-depth information, an interpretivist paradigm, which contains qualitative interview, was also considered. Qualitative interview is commonly regarded as one of the most important and widely used research and data collection methods (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Qualitative interviews aim to explore participants’ in-depth knowledge regarding particular phenomena or experiences (deMarrais & Lapan, 2003). In media studies, McCarthy et al. (2014) interviewed football club media managers regarding the concerns surrounding the use of social media. The researchers highlighted the ability of interview method in exploring the in-depth information of football media managers.

Thus, for comprehensively exploring the social media strategy and fan experiences, the mixed method that combines positivist and interpretivist approaches seems the most appropriate choice to this research.

### **3.2 Research Design**

This research sets out to adopt mixed research methods to answer the research questions. According to Decuir-Gunby et al. (2017, p.86), there are five major models for mixed methods research: Explanatory sequential, Exploratory sequential, Convergence parallel, Embedded, Multiphase. They provide the basic information of the five types as follows:

**Table 2. Five basic types of mixed-methods design (Decuir-Gunby et al., 2017, p.86)**

	Explanatory Sequential →	Exploratory Sequential →	Convergent Parallel +	Embedded ( )	Multiphase →←
<b>Definition</b>	This is a sequential two phase design where quantitative data are initially collected and analyzed in Phase 1. Using the results of Phase 1, qualitative data are collected in Phase 2.	This is a sequential two phase design where qualitative data are initially collected and analyzed in Phase 1. Using the results of Phase 1, quantitative data are collected in Phase 2.	Quantitative and qualitative data are collected concurrently but separately; the data analyses are merged.	Qualitative data is collected within a traditional quantitative design, or quantitative data is collected within a traditional qualitative design.	Quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analyzed sequentially and/or concurrently in a recursive fashion over multiple phases.
<b>Purpose</b>	Enables the qualitative data to be used to expand upon or explore an aspect that was identified by the quantitative data. This approach is often used to expand upon interesting or perplexing results.	Enables the quantitative data to be used to expand upon the qualitative data. This approach is often used in scale development studies.	Enables the combining of related data that has been collected and analyzed separately. Also, this approach is often used to collect quantitative and qualitative data using one instrument.	Allows the collection of data within a traditional framework. This approach is often used in experimental and quasi-experimental designs as well as case studies.	Allows quantitative and qualitative data to be collected and analyzed in various phases. Often used in program development and evaluation.
	Explanatory Sequential →	Exploratory Sequential →	Convergent Parallel +	Embedded ( )	Multiphase →←
<b>Data Mixing/ Integration</b>	The quantitative data are analyzed, leading to collection of the qualitative data. Mixing occurs through the creation of Phase 2 and during the analysis and discussion.	The qualitative data are analyzed, leading to the collection of the quantitative data. Mixing occurs through the creation of Phase 2 and during the analysis and discussion.	The quantitative and qualitative data are analyzed separately and then merged to create a comprehensive analysis and discussion.	The data are mixed during or after the data of emphasis has been collected and analyzed, depending upon the purpose of the study.	Quantitative and qualitative data can be merged at any stage, depending upon the data type and the purpose of the study.
<b>Example Studies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buck et al. (2009)</li> <li>• Fetters et al. (2007)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stoller et al. (2009)</li> <li>• Hayden &amp; Chiu (2015)</li> <li>• Durham et al. (2011)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kerrigan (2014)</li> <li>• Henwood et al. (in press)</li> <li>• Rosenberg et al. (2013)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quinlan &amp; Quinlan (2010)</li> <li>• Brady &amp; O'Regan (2009)</li> <li>• Weaver-Hightower (2014)</li> <li>• Marshall et al. (2015)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chilisa &amp; Tsheko (2014)</li> <li>• Youngs &amp; Piggot-Irvine (2012)</li> </ul>

As mentioned above, the quantitative content analysis could provide a general classification of social media content, and reflect how fans response to those contents. Thus, the Explanatory Sequential would be suitable to be adopted in this research.

Then, based on the research questions and methods, this research is divided into two phases. Each phase addresses different research approaches and aims to cover different research questions:

**Phase 1:** In this phase, content analysis was conducted to answer the research questions from two perspectives, one for RQ1 with auxiliary questions: *How do clubs use different types of posts/content (e.g., text, image, video) and how well do these post types influence fan engagement? What are the differences between European and Chinese clubs with regards their social media content strategies?* Another for RQ3 with auxiliary question: *What types of social media post/content do fans prefer to respond to?* Through conducting quantitative method, the data provided a basic understanding of what kinds of post type and content that clubs use most and attracting fans most. Such data provide guide for further exploring the social media strategy of football clubs and experiences of fans.

**Phase 2:** Then, following the data in Phase 1, qualitative interviews were conducted in this phase with the intention to explore the social media strategies of football clubs from manager's point of view. The content analysis in previous stage included the categorization of contents, which provided help of question design on the interview with social media managers in football clubs. The qualitative interview here aimed to answer RQ 1: *How do football clubs manage social media content for branding purposes?*

Then, interviews were also conducted to explore the experiences of fans for obtaining in-depth data. The content analysis previously of fan responses towards different content provided general understanding of the fan preferences. It allows for a deep exploration of the uses and gratification of fans. The qualitative interviews here tried to answer RQ3 with auxiliary questions: *What are the motivations for Chinese fans to use Weibo and consume sports content? What gratifications do fans seek in consuming the sports content?*

### **3.3 Sample selection**

This research aims to deal with research questions in relation to how social media was used by professional sport (particularly football) brands; therefore, it is important to carefully choose the sample from numerous football clubs around the world. Five clubs in total have been selected as the samples: Football Club Barcelona, Football Club Bayern Munich, Manchester United, F.C., Beijing Guoan F.C. and Wuhan Zall F.C. There are three main reasons to justify this selection. Firstly, to take into account the variety of different cultural backgrounds, clubs from different regions have been chosen. The sample clubs are drawn from leagues in Spain, Germany, England, and China. Secondly, famous and successful clubs have been chosen as the research samples may provide meaningful implications for both theoretical and managerial perspectives due to their level of experience. Thus, four of the five sample clubs are from the top division of their national league and have won the championship before. Thirdly, to gain a wider understanding of different clubs, a relatively small club Wuhan Zall has also been selected for comparison with the four famous clubs.



In order to secure their professional opinion regarding social media operation, two communication managers or social media managers from each club have been selected as the interviewees. Some clubs employ local agency companies to help them manage their media business in the Chinese market rather than attend to the management directly. For this reason, managers from agency companies have also been chosen as interviewees since they run the business following the instructions from clubs, which means that they explicitly understand the strategy of their clients and can represent their opinions to a large extent.

As for the collecting and analysis of social media posts by content analysis, Weibo posts displayed under the official account homepage were considered as the samples. All types of posts were collected which including not only the originally produced contents but also posts that forwarded from other sources. Information including the date, content, text, type of post (e.g., Image, Video and so on) and frequencies of responses (Likes, Comments and Shares) were collected for analysis.

This research sets out to investigate the fan experiences of using social media and consuming sports information. Therefore, the justification for the selection of fans should also be noted here. As the research aims to conduct qualitative interviews as the method to explore fan motivations and gratifications, loyal and active fans should be chosen since they have greater experience of using social media and are likely to have more thoughts to communicate than new fans. Therefore, fans who have commented on the official Weibo posts more than twenty times have been selected as the research samples. Twenty-five fans in total have been selected as the interviewees, five for each club. It should be noted here that the background information, such as gender and education level, is not the primary interest of this research. Fans thus are randomly selected rather than being selected by gender or using other filter factors.

However, this approach to selecting samples raises certain limitations for this research. First, the fact that only five clubs from four different regions have been considered means that clubs from other nations and leagues such as France and their strategies are neglected. Such consideration was out of the popularity and fan size on Weibo. Second, the fan size in interview is relatively small and hard to represent the general Chinese fan population. Therefore, to address this limitation, case studies have been adopted to deal with the relevant research questions.

### 3.4 Case study

Multiple case studies are adopted in this research to explore the social media content strategy (RQ1) and engagement strategy (RQ2) of football clubs. The use of case studies is increasing in football and marketing research. It enables the researcher to evaluate the “how” and “why” questions to explore those under-investigated areas (Parganas et al., 2015; McCarthy et al., 2014). For RQ1 and RQ2, five case studies have been designed to correspond to the five clubs in relation to their social media content and engagement strategy. The following tables introduce the background information for each case study separately:

**Table 3. Basic information of cases**

Case study	Club	Nation & League:	Honour	Influence	Weibo followers (until 31/12/2021):
Case 1	F.C. Barcelona	Spain, La Liga	Domestic league champion: 26 UEFA Champions League: 5	World-famous	10.5 million
Case 2	Manchester United F.C.	England, Premier League	Domestic league champion: 20 UEFA Champions League: 3	World-famous	11.04 million
Case 3	F.C. Bayern Munich	Germany, Bundesliga	Domestic league champion: 31 UEFA Champions League: 6	World-famous	4.5 million
Case 4	Beijing Guoan F.C.	China, Chinese Super League	Domestic league champion: 4 AFC Champions League: 0	Domestically famous	5.52 million
Case 5	Wuhan Zall F.C.	China, Chinese Super League	Domestic league champion: 0 AFC Champions League: 0	Domestically well-known	1.14 million

In addition to the basic background information for each case study, some extra information is provided here to justify why those clubs have been chosen.

**Table 4. Extra information of cases**

Case	Extra information
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- 
- Case 1 The club is regarded as one of the most successful sports organisations in terms of not only sporting performance but also its marketing and branding strategy, particularly its expansion into the global market. It is described as a ‘multinational entertainment corporation’ that aims to expand its influence beyond football to further compete with strong brands of the entertainment industry (Ginesta et al., 2020).
- Case 2 As the most famous football club around the world, Manchester United is viewed as the icon of football commercialisation and marketing. It is one of the most valuable football clubs (Ozanian, 2019) and is famous for its extraordinary media management and brand promotion (Robetson, 2004; Guzmán et al., 2021)
- Case 3 Similar to the cases above, Case 3 is also one of the most well-known and successful clubs. As the only German football club that can be considered as a global brand, Bayern Munich outperforms most clubs in developing a globalisation strategy, building a powerful brand image, and attracting fans (Baena, 2019)
- Case 4 As the founding member of the Chinese professional top tier league, Beijing Guoan is one of the most famous teams in China and Asia, and the second most valuable Chinese football team, according to Forbes (Forbes, 2016). It is also one of the most confrontational domestic clubs in China because of its special fan culture and brand management (Ma, 2019). In addition, as a club with a long history, it is also the most iconic club in China.
- Case 5 The club enter the Chinese Super League in 2013 and 2018 and has remained in the top tier ever since. The club was also well-known during the past few years for its coach Li Tie, who also served as the coach of the Chinese national team.

### **3.5 Phase 1: Quantitative analysis of the Weibo posts**

In this phase, content analysis (C.A.) was employed to analyse the Weibo page of football clubs. It aims to contribute insights to two perspectives: 1) the content strategy of football clubs – by investigating how clubs manage different post types and content types, and 2) the preferences of fans for different types of content – by investigating what contents that fans interacted with most. Relevant procedures including the process of collecting data, how codes were established, how Weibo posts were analysed and how intercoder reliability were reached are fully explained.

#### *Developing the brand attributes list*

The first step in conducting content analysis is designing a coding scheme deductively based on the previous literature (Sjøvaag & Stavelin, 2012). Such a process should provide the opportunity for researchers to reduce the risk of validity problems. Therefore, this research followed the research of Gladden and Funk (2002), Parganas et al. (2015) and Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) regarding brand attributes, contents, and fan interactions in designing the brand attributes coding scheme and investigating the social media posts. In their studies, the researchers above linked brand attributes with social media contents and effectively examined how clubs manage their content and the relationship between brand attributes and fan preferences.

Brand attributes are “descriptive features that characterise a product or service” (Keller, 1993). The attributes can be categorised into two main aspects according to their relationship with the product, namely: Product-related attributes (PRA) and Non-product-related attributes (NPRA). PRA are features that could directly contribute to the product itself, which means the game in the sports area, and NPRA is elements that contribute to the perception of fans regarding the brand and consumption of the product (Keller, 1993; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018).

In their study, Gladden and Funk (2002) proposed the Team Association Model (TAM) as the tool to examine the brand associations, which include PRA, NPRA, symbolic benefits, experiential benefits, and attitudes. Then, Bauer et al. (2008) developed their model by increasing testing items to further examine fan loyalty and brand image. Based on their studies, Parganas et al. (2015) and Anagnostopoulos et al.

(2018) employed this model and focused only on the relationship between brand attributes and fan engagement. As this study aims to explore how football clubs manage their Weibo contents and the relationship with fan engagements in a similar way to the research conducted by Parganas et al. (2015) and Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018), it therefore developed and proposed 15 brand attributes as the categories for content analysis. The categories are displayed in the table below, and the definitions, logic and examples of each attribute are presented in Appendix 2.

**Table 5: Brand attributes in this research**

**PRA:**

Events' image	Team performance
Star player	Head coach

**NPRA:**

Interactions	Reward draw
Club's culture and values	Assets and Product
Local events	Call for action
Club's history and success	Offline activities
Sponsor or owner	Brand mark
Management	

***Determining the time range***

Before the collecting stage, it is always necessary to define the time range of target samples. Relevant studies had examined the football club content strategy in both on-season and off-season periods (Parganas et al., 2015) and off-season solely (Achen et al., 2020). Although scholars have noted that focusing on the off-season data could provide more insights into how clubs manage their contents without the help of match-related content (Achen et al., 2020), this research still collected the on-season data with the intention to assemble the most comprehensive data, since on-season data could provide not only contents that usually happens on-season such as match-related contents, but also other information that may occur off-season

such as discussion about the squad.

Due to all the cases being from different leagues, the differences among season times must be considered. Generally, the season time of clubs for Cases 1-3 is similar (from August to May), and December is the busiest month with many matches and festivals, so the time range for Cases 1-3 was selected as December of 2019. Since Case 4 and Case 5 relate to the CSL (China Super League) where the league usually starts in March and ends in December, the last month of the season (December) was selected.

However, during the collecting stage, the researcher found that Case 4 and Case 5 showed a low frequency of updating, which means the collected posts were limited (for example, there were more than four hundred posts for Cases 1-3, but no more than two hundred posts were collected for Case 4-5). In order to ensure the validity of samples from Case 4 and 5, more samples were collected until the quantities reached numbered four hundred. Finally, the time range for Cases 1-3 was the whole of December in 2019, Case 4 was from 15/06/2019 to 31/12/2019, and Case 5 was from 02/07/2019 to 31/12/2019.

### ***The sample collecting process***

The Weibo posts from the homepages of each club were considered as the target sample. Initially, the researcher tended to use web-crawling software to automatically collect the Weibo posts. However, the pilot collection returned different sizes of posts on several occasions. The reason for this could be because the platform of Sina Weibo is not stable when using crawling software, or the whole posts were not visible when browsing the page. This meant that the accuracy and validity of data could not be guaranteed. Thus, the whole data collecting process was conducted by hand. Before starting the coding process, there was another coder recruited in the research for helping to collect and record data. The second coder is a friend of the researcher, who was studying at the University of Dundee for the PhD degree of Accounting and Finance. His educational background could increase the reliability in coding process. The duration of the collecting process was started from the middle of January of 2021 to the end of that month, which lasted almost two weeks.

Then, this research set out to explore what kinds of Weibo posts and content was used by clubs. The post text and post type were chosen as the variables for further coding and analysis. In addition, as another central element this study aims to explore, fan interactions, including likes, comments, and shares, were also considered as variables. The Weibo homepage posts for each case study were considered as the units of content analysis.

A typical Weibo post consists of the account name, date, content, likes, comments, share and other affiliated contents such as the image, video, vote and link etc (Figure 3). According to those elements, a workbook was designed in Microsoft Excel for collecting and classifying different posts.

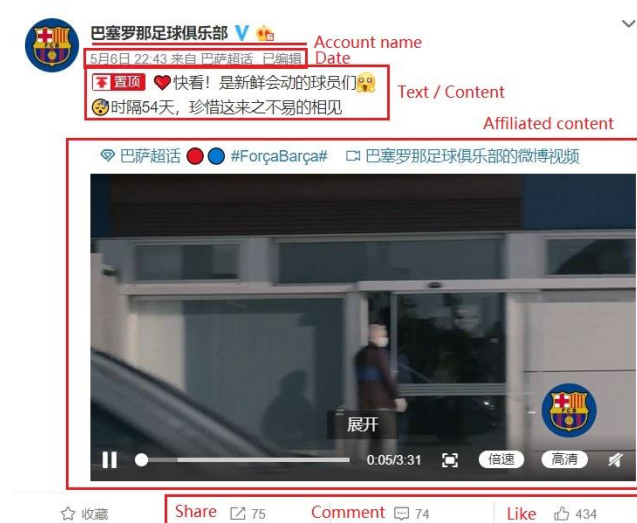


Figure 2. Example of a Weibo post

For analysing the different post types, the type attribute information including “Pure-text” “Image” “Video” “Link” “Vote” “Share” were labelled and established in MS Excel (for simplifying the coding process, “Pure-text” was recorded as “Text”). For analysing the different content types and their aligned brand attributes, the brand attributes types were also established in Excel, and divided into two categories: product-related content and non-product-related content (see Figure 3). During the collecting process, each unit (sample) was assigned a different post type and brand attribute according to its information.

Figure 3. Example of the Excel data workbook

2019/12/1 3:27	全场比赛结束，今天不属于我们。全场比赛结束，今天不属于我们。	Picture	Events' image		428	193	106	727
2019-12-1 03:29	[感冒]12月，请对我们好一点。[感冒]12月，请对我们好一点。	Picture		Fan interactions	561	94	49	704
2019/12/1 7:07	欢迎@足球带我奔跑 @足球不过是个球 @呆特-Fairy @崔崔崔崔Even @虎扑足球 @懂球帝	Picture		Sponsor or owner	255	39	10	304
2019-12-1 12:39	弗里克：“我很难批评球队的表现，我们踢得不错，一直保持侵略性。”	Picture		Head coach	189	25	12	226
2019/12/1 18:43	诺伊尔：“我们理应进更多球，可惜运气不在我们这边。有些事情的确很难	Picture		Star player	173	15	9	197
2019-12-1 21:10	又见穆式呐喊！本场之前1323分钟的球荒终于打破了！#MiaSanMia#	Picture		Star player	297	23	12	332
2019/12/1 21:56	#hi十二月# 2019只剩最后一个月了，是时候给你和拜仁立一个年末小目标	Picture		Fan interactions	226	62	15	303
2019/12/2 9:49	12月的第1个周一，从换新的壁纸开始！	Picture		Fan interactions	144	23	9	176
2019/12/2 11:41	圣诞月#到啦！这个月每一个周末安联球场都会亮起特别配色哟！是不	Picture		Stadium	225	24	19	268
2019-12-2 12:35	C组: NL UA ATD组: HR CZE组: ES SE PLF组: PT FR DE	Picture	Events' image		209	35	16	260
2019-12-2 14:10	是时候去换一个门框了？[摊手] 是时候去换一个门框了？[摊手]	Picture		Star player	262	36	17	315
2019/12/2 15:51	周六，安联球场。对阵勒沃库森的比赛前，还有一个特殊的仪式。为了感	Picture		Club's history and success	188	11	13	212
2019-12-2 17:22	👉👉指挥官二娃上线！@托马斯穆勒ThomasMueller L拜仁慕尼黑足球俱	Video		Star player	100	20	9	129
2019/12/2 18:22	队长发话了：“看到那个门柱了吗？！（拆了它）”	Picture		Star player	277	23	21	321
2019/12/2 20:31	一起白头，在雪本纳大街👉👉 一起白头，在雪本纳大街👉👉	Picture		Stadium	206	9	6	221
2019/12/2 22:07	这就是为什么我们称之为“拜仁大家庭”！你们的支持是我们最大的动力！	Video		Club's culture and values	220	22	27	269
2019/12/2 23:04	👉👉欢迎回归训练！我们等你回来！[爱你]#MiaSanMia#	Picture		Star player	257	36	23	316

It is important to note how we processed some controversial units during the collecting stage. Some units were assigned into multi attributes because they were not clear. For instance, a post describing a player from the past whose goals helped the clubs to achieve some record. A post like this could be categorised not only under ‘Star players’ but also under ‘Club’s History and Success’.

### 3.6 Phase 2: Qualitative interview of managers and fans

In this phase, the focus of the research is on the social media strategy and fan experiences. The study of Parganas and Anagnostopoulos (2015) provides a good example of exploring football club social media strategies through interview. This section aims to introduce issues related to the semi-structured interview, including participants selection and recruitment, interview question design, and relevant ethical issues.

#### 3.6.1 Conducting the interview with managers

##### *Participants selection*

As mentioned earlier, two managers from each club were selected as interviewees to talk about their content management and fan engagement strategies. Since repetitive answers might be generated if the two managers were in similar positions, I set out to contact managers who are separately responsible for content management and branding or marketing in order to explore thoroughly their content strategy and fan engagement strategy. Therefore, in total, ten semi-structured interviews were arranged with the senior social media managers and marketing managers respectively of five football clubs. Their basic information is set out in the table below:



**Table 6: The information of interviewees (manager)**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Club</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Licha Zhan	Barca 1	F.C. Barcelona	Social media manager (for Chinese market), F.C. Barcelona, Spain
Fan Zhang	Barca 2		Marketing manager, HUPU Anchor*, China
Li Zhang	Bayern 1	F.C. Bayern Munich	Head of Media Relations Bayern China Office, China
Anonym	Bayern 2		Senior Account manager, Bayern China Office, China
Xiaoluo Zhan	MU 1	Manchester United	Senior Account manager, HUPU Anchor*, China
Charlie Zhang	MU 2		Senior Account manager, HUPU Anchor*, China
Xiao Cao	Beijing 1	Beijing Guoan F.C.	Director of Media Apartment, Beijing Guoan F.C., Beijing
Yan Zhang	Beijing 2		Senior Account manager, Beijing Guoan F.C., China
Ruiqi Fan	Wuhan 1	Wuhan Zall F.C.	Director of Media Apartment, Wuhan Zall F.C., China
Xinpeng Zhao	Wuhan 2		Senior branding manager, Han Power*, China

\*HUPU Anchor is an agency company that runs all digital media platforms including Weibo, WeChat, Douyin (Chinese version of TikTok) and official website for foreign sport brands to enter, operate and promote their business in Chinese market. They are the agency for Manchester United and F.C. Barcelona.

\*Han Power: the agency of Wuhan Zall orchestrates the social media promotion and management on Weibo, WeChat and Douyin for the club.

Given that some Chinese names of managers are similar and may be confused for reading, the decision was

made to name the interviewees with codes. The code for managers is made in the form of 'club name + number'. 1 refers to the manager who focuses on social media content and 2 to the manager who focuses on branding or marketing issues. For example, 'MU1' means the manager for Manchester United who is mainly in charge of content and social media issues, while 'Bayern 2' means the Bayern Munich manager who mainly care marketing issues.

### ***Recruitment***

Initially, the researcher set out to contact the social media operators by messaging the Weibo account or email. However, taking into consideration trustworthiness and reliability issues, it proved difficult to make an appointment with managers. Therefore, the researcher sought help from a friend who works as a professional in the sport and media industry in China. This person worked at the studio of a famous Chinese sport commentator, who have wide human resources in the sport industry. Therefore, they introduced the media manager of F.C. Barcelona, F.C. Manchester United, F.C. Beijing Guoan and F.C. Wuhan Zall to me. Since they are also loyal fan of F.C. Bayern Munich, with their long-time work experience in the industry, they have a close relationship with the Head of Bayern Munich China Office, Li Zhang. So, they also introduced him for this research project.

It should be noted here is that not all the managers were recruited through the recommendation from my friend. Some managers were contacted and appointed through a snowballing strategy, which means interviewed managers were requested to invite their colleagues to participate in the research. In addition, during the process of contacting managers, the researcher found that not all the clubs or agencies had a clear division between content manager or marketing manager. This meant that the original selection did not work fully to select the most appropriate interviewees. Therefore, when I used the snowballing strategy, I requested that managers with different focuses were recommended. For example, after completing the interview with a manager who was responsible for content management, I asked him if he would be willing to recommend someone who mainly works for branding or marketing. Fortunately, managers showed little reluctance in recommending their colleagues to participate in these interviews, which was very helpful in the recruitment process.

## *Interview process*

Initially, the interview appointments were arranged on the end of December in 2019. However, before the face-to-face interviews could begin, the COVID pandemic broke out in China, and all the interviews were rearranged to take the form of telephone conversation due to the 'stay at home' regulations during that period.

The interview was semi-structured to allow respondents more freedom to express their thoughts. Before each interview, the consent form was sent to every interviewee by WeChat to inform them of the general content of the interview and related issues. The interviews were then conducted through the digital telephone function of WeChat. Interviews were recorded by the researcher on another phone. However, not all the participants permitted the researcher to keep the recording of the interview, due to concerns regarding commercial risks and other reasons. Thus, after the transcription, only eight conversation recordings of ten interviews were kept. The interviews lasted between 20-70 minutes, with an average length of 40 minutes. Before the interview formally began, I informed interviewees that they had the right to refuse to answer any questions that were sensitive or made them uncomfortable.

At the beginning of the interview, a welcome and greeting were made to make participants feel comfortable. Then, some warm-up questions were asked, such as 'What is your job mainly about?', 'As an agency, what do you do for the club?', 'Are you also a fan of the club you are working for?'. Such a warm-up process aims to make participants feel more relaxed to encourage a more open conversation. Since the interviews were conducted in Chinese, the transcription of recordings was also made in Chinese and then translated into English for the finding chapters when discussing the results.

What should be noted is that during the interview, not all the questions were fully or comprehensively answered by all participants. The validity problems of the qualitative interview that interviewees may only answer part of the questions had long been suggested by scholars (Barriball and White, 1996). Nevertheless, this does not mean that the collected data is invalid. The answers from managers still provided significant

and valuable information for this research.

### *The interview question list*

The research aims to conduct interviews that explore two aspects of the social media strategy of football clubs: the content strategy and the engagement strategy. In order to gather the data comprehensively, a set of interview questions was designed carefully to explore both aspects. As mentioned in Section 3.2, the categorization of content in quantitative content analysis provided a basic understanding of post types and content types, which further guided the design of interview questions. In addition, since the research was to be conducted in the context of the Chinese market, questions about localisation such as why clubs value the Chinese market and how do they design strategies for Chinese fans were also included.

A semi-structured interview list was designed as follows:

Q1: Please simply introduce your social media strategy.

Q2: Can you talk about your specific strategy for content management? / Can you talk about your specific strategy of fan engagement?

Q3: What are your objectives in relation to the Weibo operation? What goals do you aim to achieve?

Q4: What kinds of posts do you use most, such as Text, Image or Video? Why?

Q5: What kinds of content do you use most, such as player-related information, match highlight? Why?

Q6: Do you have any special strategies? If you do, could you share them? If not, what competitive edge do you believe your social media operation provides?

Q7: Are there any special features for Chinese fans? How do you satisfy the needs of Chinese fans?

Q8: How do you conduct branding on Weibo and build the relationship with your fans?

Q9: What approaches to fan engagement do you have?

Q10: Do you directly interact with fans, such as replying to their comments? Do you interact with fan groups or fan representatives?

Q11: How do you manage your relationship with fan organisations?

Q12: How do you view the Key Opinion Leaders or fan-formed accounts? How do you manage your relationship with them? Are they helpful in improving the branding outcomes and your relationship with fans?

Q13: What changes will you have to your strategy? Why?

Q14: Do you have anything to add?

This set of questions was used in the interviews with both content-focused managers and branding-focused managers. Although some questions may appear repetitive, the same interview question with a different person in relation to the same topic could generate different kinds of response, which further contributes to improving the research quality (Denscombe, 1998). Edwards and Skinner (2009, p.141) also mentioned that comparing the data relating to the same topic, but from different phases of fieldwork and different respondents at a different level of occupation in a sports organisation can help ensure the validity of data. Such a technique was called triangulation, which suggests that researchers would “continuously reformulate and reiterate various questions and comments to consolidate or disconfirm their degree of validity or worth” (ibid). Following the literature above, the question list was applied to all the managers to ensure more valuable results.

### **3.6.1 The qualitative interview with fans**

As stated earlier, this research aims to investigate the fan experiences, including motivations and gratifications of fans by utilising the qualitative interview. The process of conducting the interview for fans is presented in this section.

#### ***Participants selection and recruitment***

As the consumption experiences of fans are the object that the research aims to explore, fans who are more active and show a close engagement with the club accounts were considered as the primary choice. They could provide deeper insights into the gratifications. Sometimes, people claim to be football fans, when they are not real fans. For example, in their study, Hunt et al. (1999) develops a classification of fans and refer to this kind of fans as ‘temporary fans’. They define temporary fans as people who are only a fan for a constrained time period and do not regard “being a fan” as their self-identification. Therefore, selecting fans who have demonstrated a long-term engagement to the club would enhance the validity of the sample and data collected. Thus, a fan who had commented on the club homepage posts more than twenty times was defined as the criterion for sample selection. In order to minimise the influence from different clubs (for instance, fans of some clubs may be more active than others), five fans from each club, twenty-five in total, were invited to participate in the interviews. All interviewees were invited through the private message function of Weibo, and the consent form and project introduction were sent to them as soon as initial contact was established.

Since interviewees were invited through the internet, it was rare that fans were willing to provide their real personal information, such as their real name. Therefore, all the samples were coded by letter ‘R’ (for ‘Respondent’) and number. The coding information is displayed as follows:

Barcelona fans: R1-R5

Bayern Munich fans: R6-R10

Manchester United fans: R11-R15

Beijing Guoan fans: R16-R20

Wuhan Zall fans: R20-R25

### *Interview process*

Once fans had consented to participate in the study, the researcher arranged appointment times with participants and the interview process began. Since this phase of the research began in February in 2020 in China during the COVID pandemic and the attendant travel restrictions, the phone interview was considered to be the most appropriate method to use. Some fans agreed to be interviewed directly by telephone, while some of them only agreed to communicate via internet chat applications such as WeChat and QQ (another instant message app in China). All the recordings were made after the oral permission of interviewees. During the conversation, all the calls were made using a hand-free speaker phone and recorded on the researcher's second phone. On average, the interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Chinese and translated into English in the data analysis stage, which is presented in following sections.

### *Question list design*

Before the formal interviews began, a warm-up stage was designed to make participants feel relaxed. Two warm-up questions were formulated: 'How long has it been since you became a football fan?' and 'Why do you like your club?'.

Since the research aims to explore the motives of fans for using social media to follow football clubs based on uses and gratification theory, two pilot interviews were carried out with friends of the researcher (who are also football fans and Weibo users) to identify potential problems of the interview design.

Initially, the questions had been designed generally and openly due to the semi-structured nature of the interview and with the intention of offering greater freedom for fans to describe their motives and gratifications. However, the researcher found that participants struggled to understand the meaning of gratification when asked what gratifications they were seeking when using social media. Therefore, more

specific, and everyday questions were designed to explore the feelings of fans, such as ‘Why do you choose Weibo for football information?’ and ‘What do you like most when using it?’. Thus, questions related to the everyday actions and feelings were drawn up. It was also decided to ask about two background factors that may influence the uses and gratifications, namely gender and relationship length (the length of time they had been a fan). Furthermore, questions about suggestions for the Weibo account of their favourite team and content that they would like to see were also introduced to see whether they matched the social media strategies of clubs, as this could provide certain practical suggestions for social media managers.

Since the interview was to take a semi-structured form, a set of open-ended questions were designed as follows:

1. How long has it been since you became a football fan?
2. Why do you like your club?
3. What role does your club play in your life?
4. On a 0-10 scale, 0 for not loyal, 10 for extremely loyal, please rate yourself. Why?
5. How frequently do you visit your football team’s Weibo account? Why did you choose Weibo?
6. What do you use it for?
7. What content do you like most? Why?
8. Do you usually interact on Weibo? Why?
9. How do you feel when using Weibo?
10. What do you think Weibo can bring to you in terms of football information?
11. Do you usually view the club’s official account? Do you like it? Why?
12. Would you like to provide some content suggestions for the official club account?
13. What would you like to see in addition to the current content?
14. Taken as a whole, how would you comment on the experience of using Weibo for football information?
15. Do you have anything to add?



## 3.7 Data analysis

### 3.7.1 The analysis of qualitative data

After the interview, all recordings were transcribed promptly into written text for greater accuracy. As the interview was conducted in Chinese, all recordings were transcribed in Chinese in the first place and then translated to English by myself. To ensure the accuracy, the translating process was conducted manually instead of translating software. Since there were amounts of slangs and dialect in the conversations, the manual translation can ensure the better accuracy and consistency than software. A translation protocol was thus developed and provided in Appendix 9.

Given the small size of the sample, all the interview data was analysed manually, rather than employing any analysis software such as NVivo. However, it was important to choose an appropriate transcription method. Scholars have argued a lot about the constraints and advantages of different transcription methods (Oliver et al., 2005). The central debate concerns the necessity and effects of verbatim transcription in qualitative interviews. Halcomb and Davidson (2006) suggested that a verbatim transcription with the reflection of all the details in interview is not necessary for thematic analysis. As this research aims to investigate the social media strategy, which means that different themes should be developed to reflect the strategy, a verbatim transcription technique was therefore not adopted for this study. Carey (2012, p.218) points out that qualitative analysis tends to be ongoing from the data collecting phase and should be reduplicative in analysing the transcript. Therefore, a reflexive and iterative coding and transcription process was deemed more suitable for this research.

In the data analysis process, thematic analysis was noticed by the researcher which could be used in this study. Thematic analysis is an analysis technique for identifying and classifying themes for qualitative data and enables researchers to interpret the importance of those themes (Braun et al., 2017). It is suitable for investigating people's experiences regarding some issues and identifying "patterns in people's (reported) practices or behaviours related to, or their views and perspectives on, a certain issue" (ibid). As this research seeks to investigate the views of managers on social media management on Weibo and the uses and

gratifications of fans, the thematic analysis approach is thus appropriate for all the qualitative interview analysis conducted for this study.

The first step of thematic analysis is familiarisation. In this process, the researcher should generally read the data and become familiar with the basic image and features of the contents. This was a process to get to know what interviewees talked about and get ready for the coding stage. Then, through the iterative reading of interview transcripts, several patterns (themes) were identified in terms of content strategy, engagement strategy and the fan motivations. For social media content strategy, there were five major themes that could be developed in accordance with the interview data (findings are presented in Chapter 4):

1. The objectives of social media operation
2. Management of social media post types
3. Essential contents that aim to fill the central information needs of fans such as match results, player news, transfers etc.
4. Interactive contents that aim to encourage the engagements of fans
5. Managers' perspectives and opinions on the role of social media platforms in the future.

For engagement strategy, findings were constructed around three main themes to investigate how clubs enclose their relationships with fans (findings are presented in Chapter 5):

1. The localisation of brand and integration with the local society
2. Building a strong and attractive brand image
3. Direct and indirect interaction with fans.

For fan motivations, seven main themes were identified based on previous studies of Vale and Fernandes (2018) and Whiting and Williams (2013) (findings are presented in Chapter 6):

Information seeking

Social interaction

Entertainment  
Empowerment  
Passing time  
Brand love  
Remuneration

Those major themes include many sub-themes for further classification of the dataset. After the initial and general coding in the first stage, re-examination and re-coding was progressed, following the suggestions of Edwards and Skinner (2009, p.134-135). This is also called selective coding, which means to confirm the themes and sub-themes for the accuracy of coding. During the analysis, memo writing was also applied. Memoing refers to the technique of recording new ideas, reflexive notes, explanations, and other thoughts the coder is learning from the data (ibid). It could be written at any stage of the data analysis whenever the researcher wants to. In this research, memos were handwritten and then copied across into Word.

After the data that addresses content and engagement strategy was collected, a simple analysis of the level of overall social media strategy of clubs was conducted to provide an overview of general strategy tactics. The evaluation is based on the 'Strategy Cone' theory proposed by Effing and Stil (2016), as mentioned in the Literature Review (Chapter 2).

All the materials were transcribed promptly after the interviews from the December of 2020 to the January of 2021. And then, the data coding process and data analysis were conducted from the end of January of 2021 to the start of May of 2021, which lasted more than three months.

### **3.7.2 Analysis of quantitative data**

Before the analysis procedure started, a necessary work is to prepare and coding the data in a scientific way. There were two stages of the coding process: the recording of the samples in MS Excel and the transformation coding in SPSS 23.0. SPSS is statistical software for data management, data analysing, and data storage.

In the first stage, key information of the Weibo post including date, content, post type and frequencies of interaction type were recorded in Excel. Then, according to the content description, the classification of brand attribute was manually made. For instance, as to the video post about the player training, it was assigned into the category “Video” and “Star Player” in “Product-related content”.

Before transforming the data into SPSS, which is the stage two, it is necessary to conduct the analysis of Cohen’s Kappa for examining the consistency between two coders. Cohen’s Kappa is one of the most common approach for assessing the agreement or intercoder reliability between two coders who code the same set of data (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992). Two rows of variable data (scores) including the different categories of brand attribute, named ‘Coder 1’ and ‘Coder 2’, and one row of frequency were input in SPSS from Excel. Next, the cases were weight by the frequency. Then, a crosstab was established and the kappa test was conducted (See Appendix 7). Finally, the result of Cohen’s Kappa was at 0.923, which was higher than 0.7 and means the coding result is reliable (Parganas et al., 2015). Finally, there were 2144 units collected and recorded in total.

Then, entering the analysis phase, all data was input in the IBM SPSS 23.0 for statistical analysis. There are two main stages in the data analysis process. The first stage is descriptive analysis. In this stage, the dataset was input into SPSS to establish the analysis case and prepare for further coding inside the software. Then, descriptive analysis was applied to calculate and obtain simple descriptive results such as percentages and means. For instance, for investigating how clubs manage their Weibo post types, the percentage of different types of posts in the overall dataset was analysed to obtain a general overview.

The second stage is a statistical analysis that aims to predict and examine the relationship between certain factors, such as whether the differences exist between each post type on fan interactions. In the same way as the process above, all data was input into SPSS for analysis. However, before the analysis began, preparation work was conducted to understand the different statistical concepts and choice of analysis techniques.

The statistical technique was employed in order to answer research questions including: *'How do clubs use different types of posts (e.g., text, image, video) and how well do these post types influence fan engagement?'* For this reason, analysis tests that could examine the differences and potential associations were employed. The Pearson's Chi-square test and One-way ANOVA test were selected as the main analysis techniques in this research (the work examples were provided in Appendix 8).

The Pearson's Chi-square test, also called the chi-square test ( $\chi^2$ ), is one of the most common statistical analysis methods in social science research. It enables researchers to examine the differences between two groups of data (Hess & Hess, 2017). In this study,  $\chi^2$  was employed to examine whether the significant differences exist between different post types and interactions received and between different content types and interactions. In other words, it was used to examine whether the use of different types of posts and contents influence fan engagements. In this research, the data of post types, interaction types and interaction frequencies were input into SPSS. Next, the cases were weight by the frequencies. Then, a crosstab was established to conduct the chi-square test to examine the relationship between post types and interactions. For brand attributes and interactions, similar procedures were conducted to examine the relationship between different brand attributes and interactions.

Another analysis approach is the ANOVA test (analysis of variance). ANOVA is a method that "compares the means of two or more groups for one dependent variable" (Ross & Wilson, 2017). In this study, the test was used to examine the statistically differences between post/content types and each interaction type. In other words, it was used to explore how different post and content types influence the frequencies of Text, Comment, and Share. For example, it could be used to examine the differences among every type ('group') of post on likes ('frequency'). After inputting the data into 'group' and 'frequency' in SPSS, the ANOVA test was run by clicking 'compare means' → 'one-way ANOVA'. At this stage, in order to obtain specific understanding of what types of post received most interactions, a Dunnett T3 test was chosen as the post-doc analysis after ANOVA. Dunnett T3 test is a method that usually used to make pair comparison of groups after ANOVA. For example, it was used to examine the differences between Text and Image on likes, Text and Video on likes, and so on. Such methods provide me a clear understanding of the relationship among different types of post on fan interactions.

After the analysis techniques had been conducted, all data was concluded in relevant graphs, charts and tables by using SPSS. More detailed information is provided in the finding Chapter 6.

### **3.8 Ethical issues**

It is always crucial to consider the ethical issues in research, particularly in social science research, since it examines complex issues of human society, such as legal, cultural, economic, and political areas (Madhushani, 2016). In this research, due to the use of mixed research methods (qualitative interview and quantitative content analysis) and the investigation of multiple research subjects (communication managers, football fans, and social media content), conforming to ethical regulations is necessary for protecting the benefits of participants.

#### *Confidentiality*

This study investigated large amounts of information, including interview materials with managers and fans and quantitative data from social media pages. Thus, the confidentiality of data and subsequential analysis would be the first priority of ethical issues. In the fieldwork process, data protection rules were emphasized first to participants. All participants were aware of the use and storage of information. Consent forms, original interview audio recordings, the original Chinese transcription, and English translations, and collected Weibo posts were all stored in a safe cabinet of the researchers. The audio recordings were stored in an old smartphone, and the transcriptions and Weibo posts data were saved on a mobile hard disk drive. The smartphone was locked with a password that was only known by the researcher. The mobile drive was locked in a cabinet with a password, either.

#### *Consent issues*

In the recruitment process, the Interview Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix 3 & 4) from the Ethics office for the College of Arts was handed out to every interviewee to let them understand the basic

information and other issues such as the duration of the research program. After all the related issues of the program were informed and understood by the participants, the 'Consent to Participate and 'Agreement to The Use of Data' form was provided (See Appendix 2). It informed related data use and protection issues. Participants were voluntarily to sign the consent form without any force or inducement. For managers, a special declaration of data protection was emphasized for protecting the information which is related to commercial secrets. Football fans were informed that only their simple personal information, such as gender and age, would be collected. Participants were informed that they have the right to refuse to answer questions that make them uncomfortable. And they were also informed that they could withdraw from the interview at any time if they wanted to.

### *Children, age, and gender issues*

There was constant debate about involving children in qualitative research since children and young people were usually regarded as the role that in lack of ability to concisely understand and answer questions (Mishna et al., 2004). This research aims to investigate the social media management strategy and experiences of football fans, which required years of work and football-watching experiences. Thus, only adult people were considered to be involved in this research. As football fans were randomly selected from the comment section under the football club's Weibo homepage, every participant was asked for their age information before the interview. Fans who are under 18 were withdrawn.

In terms of gender issues, the previous study has shown that men and women have different motives for sport consumption (Ridinguer & James, 2002). It means that motivation research which includes both men and women fans can contribute more implications than those only involve one gender. Thus, in the recruitment process, the gender of participants was not intentionally distinguished. All the participants were recruited randomly and interviewed with the same questions and power during the interview.

### *Safety and health*

The qualitative interviews in this research were conducted by telephone and online telephone function of

WeChat. Therefore, there were basically little influence on the safety of participants. In terms of health problems, during the interview, the researcher tried the best to maintain a comfortable conversation. Approaches to make interviewees include proposing warming questions to make them feel relaxed; no nosy questions; no force for answering; asking entertaining questions when they feel tired, and providing sufficient support for their other requirements.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

By reviewing relevant literature and explaining the design of the research process, this chapter provided the methodology for how the research for exploring football clubs' social media strategies and fan experiences should be conducted. The empirical design enabled me to fulfil the aims of the research, prepare for the data analysis stage, and report the findings of this study. In the next three chapters (Chapter 4, Chapter 5 and Chapter 6), the research findings regarding the football club content strategy, the engagement strategy, and the fan experiences will be presented separately.



# Chapter Four: The social media content strategies of football clubs

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the fieldwork results relating to one central research question: How do football clubs manage social media content for branding? Qualitative interview materials and quantitative content analysis are presented to discuss the social media strategies of clubs. Highlights of the findings include assessments from communication/marketing managers regarding their club branding objectives, social media post and content types; data analysis of social media posts regarding post types/ on brand attributes; differences between the European and Chinese football clubs regarding their social media strategies; and opinions from communication/marketing managers regarding the current and future social media platforms.

Four sub-sections are included in this chapter. The first section sets out the views of club communication managers regarding their branding objectives. The second section presents the data collected from the communication manager interviews, covering topics including the most-valued type of posts, brand attributes and other specific strategies. Quantitative data regarding the post types and content types that clubs use are provided in the third section. Weibo posts are allocated into different brand attributes to reveal clubs' branding strategies in greater detail. Relevant studies suggest that the appropriate management of online brand attributes could be positively related to brand image, which could further positively affect brand equity (Sasmita and Suki, 2015; Vinhas Da Silva and Faridah Syed Alwi, 2008). In total, 2144 Weibo posts were collected and analysed to investigate the use typologies of clubs. Ten football club social media managers were interviewed to explore further their social media strategies in relation to the use of Sina Weibo.

Then, in the final section, the role of Weibo in football club branding is also discussed to contribute to the literature about how social media platforms can be used effectively by football clubs, today and the future, especially in the context of China.

## 4.2 The branding objectives

This section presents the interview responses from football club communication/marketing managers (n=10) from 5 different European and Chinese clubs regarding their Sina Weibo media strategies. Communication/marketing managers talked about the objectives that they wish to achieve. It has been suggested that social media strategies should be aligned with specific goals (Larson & Watson, 2011). Therefore, discussing the football club's objectives may help understand their initial thoughts and how they design their strategies.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, sports clubs typically wish to achieve a number of goals such as branding and promotion objectives or deep integration of the market by adopting different relationship marketing strategies (Berry, 1995; Grönroos, 2000). For instance, European clubs generally wish to gain a better reputation or to improve their brand image. Specifically speaking, each club has its own emphasis. For example, Bayern Munich cares more about deeper engagement and integration with fans and wishes to improve its image by maintaining a positive fan relationship. As their communication and marketing managers said:

[...] In fact, we wish to communicate better with Chinese fans to expand our fan base, expand our reputation, make our brand image more intimate with fans, and let fans feel that we are communicating with them here, not from far in Munich. (Bayern 1)

We would like to serve our fans more deeply. For example, we might increase the time length of digital events to make them longer or increase the number of events and interactions with KOLs. In addition, we would also increase the interactions with our players and accounts on other platforms. (Bayern 1)

[...] what we aim to achieve is to see 'real' improvements in fans' experiences, instead of showing off something through data. If some media outlet wished to make a report or rank who has the best performance among million-fan level clubs, we want Bayern to be at the top and become widely known. That is what we value. (Bayern 2)

Barcelona have similar goals to Bayern Munich. As the Barcelona agency, HUPU Anchor marketing manager M2 articulated: “We want to gain Digital Media Brand Awareness No.1 among all sports clubs in the 19-20 season.” She then added:

The business can be divided into two parts: fan base and fan engagement. Barca cares more about engagement. The followers or fan base can be illusory sometimes, while engagement is truly there. When we first took over the work, Barca used to tweet much more than now but received very few interactions. Now, we have made it No.1 for engagement...so Barca care about the metric of ‘engagement’ very much, such as how much do you interact with fans or how frequently you interact with fans. (Barca 2)

To be honest, ‘Barca’ is already a famous brand, so we focus more on maintaining a great brand image rather than breaking through something. The brand equity of Barcelona has already reached a high level. Therefore, our job is to do high-quality content projects that deliver the club value and keep a positive image, then attract fans and enhance their loyalty. (Barca 2)

The extracts seem to reflect that Barcelona has multiple objectives, including both brand awareness expansion and brand image maintenance. As the Barca 2 marketing manager makes frequent mention of “engagement” in her responses, it suggests that online interactions, interactive projects or contents, and other content activities that could attract engagement may form the most important part of their strategy.

As for Manchester United, they aim to change their account style gradually. MU 1 and MU 2, the social media manager and marketing manager for Manchester agency HUPU Anchor, made the following contributions:

We wish to improve our tone of voice largely. Because our tone of voice was boring before; it was basically about serious official news. Nevertheless, social media like Weibo is an entertaining platform. We want our tone of voice here to be more active and interesting. (MU 1)

Our objective is the change in style. Now MU want to be more familiar with fans. In the past, the brand image of Manchester United was serious. They always tried to keep an image of a ‘traditional big club’...Now, we aim to add more local popular slang and social events in our Weibo account to become more vivid. In fact, Manchester United’s Facebook and Twitter accounts have also improved in this regard recently. Because what they did before was also relatively bland. So, we wish to show we care more about the needs of fans. (MU 2)

The use of words like “interesting”, “active”, “vivid” reflect that Manchester is keen to change its brand image in the Chinese market. The change means that they may generate more localised and interactive content to improve the brand attitudes of fans.

One of the Chinese clubs, Beijing Guoan, shows many similarities when compared to European clubs, as the objective of Beijing is also to improve the fan experience, and they regard it as a vital way to improve their brand image.

As Beijing 1, the club senior communication manager stated:

Guoan has 5 million fans on Weibo, which is quite a lot among CSL clubs. So, we aim to keep a good relationship with old fans and attract new fans through the high quality of our operation. Furthermore, by establishing an excellent Weibo account, we hope to improve the club’s image and make more people know us. (Beijing 1)

Since the communication manager mentioned words like “reputation (koubei)”, “image (xingxiang)” and “improve (tigao)” “fans (qiumi)” “experience (tiyan)”, it could be suggested that they consider improving the fan experience as one of the vital ways to improve their brand image and expand their brand awareness in the same way as Bayern Munich.

For the club Wuhan Zall, their aim is to maintain a good relationship with current fans. The lack of staff

makes them focus more on maintaining their current level of updates. For instance, their agency marketing manager Wuhan 2 said that:

We just complete the daily updating of news, match information and other posts. You can say that's because we care about our current fans, instead of trying to attract new fans, because Zall does not have enough staff and money to maintain a high-quality multiplatform strategy. (Wuhan 2)

This response reflects what Price et al. (2013) mentioned in their Twitter research that developing a large fan-base demands that organisations commit significant human resources, even though social media itself is free to use.

In summary, 4 of 5 clubs in this study revealed that they wish to improve or maintain their brand image, to expand their brand awareness, and enhance the club-fan relationship. This means that clubs need strong communication strategies to enhance their image and effective engagement strategies to interact with fans.

As mentioned in the literature review, Keller (1993) suggested that customer-based brand equity consists of differential effects, brand knowledge, and the consumer response to marketing. Brand knowledge which includes brand awareness and brand image is the central element of customer-based brand equity. According to Bauer et al. (2008), sports brands usually have a high brand awareness amongst their fans. As the MU 1 agency manager mentioned: "Small clubs usually wish to utilise social media to expand their awareness, but MU already enjoys high-level awareness." Thus, improving the brand image may be the primary objective of larger football clubs.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the brand image could be defined by the brand associations, which consists of three aspects: brand attributes, brand attitudes and brand benefits (Keller, 1993). Clubs that care about their brand image must focus on these three aspects. For example, as MU and Beijing wish to change the 'serious' impression of their brand image, they may promote their brand attributes through the content strategy and improve the fan attitudes through frequent interactions. Therefore, further findings into how clubs manage their social media content and what kinds of brand attributes are promoted are provided in

the following sections.

### **4.3 Social media branding: the content strategy**

By presenting interview texts, this section seeks to answer the research questions: *How do clubs use different types of posts (e.g., text, image, video) and how well do these post types influence fan engagement?* The section contributes to the literature on the Weibo strategies of football clubs by not only providing information about the daily operational strategies of clubs, but also deep insights into the China-only social media platform Weibo, the Chinese fan bases, and the Chinese market. Relevant detailed findings, including what online branding strategies were adopted and what brand elements were promoted, are reviewed in this chapter.

#### **4.3.1 Manager views on post types**

In the interviews communication/marketing managers shared what types of posts they valued most and explained their reasons. Unsurprisingly, all five clubs investigated in this research regard visual images and video as their primary post types. Furthermore, all clubs think that short video will be the future trend in the social media landscape, and they are seeking a way to adapt to this trend. For instance, the three European club communication managers made similar comments:

Actually, we think this should be based on what fans like. Weibo users like images and videos even more. Video is the future trend, so we also value it very much. (MU 1)

Barca is one of the few clubs that has its own studio. Barca Studio is excellent. They have hundreds of staff. Organisations, such as La Liga, even ask Barca for help. So Barca has strong video production capability. For example, the documentary Match Day is made by Barca Studio themselves. [...] In fact, we post more images and videos, especially videos. Whether they are homemade or training videos or whatever, we have a lot of video content... We have tried many other forms of posts, but we believe

video is the most popular one currently and, in the future, especially short videos... Weibo is our primary platform, it is where our short-video strategy started... (Barca 1)

[...] we have also shown the importance of short video and mobile trends in China to the staff from Germany headquarters. For example, nearly everyone watches short videos on the subway. It proves the significance of a short video when people watch it in such a fragmented time. So, we regard it as the future trend and will increase more videos on Weibo. (Bayern 1)

Chinese clubs have similar strategies in this area:

As for the types, it is mainly based on images and videos. Video is trending on social media currently, so we try to make as many videos as possible. And the video can show more content and reflect the image and characteristics of the club better. (Beijing 1)

...Weibo is basically about images and video. We try to post lots of images for every match and make short videos every two or three days. (Wuhan 1)

In the Chinese market, the number of short video users had reached 648 million by 2018, nearly 80% of total Internet users (China Internet Network Information Centre, 2019). With video trending so strongly on social media, it is therefore not surprising that communication managers regard video as one of the most important parts of their strategy. The frequent use of Image and Video means that clubs have a clear understanding of the needs of fans, as studies have shown that consumers tend to engage better with content that contains videos and photos (Tafesse, 2016; de Vries et al., 2012).

Two club communication managers discussed their views on other post types, in addition to image and video. The managers suggested that other post types convey less information and may be controversial. As the communication managers from Beijing Guoan and Barcelona put it:

We rarely use other forms of the post because they convey less information and do not express what we

want them to. Moreover, they are too entertaining for us. We still wish to maintain the serious image as an official account. (Beijing 1)

We do use other types of post like Vote posts. As I know, the account of European Championship League Official use Vote posts a lot. Fans are asked to vote on lots of strange content which can be controversial. If you follow us, you know that Barca uses Vote posts very rarely. We only use it when we have particularly interesting content. (Barca 1)

In summary, Image and Video are still the two most popular post types among the football club strategies. As Tafesse (2016) suggested, photos and videos can be used to convey the “sensory, emotional and aesthetic components” for brands. Furthermore, sports often elicit strong emotions from spectators. People watch sport to meet experience needs such as pride, joy, and anger or jeopardy (Bauer et al., 2008). The research of Tafesse (2016) has found that brand pages with experiential content generate a higher level of engagement. Therefore, this shows that football clubs in this research have put in place strategies to satisfy the needs of fans and provide experiential benefits for fans.

#### **4.3.2 Manager views on content types**

Relevant studies have shown that intentionally designed social media content shows more significant efficiency in increasing fan engagement or interaction (Thompson et al., 2014; Pronschinske et al., 2014). This section presents the findings about the type of content clubs use on their Weibo pages and why they choose to use them.

First, all informants note that one of the most crucial parts of their content is “essential content”; this is the club’s core content which includes news and clubs-related content. For instance:

Our main strategy is to provide fans with the most important information since we target the most hardcore fans, which may actively respond. So, this is the most important part, and we must post it without any delay. This includes daily or match day information...daily includes training and things



like that. (Barca 1)

We are the official account, so we regard the daily content of Bayern as the primary thing, such as official announcements and news before and after the match. These are very regular things. (Bayern 1)

First of all, team-related content must be on time and comprehensive. To do this, we regularly discuss with the media team in Manchester to ensure that important news like transfer and match news never arrives later than the global channels to show the official and authoritative features of our account. (MU 1)

The daily content is the most crucial part of presenting and promoting the club (Beijing 1)

[...] you must do the team-related content well because the attention on us is still based on our content. (Wuhan 1)

European and Chinese communication managers all described the “essential contents” using words such as “important”, “must”, “primary”. Furthermore, they all convey the opinions that team-related daily contents are the priority of their social media operation, especially in their role as the official account. This is consistent with the previous study about Twitter and Facebook, which shows that sports marketers tweet more player and team-related information than any others, this kind of content can attract large amounts of interactions from fans (Achen et al., 2020). In addition, as Weibo is usually regarded as a Twitter-like platform (Zhang and Pentina, 2012), the finding also supports the proposition that organisations usually use Twitter as an information-sharing platform (Thompson et al., 2018; Haugh and Watkins, 2016).

From a branding perspective, the emphasis on team-related content means that clubs value the official attribute of their brand. As the Manchester communication manager mentioned, the ability to present the news first, especially any exclusive information also demonstrates the club’s authority.

In addition to the essential team information, European clubs generally place their emphasis on localised

content to integrate with fans and the local market. As communication managers from European clubs noted:

We try to keep increasing our localised content as much as possible, such as match posters, traditional festival events and related content. This is also a requirement from headquarters...As a Chinese agency, Manchester wishes us to make more content to suit the habits of Chinese fans. Such as something you can post on Twitter with some words and a link. Though our fans dislike outside links, so we need to make an adjustment for this. (MU 1)

[...] now Bayern focus on localised content more. We want to provide something based on the interests of Chinese fans...We value greater localisation rather than just translating Twitter content as we did before...We design our own social media events, such as festival events and others like “Take Bayern to Travel”, although headquarters already has many similar campaigns. (Bayern 1)

[...] it includes campaigns about big matches, no matter whether its El Clasico or the Champions League. We also design campaigns for traditional, even contemporary festivals such as the “Double 11” shopping festival. As well as for big social events like a college entrance exam. (Barca 1)

It is not surprising that clubs pay a great deal of attention to the localisation of their contents, as becoming international has been the primary objective of many sports brands (Chanavat and Bodet, 2009). Cultures and values in different networks play an important role for organisations to develop the incentives for users to engage with the brand (Gao et al., 2018). It means that the localisation of content is also part of the brand benefits that clubs provide to fans. In addition, as Yang (2003) suggest, one of the most important elements of localisation is the relationship with consumers. As foreign clubs, the active integration with the local market shows that clubs regard it as a vital way of improving their brand image.

In terms of two Chinese clubs, their communication managers all revealed the use of behind-the-scenes content to attract fans:

Our special content introduced more about how the club works behind the scenes, this lets fans know

more about the club and amplifies the image of the club by providing fans with more detail about us.

(Beijing 1)

At the very beginning, we did what we want for them (the club) ...such as fan columns and festivals.

Then, they had some ideas. They suddenly wanted to try something new and let us make it. The other part is to meet the promotion goals of the club and owner...for example, at the end of the year, we made a video about the club's staff, including the pitch cleaners, chief suppliers, poster maker and fan service team. This video was made for the Zall Group anniversary. It is for the club and owner promotion. It was one of the main work priorities in the past year. (Wuhan 2)

Previous studies have proved that human-interest stories or behind-the-scenes content can be effective in improving fan relationships since they can connect fans and players and help fans feel more attached to the brand (Achen et al., 2020). The use of such content indicates that the club wishes to establish a deep connection with fans, which also means that clubs recognise Weibo as an important way of maintaining a strong relationship with their fans.

### **4.3.3 Interactive contents**

In the previous section, communication/marketing managers mentioned that clubs pay a great deal of attention to their content in addition to the essential team-information. For a better understanding of the strategies of clubs, this section aims to explain the interactive contents that managers mentioned, including digital campaigns, O2O activities and other special activities. Examples and explanations provided by communication/marketing managers are presented in this section.

During the interview, managers from three European clubs spoke a lot about digital campaigns. A digital campaign is a general concept here. It means a digital event and special campaign to coincide with big matches, festivals, and popular social events. Through the digital campaign, clubs can connect themselves with trending events and bring benefits to their fans, as the Barcelona communication manager said:

Barca produces serial contents such as what we called ‘Red Blue Tutorial’ and various kinds of vlogs. We make vlogs for every match to introduce the team background and local culture... In addition, another important part is the digital campaign... I can say Barca makes the most frequent digital campaigns compared to others, it’s about once a month at least...So, you can say that our content strategy is ‘Daily contents plus Digital campaign’. (Barca 1)

It can bring very positive benefits. At first, it makes fans feel that the club cares about them. In fact, fans will become bored if you only tweet team-related content... Then, you must be interesting. Everyone uses Weibo for leisure. If you can provide interesting content, you can help others feel happy, which can return much more for yourself. Fans will feel a sense of belonging and other things like that. Anyway, if you make fans feel good, then they will have a positive impression of you. (Barca 1)

Although the manager called their content a digital campaign, it is about the designed content that encourage interactions with fans. For example, the event “Red Blue Tutorial” (mentioned above) aims to broadcast historical knowledge for fans and encourage them to share their feelings. These kinds of activities are relevant to the experiential benefits of fans as they can evoke emotions, companionship, socialising and entertainment (Bauer et al., 2008). Therefore, the use of digital campaigns can effectively improve brand image and engagement with fans.

Other European clubs run similar activities to Barcelona:

[...] Besides that, we do many of our own campaigns such as the “National Day” Golden Week holiday and so on. Those are campaigns that headquarters definitely does not run. No matter whether it’s the Spring Festival, or the COVID-19 pandemic, we try to run any kind of digital campaign. (Bayern 1)

We are continuing to increase our campaigns and localised content. For example, for the last year Qixi Festival, the Chinese traditional Valentine’s Day, we designed it as the love relationship between MU and their fans. Then, because there is a ‘Qi’ (“七”, means seven) in Qixi, we also made a poster of our NO.7 player for localisation... In addition, with some content on Twitter, you can post a paragraph and

a link. But our fans do not like links, so we need to show this separately. For example, to celebrate the 2000 goals of the club, MUTV and YouTube made a 24-hour live event, but Chinese fans cannot see it, so we made several videos to show them separately. (MU 1)

The two extracts also could show that a digital campaign is an important route to localisation in the strategies of European clubs. It means that European clubs may wish to increase their online engagement and avenue by frequent digital campaigns, since studies have shown that experiential events held by marketers can positively influence users' digital engagement and affect the sales, ROI, and positive word-of-mouth (WOM) on social media (Meire et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2013).

Given the home advantage that Chinese clubs enjoy, contents about their O2O (Online to Offline) operations and offline activities play an important role in their strategies. For instance:

[...] we will also publicise and promote our offline activities on Weibo sometimes. Guoan values offline activities very much. The interaction with fans offline is more practical than online for us. (Beijing 1)

They (*the club*) usually use Weibo to promote their offline activities, such as the meet-and-greet this year and the exhibition of clubs' collections. (Wuhan 2)

During the interview, the two communication managers all explained that they could attract more local fans and enhance fans' identity through the promotion of offline activities. As they suggested:

The combination of online content and offline activities can connect fans' lives with Weibo. This is beneficial for us to build a football ecology and build a comprehensive football media presence. In this way, we can enhance not only the brand image but also the 'stickiness' and engagement of and with fans. (Beijing 1)

From the local perspective, O2O activities can attract more Wuhan fans...Then, it is about the sense of belonging to the city. For example, in our game with Guangzhou, fans regard it as a battle between

cities win or lose. This would enhance fans' emotional connection and their sense of identity. (Wuhan 2)

The extracts above reflect that the two Chinese local clubs both care about engaging with offline fans by using social media as a communication tool. In their study, Wu and Huang (2019) show that online sport-related topic participation positively impacts offline communication. It means that clubs may evoke engagements or other benefits through the combination of online and offline connections. In addition, the study of Swoboda and Winters (2021) also shows that offline-online service could increase the purchase intentions in the fashion industry. However, scant research focuses on the online-to-offline nexus in the sports field, especially the relationship between online promotion and offline engagements with fans. This may therefore provide a fruitful avenue for further research.

Moreover, Beijing Guoan regards teenager training as one of their most important areas of content, as their communication manager explains:

Some content receives less attention because it is not as attractive, such as information about teenager training. Outside media do not care about this part or care about our youth team's on-field performance. No one cares about our long-term development and investment. But as the official media, we have to be responsible for its promotion. Through our planned reports on these activities, we let more people know about our development and huge devotion. From the brand image perspective, we can successfully change the opinions of outsiders. (Beijing 1)

It is not hard to see that Beijing Guoan regard teenager related content as one way to present the activities of the club and improve its brand image. As a kind of behind-the-scenes content, it plays an important role in improving brand image as it is exclusive could and could deliver unique insights for fans (Thompson et al., 2017). The continuous showcasing of such content has the potential to build stronger brand associations with fans (ibid).

Before the summary of this section, a surprising finding should be noted here. After the interview, in the

normal chat with the Barcelona marketing manager (Barca 2), the participant suggested that some Chinese clubs do not care much about the engagement with fans because fan consumption is not their main source of income, because they enjoy financial support from the government. As the manager said:

The funny thing is that CSL (Chinese Super League) teams have large differences compared to us. As I understand it, they do not rely on fans for earning money. For many cities, they have only one team, so the government provides lots of policy-support for them. That is why some clubs do not care about fans so much. Because fan consumption is not the most profitable part. Tickets and jersey sales are only small part of incomes. They have many other ways to maintain the business. (Barca 2)

The finding could connect with Ma and Kurscheidt (2020) study in the literature review, which found that Chinese football commercialisation is the politically-led logic (football clubs owned by the Provincial Sport Bureau), rather than corporations as in Western countries in the logic of media-driven (driven by profit-making and media exposure). In that case, geographically based club culture is developed, rather than the community-based culture in Western countries. This finding may provide a deeper explanation for the low frequency of posts from Chinese clubs and their strategy towards city culture connection. Although Peng et al. (2019) showed that in China government-controlled clubs are gradually being transferred into private ownership, it still could be seen that this special political logic has many influences on the clubs' social media strategy and operations, which may further influence the fan experiences.

In summary, the qualitative data above reveals the opinions and activities of club communication/marketing managers in relation to their social media content and how branding elements are delivered. European clubs and Chinese clubs revealed the differences in their strategies as the former care more about localisation by digital campaign and the latter focus more on O2O contents. From a branding perspective, European clubs generate more localisation content to deliver more experiential benefit to fans, improve the favourability of brand associations through well-designed campaigns, and gradually change the brand attitudes or impression on their brand image. Chinese clubs wish to provide more behind-the-scenes content to strengthen the uniqueness of their brand associations and enhance the attachment of fans by combining online and offline activities. More details from the quantitative analysis on how clubs use Weibo are

presented in the following section.

## 4.4 Social media branding: attributes and posts

Previous sections presented the communication/marketing managers opinions on their content strategy. This section presents the quantitative data about how clubs manage their Weibo contents. Two main research questions are addressed in this section: *How do clubs use different types of posts (e.g., text, image, video) and how well do these post types influence fan engagement?* And, *How do clubs manage different types of content (e.g., club history, player news) and how does the content type influence fan engagement?*

### 4.4.1 Type of posts

Table 7 shows the quantities of each type of post and their percentage of the total. Seven types of posts were selected for collection: Text, Image, Video, Reward Draw, Link, Forward (from other sources) and Vote.

**Table 7: Post types used by clubs on Weibo**

Types	/ F.C.	Bayern	Manchester	Beijing	Wuhan	Total
Teams	Barcelona	Munich	United	Guoan	Zall	
<b>Text</b>	45 (11%)	47 (10%)	184 (39%)	82 (21%)	13 (3%)	371 (17%)
<b>Image</b>	216 (51%)	289 (63%)	185 (40%)	201 (50%)	207 (52%)	1098 (51%)
<b>Video</b>	122 (29%)	62 (14%)	61 (13%)	36 (9%)	35 (9%)	316 (15%)
<b>Link</b>	8 (2%)	24 (5%)	9 (2%)	15 (4%)	108 (28%)	164 (8%)
<b>Forward</b>	22 (5%)	27 (6%)	20 (4%)	66 (17%)	37 (9%)	172 (9%)
<b>Vote</b>	7 (2%)	9 (2%)	7 (2%)	0	0	23 (1%)
<b>Total</b>	420	458	466	400	400	2144



Generally, image is the most-used post type by clubs, more than 50% of overall posts are images. All the clubs post images most, especially Bayern Munich. The Image use rate for this club exceeds 60%. The result is consistent with the interview results where communication/marketing managers said that they regard the image as one of their most important post types. The large number of images used can help clubs to receive more interactions, as a previous study (Alboqami et al., 2015) has shown that social media users are more likely to favourite or share posts with images.

In addition, a surprising finding is that Text is the second most-used type of post, which accounts for 17% in total, a little more than the third most popular type of post, Video, which is at 15%. Although communication/marketing managers in the interview all said that they care about image and video most, Text is still used more than video. On the one hand, it may suggest that not all clubs have a strong capability to make video content, as the Wuhan manager mentioned. On the other hand, as this study mainly focuses on the on-season data, it may be because of the live match content updates, which frequently use Text. For other types, Vote posts are used least. Only 23 (1%) Vote posts were posted by clubs. Link and Forward posts account for 8% and 9% of post respectively.

Comparing the data of European and Chinese clubs, there are many differences. First, the number and frequency of posts from European clubs are far greater than Chinese clubs. This means that there is room for Chinese clubs to increase their updating. Previous work has shown that football clubs with a low degree of social media use or who post less content may experience decreased user engagement (Aichner, 2019). Therefore, the frequency of social media use by teams should be noticed and highlighted.

Secondly, Video accounts for a higher proportion of the strategy of European clubs (all over 10%) than Chinese clubs (no more than 10%). Barcelona posts more videos than its competitors; the proportion reached near 30%. As Video is increasingly popular and plays a more crucial role in the current and future social media landscape (Shutsko, 2020), a greater focus on this area could be important. Thirdly, Chinese clubs use far more Vote and Link posts than European clubs, 17% of Forward and 28% of Link are used in the strategies of Beijing Guoan and Wuhan Zall respectively. Although they were focusing on the tourism industry, Alboqami et al. (2015) have shown that hyperlinks and multiple uses of post types have the

potential to affect the intention of users to adopt e-Word of Mouth (eWOM). This means that more positive attitudes may be received by adopting multiple content strategies as eWOM plays a vital role in shaping consumers' brand attitudes (Kudeshia and Kumar, 2017).

With regards particular club features, Manchester United is the only club that uses Text nearly as much as an image. 39% of Text posts are published on their official Weibo account, while their Image post use stands at 40%. This could be because they prefer to use Text in their live match reporting, unlike other clubs who use more images to illustrate the progress of the game. In addition, Wuhan Zall tweeted most Link posts compared to others. They prefer to use inside links to show the match information, including preview and match results. For Beijing Guoan, they use Forward most compared to other clubs. They tend to use Forward posts from other sources to deliver information and drive fan interactions.

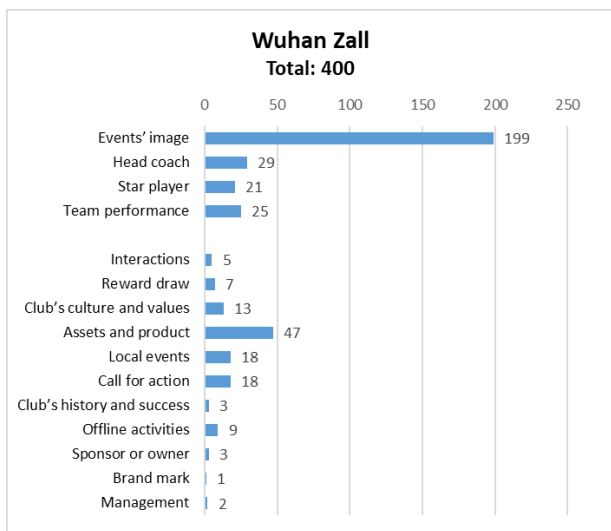
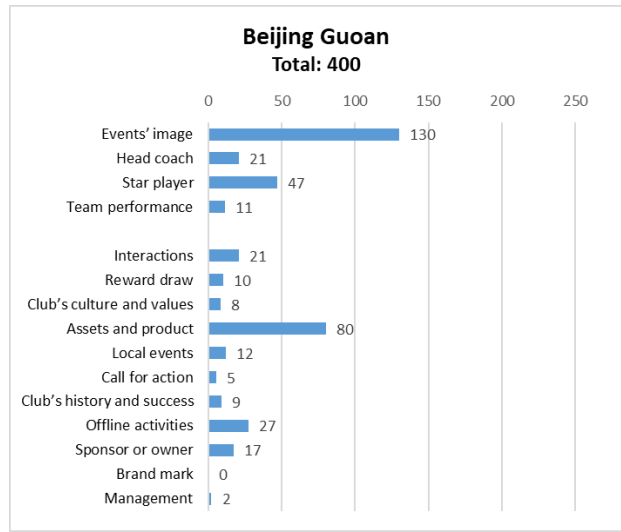
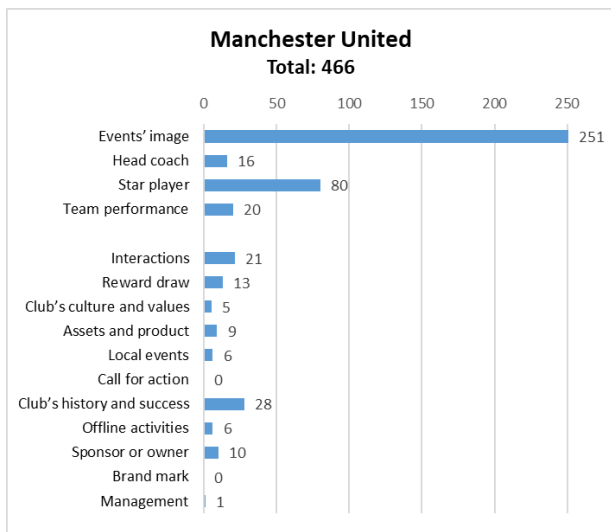
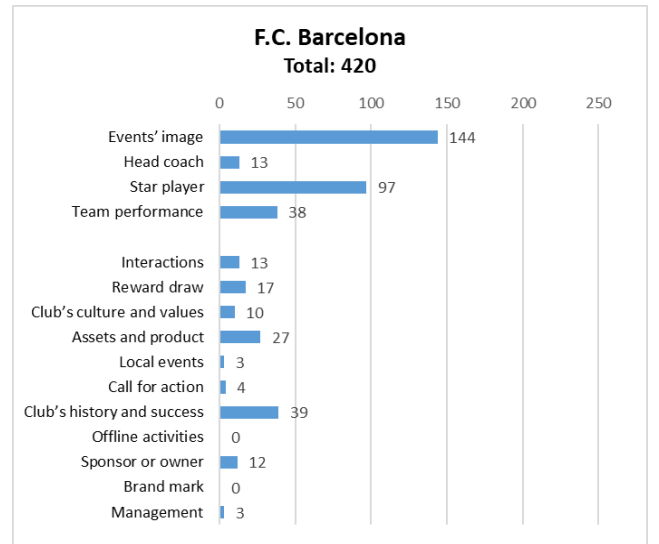
In summary, clubs mainly use vivid posts such as Image and Video to further improve fans' experiential experiences and generate more engagement. The use of vivid posts may positively contribute to the brand benefits and further to the brand image of clubs. The data also shows that Chinese clubs adopt more varied types of content. Relevant studies have shown that the use of multiple content could positively impact brand attitudes (Thompson et al., 2018). It means that, from the branding perspective, Chinese clubs care more about brand attitudes and wish to secure a better reputation. In comparison, European clubs appear to focus more on improving brand image by providing better experiences for fans.

#### **4.4.2 Brand attributes**

This section provides the data about the social media content that clubs posted on Weibo, and the brand attributes that could be assigned to them.

After the data analysis process, all Weibo posts were assigned to the attributes listed above. Brand attributes reflected in club posts on Weibo are shown below:

**Figure 4: The attributes shown on Weibo of five clubs**



In this research, the figures above clearly show that nearly every club (except Bayern) post contents about “Events’ image” most. This attribute includes content about the competition such as game preview, game

squad, match live and opponents. Clubs tweet much more contents that are related to this attribute mainly because they report the game live on Weibo. As the PRA scholar has suggested, it could significantly influence the e-Word of Mouth or the intentions of interactions of users (Alboqami et al., 2015), which means that clubs wish to attract greater fan engagement through the live coverage of matches.

For European clubs, it can be observed that the brand attribute “Star player” commands greater attention in their strategies. There are 140 (31%) “Star player” posts of Bayern Munich (even more than “Events’ image”), 97 (23 %) of Barcelona and 80 (17%) of MU in their strategies. In the study of Parganas et al. (2015), “Star player” is classified to the “Product-Related” contents. Kaynak et al. (2008) suggest that product-related attributes are usually associated with higher purchase intentions. Achen (2020) suggests that fans are likely to engage with personnel and player-related content. Thus, the focus on “Star player” could indicate that three European clubs may wish to influence the consumption intentions of their fans and encourage more fan engagement.

In addition, European clubs also focus more on promoting their “Club’s history and success” while Chinese clubs do not care so much about this. This attribute relates to the club’s past successes, records, legendary matches and players, historical events of the team, as well as past data, goal videos and images of a club. Boyle and Magnusson (2007) suggest that the promotion of clubs’ history could contribute to fan identification and brand equity. It could reflect that European clubs care more about showing their history to increase the perception of affiliation of fans. Furthermore, it also indicates that European clubs aim to maintain a long-term fan base and improve their brand image over time.

As for Chinese clubs, Beijing Guoan and Wuhan Zall both prefer to post information about their assets as 72 (18%) and 25 (6%) of posts were about “Related assets”. This attribute is about the other assets of the club, such as youth camp and youth team. The result is consistent with the reflections of the Beijing communication manager who said that they care about showing fans their wider activities outside match performance. As NPRA, the emphasis on this aspect could also show that Chinese clubs aim to improve the perception amongst and long-term relationship with fans.

Interestingly, Wuhan Zall generates the most “Call for action” content (18, 5%). This attribute is about calling fans to do something like vote for a player or plan for certain events. It could reflect that Zall considers it as the way to interact with fans and increase their brand exposure since marketer-generated appeals can be effective tools to increase user engagement and enhance brand perception (Weiger et al., 2017).

As for the features of each club, Bayern Munich is the club that actively interacts with fans most compared with the other four. It published 50 posts to increase interaction while the quantity posted by the other clubs numbered no more than 20. The result is consistent with the study by Achen et al. (2020), who found that sports clubs rarely actively interact with fans on social media, including Twitter and Facebook, despite the fact that scholars commonly argued that organisations can utilise social media to encourage interactivity. As the communication managers mentioned earlier, active interaction from the organisation can bring certain risk, such as the mismatch between brand image and social media presence. This means that the opportunity social media provides for clubs to interact with fans directly may play a less important role in practice. A strategy that encourages fan engagement, rather than active organisational interaction, may generate greater benefits for clubs.

Similar to Beijing, Barcelona also focuses on “Related assets” and posts more content than the other two European clubs. As Barcelona owns the famous La Masia Youth Camp, it is no surprise that they post proudly about their youth camp. For Manchester United, it paid greater attention to match-related content. The attribute “Events’ image” accounts for more than half of the data collected from their account (251, 54%).

Focusing on the two dimensions of brand attributes – PRA (product-related content) and NPRA (non-product-related content), all investigated clubs focus mainly on showing their product-related attributes. This result is consistent with the research of Parganas et al. (2015), who mainly focused on Twitter. Manchester United shows the highest level of PRA as 80% of their content is product related. The data from Beijing shows that only 55% of their content can be referred to as PRA. Table 8 displays the details for each club.

**Table 8: PRA and NPRA shown in the contents of clubs**

Clubs	PRA	NPRA	Total
	n (%)	n (%)	
Barcelona	292 (70%)	128 (30%)	420
Bayern Munich	315 (68%)	143 (32%)	458
Manchester United	367 (79%)	99 (21%)	465
Beijing Guoan	209 (52%)	191 (48%)	400
Wuhan Zall	274 (68%)	126 (32%)	400

From Table 8, it is clear that European clubs post more PRA content than Chinese clubs as their proportions are all higher than 65%. The finding shows that European clubs wish to earn more revenues by updating purchase-leading content, as product-related attributes are related to higher purchase intentions (Kaynak et al., 2008).

On the other hand, Chinese clubs tweeted more NPRA content as the proportions for both teams are greater than 32%. Non-product-related attributes could contribute to the perception of fans of the organisation. The majority of the NPRA posts of Beijing are about their related assets. The exposure of their related assets, such as the youth camp, could provide more opportunities for their fans to further learn about their team. This kind of off-field information may contribute to enhancing the connection between fans and the club (Wallace et al., 2011)

In summary, the quantitative analysis results show that attracting engagement is the main part of the clubs' branding strategies. By continuously reporting the product-related attributes such as game- and player-related content, clubs wish to encourage online engagement and purchase behaviours and ultimately increase their revenues. Although all five clubs care about the PRA, Chinese clubs relatively use more NPRA than European clubs. This indicates that, as local organisations, Chinese clubs could expose and reveal more NPRA content to their fans and regard it as the way to enhance the club-fan relationship, rather than European clubs who seem to provide limited NPRA to Chinese fans. Therefore, it could be beneficial

for the branding of those clubs that increase NPRA or off-field information in the foreign market.

#### **4.5 Power of platform: strength, competition, and future**

Previous sections have shown how clubs use Weibo for branding. In this section, interview materials of the role of Weibo, what opportunities the platform could provide, what competition it faces, and how its role may change in future are presented.

Scholars have shown that appropriate channel choice may impact the effectiveness of social media use (Billings et al., 2017; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Among the five investigated clubs, European clubs all mentioned that Weibo is the most important part of their overall social media strategies. One of the most obvious reasons is that Weibo can provide significant exposure for them. Clubs have a greater fan base on Weibo compared to other platforms. For example, one of the communication managers from F.C. Barcelona (marked as “Barca 1”), who is serving as the Senior Social Media Manager in Barcelona, Spain, shows a firm commitment to Weibo:

One part of our strategy is how do we position ourselves on Weibo. We think it is the most effective channel that allows us to get in touch with fans. In addition, you know that Chinese fans cannot use Facebook and Twitter, so Weibo has become the most powerful and primary social media platform. We regard it as our main battlefield. Although it is in a down-trending stage, it is still our main place to run our social media business and the main field where we have the most fans compared to other platforms.

(Barca 1)

He suggested that the size of Weibo is one of the main reasons that they consider it as the “main battlefield”, especially when fans cannot use Facebook and Twitter. It makes Weibo “powerful”. Similar opinions are also mentioned by other clubs’ communication managers such as Bayern 1, the head of Bayern Munich China Office, who said that “As the first official European football club office in China, we are not special. We just established it at the right time because the digital (Weibo) fan base in China is increasing, and the

market is expanding.”

In addition, as many researchers have argued before, social media platforms can provide a channel for a club to engage with its fans directly (Achen, 2017; Yan, 2011; Boyle & Haynes, 2004, p.141). Similarly, Weibo also provides other opportunities for organisations. For example:

[...] one of the primary reasons we run Weibo is that we need to maintain the existing fan base. If we want to do it better, we must engage with our loyal fans on a daily basis. The best way to engage is through Weibo. In addition, attracting new fans and maintaining deeper connections can also be achieved through Weibo. (MU 1)

Furthermore, clubs also appreciate the role that Weibo plays due to the higher-quality and greater number of sponsors that Weibo can provide. For instance, Barcelona manager M1 said that “The development of sponsorship is one of the most important considerations behind our Weibo operation.”

Similarly, Beijing also appreciates the greater engagement with their fan base and the sponsorship that Weibo brings. For example, as Beijing 1 stated:

Guoan has more than 5 million fans on Weibo. This is a very large fan base compared to other Chinese clubs, so the club is very appreciative of the operation and promotion they receive on Weibo (Beijing 1, Beijing Guoan, Senior Communication Manager.).

He also mentioned how they cooperate with sponsors when they update content on Weibo.

Sponsors value the official Weibo account very much as it is an important promotional channel for them. The majority of sponsors write it into our contract that we have to promote relevant content on Weibo. (Beijing 1)

This extract supports what Schönberner et al. (2020) mentioned that sports clubs need to achieve the



corporate goals required by their sponsors. It also indicates that social media platforms like Weibo or Twitter still offer significant opportunities for football clubs in terms of their commercial marketing, not only their consumer marketing.

As for Wuhan Zall, one of the Chinese clubs in this study, they admit that they still care about Weibo due to their large fan base there, although they are trying to change the priorities of their social media strategy. For instance, Wuhan 1, the head of the Communication Department of Wuhan Zall club, said that:

I took over this job in 2016. We cared more about Weibo before 2016 actually and received more attention from fans back then. But then I found the user flow of Weibo was gradually decreasing. Sometimes one post might only receive a few comments. So, we decided to make Toutiao the top priority for our digital strategy. Of course, we are still running our Weibo account, after all we have 260k fans there. However, we only provide daily information updates now. (Wuhan 1)

During his interview, the Wuhan Zall communication manager suggested several times that they receive fewer responses from fans on Weibo, and the user flow is decreasing year by year. This highlights the challenge from other Weibo-like platforms to Weibo's former dominance. On the other hand, the large fan base of organisations still keeps the platform competitive. Therefore, it also highlights that organisations, especially small clubs like Wuhan Zall, should carefully evaluate the influences of social media landscape change and when formulating the most appropriate strategy.

For example, with the prevalence of new social media platforms such as the short video platform Douyin (Chinese version of Tik Tok) and professional sport/football related platforms such as Dongqiudi (AllFootball) and HUPU, the role of Weibo in the sports area faces many challenges. All the European club communication/marketing managers suggest that Weibo is still the main platform in their strategy, but Douyin (Tik Tok) will be an important part of their future strategy. For instance, Barca 1 suggested that "Weibo and Douyin are the two most valued platforms amongst all the available platforms." The Bayern Munich communication manager explained the strengths that Douyin has:

[...] Bayern has signed up for an account on Douyin since we think short video will trend strongly in China in the future, maybe already now. We also keep communicating with our Germany colleagues and have invited them to come to China in the last year to experience the short video atmosphere...The reason that we value Douyin is it has an enormous user base that we can reach...Although we wish to have bigger fan base on Weibo as well, it is not easy. But on Douyin, you can imagine that in some small cities even rural areas, a man who has never heard of Bayern [Munich], could still see our videos on Douyin and start to love us...so Douyin provides us with the possibility to expand our coverage and promotional activities. (Bayern 1)

The extract could reflect that short video is trending, and the lack of such content may weaken the role of Weibo. In that case, Weibo provided may face challenges from the new platform that may eventually outweigh the advantages of its huge user base. Like MU 1 argued: *“the user flow of Weibo is decreasing in the face of competition from the new platform. so, we are adjusting our strategy.”* Therefore, it could be argued that, for the sports industry, the Weibo-like platforms may not be the primary and most competitive platforms anymore. In the dynamic world of social media, professionals should take notice of this trend and adjust their strategies accordingly.

However, sport-only platforms may not threaten the role of Weibo. For example, Barca 2 express a firm attitude that they would not choose professional platforms:

Firstly, professional platforms are relatively small. They are too ‘sports orientated’ and it does not matter whether the information exchange comes from the official accounts or not. For example, on Donquidi (AllFootball), anyone can discuss anything about Barcelona. The threads don’t need to be official. If we settle in there, negative discussions may form, such as abuse directed towards our coach Valverde. Clubs prefer platforms that have a more pervasive influence, such as Bilibili and Douyin. (Barca 2)

Professional platforms are not suitable for releasing official announcements and serving fans. We want to attract more ordinary users instead of those who are already fans. Those platforms do not offer those opportunities. (Beijing 1)

The extracts show that Weibo provides clubs with a more open environment for their branding and a more controlled arena for discussion than the sport-only platforms.

There are also some clubs who maintain a multiplatform strategy. As Bayern 1 and MU 1 stated:

Many platforms invited us to register with them. We usually move our Weibo content onto them because they are no real differences in how they work...It doesn't worry us whether they are new platforms or old platforms, or whether they have certain differences in contents and fans. If the platform is good enough, we will consider focussing on it. We don't discriminate against them, it is only a question of workload. (Bayern 1)

I think platforms like Dongqiudi have more of a 'community attribute'. Fans use it more for expressing opinions. They are quite different to Weibo. Weibo is a more of an open space. The two kinds of platforms have different types of fans. Weibo has users from all backgrounds, but professional platforms have more sports fans. However, for big clubs, we need to attract both kinds of users. So, we have different strategies for different platforms. (MU 1)

Nevertheless, a surprising finding is that Wuhan Zall has a contrary opinions about the role of Weibo and professional sports platforms, which argues that professional platforms are more suitable for football clubs. As their marketing manager, Wuhan 2 argued:

From the club's operation standpoint, professionals are easier to operate. They have a high quality of fans which makes it easier to establish a high-quality community. Weibo is a platform based on entertaining content and is not suitable for Zall to promote its brand. Because our core fan base is not on this platform. Therefore, Zall may gradually shift its focus on other platforms. (Wuhan 2)

The extract is meant to recognise the potential of sport-only platforms for building a more concentrated community and attracting more loyal fans. It could reflect that Weibo may have weaknesses when it comes

to developing fan loyalty.

In summary, this section reviewed communication/marketing managers' opinions toward the role of Weibo in sports social media management. The findings show that Weibo is still powerful due to its large fan base, which can provide massive exposure to brands. Nevertheless, compared with new emerging and sport-only platforms, it faces problems with losing users, a lack of the short video content, and developing fan loyalty. Therefore, dedicated platforms for visual content may be increasingly important for clubs in the future (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). For larger football clubs, a multiplatform strategy may be effective in maximising the marketing or branding effects. However, for smaller clubs who lack resources, they should carefully consider their objectives and strategy, and focus on the most appropriate platform(s).

## **4.6 Conclusion**

This chapter answers the central research question: How do football clubs manage social media content for branding? This chapter presents the qualitative interview responses from communication/marketing managers and the quantitative content analysis data to show the Weibo strategies of five football clubs. It provides materials for understanding the content strategy of clubs and the brand values that clubs wish to convey, and the role of Weibo in football social media branding. There are five main conclusions that can be drawn from the above data:

1. The research question: What are the overall branding objectives of football clubs regarding the use of Sina Weibo? is answered here. The general objective of football clubs is to improve their brand image in China. Explicitly speaking, European clubs wish to offer more brand benefits, build more connections with Chinese fans, increase online engagements, and increase revenues. Chinese clubs also aim to build more connections with fans, but they focus more on O2O marketing and wish to build long-term and high-quality relationships with fans. Furthermore, deeper, higher quality, and more efficient operations are what communication/marketing managers are pursuing at this time.
2. In relation to the content strategy of football clubs on Weibo, this study found that clubs use mostly

Image and Video as the way to increase engagement. The study of Annamalai et al. (2021) has shown that vivid contents including images and videos result in a higher level of fan interactions. This means that such visual content should play an important role in clubs' social media strategies. Furthermore, communication/marketing managers all agreed that video in particular will be the future trend having witnessed the worldwide popularity of short video platforms like TikTok (Shutsko, 2020).

3. With regards their brand attributes, all clubs regard first team-related and match-related information as essential content that demonstrates the product-related attributes. This result supports the contention of Achen et al. (2020) that player and team-related contents make up the majority of posts by sport teams. Besides that, European clubs pay a lot of attention to the localisation of their brand image. For better integration with the local market, European clubs care more about the interests of fans. By providing experiential benefits such as digital campaigns, they wish to foster deeper connections with the Chinese society and fans' lives to encourage greater engagement. As for Chinese clubs, they focus more on promoting club image and club awareness. By generating O2O content, they try to connect more with fans offline than online. Moreover, by showing more non-product related attributes, they wish to influence fans' affiliations and perceptions and build firm, long-term club-fan relationships. Such competition further develops and supports the argument of Bodet and Chanavat (2010), who stated that although brand awareness is the key determinant of sport brand equity in the Chinese market, a clear brand image and strong fan loyalty could be more crucial.
4. It could be argued that European clubs focus more on promoting their brand values due to the large amounts of posts about "club history and success" and ideologies. As mentioned in Chapter 2, cultural branding approaches such as diffusing the ideology enable brands to quickly identify and attract the targeted population on social media (Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012; Holt, 2016). The promotion of club values shows that European clubs wish to keep enlarging the Chinese fan base on the Internet. Chinese clubs seem to prioritise establishing stronger relationships with local fans rather than trying to attract fans from other areas. Because more regional features like city culture are reflected in their strategies, the results support the literature that cultural branding may potentially enhance the organisation-fan relationship and brand perception (Cayla and Arnould, 2008).
5. As the largest social media platform in China, Weibo still plays a vital role in social media branding for sports organisations. It can bring massive brand exposure, enlarge the fan base, provide two-way

communication, and attract sponsorship. It is still competitive on the online battlefield especially when compared to other niche platforms such as sport-only platforms.

6. However, in the face of increased competition from short-video social media platforms, the lack of video contents, the loss of users, and the comparative weakness for building firm and loyal fan relationships, Weibo, may prove a less attractive platform for football brands moving forwards. In the research interviews, all the communication/marketing managers emphasise the importance of Tik Tok, which reflects a potential change in the social media landscape and sports branding. Therefore, organisations should keep abreast of new trends in social media use to form the most suitable strategies.

In the next chapter, qualitative interview data from football club social media managers will be explored to help understand their fan engagement strategies. Relevant content, including how clubs engage with fans, what strategies they make, and the differences between Chinese and European clubs, will be presented and discussed.

# **Chapter Five: The social media engagement strategy of football clubs**

## **5.1 Introduction**

As Baena (2016) suggested, sports clubs should aim to design social media strategies that will increase online engagement, as online engagement is highly relevant to ‘brand love’, and the traditional business streams such as ticket sales struggle to bring growing revenues to the football industry. This chapter focuses on engagement strategy to address the central research question: How do football clubs use social media to encourage fan engagement? The previous chapter discussed how football clubs position their online contents for branding purposes. Similarly, this chapter aims to discuss how clubs design strategies to encourage fan engagement. Here strategy refers not only to the design of contents, but also other approaches such as the cooperation with KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) and co-branding with other brands.

Qualitative data from interviews with 10 football club social media managers will be presented to explain their fan engagement strategies on Weibo. Highlights of this chapter include: the opinions of these social media manager regarding their activities to encourage fan engagement through their localisation strategies; their brand management activities using brand personality and other brand values to attract and enhance engagement; their active fan-interaction strategies through direct conversation and relationship marketing with KOLs; and an overview of football club social media strategies.

This chapter is divided into four main sections. The first section explores the intentionally designed localisation strategy to attract fans and encourage interactions. The use of three main approaches towards content design are highlighted, including localisation, branding outside sports, and branding club services, and other special approaches of each club are discussed in detail. The second section discusses how clubs manage their brand by constructing its brand personality and using these brand values to engage fans. Then,

direct and indirect interaction approaches are discussed. Direct interaction includes the private message, comment, and hashtag functions; indirect interaction, including the maintenance of the relationship with KOLs and UGC accounts, are discussed separately. Finally, combined these findings with the content strategies discussed in the previous chapter, a general evaluation of club social media strategies is presented. Overall, this chapter explores football clubs' social media engagement strategies, and discusses some of the implications of these strategies.

## **5.2 Deep integration of the local society**

The previous chapter mentioned that managers use special content such as digital campaigns to connect them with local events and interests. This section aims to discuss in greater detail how clubs design their localisation strategy. Localisation has been a vital part of the strategy of sports brands who want to be both “national” and “international” (Richelieu, 2008; Chanavat & Bodet, 2009). Especially in sport-media research, the localisation of public relationships and media information output can contribute greatly to the development of a global sports brand (Zhou et al., 2017; Cho et al., 2012). Based on the interview findings, three main approaches and several special aspects of content are established and explored in the following sub-sections.

### **5.2.1 Festival, culture, and society: the localisation of social media contents**

During the interview, communication/marketing managers described how their content design played an important part in influencing the perception of fans and encouraging interactions on social media. Literature has suggested that intentionally designed social media content is more effective in increasing fan engagement and interaction (Thompson et al., 2014; Pronschinske et al., 2014). Chapter Four has discussed how clubs use localised content to influence fan perceptions and construct a strong brand image. This chapter discusses how localised content is used to encourage fan engagement. In their interviews, communication/marketing managers describe how they localise their social media to suit the preferences of local fans. For example, as the Bayern Munich and Barcelona marketing manager said:



We take care to make localised content...No one wants to keep watching highlights videos of matches unless the content focuses on superstars like Messi...In addition to that, we need to think carefully about what kinds of content fans, especially Chinese fans, like most, and how to localise it to attract their attention. (Bayern 2)

From the perspective of [Chinese] fans, they have their unique culture. You have to understand this because their thoughts, habits and preferences are significantly different to Western fans. So, you have to be immersed into them. (Barça 2)

These two extracts explain why it is necessary to explore and think about what local fans need before making localised content that will attract them and enhance the relationship between fans and club. In addition, the view of Bayern 2 seems to suggest that normal news, highlights, and other team-related content are not sufficient to satisfy the diverse needs of Chinese fans anymore. This is consistent with the findings of McCarthy et al. (2014), who found that solely posting news feeds and other similar content may result in a lack of interaction on official club sites on Facebook and Twitter.

The communication/marketing managers provided examples of how they make content more localised. The most common approach they use is to customise social media content from global channels such as Twitter, Facebook, and the official site. Managers suggest that localised content should be more attractive than translating the messages from Twitter and Facebook. For example, as the MU marketing manager explained:

Some of our content comes from Twitter. But that is presented in the English style, which Chinese fans may not understand that well. So, we must increase the number of local memes so that fans understand the message more clearly. (MU 2)

From these extracts, it can be seen that managers recognise that localisation is not only about satisfying the needs of fans but also about diving into the local internet environment. It requires that clubs pay more attention to the details of social media content, such as the use of memes and the style of text, rather than the simple distribution of news. This finding supports the study of Woodcock et al. (2011), who suggested

that fans respond more positively to content that is “tailored specifically for them”, especially information that is not directly translated from the club social media page.

To integrate better with the local market, communication/marketing managers further suggest the importance of designing content to fit in with local festivals and regard this as a part of their normal social media strategy.

China is a country with many traditional festivals. It is extremely important to keep focusing on the festivals, as well as trending social media topics. (MU 2)

Our campaigns for Barça are very frequent...For example, our posts will include special pictures, and videos for the Lunar New Year this month. Then, we will prepare for Women’s Day in March, following this with the El Clásico, the Dragon Boat Festival in May, and the College Entrance Exam in June. (Barça 1)

Designing for festivals has become part of our daily routine, including shooting special videos with the first team players. We often produce content like that. (Bayern 1)

It can be seen that clubs regard designing content for local festivals as a key approach to building their relationship with fans in China. But, behind this strategy, there was a sense that what clubs wish to achieve is to enhance a sense of belonging amongst fans. As Bayern 1 mentioned: *“they (Chinese fans) are far away from Germany, they need a sense of identification. We need to localise more content to please them.”* The study of Kenyon and Bodet (2017) presented similar findings from Liverpool Football Club, which revealed that their international strategy is designed to make fans feel “part of the home.”

The Bayern Munich marketing manager provided a further example of how they try to make fans feel being part of the club and the benefits they receive:

We try to integrate deeply with the local society. Bayern was the first football club to come out in

support of China during the [Covid-19] virus pandemic. We have asked Muller and other players to send positive messages to Wuhan since January... For example, there was a doctor called Dr Dai, who was working for Wuhan Central Hospital during the pandemic. He is a fan of Muller. So, we asked Muller to send him messages of encouragement on Weibo. Then, their interaction was widely reported by Chinese media. In fact, the media report was happened by accident. We did this solely with the intention of showing solidarity with our Chinese fans. (Bayern 2)

When the Bayern manager spoke about this experience during the interview, he had no intention of describing it as a special approach or strategy. It appears that localisation is treated as a way to engage with fans rather than a specific commercial strategy. As he continued: *“We do not want to make Bayern too commercial. We just want to build our relationship with the fans.”* Similar concerns from clubs were also found from the earlier study of McCarthy et al. (2014). One of their interviewees, a marketing manager from a football club, described making social media overtly commercial as a “danger”. McCarthy et al. (2014) also noted that social media are often regarded as user spaces by fans, so there is pressure on clubs not to make it commercial. It suggests that when designing the contents to encourage the fan-club relationship, clubs need to find a balance between commercial activity and engagement activity. A sincere intention to engage may bring more benefits.

In addition, online to offline (O2O) content is also recognised as an effective way to encourage interaction and attract fans. Especially for Chinese clubs, O2O content is regarded as one of the primary strategies of their social media operation. As the social media managers noted:

We wish to expand our brand awareness through a combination of online and offline activities. For example, last year, we won the ‘Best Integrated Marketing Award’ from CSL, which was awarded by the Sike Football “Si Rank” team. During that time, we encouraged fans to make a huge banner which was hold up by of 50K fans in our stadium. Then, we made a post about this and distributed it on Weibo. This Weibo post gets a huge number of shares and a lot of attention. (Beijing 2)

We post about some meaningful offline activities on Weibo. Recently, the club paid more attention to

the brand culture construction of the team and often displays mementos from the 1990s. That's what fans like. We often post similar activities on Weibo, which not only build a favourable impression and interaction amongst fans but also promotes the club's culture and brand awareness. (Wuhan 2)

These extracts reflect that social media plays a role connecting offline activities with online content. By connecting online and offline content, clubs can integrate their online and offline marketing to enhance the relationship with fans and expand brand exposure (Watkins, 2020). In addition, the activities mentioned by managers, such as banner making and displaying mementos, could be described by the term "Ritual" defined by scholars (Underwood et al., 2001; Boyle & Magnusson, 2007). Invoking team rituals can allow fans to reveal their identity publicly and enhance their identification of being a fan (Watkins, 2014, p.71; Boyle & Magnusson, 2007). Thus, the online promotion of offline rituals may contribute to attracting fans and enhancing online engagement.

However, owning a localisation strategy does not directly make clubs competitive about their social media branding. Social media has developed over many years, as have the branding strategies of sports organisations. In contrast to the earlier finding of McCarthy et al. (2014), who found that clubs generally recognised that no one manages social media particularly well, the findings from this study show that many clubs have developed relatively mature strategies. For example:

To be honest, clubs have developed very similar strategies in recent years. Especially their operations on Weibo, which have been developing for several years and have reached a mature stage. Clubs nowadays compete on who has unique content and unprecedented ideas. (Bayern 1)

Indeed, social media is not in its early stage anymore. While the marketing manager said that there is a high level of competence among football clubs, he did not seem concerned by this. Instead, it seemed that the manager was suggesting that clubs need to develop their own style of strategy. During the interview, the Bayern Munich manager mentioned many times that regardless of the strategies of other clubs, what they value most is the ongoing engagement with fans. As he noted:

The social media environment develops and changes so quickly. Not every other year; it changes every year. Thus, the best thing to do is to engage with fans so that you can understand what they think and want. (Bayern 2)

This suggests that to develop an effective fan engagement strategy, clubs should not only have clear objectives that are aligned with their overall branding strategies but also keep listening to fan voices and improving their social media operation incrementally.

In summary, this sub-section discusses the localisation strategies of football clubs in the Chinese market. Re-designing text and producing content is important to fan engagement. In the highly competitive social media environment, clubs need to be careful not to be overtly commercial and avoid simply presenting content. More creative ideas are required to attract more attention from fans.

### **5.2.2 Beyond football, beyond sport: branding in other fields**

To expand their brand exposure and engage with more potential fans, clubs talked about their strategies for branding outside the football and sport domains. For example, as Barcelona's marketing manager revealed:

In the digital arena, Barça has been NO.1 in terms of many aspects. So, they wish to compete not only with football brands like Real Madrid but also entertainment brands such as Disney. This means they want to attract audiences outside sport. (Barça 2)

In this section, the strategies of football clubs to engage with and attract potential fans in other fields are discussed, particularly the connection with other aspects of local society. Three main approaches are introduced, including co-branding with other brands, posting in other fields, and cooperating with social media platforms.

Generally, the communication/marketing managers described their cooperation on social media with other brands as 'crossover' activities. According to Ji and Shen (2013), the term 'crossover' can be defined as the

cooperation between a pair of brands, who aim to attain “effective marketing spread and penetration”, but with low common value creation. This can be regarded as a part of co-branding. This research employs the term ‘co-branding’ to describe the ‘crossover’ strategy. Clubs revealed several examples of their co-branding activities with local brands:

We try to attract more fans from outside the football world; for example, we cooperate with Shanghai Male Basketball Team. We also have many crossovers with other fields to attract more fans. (Bayern 2)

For instance, we made posts this year in collaboration with the China Academy of Art. Although we can make posts like that by ourselves, the effects are totally different. It can make Barça well-known outside the sports world. (Barça 2)

We held a fan meeting this year in collaboration with Tsingtao Beer. That was a great collaboration. We enjoyed a lot of interactions on Weibo (Wuhan 2).

Marketing managers generally regard co-branding as one of their core strategies to encourage greater engagement. This means that co-branding can form an effective part of social media branding that builds brand exposure and brings other benefits. A number of significant positive influences of co-branding on branding have been suggested, including media coverage, attracting more fans, profile enhancement and increasing sales (Frederick & Patil, 2010). In addition, co-branding is also recognised as a low-cost strategy and localisation approach for football clubs. For instance:

Cooperation with organisations such as China Academy of Art can deliver quite positive effects with very low costs. It’s not only valuable for branding and marketing value but is also good for public relations. Meanwhile, it is also a good form of localisation which is what Barça wants. It makes fans feel that you are really embedded in China, rather than that there is still distance between us. (Barça 1)

This response suggests not only how co-branding can serve as the tool to improve branding outcomes but also how deeply co-branding can connect with local institutions and influence the fans’ perception of the

brand. In their study, Yu et al. (2020) demonstrated that co-branding has a significant positive correlation with the symbolic and functional perception of fans on both co-brands. This means that a co-branding strategy can both boost short-term interactions and extend the influence of the club's brand image in the longer term. This demonstrates that co-branding with a local brand can provide an effective way to develop a club's localisation and globalisation strategy.

In addition to co-branding, a common approach that clubs take to increase their exposure is to post hashtags within an online discussion about other topics, especially discussions about some local hot topics. Participating in these discussions can offer brands greater exposure in a short time and cement the relationship with fans, for example:

We usually add ## on our contents to post them in the communities of not only fans but also potential fans, rather than restrict their use in online football communities such as Manchester United and Premier League. (MU 2)

When BingBing Fan and Chen Li broke up they used a popular phrase "We are still who we are." It has a similar meaning to the club slogan "Mia san mia". So, we made a great promotion based on this trending topic. (Bayern 1)

The death of Kobe Bryant was a trending topic in China. We put together relevant content immediately. Since Kobe is also a fan of Barça and has many connections with Barça, fans can feel we are standing with them. (Barça 1)

The approach managers mentioned can be linked to Watkins' (2014, p.60) suggestion that being involved with popular culture can contribute to the humanisation of the team brand. Additionally, although managers referred to being part of a discussion during the interview, it is more about how clubs combine their brand value with popular culture, as the Bayern 1 and Barça 1 showed. Thus, the approach requires that the club must understand the local culture as well as their brand values so that they can maximise the impact of their content.

It is not enough for clubs to focus only on their own activities on social media. The thorough use of social media platform resources can help them to further expand their influence. Communication/marketing managers revealed that they sometimes cooperate with Sina Weibo company to find opportunities to increase brand exposure:

We talk to the operation team of Weibo every day to find out what platform campaigns we can get involved with. Because you can get support from the platform in those campaigns. Thus, we can get more exposure, attract more attention and more new fans. (Bayern 1)

Weibo offers a “pay and promotion” function, as well as other different services. We may increase the diversity of our promotion channels in the future. (MU 2)

Managers did not explain further how they cooperate with the platform and in what form, but there was a sense that managers recognise this is an effective, direct, and commercial solution to increase their exposure. The approach requires clubs to not only maintain the relationship with fans but keep communicating with the platform. In other words, it means that platform-club activities have the potential to be a strong driver for social media branding outcomes. Although few studies have focussed on this aspect, it suggests there is an opportunity, beyond the self-managed social media strategy, for clubs to further expand their brand awareness.

In summary, clubs generally recognise that branding outside of sport and football communities is one of their most important parts of their social media strategy. Although many studies have shown the significance of these activities (Achen, 2020; Yun et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2019; Williams and Chinn, 2010), the majority of researchers focus on the relationship between content and fan responses rather than the deeper organisational strategies. Findings in this sub-section revealed that expanding these branding channels could be as important as other strategies such as localisation. Efforts in this area could bring more brand exposure and generate more public engagement.



### 5.2.3 Benefits and service: branding the uniqueness

Previous sections discussed the engagement strategies with respect to localisation and branding outside sports. This section mainly focuses on how clubs tweet content about their local services, related assets, and other unique aspects of their branding that they can offer to local fans.

Sports brands are usually considered as service brands that provide services and experiences for their consumers, and sports fans value a greater number of experiences than solely game watching (Stavros et al., 2014). Therefore, it requires that sports brands need to provide unique and meaningful services (also experiences) so that fans can maintain ongoing positive club-fan relationships and create deeper engagements (Watkins, 2020, pp.33-34). Communication/marketing managers revealed their engagement strategies for branding their own services on social media to engender a positive feeling amongst fans and generate more positive engagements. For example:

The businesses Bayern have launched in the Chinese market are increasing. For example, we opened a football school, as well as an online official Tmall store to let fans purchase official products like jerseys without paying taxes. The purpose of running those business and promoting them on Weibo is not only about football content and interaction, but more exposure of our business, which can enhance the positive impression of fans. (Bayern 2)

You know that Barça has the Barça Experience in Haikou and five to six other academies around the world. We need to produce content about this. The team-related information is of course primary, but we also produce contents about the academies and Haikou every month. (Barça 1).

The extract suggests that clubs can also benefit from the promotion of their services and businesses on social media. Many clubs regard social media as a platform for sharing news and interacting with fans but ignore the potential for advertising. As Van Doorn et al. (2010) noted, the competitive actions of brands such as advertising can help influence customer engagement behaviours by providing customers with unique and superior values and benefits. Customers may form a deeper engagement when they perceive the

connection between sports brands and their needs. In his astonishing study about brand equity, Keller (1993) also notes that customer-based brand equity can be developed when the customer holds the unique benefits that he or she associates with the brand. This suggests that clubs should also value the power of promoting their commercial actions to potentially influence the engagement behaviour of fans.

In addition to the promotion of services, combining with the local social media platform and club system can provide another effective strategy to engage with fans. For instance, the marketing managers of Bayern and MU both mentioned that they plan to establish a membership system in the future to provide fans with unique experiences:

Many clubs have their own membership systems in China, such as Arsenal and Manchester City which are different from the European versions. These systems would provide Chinese fans with unique content. Manchester United has not established a system like that yet because we have too many fans. But we will make that happen in the future. If we do so, Weibo will be an important recruiting and managing platform. (MU 1)

Although many of our fans are members of Bayern Global, their needs and interests are still hard to meet. So, we try our best to satisfy them through Weibo...Dortmund has its own membership system called "Yellow Black Circle", even companies in other fields such as DXY also operate a system like that. We will learn their tactics and launch our own project. No doubt, online content will play a critical part, and Weibo will be the primary platform. (Bayern 2)

Although the trends that the strategy managers revealed may be not suitable for every club, they support the core idea again that clubs should aim to provide fans with unique benefits. Especially for international brands, with a restricted presence in the local market, the uniqueness of their content and services could give them the vital competitive edge when it comes to branding. As the marketing manager of Manchester United explained:

As a foreign club, the activities we can manage on Chinese social media platforms are limited...so we

must try to break through into the local market. We therefore try our best to meet the goals of fans, to provide Chinese fans with special offers, whether these is unique content or activities. (MU2)

The finding can be linked to the finding of Biscaia et al. (2016) who suggested that by establishing a mutually beneficial relationship with fans, clubs can provide fans with high-level internalisation, which can influence the behavioural actions of fans. It means that the uniqueness service such as membership system clubs mentioned may contribute to an increase in interactions and ultimately lead to a rise in revenue.

#### **5.2.4 Summary**

This section discusses the localisation strategies of football clubs from three main perspectives: localised content, branding outside sports, and branding benefits and services. Generally, a well-designed localisation content strategy can help clubs penetrate the local market, break down cultural barriers and enclose the relationship with fans. In addition, branding outside sports can expand clubs' brand exposure and potentially attract more fans. Furthermore, the branding benefits and services of clubs can provide fans with the unique experiences, and influence fan engagement behaviours to develop deeper engagements. In the next section, the brand management approaches of clubs are reviewed to discuss how clubs engage with fans by managing their brands.

### **5.3 Brand power: the use and management of brand**

In addition to the content design strategy discussed in the previous section, clubs talked about how they attract, engage with, and enfold their relationship with fans by managing their brand. Through the management of brand identity, sports organisations can enhance fan loyalty affiliation and encourage more engagements (Bulovic & Seric, 2021). The three main approaches discussed in this section are: constructing the brand personality, promoting the brand values, and connecting the brand with the local culture.

### 5.3.1 Being interesting and lively: the construction of brand personality

Brand personality is about attaching human qualities or human attributes to a brand (Aaker, 1997). For sports brands, well-managed brand personality can contribute to influencing team identification amongst fans and positively encourage purchase behaviour (Carlson et al., 2009). In this study, communication/marketing managers shared their strategies for constructing the brand personality for clubs on Chinese social media. The most common approach is to change the tone of voice of their social media message, to be interesting and lively:

...you need to work hard on your copywriting, such as how to express a lively tone of speech...One problem is that our content is too official and boring sometimes. We try to make it more approachable to fans and motivate more interactions. (Barça 2)

In fact, the fan group for MU is relatively established. The brand image has always been of a big, traditional top club. Because the team performance is not very good in recent years, we need to make some trade-offs in terms of attracting new fans. It means that we need to make content suitable for young fans rather than their elders... We increasingly make more relaxed, entertaining, and life-relevant content to attract fans and avoid sounding too official. (MU 2)

Currently, the official account maintains an official, serious position and image. The main tone is serious, but sometimes it needs to show our passion. (Beijing 2)

By changing the tone of voice, clubs aim to construct a brand personality that is more entertaining and relaxed. The interesting personality plays an important role in branding, especially for the Chinese market. In their study, Chu and Sung (2011) suggested that Joyfulness is a China-specific dimension of brand personality. It reflects the interdependence and harmony of East-Asian cultural values and suggests that maintaining harmony, happiness, and a friendly brand presence can help cement the relationship with consumers. In addition, the interesting personality can evoke a stronger intention amongst fans to interact with clubs as illustrated by the example that Barça marketing manager provided:

For small clubs, I know that Leverkusen does very well in this aspect. They attract many followers with their humorous style. Even though many are not their fans... They do this well because it makes you feel they are funny. Even if you don't know the player; you still want to interact with them. (Barça 2)

In addition to changing the tone of voice, interacting with players is also regarded as an effective way for clubs to attract fans and construct brand personality. For instance:

We have Thomas Muller, a star player who is very active on social media. He often helps us to interact with our fans on Weibo. (Bayern 2)

For example, we may talk more about new popular players. And, for female fans, we also talk more about handsome stars, like James. He's a young, lively boy, so we focus a lot on this aspect in our copywriting and content design to make him more attractive and to attract more potential fans. (MU 2)

Inviting athletes to become involved in the online discourse can be effective since athlete branding not only enhances the identification of fans to the athlete but also encourages fans to identify with the team (Carlson & Donovan, 2013). The attractive personality of an individual athlete can further influence the estimation of fans in terms of both team and marketing offerings. Other studies have also shown that player and personnel promotion content is popular amongst fans and could attract more interactions (Achen, 2020; Parganas et al., 2017). Although involving famous players can be helpful for branding, not all players are willing to get involved in online discussions, or want to be contacted, especially by a foreign social media department:

Sometimes it's hard to contact first-team players. For example, you cannot access a first team player like Messi to make videos about the death of Kobe (for Chinese fans). That makes our job difficult. We basically rely on our understanding and re-edit previous materials to make content. (Barça 1).

Although the manager talked about the difficulty of inviting athletes to participate, he clearly stated that an

understanding of athletes and access to prepared materials is also important for athlete branding. This requires that social media managers are sensitive to trending topics and know how to amalgamate the identity of players with relevant materials and brand associations.

In addition, there was one marketing manager who mentioned an important and unique factor to bear in mind when constructing the brand personality:

...this is our trait. Every club has its own traits. Like Barcelona, they have Messi, which can become a trait. The key point is how to amplify your traits. (Bayern 1)

The previous section has shown that clubs recognise the importance of offering fans unique content and experiences. As part of the brand image and brand association, a unique brand personality also plays an important role in developing brand equity, as the unique connections between fans and clubs can enhance brand awareness and significantly influence the brand identification (Walsh et al., 2013; Watkins, 2020, p.59). This means that constructing brand personality should not only focus on satisfying the needs of fans to be lively or interesting but also distinguish the brand from others. As Walsh et al. (2013) suggest, sport organisations or events should actively manage their social media pages by frequent updating and by making an effort to design content that will have unique influences on their fans' minds to engender further positive impacts on their brand, and lay the ground for future revenue-generating opportunities.

Some concerns were also expressed by communication/marketing managers regarding their brand image. Clubs generally seek the balance between being interesting and aligning with the brand value; however, overemphasising brand personality may have negative influences on brand image. For example:

We have now adopted relatively relaxing copywriting but still don't keep a strong personality like WeChat. The current situation is that we try to enclose our fans while still maintaining the Manchester United image of a traditional top club. (MU 2)

We may interact with a humorous tone, but our core standpoint is still official. Maintaining this balance

between being cheerful and authoritative is our priority. In fact, there is a lot of content that could evoke a lot of engagement, but if they are not serious enough, or a little bit controversial, we would rather not use them than send out the wrong message. (Barça 2)

Social media managers value maintaining their official stance because they recognise that an over-entertaining brand personality may make them look unprofessional and unreliable. The previous chapter has shown that clubs regard maintaining an official stance as vital to distinguish them from unofficial accounts. This finding supports the research of Molinillo et al. (2017), who found that a responsible brand personality can strongly predict brand loyalty and brand trust. A dynamic brand contributes more to brand awareness rather than loyalty and trust. It means that developing a strong brand personality need clubs to care about both the dynamic and responsible attributes of the brand so that clubs can benefit from expanding brand awareness, more engagement and build a long-term fan-club relationship.

### **5.3.2 Slogan and values: the promotion of brand culture**

It is important for sports brands to provide unique experiences, unique identification and to distinguished themselves from their rivals, as the previous section discussed. Fans generally look for congruency between themselves and the brand identity in the process of supporting a team (Aaker, 1997). Therefore, the construction of the brand identity should be attractive to fans or potential fans who are seeking a similar ideology. In addition to constructing brand personality, clubs also recognise that promoting the brand values (slogan, or ideology) is important to attract fans:

...we use many hashtags of 'Mes que un club' for the wide-spread use on Weibo. Since Barça is already a famous brand, our strategy focuses more on maintaining a good brand image than looking for improvements. Therefore, through exquisite content, excellent campaign and spreading of values, we aim to attract fans, earn a positive impression, and increase fans' engagement. (Barça 2)

The slogan of our club explains what we do for branding and fans. 'Mia San Mia' means to publicise the fact that this is a big family. Integrating with fans and highlighting the values of the club is the core

task in our branding work (Bayern 2)

The strategy of conveying club values can be linked to the concept of cultural branding that was introduced in Literature Review. Through the conceptualisation of brand and spread of ideology, sports organisations can construct the club identity, enhance the identification of fans, and enclose their relationship with the brand (Holt, 2016). Furthermore, once fans perceive and recognise the club values, they can then help form and enhance the ideology of clubs to further expand the influence of the brand (Bauer et al., 2008).

The cultural branding can also be reflected in the strategy of city branding or nation branding. Clubs emphasise the culture that their brand represents. They therefore try to connect their brand values with the local city and nation culture, as these managers explain:

Barça has a clear strategy and idea about what their brand represents... The brand is not only restricted to the football team...the promotion of Catalonia culture is another important part of their strategy.  
(Barça 2)

Beijing Guoan has its roots in Beijing, and its fans are mainly local Beijingers. The club has inherited the city's associations and character. Therefore, we display the brand image with force and attitude since we have a supportive audience. The club is a symbol of city culture. Accordingly, the content and personality of our Weibo channel can be built more clearly. That's why the interaction and commitment of our fans is one of the best in China (Beijing 2)

As a club is located in Wuhan, our current brand image is to represent Wuhan and the city's culture and spirit... Because our fans are mostly from Wuhan, the local and regional characteristics need to be reflected. This is one of the most important features of our branding. (Wuhan 2)

Many successful football clubs connect their brand with the local culture. Some can represent the city or even nation, for instance F.C. Barcelona represents both Barcelona and the Catalonia culture, Glasgow Rangers represents its city and Scottish football, and Manchester United has become one



of the symbols of Manchester. In this cultural domain, football brands can foster emotional and cultural associations with the brand and make fans connect with the wider community (as well as providing a sense of belonging for fans) (Lee, 2016). Therefore, the symbolic meaning of brands should be enhanced to attract and deeply engage with local fans (Juventeny Berdún, 2017). This supports the idea that football brands should brand themselves broadly by focusing on more social aspects rather than simply promoting the team.

### **5.3.3 Summary**

This section discussed the brand management approaches in relation to clubs' online engagement strategies. By managing their brands well, clubs can reap many benefits. The construction of a strong brand personality can provide the ideological congruence that fans are looking for, which can in turn enhance their identification with the brand and encourage more engagement. The promotion of values and culture can build connections between fans and local culture, which enhances the symbolic meaning of the brand and provides fans with a sense of belonging. However, brands should also take care to ensure that their brand management always aligns with the core brand requirements and values to reduce possible risks.

## **5.4 Direct and indirect engagements: the conversation with fans**

The previous section discussed the engagement strategy of clubs in relation to the ways that they manage their content and brands. This section focuses on how clubs actively interact with fans and fan organisations. Many researchers have recognised the importance of social media in providing marketers with the opportunity to collect customer opinions and to facilitate two-way communication (Achen, 2020; Geurin & Burch, 2017; Holt, 2016; Felix et al., 2017). Communication/marketing managers also shared their approaches to engage with fans, directly and indirectly.

#### 5.4.1 The direct communication with fans/fan organisations

Clearly, the easiest way to collect fan opinions is to read fan comments. European club managers all revealed that they sometimes read the interaction messages from fans such as private messages, comments, or discussions under hashtags and then make further adjustments to their social media operation. As following extracts showed:

We may be the only club now that has a special fan department and fan staff. I ask our staff to read fan comments, private messages, opinions, and feedback on Weibo at least twice a day. Besides, we need to read fans' questions every week, to answer their questions and requests as best we can...like where to buy the jersey, how to write a letter to the players, how to get to the Allianz Arena. (Bayern 2)

We adjust our [social media] operation based on the comments of fans. For example, our official Twitter channel posts historical match videos before every match, so we do the same. Then we found out the if the match is lost, fans don't want to see those videos. So, we changed our strategy by decreasing the number of video posts to avoid unhappy outcomes. (MU 2)

The feedback of fans is important to us, and we adjust [our strategy] based on that. We pay a lot of attention to this every day. (Barça 1).

This finding is consistent with what has been mentioned in the literature review, that social media is usually regarded as a tool to collect opinions and thoughts of fans. It also supports the idea that monitoring fan discourse can provide insights to help organisations focus on maintaining their reputation and branding management (Kim and Johnson, 2016; Geurin and Burch, 2017). Fan opinions provide marketers with the opportunity to adjust their strategies in a timely manner (Williams and Chinn, 2010). Some clubs even directly discuss the design of the content with their fans, for example:

The poster for each game... every time before we make one, we will ask the fans on Weibo for their ideas and ask them to comment on the question: "What do you think the next poster should be?" Then

we put the fans names in a draw to win star player cards and tickets. We do it before every home match.

(Wuhan 2)

Involving fans in the strategy design can make them feel that they are valued by the team they support. The desire for interaction is encouraged and fans may continue to communicate with clubs. In addition, researchers such as Dimitrios Kolyperas et al. (2019) and Hajli and Hajli (2013) have noted that sports brands can co-create value through the close interaction with fans and the collection of fans opinions. The developing relationship with fans can also influence their perceptions of the brand. And social interactions among fans in online communities can enhance the mutual trust between them which in turn contributes to brand loyalty and brand trust (Hajli & Hajli, 2013).

In addition, clubs also initiate conversations with fan organisations to directly communicate with individuals. For example:

There are a lot of fan organisations on Weibo, such as the Green Hurricane and the Light Up Workers Stadium Fan Association, and we regularly interact with them on Weibo so that we can maintain close contact with fans both online and offline. (Beijing 2)

...the second point is that we always keep close relationships with big fan organisations. We often discuss how we can make the connection deeper. Because Bayern is the sports club that has the most registered members...we also have many fan organisations. (Bayern 2)

Sports fans usually play an important role in sharing emotions and co-creating perceptions (Parganas et al., 2017). Fans who are members of fan clubs are active fans who are willing to interact with the club. Thus, regular engagement with fan organisations can strengthen the branding outcomes and perceptions of fan power. In addition, sports fan organisations see themselves as more than a mere audience group but as professional stakeholders. Their feedback and opinions can influence the strategy choice of clubs and the behaviour of other fans in value co-creation (Zagnoli & Radicchi, 2010). Fan clubs empower individual fans to make their voices heard (ibid). Therefore, this supports the finding that listening to the voices of fan

organisations can provide clubs with deeper insights for better fan engagement.

However, fan communities do not always play the role of supporters. Sometimes they are critical and contemptuous when they are not satisfied with the team's performance. Communication and marketing managers in this study also discussed how they deal with these challenges:

Fans may criticise you when you lose the game. But criticism is also a form of engagement. Over time it is just a small thing, whether we win or lose. But when it happens, we have a special strategy to deal with the situation. For example, we may post more commercial information rather than report on the game. (Barça 1)

That is how football is; when you perform well in the game, it's always good, and everything is great. For example, I put out a normal post, and fans will feel good. But when you lose, they may criticise you for everything. So, you should not keep interacting when the team performs badly. (Wuhan 1)

An earlier study found that football club marketing managers are generally too concerned with controlling the discourse of fans, which may have negative impacts on their brand image (McCarthy et al., 2014). But in this study, managers do not seem too concerned in terms of this respect. Clubs recognise that releasing some control of the discourse is a normal part of their strategy. They seem also to have accepted the fact that fans do not always express what they want to hear, and they cannot control them, as McCarthy et al. (2014) suggest. Dineva et al. (2017) defined this approach as “non-engaging” and found it is very common in the management of social media pages by organisations.

This does not mean that organisations should let fans freely express their complaints without any moderation. Conversely, what marketing managers suggest is that football clubs should focus on trying to guide of discourse rather than control it. Taking the long view and influencing conversations may engender greater benefits than short-term interventions.

#### 5.4.2 The relationship with KOLs and UGC accounts

The Literature Review chapter has introduced the proposition that sports organisations may encourage fans to make content and cooperate with them, to enhance their brand image, and improve their reputation (Achen, 2017). For example, in their study of brand-related UGC contents, Kim and Johnson (2016) show that ‘consumers’ behavioural responses to brand-related UGC were related to brand sales (i.e., impulse buying, future-purchase intention), relationship building (i.e., brand engagement), and ‘electronic word-of-mouth’ (eWOM). The use of UGC is also recognised as ‘user-generated branding’ (UGB) by scholars (Arnhold, 2010). Communication/marketing managers in this research also talked about their relationship with fan-generated UGC accounts and ‘Key Opinion Leaders’ (KOLs) on Weibo.

On Weibo, some UGC accounts may have a similar or greater reach than the official accounts. For example, the UGC account “Barça News” has more than 7 million followers, while the official Barcelona account has 8 million. The interview data revealed the attitudes of managers towards those UGC accounts and KOLs. European clubs are generally more open towards them. Bayern Munich and Manchester United said that they may cooperate with them in the future, though Barcelona said that they would not do that. For instance, as the Bayern and MU social media managers noted:

We have a lot of interactions and connections. In fact, my own account can also be considered as a KOL, so I usually think about how to make Bayern’s account interact with KOLs in a meaningful way to generate positive brand image promotion. I think it would be a good thing if we could guide them better. Not only KOLs, but even the personal accounts of fans, we also encourage our account to interact with them sometimes. People produce good content...so, we don’t reject KOLs...Bayern can benefit from the positive guidance and cooperation. (Bayern 1)

You cannot stop these accounts appearing. Even on Twitter, there are lots of similar accounts which have great discourse power. There are different types of these accounts, such as news accounts or KOLs. I think they just play different roles...Their existence can be positive as there are some things that official accounts can’t say. For example, if a player wants a transfer, I can only post about it after the

official announcement. However, they can constantly hype the news, which also increases the exposure of the club to a certain extent...So, we're working more with these KOLs. (MU 1)

The two extracts reveal that organisations working with KOLs and UGC could further expand their brand awareness and be closer to their fans. It also shows that clubs could benefit from the cooperation with KOLs, such as encouraging more interactions with fans. As MU 1 further added: "When we invited KOLs to express their views on Solskjaer . Then we got lots of interactions. But officials can't make such comments, can they." Kim and Johnson (2016) have suggested brands can sustain and familiarise their relationship with customers and increase sales by providing the venues and opportunities for consumers to keep talking about their brand. This suggests that clubs could benefit from encouraging UGB and maintaining a good relationship with KOLs. As Geurin and Burch (2017) suggest, the neglect of this aspect may make teams lose opportunities to further increase their brand exposure and awareness.

However, as unofficial accounts, UGC and KOLs are not always positive for clubs. For example, commercial advertisement on these accounts may have negative impacts for the brand image of clubs:

First, they have a team to run it, and it's profitable. You can see them advertising for betting companies. So, it's impossible for us to cooperate with them deeply...we are also concerned that they may steal our video content. Those videos are made by our colleagues in Barcelona. If they use them without permission, we may sue them over it. (Barça 2)

The finding basically supports the argument that fan engagement may have a negative impact on the brand image (McDonald & Karg, 2014). In the extract above, although the manager was talking about the influence of commercial advertising, what he meant to express is that UGC and KOLs whose values are not consistent with the official position could have a negative effect on the club's brand image. That is why clubs in this study have different opinions on this topic. For example, the Beijing manager expressed a more open attitude since the UGC and KOLs are better aligned with their values:

In fact, we have contact with the UGC accounts on Weibo, especially those with many followers. Some

of them are created by the official Sina Weibo company. Some belong to our fan organisations. Therefore, their establishment and operation are in line with the brand interests of Guoan. We are not particularly worried about this because we have strong engagement with our fans... We just need to make sure we do our job well. (Beijing 2)

This suggests that UGC or KOLs may be a two-edged sword for clubs. Clubs should carefully evaluate the values of those fan-formed organisations before seeking opportunities for cooperation.

### **5.4.3 Summary**

In summary, this section reveals how clubs engage with fans, directly and indirectly. Previous research has shown that the application of dialogue strategies and the aim of sharing content can benefit the social media operation of sports organisations, including building a close relationship with fans (Sundstrom & Levenshus, 2017; Wang & Zhou, 2015). Based on the responses from social media managers, clubs included in this research engage with fans using multiple strategies, including attractive content design, brand management and direct and indirect communication with fans or their UGC. Researchers have suggested that organisations that utilise different content and engagement strategies will be successful in terms of their branding and eliciting engagement (Kim & Johnson, 2016; Geurin & Burch, 2017). This means that sports clubs should be dynamic in their social media management to maximise their branding performance. In the next section, the overall review of clubs' social media strategies are discussed to provide deeper insights into football clubs' social media operation.

## **5.5 Discussion and evaluation: the overall organisational social media strategy**

In this and previous chapters, findings of the social media strategies of football clubs, including the content strategies and fan engagement strategies, were discussed. This section aims to provide a summary and overview of the various social media strategies. As discussed in the literature review chapter, Effing and Spil (2016) propose the social strategy cone as the framework for evaluating social media strategies. Based

on their framework, this section aims to evaluate the social media strategies of the 5 football clubs investigated in this research. It is worth mentioning that this evaluation is not about judging or assessing the performance of these strategies. It simply aims to provide a general and comprehensive overview for understanding in what ways and how football clubs run their social media in China. The evaluations are listed in Table 10:

**Table 9: Overview of the key elements and evaluations of football clubs.**

Key element	F.C. Barcelona	F.C. Bayern Munich	Manchester United F.C.	Beijing Guoan	Wuhan Zall
Target Audience	●	●	●	●	●
Channel Choice	●	●	●	●	●
Goals	●	●	●	●	○
Policies	●	●	●	●	●
Resources	●	●	●	●	○
Monitoring	●	●	●	●	○
Content Activities	●	●	●	○	○

The table above shows elements that are addressed in the clubs' Weibo strategies. Items marked with an "●" means this is an element that clubs already address and will be continued in the future. "○" means an element of strategy that clubs do not have. From the addressed elements, the maturity stage of social media strategies of clubs can be evaluated as Table 11:

**Table 10: Stages of Maturity of football clubs**

Stages	Clubs
<b>Maturity</b>	F.C. Barcelona, F.C. Bayern Munich, Manchester United F.C.



**Diffusion**

Beijing Guoan

**Initiation**

Wuhan Zall

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According to the stages of maturity and the key elements, an inter-case analysis and case analysis of each club are presented as follows:

**Inter-case analysis:**

From Table 2 and Table 3, three key elements are owned by all five investigated clubs; these are *'Target audience'*, *'Channel choice'*, and *'Policies'*. Given the expanding sports market in China and the dominant position of Weibo as the most popular social media platform, football clubs have a clear target population and plans to attract Weibo users, and regard it as the most important platform in their strategy (Li et al., 2019; Liu and Berkowitz, 2013). In this research, approaches for expanding brand awareness such as combining with local culture, promoting by platform service and co-branding indicate a clear strategy to target audiences. Effing and Spil (2016) mentioned that selecting the target population should be the first and most basic step when starting a social media business. This suggests that not only sport brands but also brands from other areas should make deciding on their target audience the primary objective of their social media work.

In addition, clubs not mainly talked about their Weibo strategy but also mentioned their strategies on other platforms such as Tik Tok and WeChat, which shows that clubs have multi-channel strategies for the Chinese social media market. A previous study has shown that fans on different platforms aim to seek for different gratifications (Billings et al., 2019). Thus, a multi-channel strategy means that brands can satisfy the diverse needs of different groups of fans which could be beneficial to the brand itself.

In terms of *'Policies'*, the teams included in this research all revealed that they monitor the fan comments, private messages, and direct communication. Besides that, clubs also try to avoid negative influences from direct interactions and an overly strong brand personality example. For instance, Barcelona and Wuhan control their online interaction with fans to avoid engaging with negative commentary relating to lost matches or other unpleasant elements. This shows that clubs are aware of the potential risks that social

media may bring and have relevant policies to defend themselves. Furthermore, given there has been little research in this area, it highlights the importance of researching these social media risks as they may influence how clubs manage their brands.

### **Case analysis:**

Since the three European clubs returned similar results from the maturity evaluation, their analysis will be discussed together.

**European clubs.** The framework shows that the social media (Weibo) strategies of the three European clubs could be assessed as showing “Maturity” because they all contain the seven key elements. No matter whether the club like Bayern Munich manages their social media business themselves, or they use local management agencies, the three European clubs all manage their Weibo accounts in a mature way. For example, they all have clear goals that they want to achieve through their strategies. Barcelona wishes to achieve “Digital media brand awareness No.1” in China; Manchester United aims to change their brand image gradually, while Bayern Munich is focussing more on making real improvements to fan experiences. The clubs have all put in place operations that are consistent with their goals. For example, Barcelona is keen to increase its online campaigns to expand its brand awareness (Content Activities). Manchester tries to produce funnier and more dynamic content to improve their brand image (Content Activities), and Bayern Munich is active in communicating with fans (Monitoring).

**Beijing Guoan.** The top Chinese club displays many similarities when compared to the European clubs. For example, they have similar goals to Manchester United to change their traditional serious brand image (Goals). They listen to fans regularly and care about their needs, especially voices from their fan organisations (Monitoring). They also care about the negative influences, so they refuse to engage with fans too frequently online (Policies). However, the lack of Content Activities means their strategy does not reach the Maturity stage. As Effing and Stil (2016) suggest, the frequency of posting could also be an important aspect to be included in the evaluation of strategy, as it may influence the branding performance. The quantitative analysis in Chapter 4 has revealed that both Chinese clubs have a much lower post frequency than the European teams.

In addition, the Beijing communication/marketing managers also did not mention many online campaigns or having schedules for online projects. During the interview with the Beijing communication and marketing managers, there was a sense that they try to control relevant discourse and are more worried that frequent engagements may negatively influence their brand image. They regard their brand as that of a traditional top domestic club and still wish to present a relatively serious image. That may be why they do not initiate as many online activities as European clubs such as Bayern. This finding supports the study of McCarthy et al. (2014), who found that managers may limit their online activities due to the fear of branding risks. A conservative strategy may mean that clubs lose opportunities to further improve their branding outcome (ibid). This suggests that clubs should merge their brand values into their social media strategy so that they can provide fans with the best experiences and minimise the branding risks in the short term.

**Wuhan Zall.** Wuhan Zall is evaluated as being at the “Initiation” stage for their social media strategy because they still have some limitations. For example, their communication/marketing managers revealed that they do not have specific goals. They just concentrate on updating information. The relevant study has shown that social media should be utilised based on concrete and measurable goals (Gotterbarn, 2012). In addition, like Beijing, Wuhan Zall also lack *Content Activities*. The *Monitoring* element is also not reflected in their strategy. Their managers have revealed that the reason for this is a lack of resources, particularly human resources, to operate a comprehensive social media strategy. However, as Tafesse and Wien (2018) suggest, social media performance can be positively related to marketing performance. Therefore, greater investment in social media strategy is still needed for clubs like Wuhan Zall.

However, it should be noted here that how well the clubs perform regarding their branding outcomes is not necessarily dependent on whether the strategy is mature or not. The cone is a general assessment of social media strategy that provides an overview of strategy quality rather than efficiency. Specific tactics such as content type choice, post frequency and brand personality construction can play a more important role in branding. Practitioners should choose the most appropriate tactics to keep the balance between their brand values and fan needs, between maximised branding performance and potential risks, and thereby contribute improved branding outcomes and increasing revenues.

In summary, the social media strategies of European clubs are generally more mature than Chinese clubs based on the social media strategy cone theory. In terms of online engagement, European clubs use multiple tactics to deeply engage with fans, such as the building of brand personality, more online campaigns, and more direct conversations. Although Chinese teams also try to do the same, they do not have clearly articulated objectives nor diverse approaches to social media engagement. Besides, they post less frequently and with a lower level of content diversity. It may be because Chinese clubs are local organisations that do not need to put in so much effort to fit into the market and have the natural advantage in terms of engaging local fans (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2004). In the next section, the main findings and analysis of this chapter are concluded to provide a general review of football clubs' fan engagement strategies in the Chinese market.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

This chapter reviews the online engagement strategies of football clubs and then evaluates the maturity of their strategies based on the findings in the previous chapter. It responds to the central research question: How do football clubs use social media to encourage fan engagement? Based on the research question, the findings the four main conclusions that can be drawn are as follows:

1. This study basically supports the argument that sports organisations can improve their branding and marketing performance and attract interactions through the appropriate management of social media content and activities (Wang, 2020; Sundstrom & Levenshus, 2017). The interview responses from social media managers indicate that all the clubs investigated believe that attractive content and social media activities is the most important way to engage fans. Whether exploring the localisation strategies, the brand personality construction, or the O2O communication strategies, the study shed light on clubs' diverse approaches to attract and encourage engagement and enclose the fan relationship.

The interviews revealed many surprising findings regarding localisation and deep engagement, such as the example of a club interacting individually with a Wuhan doctor during the pandemic. Previous

studies about sports globalisation have focussed more on cultural adaption and meeting the needs of local fans. Rarely have studies noticed this kind of deep engagement with local society (Andreff, 2008; Rowe, 2013). Social media can amplify normal events in daily life. Consequently, it can also amplify the positive influences of some events and brand awareness. It suggests that clubs should be sensitive to trending topics in local society and try to connect with them. This can generate significant benefits in a short time.

2. This chapter found that although many scholars have emphasised the importance of increasing fan engagement, clubs still wish to find the right balance between brand image and fan engagement (Bodet et al., 2020; Williams and Chinn, 2010). This is because over-frequent interactions with fans may create a mismatch with the brand presence. Three of the five football clubs in this study displayed cautious attitudes towards online interaction when considering the potential mismatch to brand image. For example, as a traditional top club with long history, Manchester United want to maintain a strong and authoritative image, but frequent interactions with fans may make them appear unserious. As this concern may influence the choice and design of a club's social media strategy, scholars should pay more attention to this aspect.
3. UGC and Brand-related UGC content is increasingly popular online, and has demonstrated its potential to affect brand outcomes and to develop stronger organisation-fan relationships (Nanne et al., 2021; Geurin and Burch, 2017). This chapter found that, although sports organisations are cautious about cooperating with UGC or Brand-related UGC contents, such cooperation has the potential to positively influence branding performance, such as increasing interactions and expanding brand awareness. This suggests that a guided and cooperative relationship with these accounts could offer more advantages than disadvantages.
4. This chapter evaluated the maturity of the social media strategies of football clubs. Results show that European clubs in this study generally have a more mature strategy in comparison to Chinese clubs, especially in terms of their content management European teams update their posts more frequently, they initiate more digital campaigns, and have better organised social media projects. Although clubs

branding objectives vary and they have different organisational capacities in terms of investments, resources, and labour, managing a club's web presence well is clearly necessary to improve branding outcomes (Wang, 2020). Moreover, after years of development of social media, the competence among football clubs on social media domain is intense than ever. Notwithstanding this research finding that diverse approaches can result in better branding performance, it is clear that clubs need to design their strategy as comprehensively as possible to construct an attractive brand image and building strong fan relationships (Baena, 2016).

In the next chapter, findings from the other side of the coin – the experiences and opinions of fans will be explored to provide further insights into sports social media management.

# **Chapter Six: The experiences of Chinese football fans**

## **6.1 Introduction**

The findings in this chapter respond to one main research question: What are the experiences of Chinese fans regarding social media use and sports content consumption? Here the same Weibo posts as in Chapter 4 are analysed to investigate the interactions from fans on the clubs' Weibo homepages. Twenty-five fans were selected from the Weibo comment list and interviewed about their gratifications and motivations for using Weibo to access football information. Four main sections are included in this chapter. The first displays the content analysis data of fan responses, exploring what kinds of content and types of social media posts fans love most. The second presents interview materials about the gratifications fan sought and their motivations for using Weibo. The third section explores the influence of the background of fans on social media using motives and preferences, specifically two factors: gender and fan relationship length.

## **6.2 Responses to football club strategies**

The previous chapter has analysed the Weibo posts of football clubs in terms of what kinds of content are generated most and what brand attributes are assigned. In this section, the data of responses from fans, including “Likes”, “Comments,” and “Shares (Forwards)”, are presented to explore what kinds of content fans like most and which attributes fans find most attractive.

### **6.2.1 Post types and fan responses**

#### **a) Descriptive analysis**

Six types of posts for three interaction items (Likes, Comments, and Shares) are displayed in Table 12. The analysis shows that Image and Video attract the most fan interactions, with Image accounting for more than a half of all interactions (57%). Video is the second most popular type of post to interact at 18%. Surprisingly, Vote is the third most-interacted post which accounts for 12% of interactions, followed by Text (7%), Share (5%), and Link (2%). These results are consistent with previous studies which have also shown that fans/consumers are more likely to engage with visual content such as Image and Video (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Tafesse, 2016; Alboqami et al., 2015; de Vries et al., 2012). However, contrary to the argument that Video generates a higher level of interactions than Image and Text (Khan et al., 2016), the result revealed that Image received more interactions than Video, which may be partly influenced by the greater use of Image posts by clubs.

**Table 11: Interactions according to different post types**

<b>Types</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>Likes</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Comments</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Shares</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Text</b>	371	42210	6%	15110	12%	6418	5%	63738	7%
<b>Image</b>	1098	389966	57%	76344	59%	74955	54%	541265	57%
<b>Video</b>	316	114391	17%	14366	11%	44044	31%	172801	18%
<b>Link</b>	164	14840	2%	4318	3%	1935	1%	21093	2%
<b>Share</b>	172	32666	5%	5230	4%	6193	4%	44089	5%
<b>Vote</b>	23	93296	14%	15110	12%	6418	5%	114824	12%
<b>Total</b>	2144	687369	100%	130478	100%	139963	100%	957810	100%

In terms of specific interaction items, Image generated greater numbers of all three interaction items (Like, Comment, and Share) than other post types and received more comments and likes than shares. Video triggered more shares than the other two items. This finding partly supports the study of Annamalai et al. (2021) as they found lower vividness posts such as Images linked with a higher number of likes and comments, while higher vividness posts such as Video occasioning more shares. However, in this study, Video received fewer responses than Image on all three interaction items. A possible explanation for this is



that Image (n=1098) has higher usage than Video (n=316). This means that fans may recognise and receive the information delivered by Image or Text but tend to share videos to affect a response in others. Therefore, increasing video content may help clubs to expand their brand awareness, and more images may enhance fan identification with the brand.

In addition, the data also shows that Vote is one of the most attractive factors for social media interaction. Only 23 posts were categorised as Vote, but 12% of all interactions were generated from it. Vote is a type of post where clubs post questions and choices and ask fans to decide which they prefer. This supports the argument that well-designed questions from the organization can positively impact the level of responses (*Likes, Comments* and *Shares/Forwards*) from fans (de Vries et al., 2012). It also means that Vote may have the potential to impact the club-fan relationship positively. As an irregular post type, it should be noticed that Vote can attract and encourage large engagements.

Several findings should be noted. For example, in the single analysis of clubs, Manchester United posted the most Text posts (n=184) compared to other clubs, while they received significantly fewer interactions from Text, the figure is only at 1%. It provides evidence that fans are not interested in pure-text content. Beijing Guoan posted more Share (n=66) posts than Video (n=36) posts. Share refers to content that is used to share relevant information from other sources or interact with other accounts (such as those of players or other teams). However, Video posts received more interactions than Share. The two findings could support the argument that fans are more attracted to and willing to interact with visual content such as Video and Image (Annamalai et al., 2021).

An interesting finding is that Link (21%) became the second most responded post type in the Wuhan Zall dataset. The study of Alboqami et al. (2015) suggests that social media contents, including hyperlinks, typically receive more attention from users. The finding means that proper use of Link may attract significant responses. Early studies (Boyd et al., 2010; Suh et al., 2010) also suggest that hyperlinks may increase the desire of users to further share content with others. However, since Wuhan Zall was the only club to use large amounts of hyperlinks in this research, the full effect of this post type should be explored in future research.

As one of the main post types, Text accounts for only 7% of all interactions. The result supports a previous study that argued that Text is not popular on social media (Pongpaew et al., 2018). Due to this study focusing on on-season posts only, this finding could indicate that majority of text-only posts are about the live matches. In that case, fans could well be focussing more on the game than interacting on social media which would occasion fewer responses. Although Wuhan's Text posts attracted greater attention compared with overall responses, Text is still weak at encouraging interaction. Thus, clubs should focus more on other more competitive types of post such as Image and Video.

## b) Statistical analysis

First, the Chi-Square test ( $\chi^2$ ) revealed that different post types significantly influence the numbers of received interactions:  $\chi^2(10, N=1019369) = 102313.976, p < .001$ . This suggests that, generally, multiple post strategies can influence fan engagements and social media performance.

The sample's basic statistical information (M, SD), including 2144 Weibo posts with six post types and 687369 Likes, 193858 Comments and 138142, Shares in total, is presented in Table 13.

**Table 12: Overview of post types and fan responses in M-SD**

Types	Likes			Comments			Shares			
	<i>n</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Text	371	42210	606.00	593.026	15110	204.40	210.677	6418	92.50	117.593
Image	1098	389966	3308.71	5677.428	76344	485.13	721.416	74955	928.88	1848.325
Video	316	114391	1369.11	1213.913	14366	170.22	176.813	44044	4283.74	9125.348
Link	164	14840	200.06	143.965	4318	71.80	119.068	1935	27.86	32.836
Share	172	32666	1577.80	2244.339	5230	253.16	356.964	6193	494.08	766.551
Vote	23	93296	7241.74	5273.890	2215	303.58	523.432	4597	433.20	734.722

One-way ANOVA analysis (Table 14) revealed a significant correlation between different post types and different interactions items. A previous study has shown that different social media response items signify different underlying behavioural mechanisms and user motivations; for example, Share is thought to be motivated by self-serving and self-representation (Swani & Labrecque, 2020). Therefore, this finding suggests that clubs can control the interaction types they wish to receive by applying different post type strategies. For example, clubs that wish to receive more comments and opinions from fans could use more Image posts, and those who wish to expand their brand exposure could use more Video posts.

**Table 13: One-way ANOVA test result**

<i>Responses</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Like</i>	[F (5,943058) = 26665.099]	<i>p</i> < .001
<i>Comment</i>	[F (5,943058) = 10931.361]	<i>p</i> < .001
<i>Share</i>	[F (5,943058) = 21214.593]	<i>p</i> < .001

Following the ANOVA test, a Dunnett T3 test was employed to conduct pairwise comparisons between each post type. It aims to compare the differences in responses between any two types of posts. As Table 15 shows:

**Table 14: Pairwise comparisons of post types**

Pair	Like	Comment	Share	Total
1:2	*	*	*	*
1:3	*	*	*	*
1:4	*	=.031	*	*
1:5	=.037	=.030	=.035	=.037
1:6	*	*	*	*
2:3	=.028	ns	*	*
2:4	*	*	*	*
2:5	*	=.010	*	*
2:6	*	*	*	*

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3:4	*	=.017	*	*
3:5	=.038	=.037	*	*
3:6	*	*	*	*
4:5	=.034	=.035	=.034	=.035
4:6	*	*	*	*
5:6	*	*	*	*

Note:

\*:  $p < 0.01$

1: Text, 2: Image, 3: Video, 4-Link, 5- Share, 6-Vote

Ns: not significant

The pairwise comparison result shows significant differences in received Likes, Comments, and Shares among every group of post types, except Image and Video on Comments ( $p=0.503$ ). By comparing the mean number of responses with the ANOVA test, the data revealed that a) Text received significantly more responses than Link only; b) Image received significantly more responses than Text, Link and Share; c) Video received significantly more responses than Text, Image, Link and Share; d) Link received significantly fewer responses than all other types; e) Share received significantly more responses than Text and Link and f) Vote attracted significantly more responses than all other five post types.

Statistical results indicate that Vote is surprisingly the most attractive post type. The result may be explained by the mechanism of Weibo. Every selection made by fans is also counted as a “Like”, which brings large quantities of interactions for the post type. Since a similar feature on Twitter called “Twitter polls” has been shown to be an effective way of maximising user engagement (Rosenkrantz & Hawkins, 2017; Amini et al., 2019), this result suggests that the use of Vote could help clubs to collect opinions and boost engagement as fans tend to respond better to Vote posts.

Video is the second most popular post type which generates a greater number of responses than the other four different types. This means that a post with Video is more likely to attract the attention and interaction

of fans, which is different result from the research conducted by Kim et al. (2015), who found that consumers respond more often to Image content. The third most popular post type is Image which attracts more interactions than three types of posts. This suggests that posts with images and videos could help organisations encourage more responses from fans. In addition, Share also played a significant role as it received more responses than Text and Link. This means that fans may pay particular attention to content that is shared from other sources, such as from player accounts or other teams. Organisations could therefore increase their interactions with other accounts to secure more responses.

In terms of Text, it only receives more attention than Link. This result again supports the argument that Text is not a popular form of post (Pongpaew et al., 2018), which means that clubs should reduce their use. In addition, this research argues that Link is not as effective a post as previous studies have shown (Boyd et al., 2010; Suh et al., 2010). Increasing the use of Link may not be helpful to overall social media performance.

Furthermore, a bivariate correlation test was made to examine the relationships between Likes, Comments and Shares. The results revealed significant positive correlations between the three relationships: Likes and Comments:  $r(2144) = 0.689, p < .001$ ; Likes and Shares:  $r(2144) = 0.266, p < .001$ ; Comments and Shares:  $r(2144) = 0.254, p < .001$ , which means that the increase of any type of fan responses can also encourage the other two.

In summary, this section presents the statistical analysis of the relationship between football club Weibo post types and fan responses. Results indicate that the use of different types of posts can significantly influence fan responses. In order to maximise branding and engagement performance, football clubs should increase their use of visual posts.

### **6.2.2 Brand attributes and fan responses**

In Chapter 4, the use and promotion of the different attributes of each club were discussed. This section aims to present the responses to each type of attribute and discuss the relationship between attributes and

responses. Both descriptive and analytical data are provided.

### a) Descriptive data analysis

This section provides the descriptive data for responses received from each brand attribute and in terms of different interaction items. First, Table 16 displays the percentage of responses generated by each attribute.

**Table 15: Percentage of each attribute on interactions**

<b>Attributes</b>	<b>Responses (%)</b>	<b>M</b>
<b>PRA</b>	<b>65.66%</b>	
Event's Image	30.05%	336.47
Team performance	5.86%	458.75
Star player	26.17%	649.18
Head coach	3.58%	352.35
<b>NPRA</b>	<b>34.34%</b>	
Assets and product	3.35%	166.39
Club's culture and value	3.08%	717.85
Club's history and success	4.42%	387.69
Interaction	4.02%	337.18
Brand mark	0.03%	139
Sponsor and owner	7.07%	1569.93
Reward draw	6.58%	1103.08
Management	0.32%	220.14
Offline activities	0.87%	193.35
Call for action	0.33%	193.35
Local events	4.25%	922.48

According to Table 16, PRA received the most interactions from fans, which is consistent with previous research on brand attributes (Parganas et al., 2015). Specifically, the *Event's Image* and *Star player* generate

the majority of responses, while the *Head coach* generates the least. The result indicates that fans in China are interested in team-related and player-related information, which is similar to the research of Bodet et al. (2020), who found the most popular attractions for Chinese EPL (English Premier League) fans are posts related to sporting and on-the-field information.

In terms of NPRA contents, *Sponsor and owner* is surprisingly revealed to be the most popular attribute generating 7 % of responses. A possible explanation for this might be the frequent cooperation between MU and its most famous Chinese fan. During the sample collection progress, the researcher found that the Manchester official account frequently interacts with Lu Han, a famous Chinese entertainment star known to be major MU fan. It can also be seen from Table 6 that this category accounts for 26% of interactions in the analysis of the MU account. Thus, the finding suggests that corporations with sources outside the football world may be an effective way for clubs to enlarge their brand exposure and attract engagement.

The analysis also reveals that *Brand mark* generates the least number of responses . This attribute refers to brand characteristics such as the brand colours and logo. This result may be explained by the fact that clubs use far fewer posts of this category to promote their brand. On the one hand, clubs often include their team logo and colours in many images or other visual posts. On the other hand, clubs rarely intentionally promote the brand marks to fans. In a recent study, *Brand mark* was shown to have a limited ability to attract interactions (Parganas et al., 2015).

Data from European clubs (Table 17) and Chinese clubs (Table 18) are presented separately due to the differences in the sample sizes.

**Table 16: The descriptive data from European clubs**

<b>Attributes</b>	<b>F.C. Barcelona</b>	<b>Bayern Munich</b>	<b>Manchester United</b>
	(n=420)	(n=458)	(n=466)
	<i>Responses (%)</i>	<i>Responses (%)</i>	<i>Responses (%)</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>

<b>PRA</b>						
Event's image	23.6%	528.23	25.1%	322.49	22.7%	134.66
Team performance	3.9%	328.71	6.9%	406.43	14.3%	1064.20
Star player	37.3%	1239.81	30.3%	358.35	14.6%	272.93
Head coach	1.5%	367.54	2.8%	257.78	2.8%	265.50
<b>NPRA</b>						
Assets and product	2.9%	348.70	3.2%	185.14	2.2%	358.67
Club's culture and value	2.0%	653.20	3.2%	1066.40	1.6%	489.00
Club's history and success	7.7%	638.38	4.5%	248.53	4.6%	246.71
Interaction	2.1%	524.38	9.9%	297.51	4.4%	311.05
Brand mark	0.0%	0	0.1%	193.00	0.0%	0
Sponsor and owner	7.4%	1995.50	0.2%	304.00	26.3%	3924.10
Reward draw	10.2%	1930.53	11.5%	2111.78	4.8%	554.46
Management	0.5%	549.00	0.5%	147.83	0.1%	126.00
Offline activities	0.0%	0	0.0%	74.00	0.0%	0
Call for action	0.4%	352.50	0.1%	117.00	0.8%	196.50
Local events	0.5%	497.33	1.6%	532.80	0.8%	188.50

From the analysis of European clubs, *Reward draw* is revealed to be the most favoured NPRA attributes, which attracts more than 10% of responses for both Barcelona and Bayern. Given that *Reward draw* refers to a give-away or gift to fans, the result demonstrates that give-away offers from the club evoke considerable engagement with fans. In addition, *Club's history and success* and *Sponsor and owner* received more than 5% of interactions in the analysis of Barcelona, and *Interaction* received nearly 10% for Bayern Munich. It means that: 1) recalling the history and recent successes of clubs like Barcelona may enhance fan identification as other studies have suggested (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007); 2) Chinese fans tend to interact with content about relationships with other famous people such as when the Barcelona account posts content about a famous Chinese sports commentator; 3) club interactions with fans can generate positive responses from fans with Bayern Munich regularly interacting with its fans.



The results in Table 18 for the two Chinese clubs further emphasises the prevalence of PRA content. *Event's Image* and *Star player* still receive the most interactions. For Wuhan Zall, 66.6% of total responses come from the *Event's Image*. This also underscores the finding that what fans care about most are team and player-related content. Therefore, clubs should keep focusing on these two type of content and see them as their core information.

**Table 17: The descriptive data from Chinese clubs**

Attributes	Beijing Guoan (n=400)		Wuhan Zall (n=400)	
	Responses (%)	M	Responses (%)	M
<b>PRA</b>				
Event's Image	39.1%	831.88	66.6%	137.69
Team performance	3.3%	824.91	4.2%	69.56
Star player	19.9%	1170.53	6.5%	126.43
Head coach	6.6%	873.52	5.3%	74.76
<b>NPRA</b>				
Assets and product	4.3%	148.71	5.0%	43.36
Club's culture and value	4.9%	1681.63	4.1%	128.46
Club's history and success	0.9%	276.44	1.2%	169.67
Interaction	3.5%	467.19	0.7%	60.40
Brand mark	0 (0%)	0	0.2%	85.00
Sponsor and owner	1.4%	228.59	0.3%	43.33
Reward draw	0.8%	217.40	0.7%	40.29
Management	0.1%	151.50	0.3%	59.50
Offline activities	2.4%	246.63	1.0%	44.67
Call for action	0.4%	221.00	1.4%	31.00
Local events	12.4%	2849.92	2.7%	61.28

In terms of its NPRA, Beijing Guoan receives a significant number of interactions from *Local events*. This attribute relates to local festivals or local social events. The result is consistent with what their communication manager mentioned in Chapter 5; that the club seeks to show that the brand cares about local people and the city’s culture. Previous research has shown that geographic bonds can be crucial in affecting people’s intention to support a team (Jones, 1997). The study of Chanavat and Bodet (2009) points out that the level of support amongst local fans for a club and its brand-equity can influence the choice and intention of people to support a team abroad. In their recent study (Bodet et al., 2020) about Chinese EPL fans, they further found that local fans can influence the supporting intention of satellite fans. This suggests that for Chinese clubs or clubs from other regions, building a strong relationship with domestic fans can be important and helpful for their international strategy.

As for the relationship between attributes and specific response items (Table 19), data reveals that fans tend to *Like* and *Comment* most on the PRA contents *Event’s Image* and *Star player*. This suggests that teams who want to encourage attitudes or opinions from fans should choose to make more content around these two attributes. ‘*Liking*’ is the most effortless interaction action for users and may represent their attitude and support on brand content (Swani & Labrecque, 2020), and ‘*Comment*’ can provide deeper insights and connections to brands by establishing two-way communication (Swani & Milne, 2017). However, NPRA content receives less attention in terms of both *Like* and *Comment*.

**Table 18: The descriptive data of all clubs on different interaction items**

Types	Likes				Comments			Shares		
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>PRA</b>										
Event’s Image	853	30.1%	244.54	825.678	46.5%	64.59	179.547	16.4%	27.34	72.173
Team perfor*	122	7.0%	397.30	742.662	4.1%	39.77	69.927	1.9%	21.53	44.057
Star player	385	28.6%	514.79	1312.919	17.6%	54.31	116.441	21.6%	80.09	338.469
Head coach	97	3.5%	251.87	406.666	4.9%	59.65	109.574	2.8%	40.84	112.365

## NPRA

Assets & pro*	192	3.5%	125.10	140.140	3.9%	23.95	31.329	2.3%	17.33	34.478
Culture*	41	3.2%	537.41	817.399	2.8%	81.12	140.586	2.9%	99.32	214.522
History*	109	5.0%	320.83	584.591	2.9%	31.72	23.124	2.7%	35.13	57.459
Interaction	114	4.4%	269.92	224.322	4.1%	42.90	41.046	1.9%	24.35	46.161
Brand mark	2	0.03%	109.50	95.459	0.04%	22.50	14.849	0.01%	7.00	4.243
Sponsor*	43	7.6%	1229.74	3348.326	4.7%	128.77	316.378	6.4%	211.42	657.842
Reward draw	57	4.0%	486.82	1357.434	5.2%	107.44	235.666	20.4%	508.82	1709.99
Management	14	0.4%	179.79	173.414	0.2%	20.64	24.942	0.2%	19.71	27.897
Offline acti*	43	0.9%	140.93	185.970	1.2%	33.91	84.740	0.6%	18.51	35.887
Call for action	28	0.4%	87.36	137.166	0.4%	16.57	34.306	0.2%	10.00	14.722
Local events	44	1.5%	242.27	410.282	1.4%	38.57	79.786	19.8%	641.64	3765.65

\*: Abbreviation of Team performance; Assets and product; Club's culture and value; Club's history and success; Sponsor and owner; Offline activities

As for *Share*, *Reward Draw* receives larger shares (20.4%) than *Events' Image* (16.4%). Another type of content that fans like to share is *Local events*; the proportion reached 19.8%. Relevant studies have shown that sharing content reflects the self-serving and self-presentation desires of individuals; it represents the purpose of individuals to elevate their identities (Berger, 2014). These results suggest that clubs who want to spread their content more widely and enhance fan identity by increasing the level of 'Shares' amongst Chinese fans, should focus more on posts about *Local events* and *Reward draw*.

In summary, this section reveals that fans mainly respond to PRA social media content. Game-related and player-related messages are the most popular types of post, which shows that fans are interested most in team news. As this research and other studies have shown, PRA can predict the brand attitude of fans towards the brand and can further influence the purchase intention (Kim and Chan-Olmsted, 2005; Kaynak et al., 2008). These results therefore suggest that teams should regard the dissemination of PRA content as their core part of social media strategy. In addition, these findings also suggest that NPRA can play a significant role in encouraging engagements, enhancing organisation-fan relationships, and influencing

brand attitude. This shows that the proper use of NPRA can be beneficial for teams who wish to improve their relationship with fans.

**b) Statistical data analysis**

A Chi-Square ( $\chi^2$ ) test was employed to examine whether a significant correlation exists between the different types of brand attributes and received responses. This shows that a significant correlation exists between the different types of attributes and types of responses:  $\chi^2(28, N=954983) = 184666.087, p < .001$ . This means that designing content strategies to focus on different attributes can result in different interactions from fans.

Focusing on the two main types of brand attributes specifically (i.e., PRA and NPRA), the Chi-Square ( $\chi^2$ ) test reveals a significant difference between PRA and NPRA with regards the number of interactions of three items (Table 20).

**Table 19: The difference between PRA and NPRA on interaction items**

<i>Responses</i>	<i>PRA (M)</i>	<i>NPRA (M)</i>	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>
<i>Like</i>	329.23	311.97	$\chi^2(2, N=693999) = 101454.080$	<i>p &lt; .001</i>
<i>Comment</i>	59.47	46.42	$\chi^2(2, N=118530) = 25293.179$	<i>p &lt; .001</i>
<i>Share</i>	41.70	118.92	$\chi^2(2, N=142454) = 3078.072$	<i>p &lt; .001</i>

The *Mean* number shows that fans are more likely to *Like* and *Comment* on PRA-related content and share posts with others regarding NPRA content. The finding suggests that fans in China are more attracted to team-related content rather than other brand elements (NPRA). The result differs from the research of Parganas et al. (2015), who found that fans reply more to NPRA but *Like* and *Share* more PRA content. The finding suggests that fans in China are drawn more strongly to team-related content rather than other elements of the brand (NPRA). This provides supporting evidence for the study of Bodet et al. (2020) who found that organisation-induced content such as on-field highlights and first-team news are the most attractive types of post amongst Chinese fans. It further supports the argument of Swani and Milne (2017) that *Like* and *Comment* are usually positively correlated, suggesting that clubs could generate more PRA content to enhance the club's recognition and fan engagement. The finding is also in line with the argument that NPRA influences the perception and identification of fans (Parganas et al., 2015), as NPRA receives more *Shares*, and this type of response is regarded as the interaction that fans use to elevate their identities (Berger, 2014). Therefore, NPRA plays an important role for clubs to not only attract shares and expand their brand awareness but also positively influence fan perception and identification.

An ANOVA test was also conducted on the data to explore whether different PRA (such as *Head Coach*) and NPRA content types (such as *Club's culture and values*) influence the level of response received. The results from this analysis are displayed in Table 21.

**Table 20: ANOVA test on clubs PRA and NPRA content and specific interaction items**

<i>Responses</i>	<i>PRA:</i>		<i>NPRA:</i>	
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>F.C. Barcelona</i>				
<i>Like</i>	593 (1587)	F=3.121, *	674 (1121)	F=2.613, *
<i>Comment</i>	60 (122)	F=1.127, p=.338	59 (146)	F=1.772, p=.089
<i>Share</i>	78 (350)	F=4.334, *	119 (535)	F=1.585, p=.136
<i>Bayern Munich</i>				
<i>Like</i>	287 (495)	F=0.630, p=.596	217 (293)	F=2.708, **
<i>Comment</i>	32 (34)	F=3.482, *	39 (60)	F=2.665, **
<i>Share</i>	23 (34)	F=1.087, p=.355	148 (988)	F=3.597, **
<i>Manchester United</i>				
<i>Like</i>	178 (432)	F=36.22, **	510 (2191)	F=1.933, p=.064
<i>Comment</i>	30 (47)	F=0.254, p=.858	73 (223)	F=2.273, *
<i>Share</i>	14 (34)	F=1.439, p=.231	104 (446)	F=2.148, *
<i>Beijing Guoan</i>				
<i>Like</i>	617 (1383)	F=0.567, p=.637	218 (408)	F=9.306, **
<i>Comment</i>	184 (339)	F=0.410, p=.746	53 (90)	F=5.541, **
<i>Share</i>	111 (240)	F=2.096, p=.102	180 (1811)	F=1.998, *
<i>Wuhan Zall</i>				

<i>Like</i>	81 (151)	F=1.030, $p=.380$	40 (36)	F=7.672, **
<i>Comment</i>	35 (65)	F=2.317, $p=.076$	11 (12)	F=4.052, **
<i>Share</i>	8 (21)	F=0.162, $p=.922$	6 (9)	F=4.384, **
<i>Total</i>				
<i>Like</i>	329 (961)	F=7.498, $p=**$	312 (1015)	F=7.672, **
<i>Comment</i>	59 (154)	F=1.126, $p=.337$	46 (120)	F=4.052, **
<i>Share</i>	42 (187)	F=7.694, $p=**$	119 (1093)	F=4.384, **

Note: \*:  $p<0.05$ ; \*\*:  $p<0.01$

For PRA, the one-way ANOVA test reveals significant differences between different attributes and *Like* and *Share*, which provides statistical evidence that choosing different PRAs can influence the number of likes and shares. However, different types of PRA content do not significantly influence the number of comments. It suggests that all types of PRA content are equally likely to generate replies and clubs do not need to produce different content arrangements to attract comments. However, the finding does not mean that comments from fans can be controlled. Research has shown that comments are positively influenced by the number of *Likes*, suggesting that more ‘liked’ content may result in more comments (Swani & Milne, 2017). Therefore, clubs that wish to collect fan opinions through comments should also make strategies that attract more likes.

For NPRA, all three interaction items are significantly correlated to NPRA-related content, which means that the use of different NPRA content could influence the *Likes*, *Comments*, and *Shares*. Previous sections have shown that NPRA is correlated with the perception of consumers towards the brand; it does not directly contribute to the branding performance but plays a significant role in influencing fans’ potential identity (Bauer et al., 2008; Kaynak et al., 2008). In addition, social contagion theory shows that like and comment on social media pages can influence other users, encouraging them to engage with the brand (Swani &

Milne, 2017; de Vries et al., 2012). Given the  $\chi^2$  results that NPRA receives more shares than PRA, this suggests that a well-designed NPRA strategy could significantly expand the brand awareness, positively influence the fan perception and e-word of mouth (eWOM), as the three items are all significant-related to different NPRA contents.

These findings shed light on the importance of NPRA content for football clubs. Football is an established product, and football brands usually aim to develop long-term customer loyalty and provide a positive experience rather than short-term sales (Keller, 1993; Bauer et al., 2008). As NPRA can influence the fan identity and perception, it is clear that a well-deigned strategy that includes more NPRA could help clubs to maintain long-term and high-quality fan-club relationships. As communication and marketing managers mentioned in previous chapters, although team-related news forms the core of their content strategy, NPRA content (such as promoting the club culture, related assets, and other services) plays an important role in enhancing the club's brand image. Therefore, this suggests that football marketers should pay more attention to their NPRA content.

### **6.2.3 Summary**

This section discussed the results of the quantitative content analysis. It responds to the research question: 'How do fans interact with clubs on social media?' It also contributes to the existing literature regarding the types of content that Chinese football fans are interested in and how they interact with clubs on social media.

This analysis reveals that fans prefer vivid content such as Image and Video, consistent with previous findings (Achen, 2020). Statistical analysis further suggests that the different post types and content types can influence the number of interactions. It sheds light on the importance of developing a multi-content strategy. In terms of content types, PRA content receives more interactions than NPRA content, which means that team-related information such as live games, previews, player news, head coach news and team performance still provide the core of football clubs' social media activities. Different content types can also positively influence the response received from fans. More specifically, PRA contents are found to generate



more *Likes* and *Comments* of social media posts. NPRA may positively impact *Shares*, suggesting that marketers could pursue different branding goals by managing their social media differently, such as receiving more recognition and enhancing the identification of fans and expanding their brand awareness.

### **6.3 Gratifications sought by fans**

Uses and Gratification Theory (U&G) theory provides the opportunity for media researchers to clarify users' purposes for engaging with social media and to provide a deeper understanding of users' motivations, perceptions, behaviours, and other psychological factors (Smock et al., 2011). Based on the U&G, this section reveals fans' gratifications and motivations for using Weibo, and content preferences for their favourite team page. These findings could contribute to the understanding of fan experiences, which is beneficial to both theoretical research and the practical operations of brand and marketing managers. The research question: 'What gratifications do fans seek by consuming the sports content?' is addressed in this section from three perspectives: fans' content preferences, the gratifications sought by fans for football-related information on Weibo, and the new emergent gratifications compared to previous studies.

#### **6.3.1 Fan voice: preferences and expectations**

The previous chapter discussed how fans interact with club social media posts; this section provides the responses from interviews with 25 football fans (n=25) to discuss fan preferences and their expectations regarding content. This research explores fan needs more deeply and provides insights for marketers.

##### *Fan preferences of contents*

Generally, the most popular type of content is player-related content. 10 out of 25 (40%) interviewees expressed their interest in it. For example:

... I also like to read gossip about the players. They usually translate this news from Twitter and

Instagram. I think it's so interesting. (R5, Female)

(What I like is) Mainly what players have said on other platforms. They have the resources to collect player quotes as well pictures and videos from other platforms. I like to browse player-related content because I think they are so handsome. I also started to follow the team because of those handsome guys; that is why I love this content. (R9, Female)

I like the content about young players...Because they are the future of Manchester, it makes me wonder about their backgrounds and their futures. (R12, Male)

The finding is consistent with the content analysis results that player-related content receives the largest number of responses. It also supports the argument that personalised player content can attract more responses, and marketers should value its promotion (Achen et al., 2020). In addition, the other three most-mentioned and preferred content types are game highlights (8 in 25, 32%), transfer news (4 in 25, 16%) and training videos (3 in 25, 12%). Respondents generally described match highlights as supplementary information if they were unable to watch the match live; transfer news as building their expectations for future change; and training videos as a way of acquiring further information. Here are several extracts from the interviews:

I like to watch highlights, such as those wonderful tiki-taka tricks...sometimes, you may not have time to watch the game live, so the highlights can tell you what happened. (R1, Male)

I like the highlights of the game, and the goal compilation at the end of a season... I think all fans like to watch their team score. It brings me a sense of honour and makes me excited. (R24, Male)

...I also like the daily training videos and images; we like to re-edit this stuff to make memes...and I like the Video very much, I think it can transfer a lot of content. (R6, Male)

The favourite information must be transfer news, and some highlights of club legends. Only when the

club officially announces the transfer can we release the weight off our mind. (R11, Male)

The results provide qualitative evidence for the argument that PRA content attracts more interactions. This finding is consistent with the content analysis results from previous sections and the research of Parganas et al. (2015), who found that fans pay more attention to team-related information on Facebook. It reinforces the importance of the ongoing reporting of team news for fans.

Besides the team-related content, fans (4 out of 25, 16%) also express their interest in historical content. They described historical content as the way to learn about the past and the legendary stories of their club and enhance their feelings of honour. As the fan interviewees commented:

I also like the stories of club legends because you can get information about current players every day. But for legends, you do not live in those times, so it is interesting. Because Bayern used to be a small club...they had to fight to get to the top. I want to learn about the past stories, although I did not live through that era. (R8, Male)

[I]...like history review relatively. Because I cannot watch that so often, it makes me curious. And it's usually in the form of a Video, which is easy to understand...the historical content can make feel connected to the past successes of Manchester United and honoured since they are not as competitive now as in those years. (R15, Male)

The extracts reflect how historical content enhances the sense of honour amongst fans. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the culture and historical content provided by football clubs can enhance fans' social identity, and the continuity of information can make fans feel they are part of the history (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007). Historical content is usually regarded as non-product-related content. Thus, the finding also supports the argument that NPRA can positively enhance fan identification.

Furthermore, two unusual content types mentioned by fans are worth mentioning here. The first is management-related information, which is unusual in both the content analysis and interview results. As

one fan revealed:

I care about the management news because the performance of the club has not been so good in recent years. So, I want to know what the management is doing and then you can understand the club from the perspective of a fan...the management content makes me feel that Bayern cares about what fans want, rather than just announcing a message. It makes me feel like I'm part of the club. (R8, Male)

The finding indicates that management news can help enhance fan identity and the sense of belonging to the club. It provides evidence that non-product-related attributes can positively influence fan perception and fan identity.

The second one is from a fan of Beijing Guoan, who expressed his love for the teenager camp news. The content about teenager camps is regarded as "Related assets" in content analysis. Although the attribute receives some responses, it is seldom mentioned by fans. This fan loves teenager camp content because he likes to watch teenage matches. As he explained:

I started to watch teenage matches last year...I enjoy watching that because young players do not have other thoughts, they only focus on playing hard and winning ...Generally, young players are the club's future; supporting them is also supporting the club, which gives me a sense of greater participation. (R17, Male)

In chapter 4, the Beijing Guoan communication manager expressed their appreciation of teenager camp information and mentioned that reporting about it regularly can positively change the impressions of fans. The finding underscores the importance of teenager camp news. It suggests that more attention should be paid to this kind of content.

Generally, these two findings shed light on the importance of a multiple content strategy for football clubs. Although fans may pay most attention to the first team news, other types of content also need to be used strategically and consistently to help develop competitive branding strategies.

## *Fan expectations*

At the end of each interview, fans were asked about what they wanted to see most on the Weibo home page of their favourite teams. Eight main types of content were identified, as shown in Table 22:

**Table 21: Content types that fan wish to see**

Type	Mentioned*	Type	Mentioned*
Player	5	Professional <sup>3</sup>	3
History, culture	4	Youth team	2
Interaction <sup>1</sup>	4	Image <sup>4</sup>	2
Exclusive <sup>2</sup>	3	No expectation	2

\*Mentioned times by different interviewees

1: Club-made interaction activities or contents, e.g., FAQ

2: Inside information of the club, e.g., daily player meal; behind the scenes staffs

3: Professional information, e.g., match analysis; more specific tactics

4: Well-made images of players, arena, or others, mainly for setting wallpaper

In the interviews, player-related content is mentioned most. Fans wish to know more information about players' personal lives, training, and daily activities. This shows that Chinese football fans have greater interests in players than other content types, which supports the finding of Bodet and Chanavat (2010), who found that player information is critically important to Chinese fans who often support a club because of its players or a particular star player.

The finding also highlights that historical and cultural content may be highly attractive to Chinese fans. History is regarded as one of the important ways for fans to gain a deeper understanding of the club, for example:

I know many young fans who have just followed Guoan for two or three years, but they know very little about the club. They are not fake fans, and they truly love the club...So, I wish the club would tell us more about their history, to let us know more details about them. (R19, Female)

Personally speaking, I want to find out the team history...for example, I used to go to the library to look for historical documents about Zall and copy them. I think it's easy to get up-to-date information, but old data from those years is all covered in dust. Knowing the history makes me feel proud and what I belong. (R23, Male)

It suggests that football clubs could post more historical content, especially for the Chinese market, since fans in China show a great interest in it, and the promotion of history and traditions plays an important role in reinforcing brand identity and increasing revenue (Kerr & Gladden, 2008).

Although club communication managers mentioned several strategies for engaging with fans, interviewees have a hunger for more marketer-generated interactive content. As one of the interviewees mentioned:

In addition to current posts, it [the club] creates little content for us to get involved with. They could review more events for fans to discuss and for new fans to find out about the history...I hope they can arouse the enthusiasm of fans. It doesn't even need frequent interactions. Like they could open a weekly column with different topics, I would check it out and interact every week (R14, Male)

The extract shows that fans wish to be engaged and to have a place for regular discussion. They also hope that clubs would be more interactive rather than just generating attractive content. As one of the interviewees said: "I can feel the '*mia san mia*', but I hope they can interact with fans more like if I were to post about Bayern on Weibo, and they were to Share it officially, then I would be pleased." (R9, Male).

Finally, in terms of the need for exclusive content, fans generally regard the information about behind the scenes staff and other club activities as "warm" and "showing humanity", as they noted:

More exclusive content, I thought, like what players eat every day. You post about the player training or something like that, but I wish to see more beyond football, like the club staff. Because the club does not only consist of players. More staff content would make people feel warm and evoke many different feelings. (R5, Female)

I hope Guoan could introduce more of the staff behind the scenes. They are also an important part of the club. Focusing on club image too much suggest a lack of wider humanity. They could also show more content about the public benefits of their services. As far as I know, they are involved in many activities like that. I think it's positive, and they could promote that more online (R16, Male)

The extracts provide evidence for the finding of Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018), who found a small proportion of posts tell the fans about the club's community services, and this kind of exclusive content can provide fans with different experiences and another way to connect with the club. The finding also supports the study of Gibbs et al. (2014), who found that fans appreciate behind-the-scenes content because it is not readily available. It also shows that fans care not only about satisfying their information needs but also their underlying emotional needs. In his early study, Keller (1993) proposes that emotional needs such as pleasure and warmth are provided by the brand experiential benefits. In chapter 4, this study revealed that clubs mainly wish to provide symbolic benefits such as identification for fans. Therefore, the finding here highlight the importance of providing more experiential benefits for fans.

### **6.3.2 Motivations of using social media for football**

Based on the studies of Ko et al. (2005), Vale and Fernandes (2018), and Whiting and Williams (2013), seven main motivations are classified in this research:

**Information seeking**

**Social interaction**

**Entertainment**

**Empowerment**

## **Passing time**

## **Brand love**

## **Remuneration**

The seven themes will be discussed and presented separately, according to the interview materials from 25 fans

## ***Information seeking***

Information seeking is the most mentioned motivation for using Weibo by football fans. More than half (13 out of 25) of respondents said that their primary motivation is to seek and acquire information from Weibo.

For example:

The main reason for using Weibo is to have a look at my team's news, and other interesting information  
(R11, Male)

Because it updates information very quickly, on the one hand, news apps like Wangyi News cannot update in time. On the other hand, their information is not from club officials or professionals. (R17, Male)

In my early years, I used a website like Sina Sport to browse football news. But for clubs like Wuhan Zall, there's not much news about them... Then I found that some amateurs on Weibo research football deeply and post many exclusive messages... there are lots of people sharing interesting information and micro-segments about football, so I gradually developed the habit of using Weibo (R23, Male)

According to the extracts, respondents generally agree that Weibo can provide them with the information they want. In addition to the extracts above, respondents reported that they use Weibo to seek information mainly about 1) team-related news, 2) player-related news, 3) beautiful images for wallpaper, 4) online discussions from other fans, 5) official announcements, 6) exclusive club information, 7) professional



analysis and 8) gossip. The finding supports previous arguments that users regard Weibo as an information-sharing platform and information-seeking tool (Billings et al., 2019; Gao & Feng, 2016). It is suggested that fan informational needs correlate positively with consumption behaviour but negatively with engagement (Vale and Fernandes, 2018). This means that, on the one hand, clubs should regard satisfying the informational needs of Chinese fans as their primary job. On the other hand, clubs should enhance their engagement strategy to improve the club-fan relationship and attract more engagement.

Another factor supporting the view that Weibo is used as an information-seeking tool is the diversity of information sources. Respondents generally mentioned that they could find the information they need on other platforms, but they use Weibo because the platform is more diverse:

The official site updates slower. And they have promotional requirements, so their content is censored. Contents on Weibo are more diverse. Different KOLs focus on different directions and have diverse styles. (R18, Male)

It [Weibo] is mainly used to browse content that you can't see on other platforms, such as the commentary and analysis of KOLs. Match-related content can be found anywhere. The unique thing about Weibo is there are many journalists and commentators on there. (R20, Male)

### ***Social interaction***

7 in 25 respondents mentioned that they use Weibo to satisfy their desire for social interaction. Social interaction refers to the desire to be involved with a community, build connections, and interact with others (Baldus et al., 2015). In their study, Ko et al. (2005) define several aspects to examine with regards social interaction, such as “To meet people with my interests.” Respondents in this study support this proposition, as they explained:

Weibo has more comprehensive information, and it enables me to discuss with people who have common interests. By using Weibo, I know many people who love Guoan like me. (R 19, Female)

Before the current head coach came, I seldom used Weibo to access Manchester United information. Then, after the new coach came, I found that many people discuss and care about the same topic, and I get along with them well. If I just wanted to find the information, I can find that on foreign websites.

(R13, Female)

The extract of R13 shows fans do not regard Weibo as an indispensable information source. They have many ways to acquire information, but they use Weibo to get in touch with others. In addition, being part of a community is another common motivation of fans for social interaction. For example:

I have a good relationship with many KOLs. We usually discuss news privately, and then I will comment on their posts. Sometimes they share their analysis about matches or news, and I will also reply to them.

(R17, Male)

The extract reflects one of this fan's main motivations for commenting and using Weibo due to his relationship with opinion leaders. Consistent with previous studies, this could support the argument that fans wish to enhance their identity through online discussion with others (Baldus et al., 2015). In addition, it also supports the argument that Chinese social media users regard SNS as the indispensable platform to seek common-interests with peers and for the social purpose (Tsai & Men, 2017).

The social interaction motive could strongly predict the user behaviour of 'commenting' (Khan, 2017). Enhancing the interaction gratifications of fans can contribute to the club-fan engagement and discussion about the brand. Therefore, marketers who wish to gain more interactions with fans should try to lead the conversation and create a discussion environment by using more hashtags or establishing chat columns to foster the in-group discussion (Tsai & Men, 2017).

### ***Empowerment***

Empowerment refers to the need to maintain and play the role of an opinion leader or influencer (Vale and

Fernandes, 2018). Two respondents in this research mentioned their needs to be opinion leaders on Weibo. For example, one respondent who also serves as one of the editors for the Wuhan Zall hashtag mentioned that he uses Weibo mainly to post news for others:

I use Weibo more than other platforms because I'm the 'host' of the #Wuhan Zall hashtag. I post team-related information under that...It takes me about half an hour to one hour to collect news and post under the hashtag. (R24, Male)

In addition, another respondent, a sports journalist, revealed that Weibo could provide leads and information sources for him. Using Weibo to collect information can satisfy not only the informational needs of fans but also the need to share messages for others:

As a sports media professional my job is to report on Wuhan Zall. So, I regard Weibo as my information source and I use it every day...although there are many other platforms, journalists still regard Weibo as the primary platform because they can receive much greater attention and more followers. (R22, Male)

The two extracts reflect the motivation of fans to influence others. Playing and maintaining the role as an opinion leader means that fans will build deeper connections with the club than others. For example, the study of Vale and Fernandes (2018) suggested that empowerment could strongly predict the 'Contribution' activities of fans (including liking, sharing, commenting and other interacting activities). Promoting the brand information can influence others, stimulate other fans to pay more attention to the brand, and generate more engagement (Acar & Puntoni, 2016). The finding here once again highlights the importance of empowering fans. In previous chapters, some club communication managers mentioned they were seeking cooperation with KOLs and revealed that these "prosumers" could expand their brand awareness and post information that they found too controversial to publish. This suggests that more empowerment for fans may bring a higher level of engagement for clubs.

### ***Entertainment***

In their model, Ko et al. (2005) described this category as the need for relaxing, including passing the time, escaping from pressure and other relaxing activities. Then, entertainment was defined as the need for enjoyment and evasion, and passing time was regarded as another dependent category (Vale & Fernandes, 2018). This research adopts the model of Vale and Fernandes who exclude Passing time from Entertainment. Two interviewees expressed the gratification they gain from Entertainment:

I usually use Weibo when I am joking around and interacting with others. Because Weibo is more entertaining. Unlike AllFootball, they know football deeper, so it's easier to get into a debate. (R9, Male)

I have two Weibo accounts. One for other information and the other for Barcelona only...When I feel stressed, I like to view my Barca-only account, which brings me lots of pleasure and has become one of my relaxing activities. (R2, Female)

The results above reject the argument that sports fans use social media more for utilitarian information than hedonic values (Baldus et al., 2015). However, in this study, the number fans who use Weibo for entertainment motive is still relatively small. Indeed, in this research, respondents generally describe Weibo as fast and comprehensive rather than entertaining. The finding also supports the research of Billings et al. (2019), who found that Chinese fans prefer to seek information while US fans want to interact with others. In their research, Vale and Fernandes (2019) also found that Entertainment has low relevance to motivating fan engagement. Given the finding that Chinese fans do not use Weibo for entertaining primarily, it means that clubs should keep providing more utilitarian information for fans rather than developing too many entertaining attributes on social media.

### ***Passing time***

Passing time is defined as the motivation for using social media when users feel bored or have nothing to do. It is regarded as time filling action (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). In this study, interviewees generally said they use Weibo in their fragmented time when they are busy or bored. It's easy to "swipe away" on

Weibo without any purpose. For example:

Normally I swipe it when I feel bored, to kill time. On match day, I would like to use it more. Because it feels like someone is watching the game with you. (R2, Female)

I don't browse it with a particular intention. It's mainly in fragmented time like eating and before sleeping. (R7, Male)

In this research, although nearly half of respondents mentioned that they use Weibo for passing the time, the motive for doing so is relatively personal. On the one hand, respondents who said they often pass the time on Weibo reported they are too busy to browse sports news with intention. On the other hand, others revealed that the contents on Weibo are not always sufficient to meet their needs. For example:

... no specific motivations. I was just looking for a while, passing time. You know, the news from the official report like transfers and injuries comes quite late, if I want to know more, Weibo is not helpful. I then look for it on other platforms like AllFootball. (R7 Male)

However, fans generally show a satisfied attitude towards the official accounts of their favourite team. They think the official account is naturally serious and they do not need to post over-entertaining content. The previous study has shown that passing time could predict the positive attitude of fans towards their favourite team (Billings et al., 2019). Therefore, it means that fans who pass time by viewing team news may have higher-level tolerance to their team and stronger brand love.

### ***Brand love***

Brand love refers to a passionate and positive feeling about the brand (Albert et al., 2009). For football fans, it describes the intense love of fans towards their teams, and it may drive fans to seek more engagement with clubs. 4 out of 25 respondents expressed strong brand love in terms of their motivations for using Weibo. During the interview, when asking about their main motivations, some respondents hesitated before

replying. They seem to regard using Weibo for football as natural behaviour, and all their behaviours come from love. For example:

In fact, (using Weibo) brings me a certain joyfulness. It is mainly comes from supporting the team and the love towards Bayern (R7, Male)

Nothing else, it is just natural, like I love the team, so I want to know them. (R4, Female)

Previous studies suggest that *Brand Love* could predict stronger fan identity and higher-level engagement (Vale and Fernandes, 2018; Wallace et al., 2014). This study supports this argument because fans who express strong brand love regard social media engagement as one of the most important ways to support their team. For example:

Frequently interacting with the club you love is a way of supporting them. Clubs can see the comments from fans, as well as players. A simple word 'cheer up' or a 'like' is all encouragement to the team. If you are upset with the club, you can also comment on them. They may listen to your suggestions. That is your value as a fan. (R11)

The response could reflect that fans who display passionate brand love are more actively engaged with clubs. As a hedonic product, sport has an irrational and emotional nature; therefore, sports fans display a stronger emotional connection with their favourite team, and the emotion may be the primary driver of high-level engagement and a devotion to supporting behaviours such as social media interaction (Vale & Fernandes, 2018). In addition, sports also own the nature of collective identity, which means that providing fans with symbolic benefits can raise their brand love and further contribute to the club-fan engagement (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). In the study of Billings et al. (2019), the researchers found that Weibo performs better on arousal. This means that Weibo is a suitable platform for developing fan brand love for and an emotional bond with football clubs. The previous chapter has shown how clubs generate co-branding and cultural content to provide symbolic benefits. Therefore, it suggests that clubs should pay more attention to these two aspects and provide further types of symbolic benefits, as Keller (1993) mentioned the 'badge'

contents, further enhancing the fanship.

### ***Remuneration***

Remuneration refers to the need to search for consumption information such as tickets or jerseys and for rewards such as draws, gifts and give-aways. Only one respondent mentioned the remuneration gratification.

As he said:

I'm quite satisfied with the official account. They update a lot of news...and have interactive features like reward draws...I won a prize once. I was so happy. (R7, Male)

Although only one respondent mentioned the remuneration motive for using social media, this research would suggest that Chinese fans may be interested in remunerative content. Because the content analysis reveals that remunerative contents '*Reward draw*' '*Assets and products*' all received more responses than information posts such as cultural and historical contents. Remuneration is considered a driver of fans' consumption behaviours, contributing to the brand or online community (Muntinga et al., 2011). However, in their study, Tsai and Men (2017) demonstrated that Chinese social media users show a lower desire for remunerative benefits than American users. Some scholars also suggest that remunerative content may predict a lower level of social media engagement (Dolan et al., 2016; Pletikosa Cvijikjb & Michahelles, 2013). This means that the level of need for remunerative contents for Chinese users, especially football fans, should be researched in greater detail. It also suggests that clubs should regard providing economic benefits to fans as an auxiliary approach to improve their social media performance.

### **6.3.3 New emergent themes**

The previous chapter discusses the common motivations for social media use amongst football fans, according to the studies of Ko et al. (2005), Vale and Fernandes (2018), and Whiting and Williams (2013). This section discusses relatively new gratifications for using Weibo that may provide further insights into the motivations of Chinese fans. Four main motivations are discussed, as follows:

Habit

Professionality

Authenticity

Idol following

### ***Habit***

Habit was found to be one of the main gratifications for fans in this research. This category describes the reason for using social media out of a habit and without specific purposes. Respondents mentioned that they used Weibo for football just because they have used the platform before. So, they continue to use it for football. As they explained:

From the beginning, I used Weibo to interact with my friend. It was mainly for social contact. Then, I started using it to follow Man United (R12, Male)

There are no other special reasons for using Weibo to follow Bayern. Just because it is the biggest social media platform. (R6, Female)

These two quotes support the finding that habit is one of the main motivations for using Weibo (Billings et al., 2019). Given that Weibo has a massive user base (566 million, Q2, 2021) (Statista, 2021), the platform offers greater potential for sports teams to turn potential fans and other non-fans into loyal fans than on other social media platform. In addition, the study of Lewis et al. (2017) indicates that team-based social media accounts are more likely to develop stronger habitual use than fan-lead accounts. This means that a well-managed official account could perform better than UGC or KOL accounts, especially on Weibo.

### ***Professionality***

This category is a sub-motive of Information Seeking. It describes the need to seek more professional



information, such as opinions and exclusive news from commentators and journalists, exclusive historical information from clubs and other users, or analysis from key opinion leaders. In other words, it is mainly about “technical” information rather than simple news reporting or posting about players. As fans explained:

My motivation is not entirely about interaction. I quite like accounts like ‘Football fairy tale’, who usually post Man U history. I follow him not for interaction but for the information. In addition, I also follow ‘Boiled water no temper’ due to his quick reviews and clear logic. Furthermore, I also like ‘Football brings me running’. His analysis is professional. I watch him purely for the analysis. (R13, Female)

I like highlights and analysis – hardcore information. I often wonder how they can spot so many details, when I cannot. But those analyses are not from the official account. They are mainly posted by KOLs, like ‘Football brings me running’. (R2, Female)

Then, there are apps like AllFootball, which makes it easier to get news. So, news on Weibo is not the most important. Compared with them, analysis and fan opinions [on Weibo] are more attractive. (R 23, Male)

The extracts may reflect the fact that, with the challenge of other football-only social media platforms, the news sharing function of Weibo is no longer so important for fans. The underlying need for deeper information such as analysis and professional opinions is becoming more attractive to fans in China. In other words, it reflects the need for high-quality content. In addition, the interview responses also reveal the high level of recognition amongst fans towards KOLs and the content they provide. Fans tend to regard KOLs as their primary information source which supports the findings of the study from Tsai and Men (2017). In their study, these researchers found that Chinese SNS users tend to engage with content when both consuming (such as reading Text and comments, watching videos, and liking) and contributing (such as interacting, sharing, and recommending). Moreover, given the country’s collectivist cultural background, Chinese fans value more the opinions of their peers who are bonding with brands (ibid; Chu and Choi, 2011). For sports organisations, seeking cooperation with KOLs and UGC accounts in certain aspects, such

as influencing discourse, may positively impact upon their operations. There is another example that could provide support for this argument:

In the beginning, I started to use Weibo due to a KOL called Zhu Yi, because his information is very accurate. Through following him, I found more reliable KOLs like him. You can get any kind of information from them. (R 25)

### ***Authenticity***

This category refers to the need for reliable and authentic information. More than half (13 out of 25) of respondents said that they regard Weibo as a reliable source of information. The most-mentioned factor is that Weibo hosts the official club accounts. Those accounts make Weibo the first choice for some fans due to the reliability of its information. For example, as fans explained:

Weibo is the largest social media [platform] in China. Although there are other social media platforms, they don't have the official stamp ... I have also used other platforms...but I still like Weibo. After all, it hosts the official account, and information is reliable. (R15, Male)

Because I think the official account is authoritative. I don't need to worry whether the information is true or fake. Because I think messages from other media platforms are not always accurate. (R19, Female)

Findings in this study reveal the deeper motives for Information Seeking amongst fans, rather than solely focusing on the different motive types as previous U&G studies have done. This underscores the fans' need for authentic and authoritative information and their high level of trust in official accounts. As mentioned earlier, China is regarded as a horizontal collectivist culture (Sivadas et al., 2008), which means that Chinese social media users may have more robust social ties with others, not only personal ties such as friendships but also other relationships such as peers or brands (Tsai & Men, 2017; Men & Muralidharan, 2017). It is suggested that strong social ties positively predict a high level of social media engagement, especially with

the brand's official page (Men & Tsai, 2013). Therefore, given the fact that Weibo is a Chinese-only social media platform and hosts the official accounts, the platform remains attractive to football fans and is a competitive platform for organizations who wish to open accounts on Weibo or enter the Chinese market.

### *Idol following*

This category refers to the gratification gained from following the team or single athlete as an idol. 4 out of 25 respondents described their main motivation for using Weibo in terms that suggest idol following. For example:

On the one hand, I use Weibo to find information about Barcelona. On the other hand, the main reason I use it is to follow my idol. You could say that the primary reason that I browse Barça Weibo is for Luis Suarez. (R3, Male)

My hobby is following stars. From my perspective, following a team is very similar to following a celebrity. Weibo is an excellent environment for following idols, so I like it and get used to the feeling. (R16, Male)

The idol following mentality motivates football fans to use Weibo and influences their gratifications and other behaviours for social media consumption. For example, as R3, a fan of Luis Suarez mentioned:

I care more about match news because I want to see whether the player that I love has scored or not...I feel happy if he scores but upset if he does not...I only interact with content about Suarez. Because I watch football, became a Barça fan, and view Weibo all for him. (R3, Male)

The extracts above could reflect that some fans consume football to follow a particular star player, which is largely influenced by player-related information. This finding provides evidence for the study from Bodet and Chanavat (2010) who found that some Chinese fans are attracted by the star player first, and then develop support for the team. In addition, the finding also reveals that following specific athletes could

bring positive benefits for sports brands, such as enhancing engagements. Previous studies have observed the rise of the athlete personal brand in the online environment and its influence on the team social media performance (Su et al., 2020). Star player contents play a significant role in attracting all online interactions, including likes, comments, and shares (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Parganas et al., 2015). Therefore, it once again highlights the importance of promoting star players in the social media environment.

## **6.4 Background information as influential factors**

Although not one of the primary objectives of this research, the influences of fan background information on social media experiences are also presented here, for a comprehensive understanding of Chinese fan experiences. Two main factors: gender and relationship length (the length of time since becoming a fan), are considered. Gender has been regarded as a significant factor in influencing sports consumption behaviour (McDonald et al., 2018). Knowing the gender differences behind social media consumption could help marketers manage their social media more effectively. It has been suggested that the fan-team relationship length is an important determinant of brand loyalty and consumption (Karjaluoto et al., 2016). Thus, the relationship between gender/ relationship length and social media use; gender/ relationship length and self-identification; gender/ relationship length and motivation are explored in this section.

### **6.4.1 Gender influences on social media use and experience**

Amongst the 25 randomly selected respondents, there were eight female fans and 17 male fans. The fact that there are more male fans than female fans is common in football research (Theodorakis et al., 2012). The similarities and differences between the genders are as follows:

#### **Differences:**

Gender differences between male and female fans were found both in terms of motivations and content preferences. Chinese female football fans are more likely to comment, interact, and engage with

organisations actively, as 62% of female fans reported the gratification of using Weibo for Social Interaction, while the proportion amongst male fans is only at 23%. In addition, more female fans (37%) reported their main gratifications were Entertainment and Idol following, and female fans prefer the player-related content such as news and gossip. The findings provide evidence for the studies by Bodet et al. (2020) and Ridinger and Funk (2006) who found that Chinese female fans value more the experience factor such as connection with the brand, and they are more likely to be attracted by players. It means that clubs could attract more female fans by increasing online interaction and posting more personal athlete content.

Furthermore, the male fans assigned more importance to utilitarian information such as analysis, news, and team performance since they were motivated more by Professionalism (41% versus 5%) and Authenticity (29% versus 10%) than the female fans. This finding supports the research of Bodet et al. (2020) who found that Chinese male fans care more about pure sports-related information.

### **Similarities:**

Generally, the majority of male and female fans reported that they started to watch football or became fans due to the influences from close relationships (such as relatives, friends, or lovers). It supports the argument that the close relationships motivation (such as those with peers, family, and school friends) served as one of the most common motivations for sports fandom (Wann et al., 2004; Wann et al., 2008).

No gender difference was observed in terms of team identification. In a simple 0-10 team identification scale (0 for not a fan, 10 for most loyal fan), the average self-ratings are at 8.0 for male and female interviewees alike. This means that both Chinese male and female fans regard themselves as loyal fans. Sports fans' team identification has been suggested to play an important role in positively influencing fan loyalty, consumption behaviour, and the club-fan relationship (Gray & Wert-Gray, 2012; Park & Dittmore, 2014). This suggests that Weibo football fans show a high-level of team identification, and football organisations should use Weibo to keep stimulating fan identification with the team. However, this result is based on one question, and the sample quantities are very small. Future research into team identification should therefore focus on interrogating larger samples of Weibo football fans .

## 6.4.2 Relationship length as an influencing factor

Relationship length, or tenure, has been suggested as a strong predictor of fan consumption behaviour, fan loyalty and identification (McDonald et al., 2014; Karjaluoto et al., 2016). Interviewees were divided into three relationship length groups according to previous research (Karjaluoto et al., 2016) and fan responses explored in this study: less than or equal to 6 years; 7 to 12 years; more than 12 years. By investigating the relationship length of football fans, this study aims to explore whether tenure influences a fan's team identification, social media preferences, and motivations of social media consumption.

Groups	n
≤ 6 years	6
7-12 years	13
>12 years	6

**Table 22. Relationship length groups and quantities of respondents**

For self-identification, this research found that fans who have longer tenure tend to identify themselves as more loyal fans. On a simple 1 to 10 scale, fans with relationship length ≤ 6 years have average rates at 7.4; 7-12 years have rates of 8.2; more than 12 years have rates of 8.6. Given that high-level identification has been suggested to impact consumption (Gray & Wert-Gray, 2012; Karjaluoto et al., 2016), this result means that fans with longer tenure are more likely to have higher consumption behaviours and contribute more significantly to the brand revenue. For football clubs, investigating the relationship length of fans and devising strategies to serve the needs of long tenure fans may bring many benefits, directly or potentially. On the other hand, in this study, all interviewees from three tenure groups reported having previously purchased official club merchandise. Considering interviewees were selected randomly from the official Weibo post comment section, this may suggest that fans on Weibo who regularly engage with the club are more likely to consume, no matter how long the relationship length is.

In terms of their motivations, fans from the three tenure groups all reported information seeking as the

primary motivation for using Weibo. In addition, the study found that respondents with shorter tenure showed a higher-level tendency for social interaction. For example, half of the fans in the  $\leq 6$  years group mentioned interacting, while the proportion in the 7-12 group and  $>12$  groups was only at 38% and 16% respectively. The result provides evidence for the study conducted by Karjaluoto et al. (2016) who found that fans in a newer relationship show a high-level of identification and are more easily influenced by brand personality. This study could also support this argument, as more than half of fans in the  $\leq 6$  years group said they were motivated by Brand Love. Considering that team identification can positively predict the level of engagement, meeting the needs of younger tenure fans may generate greater engagement.

Moreover, fans with longer relationships tend to be motivated by Professionalism and Authenticity. They also prefer historical and cultural content while younger fans ( $\leq 6$  years) are more interested in match highlights and training. The rationale behind this finding is that younger fans may need more service-based content such as team information, but elder or loyal fans need more professional and experienced content such as match analysis (Mittal & Katrichis, 2000). This suggests that clubs should develop different strategies for fans of different relationship lengths.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This chapter discussed how football fans interact with clubs on social media and the gratifications and motivations for their social media use. It addresses the central research question: ‘What are the experiences of Chinese fans regarding social media use and sports content consumption?’

For social media interactions, the quantitative content analysis and interviews both revealed that visual content was the most attractive type of content amongst fans. Increasing images and videos in social media posts could improve the competitiveness of a club’s social media strategy to attract the attention and engagements of fans. The finding partly supports Annamalai et al., (2021) who found that content vividness has a direct relation to fan interactions. But it is in contrast to their findings that high vividness content (posts with video) receives more shares and low vividness content (post with image) attracts more likes and

comments, this research found that Image generates more interactions than Video in all three types of interaction. A possible explanation for this is that an Image can be viewed and interacted with quickly whereas Video needs more time to watch (Annamalai et al., 2021). Consequently, it could be argued that the frequent use of Image by sport teams may result in better engagement than the wider use of Video or other types of content on Weibo.

In addition, similar to the findings from previous research (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018), it would appear that Chinese fans mainly care about product-related content such as match information, team performance, coach, and player news. Fans in the content analysis and interviews both showed significant interest in player-related content. This suggests that greater use of player posts and personal information could attract more engagement and interaction from fans and enhance fans' identification with the team, which supports Achen et al. (2020). The study also shed light on the importance of non-product-related content. For example, it reveals that historical and cultural content generates significant interactions and attracts satellite fans for European clubs in the Chinese market, while also helping Chinese clubs to enhance fan identification. This finding supports the studies of Wallace et al. (2011) and Anagnostopoulos et al., (2018) that off-field information can enhance the connection between fans and their club and contribute to the online branding performance. The qualitative interview results show that fans appreciate historical content and actively seek it out themselves. This suggests that although NPRA content does not generate as many interactions as PRA content, it indeed has the potential to influence fans' perceptions and to enhance their sense of identity (Keller, 1993). The more Shares received from NPRA than PRA content provides support for this argument since Share is regarded as the action that fans use to elevate their identities (Berger, 2014). Therefore, although PRA content can help brands garner interactions, NPRA content should also be valued for its ability to influence the perception of fans.

This study also found that many Chinese fans are attracted by reflective and professional information such as match analyses and opinions. As discussed by a number of scholars (Tsai and Men, 2017; Chu and Choi, 2011; Sivadas et al., 2008), the collectivist cultural background in China influences the desire amongst fans to seek the approval and recognition from peers and others. This suggests that providing professional information can encourage the identification and recognition of fans. It also suggests that seeking the



cooperation of KOLs may be beneficial to clubs to develop further the relationship with fans and increase engagement.

When considering fans motivations for social media consumption, *Seeking information* served as the primary motivation for browsing on Weibo. This supports the study by Tsai and Men (2017) that Chinese fans show a high-level of engagement in content consumption. Fans not only look for regular news, images, and player-related information but also seek out professional and exclusive information. In addition, the majority of fans continue to use Weibo due to the authenticity brought by official accounts and other reliable sources. In their study, Li and Scott (2020) explained the news production process of sport misinformation on Chinese digital media environments and noted that the fast-growing self-operated media has exacerbated the distribution of misinformation, particularly in the area of sport. This means that fans may be eager to access a steady and trustworthy information source, and the official accounts of sport teams on Chinese digital platforms may play a more important and trustworthy role than ever. This in turn suggests that adding official accounts to different platforms, or otherwise increasing their official presence may help to attract more fans and enhance the fan club relationship.

Gender and tenure differences are also revealed in this study. Generally, male fans are more interested in analytical, historical, and cultural content, while female fans focus more on player information. These results support the study of Bodet et al. (2020) about Chinese football fans. This further suggests that a more elaborate social media strategy that targets different types of content according to gender could further improve the branding performance of brands. Additionally, the research revealed that longer tenure fans tend to identify themselves more strongly as loyal fans and show more interest in professional content, while newer fans show more Brand love and tend to interact with their teams more frequently. This result means that, attracting news fans should be a priority task for brands if they wish to garner more interactions than before, while providing exclusive and professional information is more important to maintain a strong relationship with existing fans.

In the next chapter, a comprehensive conclusion of the whole thesis is presented, and the major contributions of this research are discussed.



# **Chapter Seven: Conclusion**

## **7.1 Introduction**

The aim of the current research is to explore how social media was used by professional sport brands related to branding purposes, and how sport fans were motivated to use social media, particularly in the Chinese context. Building on the findings and discussions set out in previous chapters, this concluding chapter sets out to provide a summary of the main findings and to further examine whether the research questions have been answered. This chapter also aims to identify the limitations of this research as well as to suggest possible directions and opportunities for future research.

This chapter is organised into three main sections. The first section presents the primary findings of this research such as the football clubs' content and engagement strategies and seeks to further answer the research questions. The second section identifies the main contributions and significance of this thesis from both the theoretical and managerial perspectives. The final section discusses the limitations of this research and provides suggestions for future researchers and possible new research opportunities.

## **7.2 Main research findings**

### **7.2.1 Visual and essential: the significant role of visual and product-related contents**

One of the main purposes of the current research has been to explore how social media was used by football clubs, and further understand the perceptions of managers on the potential benefits and issues surrounding their strategies in the Chinese market. By interviewing communication managers and analysing their social media homepages, this research has examined what types of posts clubs value most and what content and brand attributes used by clubs, as well as how communication managers perceive the role of Weibo and

what objectives they wish to achieve through their social media strategies.

The research provides firm evidence that visual contents, including Image and Video, are the most attractive and vital social media contents for football clubs. In Chapter 4, the interview results revealed that football clubs generally prefer to use visual posts to generate interest in their posts. Managers believe that the use of Image and Video posts can boost large responses from fans, which supports the study of Annamalai et al. (2021). In addition, given the increasing prevalence of short video platforms in recent years, managers regard video as the most important form of content in their strategy, and all have plans to launch an official presence on the short-video platforms.

The statistical analysis further revealed that video posts generate more interactions or responses from fans than other post types, thus indicating that uploading more videos can result in more interactions. The finding provides support for the research of Annamalai et al. (2021), who found that Video generates more Shares. It is also in stark contrast with the study of Kim et al. (2015), who propose that Image can attract a greater number of responses. This may reflect that Chinese football fans assign more importance to video posts because of the influence of social media short video trend since 888 million, 88% of Chinese Internet users are also short-video platform users (The State Council, 2021).

The finding also indicate that football social media content is embracing the short video era. This finding supported relevant studies, which have shown that although short-video social media platforms are part of a relatively new trend, they nonetheless have a strong capability to attract users, form a new community and influence the brand-fan relationship (Xie et al., 2019; Wang & Wu, 2021). This finding also sheds light on the short-video research domain and suggests that scholars could conduct further research into use of these platforms for sport branding. A particular area of focus could be to explore to what extent user-generated-content on short video platforms could enhance the co-creation value between users and brands, and thereby contribute to the improvement of customer-based brand equity (Xie et al., 2019).

In addition, this research indicated the primary role of product-related content since it attracts the most of interactions. This research investigated what content types and brand attributes are promoted by clubs and

what types of content fans are most interested in. Interview results in Chapter 4 revealed that clubs generally use social media to deliver the 'essential' contents. There is a great deal of literature focusing on the opportunities that social media presents to engage and interact with fans (Abeza & O'Reilly, 2014; Achen, 2015; Thompson et al., 2018; Meire et al., 2019; Pronschinske et al., 2012). However, this research found that the football clubs still regard providing their fans with essential team information, such as match previews and highlights, as the primary role of social media. Managers all expressed that first team news is the most essential part of their content strategy. This finding suggests that information distribution still forms a major part of consumption typology, at least for football clubs. This conclusion is also in line with the recent study of Achen et al. (2020), who found that Twitter is used more for information dissemination. According to Keller (1993), from the branding perspective of football clubs, the updating of first-team news and player news means providing brand experiential benefits and is a reflection of product-related attributes.

The content analysis in Chapter 6 further revealed the underlying needs of fans for product-related attributes (PRA), including team news, game information, and player and coach news. This means that the social media strategies of clubs show a strong congruence with the demands of fans. This analysis showed that PRA content attracts more interactions than other types of content, and the emphasis on different types of PRA contents significantly influences the number of interactions. This highlights the importance of PRA content and suggests that clubs can improve their branding performance through the effective management of their content strategy. This result supports the studies of Anagnostopoulos et al. (2018) and Parganas et al. (2015), who demonstrated the prevalence of product-related attributes on Twitter and Instagram. By extending the scope to the Chinese context and combining it with previous studies, the research also corroborates the findings of Bodet et al. (2020) that organisation-induced content (on-field aspects, first-team news etc.) are the most significant brand attraction factors for Chinese football fans. In addition, the effective use of PRA content can contribute to fan recognition and opinion aggregation since it was found to attract significantly more likes and comments than NPRA content. Moreover, the interview results highlight the need of fans for professional information, such as the analysis of on-field tactics and other commentary. This reflects the underlying needs of fans for more high-quality and vivid content (including video and image) since such content is otherwise only available in the form of video on TV. Therefore, the current research suggests that product-related attributes and content form the most important types of post

and should be regarded as the priority in clubs' communication strategy, particularly in China.

In a short summary, the results above indicated the fact that Weibo can be used by clubs to manage their online presence, increase the engagement with fans and finally contribute to improve their brand image. It also indicated that, Weibo serves as an effective channel for fans to consume the product, which is the football first team information (essential and product-related attributes). Thus, it can be argued that clubs should regard providing essential contents with fans as the primary task in their social media management. Considering the attractiveness of visual contents, a 'visual and essential' strategy is suggested for professional football clubs for better social media performance.

On the other hand, the importance of non-product-related attributes (NPRA) is also highlighted in this research. Interview results in Chapter 4 reveal that managers regard Weibo as not only a channel for disseminating information to fans but also the best platform to attract new fans. For instance, European clubs try to connect with Chinese fans by tweeting localised content, and Chinese clubs tend to connect with city culture to enhance fan identification. The content analysis further revealed that NPRA generates nearly 40% of interactions. Content about a club's history, active interaction, reward give-aways and engagement with celebrities were all shown to be an effective way of encouraging fan interaction. The finding provides support for the study of Keller (1993) who suggested that NPRA is usually linked with the symbolic benefits of brands, which connect with the needs of consumers for exclusivity, fashionability and prestige. Furthermore, one of the most significant findings to emerge from this study is that NPRA content plays a crucial role in expanding brand awareness as more Shares were generated from NPRA than PRA content. This is particularly important in the Chinese context and on Weibo since previous studies about Chinese sports fans have suggested that Weibo is a better platform in terms of arousal and positively correlated with positive behavioural intent (Billings et al., 2019). Therefore, this suggests that the use of NPRA content can generate more exposure for the brand and as well as attracting new potential fans.

In terms of the fans experiences, the interview results show that Chinese fans have significant interests in NPRA content, such as historical and exclusive content. Historical content is regarded as an important way of enhancing fan identity and a sense of belonging to the club (Kerr & Gladden, 2008). This research found

that some fans discussed actively researching club history on the internet, even in the library, which revealed the underlying needs of some loyal fans to know more about their team. Thus, it seems crucial that clubs talk about their history with their Chinese fans. The findings reported in Chapter 6 also shed new light on the fan need for exclusive content. Previous studies have shown that fans appreciate exclusive club content such as behind-the-scenes and community service information (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Gibbs et al., 2014) because it is not easy to access from other sources. Providing this type of content makes fans feel that clubs value them and further contribute to the fan's identification with the club and sense of belonging (Gibbs et al., 2014). Therefore, although PRA content can attract more engagement, clubs should pay equal attention to the use of NPRA content to achieve different goals. This also suggests that a multi-content strategy is necessary for clubs if they wish to develop a successful social media strategy.

The current research also provides insights into the knowledge and perceptions of football clubs with regards the role of Weibo. The interview results revealed that after years of development Weibo still served as the primary social media platform in the Chinese market for football clubs, even in the face of strong competition from short video platforms such as Douyin. Clubs that use Weibo generally aim to expand their brand awareness, improve the brand image, and enhance and maintain their relationships with fans. The large user base, two-way communication, and a well-developed sports commercial environment maintain Weibo's competitiveness compared to other platforms. For instance, compared to some sport-only and football-only platforms, the large user base can help clubs to attract new fans and expand their brand awareness. In addition, this research also highlighted managers perceptions of short videos and short video platforms such as Douyin (Chinese version of TikTok). The interview results revealed that football clubs were adjusting their social media strategy to embrace the short video trend. Communication managers generally recognise the competitiveness of Douyin. For example, the Bayern manager thinks Douyin can help them to expand the coverage and deliver their content to more people. Therefore, although some managers mentioned that Weibo is losing users, this research does not argue that short video platforms should supplant the role of Weibo for football clubs. Short video platforms are still insufficient in providing diverse contents to meet the needs of fans. Particularly, considering the investment of human resources on video making, short video platform is still not the most cost-effective option for football clubs to run their social media business.

### **7.2.2 Removing and building: the strategy of engaging with fans**

This research also set out to investigate and gain a better understanding of the social media engagement strategy of football clubs. Previous research has investigated how sports clubs engage with fans mainly through the quantitative analysis of social media posts (Achen et al., 2020; Annamalai et al., 2021; Wang, 2020; Meire et al., 2019). The current research is the first study that comprehensively investigates football clubs' engagement strategy through the qualitative interview approach and from the perspective of social media managers. It reveals the perceptions and understanding of clubs' communication managers about how they design interactive activities, produce attractive content, and manage their brand presence to attract fans and enhance the club-fan relationship. A general conclusion of the engagement strategy is that clubs try to remove the barriers between and build connections as much as possible between them and their fans. Localisation, constructing the personality and direct connection all reflects the strategy of clearing cultural or other informational barriers between the club and fans, and the efforts on building connections with fans for more engagements.

The interview results indicated the importance of localisation and extended the body of sport internationalisation literature (Hinson et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2017; Cho et al., 2012; Chanavat & Bodet, 2009; Bodet et al., 2020). This revealed that localised content plays a crucial role in engaging with fans and improving the club-fan relationship. For instance, professionals should keep focusing on and designing content for festivals, particular in the context of China, as the country has a long history with many traditions. More importantly, localisation of content makes fans feel the club is standing with them and they are part of the club, which can enhance fans' psychological identification and the sense of belonging. The study revealed an excellent example from Bayern Munich, who supported people during the coronavirus pandemic in Wuhan on Weibo which received significant attention in the wider media. Thus, it is important to note that clubs should actively attend local social events if they wish to integrate well in the Chinese market. In addition, this research also explored the localisation strategy of local Chinese clubs. Interview results showed that Chinese clubs tend to regard social media as a promotional platform where they can combine their online content with offline activities. The O2O activity has been suggested as a way to



significantly expand brand awareness and enhance fan relationships (Watkins, 2020). Therefore, clubs should notice the approach and see it as an additional branding avenue. In addition, this research also shed light on the importance of co-branding with local companies or institutions. Co-branding with local brands can help clubs expand their brand awareness and attract more fans (Frederick & Patil, 2010). For sports clubs, especially those international brands, such partnerships can positively influence the symbolic and functional perception of local fans regarding the club, which means it can be an effective approach to enhance the club-fan relationship, particularly in the long term (Yu et al., 2020; Bodet et al., 2020).

The research also indicated that a lively brand personality is necessary and effective for professional clubs improving their social media performance in the Chinese market. Clubs generally try to develop a lively and entertaining personality on Weibo. One relevant study has suggested that the emphasis on harmony, friendship and happiness of East-Asia cultural values means that a lively and friendly brand personality can attract greater engagement (Chu and Sung, 2011). This suggests that clubs should use lively mode of speech and make greater use of memes to present themselves in more relaxed manner. In addition, promoting the brand culture is also revealed as one of the primary ways for clubs to attract fans and enhance their brand image, with several managers suggesting that the connection with city culture and promotion brand value can enhance fans' positive impressions.

Social media provides the opportunity for brands to communicate directly with fans. Thus, the active interaction is proved as a powerful tool for football clubs to connect and enhance the relationship with fans. First, the study revealed the importance of direct interaction with fans. The interview results from the managers in Chapter 5 and the fans in Chapter 6 suggest that direct conversations with fans can help clubs collect fan opinions, enhance fan identification, and build brand loyalty. Second, the research highlighted that clubs should value their relationship with large fan organisations as those groups can provide more qualified and valuable feedback to clubs. In addition, the research revealed that indirect interaction (communicating with KOLs and UGCs) may be a double-edged sword for clubs. Good cooperation between UGCs and brands can enlarge the brand awareness and attract more potential fans; however, UGCs who have inconsistent values may negatively influence the brand image of the club.

On the other hand, the research indicated the fact of strong competition on social media management among football clubs. One of the most significant findings from the discussion of interview results in Chapter 5 was that managers expressed a concern that since most clubs have developed a similar and mature strategy, it is more difficult than ever to demonstrate the uniqueness of their club's brand. Indeed, social media is not in its early stage. Organisations know how to use this channel and have become increasingly competitive and professional in this competitive environment. As the managers explained, clubs not only need to develop a solid and comprehensive strategy but also promote their own brand style and brand presence in a unique way.

Importantly, the research clearly indicated that Weibo enables sport organizations to develop close relationship with fans.

### **7.2.3 All about the information: the uses and gratification of China fans**

This research sets out to explore how sport fans were motivated to use social media. The interview results revealed the uses and gratifications sought by fans and highlights that the content fan needed are generally aligned with the social media strategy of clubs. This finding provides firm evidence that fans primarily use Weibo to seek information. Fans typically prefer player-related content and first-team information such as transfer news, training videos and match highlights. This indicates that fans are not only seeking basic game information but also looking for a deeper attachment to the club, since previous studies have shown that promotion of individual players can help connect fans with the team (Achen et al., 2020). In addition, the research also highlights the importance of historical and cultural content promotion in the Chinese market, as a number of fans stated that such content could inspire a sense of honour, and they regarded as one of the most important ways to get to know their clubs. Earlier research has suggested that the history and traditions of a football club are more important than their wealth from the perspective of Chinese fans, as they tend to view cultural elements as the fundamental assets of a brand (Bodet & Chanavat, 2010). Since the results of content analysis demonstrated that historical content received significant interaction and engagement, the study suggests that Chinese fans have a strong interest in the history and traditions of clubs. Moreover, the study further revealed the interest in exclusive or behind the scenes content. As discussed in

Chapter 6, behind the scenes content embodies the experiential benefits or emotional benefits. The interest in such content means that fans wish to have a closer connection and attachment to the club. Therefore, it suggests that brands should try to provide fans with more experiential content.

Based on the Uses and Gratification Theory (U&G), the research identifies seven main motivations that Chinese fans have for using Weibo and contributes to the literature in terms of revealing four new emerging themes. First, the study identified Information Seeking as the primary reason that football fans use social media, which supports the findings of other authoritative research (Billings et al., 2019; Gao & Feng, 2016; Vale & Fernandes, 2018). Though other motivations such as social interaction act as auxiliary drivers, these play a supplementary role to Information Seeking in attracting fans to use Weibo. Thus, meeting the information needs of fans should be regarded as the most essential job of brands. Such result indicated a strong ability of Weibo in satisfying the informational need of sport fans, which can be argued that brands should recognize the importance of attracting fans by high-quality contents.

Second, the Social Interaction motivation is revealed as the second main reason to use Weibo. Fans use Weibo to interact with friends or peers, but more importantly, they wish to have more interactions with the team. This does not mean that clubs should chat with fans every day. According to the analysis in Chapter 6, Chinese fans expressed a desire for more organisation-produced content that would encourage them to participate in online discussions. Therefore, this requires clubs to create a communicative environment for fans, such as designing attractive online topics or initiating regular discussion forums.

Moreover, the research also extends the understanding of how different social media platforms are used by fans. Given the important role that Weibo plays for organisations in disseminating information and its primacy as an information-seeking platform for fans, rather than a tool for Social Interaction, this supports the idea that Twitter-like platforms like Weibo may be better suited for the sharing information. A recent study has shown that Twitter performs better than Facebook when it comes to information distribution and sharing but is weaker in terms of engagement (Achen et al., 2020). Furthermore, this suggests that Weibo may be more suitable for expanding the brand coverage and exposure than maintaining a strong fan-club relationship. Clubs should use this feature to maximise their branding performance on Weibo.

This research also shed new light on particular motivations that have rarely been noted in previous studies.

Four main motives are concluded from the interview results:

**1) Habitual use.** In the qualitative interview, the research found that several interviewees remarked on their habitual use of Weibo, which supported the study of Billings et al. (2019), who found that Chinese users particularly show strong habitual intentions. Habitual use implies that fans check their homepage or timelines on Weibo regularly. Thus, it illustrates that Weibo own the ability to attract users for constant using. Such constant using means that clubs have more opportunity to get the brand exposed. Therefore, increasing the updating frequency of their posts can expand their brand awareness to fans and enhance the brand presence.

**2) Need for professional information.** The data reveals that some fans have strong needs for authoritative professional information (such as match analysis and commentary). The needs for this type of exclusive or high-quality content is usually linked with the needs for brand experiential benefits (Keller, 1993), which can satisfy the experiential needs of fans such as the cognitive stimulation. However, this does not mean that managers should produce the professional information to satisfy the demands of fans. Since the production of such content such as match analysis is costly and time-consuming, clubs should seek to provide the experiential benefits based on their own brand style and production ability. As Keller (1993) suggests, “marketers should decide on the core needs and wants of consumers to be satisfied by the brand.”

**3) Authenticity.** A number of fans are use Weibo as their primary news source because they regard the information provided on official club accounts as official and authentic. The previous chapter discussed that the proliferation of sport misinformation in China, which may influence the need for a reliable information source, which concurs with the research of Li and Scott (2020). From the cultural perspective, Chiang (2014) has shown that their collectivist and hierarchical social background encourages Chinese people to seek out official sources of information. This suggests that the credibility of information can be the primary role in attracting Chinese fans. It also illustrates the role of social media is gradually replace the function of traditional media in terms of the authenticity perspective. Such result indicates that an

official account can be naturally attractive to fans. Thus, clubs should try to promote the attribute. Brands those have not open an account on Weibo also should consider this opportunity.

**4) Idol-following (or idol craze).** A strong affection or interest in a particular star player has been found to be one of the main drivers for using Weibo amongst a segment of fans. This provides supporting evidence for the research of Bodet and Chanavat (2010) who showed that some Chinese fans follow a team due to their love for a particular star player. This further suggests that enhancing the promotion of players can contribute to branding performance, which also supports the argument of Su et al. (2020).

#### **7.2.4 Foreign versus local: the differences between European and Chinese clubs**

Throughout the research, the differences in social media strategy between European and Chinese clubs were consistently noticed and noted. The analysis reveals that European clubs typically have more mature strategies than Chinese clubs, as they have clearer goals and more developed online content activities. They employ Weibo as the primary channel not only for disseminating information but also to maintain and improve their relationship with fans. As for Chinese clubs, they also use Weibo primarily to disseminate information to fans; however, they pay greater attention to connecting offline and online activities, which can further link the brand with local culture.

By comparing the differences, the research argues that increasing updating frequency on social media can be crucial for obtaining fan interactions and improving branding performance. According to the content analysis data, European clubs were found to update Weibo posts more frequently than their Chinese local counterparts. The interviews also revealed that European club fans show showed greater satisfaction with their clubs in this regard, which means that posting sufficient content is one of the important factors to attract fans. The finding develops the study of Aichner (2019), who noted that the frequency of social media post is positively related to the level of user engagement. Additionally, the data in this research further revealed that Chinese clubs generally update their post with a lower frequency. A possible explanation provided by one social media manager (See 4.3.3) is that Chinese clubs are usually government-controlled and publicly funded, which means that they do not need to invest so much in their social media and branding

operations (Peng et al., 2019; Ma and Kurscheidt; 2020). Given the rarity of this situation in world football, future research could focus on this aspect in greater detail to further examine the influence of public funding on branding performance.

In addition, the research provides strong research evidence demonstrating the importance of social media interaction (Achen, 2017; Filo et al., 2015;). More online activities and more direct interactions generate more positive fan comments and greater engagement for the European clubs than Chinese clubs. In other words, the strategies of European clubs focus on and are designed to encouraging engagement and improve the club-fan relationship, whereas the Chinese clubs seem to simply focus on satisfying the informational needs of fans. Thus, it supports the argument of Achen (2020) that a strategy designed with the intention to encouraging engagement typically results in more interactions, which suggests that in addition to the basic requirement of information provision via social media, clubs should try their best to build the relationship with fans and enhance engagement, regardless of whether they are a local or an international brand. The analysis has also revealed that Chinese clubs are generally wary of adopting an over-entertaining style, fearing that as the official channel this influence their brand image negatively. Although such concerns may be helpful in protecting the brand, clubs should seek an effective way to balance the risks and benefits as soon as possible since social media branding is a highly competitive environment which is rapidly evolving in a new video-dominated era.

Interestingly, this research also recognized the importance of youth camp content. Football clubs in previous literature rarely mentioned this content category; however, the analysis of fan interviews in this study shows that Chinese fans greatly appreciate such efforts as it enables them to perceive the future of the team and know more about the young players. Similar to the player-related content and behind the scenes content, reports from the youth camp also provide an extra channel to connect with fans, which further enhances the attachment and emotional bond to the brand (Thompson et al., 2017). Therefore, to increase fan engagements and maintain a strong relationship, this suggests that clubs should try to use more of this type of content to establish more emotional or experiential bonds with fans. Such bonds can enrich the experiences of fans on social media using, which further contribute to the improvement of interrelation between clubs and fans.

## **7.3 Contributions**

This research is significant because it is the first to comprehensively investigate and combine the football club social media strategy, engagement strategy, and the fan experiences as a whole. As previous research suggested, the sports media research mainly focuses on three major dimensions: the information production, the content types, and the media-audience relationship (Kinkema & Harris, 2002). Through the investigation of social media strategies of football clubs, their engagement strategies, and the fan experiences, this research is able to draw a number of theoretical and managerial inferences.

### **7.3.1 Theoretical contribution**

By examining the social media strategy of football clubs, and the interaction data of social media posts, this research adds deeper insights of social media use and relationship marketing to the existing literature. From the communication perspective, this research further explored the role and capacity of social media.

This research extended the understanding to the biggest Chinese social media platform, Weibo, and found that it is primarily employed as an information dissemination tool by football clubs. Weibo enables organizations to manage their contents with high-level of freedom. Multiple types of post functions are also provided by the platform, in which enables organizations to produce multiple contents for attracting fans. In addition, in the investigation of club content strategy, this research further develops and differentiates the Team Association Model (TAM) based on previous studies (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Parganas et al., 2015; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). It extends the adoption and understanding of this model on a new platform and suggests that the model should be examined on additional platforms and research be extended to other sports in the future.

Focusing on the social media perspective solely, this study found that Weibo performs well in terms of satisfying the habitual consumption needs of fans, which supports the study of Billings et al. (2019) and

indicates the habituality in social media daily use. As discussed earlier, the habitual use means that clubs should update their post frequently to increase their chance of brand exposure. However, respondents in this research did not display the arousal motivation which Billings et al., (2019) found in their study that suggested that Weibo is better for arousal. This could be because fans in this research primarily use Weibo for functional purposes such as satisfying their informational needs or social interaction needs, rather than their emotional needs. Moreover, the study indicated that Weibo plays a vital role in satisfying the information needs for fans. The finding supports the study of Li et al., (2019) who revealed that Weibo sport users mainly use the platform to satisfy their content gratifications. Their research also revealed that Weibo sport fans tend to engage or interact with their favourite teams when their informational needs are filled. Their argument is also supported by this research, since several fans in this research said that their intention behind interaction is promoted by the content they see. This result suggests that clubs should consider producing more content for Weibo than other platforms in their overall social media strategy, to satisfy the fan informational needs and maximise the Weibo branding performance. Furthermore, this study shows that Weibo can provide an ideal environment for co-branding between brands and brands, and demonstrates the value co-creation potential between KOLs, UGCs and sport brands. The kind of social media crossover, as it is called by managers, has been suggested as an effective way to enhance fan loyalty and engagement (Thompson & Malaviya, 2013; Boardman et al., 2019). Thus, the result suggests that social media platform is no longer restricted to the domain of communication, but also as a business tool in the marketing area to create opportunities for brands to co-create value. Considering that fans use Weibo mainly for seeking information, and given the fact that Weibo enable fans to reply their favourite teams, it indicates that social media serves as an effective channel for constructing the interrelationship between organizations (brands) and fans (consumers).

From the branding perspective, this research indicates the influences of PRA and NPRA. The analysis supports previous studies (Parganas et al., 2015; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018) regarding the role of brand attributes by concluding that the use of product-related attributes can predict greater engagement and that non-product-related attributes are related to brand perception and identification. The study also indicates that the use of different brand attributes and different post types are both positively correlated to the interactions from fans, which highlighted the importance of developing a multi-content and multi-post



strategy. Previous work on branding and content strategies has mostly employed quantitative approaches to investigate the content types and responses (Thompson et al., 2018; Achen, 2015; Kim & Song, 2018; Achen et al., 2020; Annamalai et al., 2021). This research contributes to knowledge by conducting a mixed methods analysis to further explore how clubs manage their content. It offers significant insights in terms of the opinions of social media managers and highlights the usefulness of mixed methods for future researchers. Moreover, compared to previous studies that focused only on one or two clubs, this study extends the sample size to five clubs and makes a comparison between European and Chinese clubs' strategies within the Chinese market. This sample size enriches the understanding of the branding strategies of international brands in the satellite market and local brands in the domestic market.

This research also contributes to the literature on relationship marketing showing that social media engagement strategy is about not only the use of different categories of content as previous research has focused on (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Meire et al., 2019) but also the other operations that are difficult to explore through content analysis, such as maintaining the relationship with KOLs and the use of platform services. It further highlights that a qualitative analysis of social media strategy can provide deeper insights and reveal other branding approaches. However, the research found that although clubs generally designed their content to encourage greater engagement, the attention and interactions of fans is still primarily focussed on team-related and on-field content. This is because the designed engagement content is still not at a sufficient level on Weibo or not attractive enough for fans. It is may also because the features of the Weibo platform are more suitable for information sharing than interaction.

The current study also contributes to the growing body of Uses and Gratification research. First, the exploratory analysis based on previous studies (Vale & Fernandes, 2018; Whiting & Williams, 2013) provides firm evidence that the seven-motivation model provides a reliable structure to explore fan motivations. Most of the variances can be explained within this structure. Second, the results provide a further understanding of Chinese sports fans that supports the main argument of U&G literature that sports fans use social media primarily to seek out information, particularly on Twitter and Twitter-like platforms (Billings et al., 2019; Gao & Feng, 2016). Third, the findings reveal four new motivations to be included in U&G research, namely: Habit, Professionality, Authenticity and Idol Following. It contributes to further

understanding the motivations of sports fans for using social media, particularly in the context of China and the Weibo platform. Finally, prior to this study, the majority of U&G research employed quantitative methods to analyse fan gratifications and motivations (Gao & Feng, 2016; Vale & Fernandes, 2018; Tsai & Men, 2017). In conducting the qualitative interview approach, this study identified several new motivation themes and shed light on the ability of qualitative methods to explore thoughts and opinions in greater depth. This suggests additional qualitative U&G research is needed to further enrich our understanding of fan experiences, especially in the rapidly evolving social media environment.

### **7.3.2 Managerial contribution**

This research has practical implications for sports brand marketers on how to develop a strong social media content strategy. Given that the primary role of Weibo is for information sharing and information seeking, designing and managing a competitive content strategy appears to be essential for clubs who want to build their brand presence in China. Generally, this research confirms the importance of both product-related content for attracting greater engagement, and non-product-related content for influencing fan identification. This implies that managers should carefully choose the appropriate strategy by emphasising the aspect of content that matches their branding objectives. However, the differentiating of PRA and NPRA does not mean that brands should choose one but ignore the other. A relatively balanced and comprehensive strategy can be more competitive. To be more specific, and considering the greater percentage of interactions with vivid content, this implies that clubs should put greater investment into producing more picture and video content, particularly given the prevalence of short video. More video content may increase the competitiveness of clubs on Weibo. In addition, the fact that Chinese fans assign a great interest in player-related information suggests that clubs need to pay more attention to showcasing their players. For example, social media managers can post more player training videos, on-field images, information about the daily life of players, or facilitate greater online interaction with the athlete's personal account. Such exposure is effective at attracting fans and encouraging stronger engagement. Moreover, as this and a previous study (Bodet & Chanavat, 2010) revealed, Chinese fans tend to value the club's historical and cultural context as an important part of its brand asset. Regular posts about the history and cultural elements of the club can potentially enhance fan identification and bring a sense of honour to the brand because it provides an

additional channel for fans to emotionally connect with their favourite team. For example, recalling legendary players, famous matches and derbies, or the symbolic teamwork, or the list of trophies all can be an effective way to showcase the brand. The research also reveals that Chinese fans have a needs for greater professional or technical content, such as post-match analysis or commentary. Such contents are usually traditionally delivered in the form of video on TV. However, it seems clear that Chinese fans show a growing requirement for this type of quality content, and social media managers should try to improve their content quality rather than simply information broadcasting.

Clubs should have a clear understanding of what their fans like and need, and then design a strategy that is tailored to the fan preferences and motivations rather than simply producing content that generates large interactions. For example, in the case of Beijing Guoan, the youth team content does not generate great engagement on social media; however, it was much appreciated by the fans who were interviewed in this research. This implies that content with a low-level of engagement does not necessarily mean it is invaluable. Content such as team history, youth camp, club slogan and values may have a significant long-term effect on brand loyalty. This also suggests that clubs should experiment with multiple kinds of content and find the most appropriate strategy for their brand.

This research provides strong empirical confirmation that brands should encourage fans to interact with their posts rather than passively waiting for responses. While it has been widely suggested that social media empowers users to be more active in online discourse, this research found that the desire for engagement amongst Chinese football fan still need to be encouraged, as many fans expressed a wish to see more organisation-lead interactions. It suggests that clubs should create opportunities for fans to interact with the brand or discuss with each other. For example, managers could provide a weekly discussion topic under their brand account or launch some small competition for fans to participate in, like making poems for the team. The research found that a number of fans use Weibo due to its maturity of community. This could be linked to previous arguments that Chinese fans tend to seek information from peers, friends, or professionals due to the strong role that collectivist culture has played in the country's development. This implies that brands should also create more opportunities for fans to interact with professionals. For example, social media managers could invite some famous commentators and journalists to chat with fans, as well as some

KOLs.

From the social media perspective, this research offers insights for social media managers on how to address the challenge of the short-video trend. While it is not the focus of this study the interview analysis revealed that some clubs have already embraced this new trend and are planning to open accounts on the new platforms at the same time as they improving their content offering on the current platform. This suggests that clubs who are still hesitating should notice this change in the social media landscape and take appropriate action as soon as possible. Because as professionals in this study mentioned, traditional social media platforms such as Weibo are already witnessing a decline in users due to increased competition from the short video platforms.

Taken as a whole, a key implication of this research is that clubs should try to build connections with fans as much as possible, whether through quality content or active engagement. For example, whether the club is providing behind-the-scenes content or conducting group chats with fan representatives, all these activities can be effective in encouraging further connections with fans. Such connections can make fans feel they are valued which then results in more interaction or greater long-term identification and loyalty. However, what should be noted here is that social media strategy is complicated and there is no universal standard to gauge what is good or bad because all brands have distinct objectives and brand images. For example, while it has been suggested that clubs should encourage and actively interact with fans (Achen et al., 2020), over-interaction may prove harmful to the image of some brands. Therefore, brands should acknowledge their objectives and brand style and carefully design their strategy to achieve their particular goals.

#### **7.4 Limitations, and the suggestions for future research**

Although this study has made many contributions to the existing body of literature, there are several areas of limitation that must be noted here. Responding to those limitations, further suggestions for future researchers are also proposed in this section.

A major limitation of this study is the methodological perspective. First, this research employed qualitative interviews to explore fans' motivations and gratifications of using social media. However, during the interview process, the researcher found that not all the respondents could precisely express or describe their experiences. Some of the interviewees need time to contemplate their responses or further guidance to help them to recall their motives. When considering the dynamic nature of social media and online practice, further ethnographic research is needed to constantly explore the feelings of fans and gain a more in-depth and precise analysis of fan motivations. A quantitative method such as a survey or mixed approach may also be helpful to enhance the results. Also, there are limitations in terms of the sample size. With regards the social media content, the selection of posts is limited by the time range of on-season content in one month. More off-season content should be analysed as it may reveal more diverse content management strategies when there is no regular match information, as suggested by Achen et al. (2020). In accordance with Wang (2020), this research also suggests that scholars could collect the post data from an entire season to gain a comprehensive understanding of clubs' branding strategies.

This research focused on three European clubs from different leagues and two local Chinese clubs. Although it compares the differences between such two regions, the variance that exists between clubs in their different national contexts are ignored. For the selection of fan interviewees, the sample size of 25 respondents is rather small. A larger size could provide more information. Additionally, this study did not assess the influence of educational level and age when selecting or discussing the background information of fans. Such factors may have a significant impact on fan experiences, which could be explored by future researchers.

An additional uncontrolled factor that should be noted here is the influence of the COVID pandemic on this study. During the interview, some fans said that they had increased the frequency of using social media due to the COVID and stay-at-home restrictions in China. Therefore, their motivations and gratifications may be different when compared to those in normal time. In addition, because of the travel restrictions, the majority of respondents were interviewed through video call or telephone. Thus, it missed the opportunity of closely observing interviewees when they were talking, which could have provided a deeper

understanding of their relationship with their clubs.

This research served as an exploratory study into the relationship between brand attributes and fan engagement. Therefore, the relationships between social media strategy and some other branding outcomes, such as fan loyalty, were not assessed. Although previous scholars have examined and explored this relationship, research in the context of China and Chinese social media is still limited. Thus, it is necessary to call on future researchers to pay greater attention to this aspect. Nonetheless, this research collected and analysed 2144 Weibo posts and data from 25 fan interviews to explore the content strategy, engagement strategy and the fan experiences. It is hoped that this data could provide support for future researchers who plan to focus on those topics.

As the main purpose of this research is to explore football clubs' social media strategies and fan motivations, it did not put great effort into examining the influence of cultural background on brands and fans. Throughout the study, issues of cultural influence were continually raised. For example, it was suggested that Chinese fans seek out authoritative information sources because of the collectivist cultural value. Therefore, exploring the cultural elements of brands and fans could contribute greater insights into sports branding and sports fans. In addition, while scholars had compared the differences between Chinese fans and fans of other nations as to why they are motivated to use different social media networks (Billings et al., 2019), social media is a dynamic rapidly changing environment and further comparisons should be made for deeper understanding Chinese fans and the role played by cultural influence. Moreover, as social media managers in this research were found to value the development of short-video strategies, studying how clubs manage their content on short-video platforms and fan motivations for using these platforms could provide a more comprehensive understanding of sports brand strategy and reveal more and newer insights into fan motivations.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

In the age of social media, how to use social media with the intention to manage the online image and

content, engage with consumers, and understand consumer needs have already been shown to be fundamental to the success of a brand. Through exploring the sports brand social media strategy and fan experiences, this research provides greater understanding regarding the ways in which football clubs operate their online business in one of the largest sports markets – China, and the fan needs and motivations. It sets out to conclude three major arguments: 1) Clubs acknowledge Weibo as the primary social media platform, they employ it mainly for expanding brand awareness and improving brand image, but some clubs still lack a specific objective and scientific design for their strategies; 2) Weibo plays a significant role in sports branding, its ability to disseminate information, foster engagements, and attract potential fans makes it a valuable platform to be researched by both scholars and professionals 3) satisfying the information needs of Chinese fans is a promising area for online branding since information seeking appears to be the foremost motivation for using social media, particularly for player-related, historical and cultural, technical and professional and behind-the-scenes content.

Given the limitations of this study, some positive suggestions are made for future research, such as expanding the sample size for a more precise exploration of brands social media strategy, evaluating and comparing the influence of cultural values for deeper understanding of Chinese fans, and employing a mixed research method to gain greater insights in to fan experiences have been raised. It is anticipated that these suggestions will be valued and have practical and theoretical implications for organisations and future branding research.

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# Appendix 1-Content analysis coding book

## Coding sheet

1. Club:
2. Date:
3. Post:
4. Fan response:

- Like
- Comment
- Share

5. Types of post:

Text	Image
Video	Vote
Link	Share

6. Product-related attributes:

Events' image	Team performance
Star player	Head coach

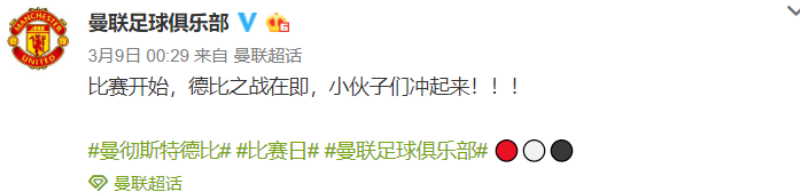
7. Non-Product-related attributes:

Interaction	Reward draw
Local events	Club's history and success
Assets and product	Call for action
Offline activities	Management
Club's culture and values	Brand mark
Sponsor or owner	

## Coding Guide

## 1. Post Types

- **Text:** text-only contents.



(e.g. )

- **Image:** contents with pictures



(e.g. )

- **Video:** contents with videos

(e.g.



巴塞罗那足球俱乐部

5月6日 22:43 来自 巴萨超话 已编辑

快看! 是新鲜会动的球员们  
时隔54天, 珍惜这来之不易的相见

巴萨超话 #ForçaBarça# 巴塞罗那足球俱乐部的微博视频



收藏 | 75 | 74 | 434

- **Vote:** vote for questions and selections



巴塞罗那足球俱乐部

5月3日 21:38 来自 微博 weibo.com

2005年5月1日, 梅西打入了他巴萨生涯正式比赛的首球。而就在那之后的两天, 另一名球员完成了他职业生涯的首秀, 你知道他是谁吗? 缘, 妙不可言

巴萨超话 #ForçaBarça# 巴塞罗那足球俱乐部的微博投票

以下哪位球员在2005年5月3日完成了职业生涯首秀?

苏亚雷斯	1514人
皮克	953人
法布雷加斯	1140人

3607人参与 还有2天结束

@巴塞罗那足球俱乐部 创建

分享我的投票观点

收藏 | 59 | 29 | 3715

(e.g.

*(On 01/05/2005, Messi got his first goal in his Barcelona life. Two days after that, another player finished his first match in his career. Do you know who is him? Destiny, so interesting*

*Q: Which players below finished his first match on 03/05/2005?*

- Luis Suárez
- Pique

□ Fabregas

- **Link:** contents with outside or inside link

(e.g. Inside Link

 **武汉卓尔职业足球俱乐部**   2019-10-14 16:43 来自 微博 weibo.com

发布了头条文章: 《远征 | 天津远征招募(非协会会员), 我们一起踏上征程! 》  
目 远征 | 天津远征招募(非协会会员), 我们一起踏...



☆ 收藏 | 5 | 5 | 17

**Outside Link**

 **曼联足球俱乐部**   2019-12-28 18:35 来自 微博 weibo.com +关注

还在一个人熬夜看红魔比赛? 曼联线下观赛活动来不来👉

1月11日深圳大中华交易广场, 曼联  诺维奇英超之夜等你👉

红魔传奇布莱恩·罗布森、韦斯·布朗亲临现场, 打造最火热的球迷派对🔥

数量有限, 点击链接即刻报名  [网页链接](#)

门票申请截止至1月1日, 还不赶紧冲冲冲👉

#曼联足球俱乐部#   



☆ 收藏 | 6 | 9 | 50

*“Watch Red Devil alone? Attending offline activity or not?*

*11, January, Great China Square, Shenzhen, Manchester United Vs Norwich, the Premier League night is waiting for you!*

*Click the link and join us!”*

- **Share:** share/forward from other accounts (shares from the previous own posts are not considered)



“What a wonderful birthday!”

## 2. Product-related attributes:

- **Events image:** contents about the competition, including game preview, game squad, match live and opponents.

(e.g. *Lewan scored twice! Bayern reversed 2-1! In the fight, Mueller scored for a header, and Lewan made a light kick against the offside to score the goal! # MiaSanMia #*)

(e.g. 🏆 # Getafe vs Barcelona #

📄 the squad list of game is released, Messi and Fati are absent due to injuries)

- **Team performance:** the match and off-match performance of team, including the team style, ranking, training pictures and videos

(e.g. *The final preparation before the game*

*Look these long legs! # MiaSanMia #*)

- **Star player:** news, performance, interviews, personal life, personal awards or other relevant information of highly recognizable players

(e.g. *Congratulations to captain @LeoMessi10 selected as FIFA Men's Player of the Year! 🏆🏆🏆 #fifa#*  
 ●● # ForçaBarça #)

- **Head coach:** interview and relevant news about head coach.

(e.g. 🗣️ Head coach Valverde interviewed:

⚽ "We had some difficulties at the beginning of this season, but now we are improving, and we are gradually achieving our goals.")

### 3. Non-product-related attributes

- **Interactions:** interactions-only contents with fans or other accounts such as other teams or organizations.

(e.g. Good morning Barsa fans! )

(e.g. Where do you think is the best place for new year holiday? #MiaSanMia#)

(e.g. Farewell! Wolf! @Wolverhampton)

- **Reward draw:** gift give away or draw information on Weibo for fans without any other information

(e.g. In the past year, thank @ 亚博体育官方微博 and most fans and friends for their support and companionship to Bayern Club! It's time for Thanksgiving to give back on Thanksgiving this week! Now follow @ 亚博体育官方微博, comment forward this Weibo and @ 3 friends, a little cutie can get Bayern Munich genuine jersey, and send 88 cash red envelopes for the other two cuties, by @Weibo official draw platform! # MiaSanMia # O lottery details)

- **Local events:** contents about local social events and local festivals.

(e.g. I wish the Red Devils fans who will work hard in the college entrance examination field to finally achieve satisfactory results!)

(e.g. 🍊 Devils, # 中秋 # Happy!

🍊 As long as the hearts are together, even the farthest distance is also a reunion. Where do you spend this Mid-Autumn Festival?

⚽ Take me home, United road, to the place I belong.)

- **Management:** The executive management of the club, including policy, objectives, incomes, player transfers and other related issues.

(e.g. [657.4 million euros! Bayern's total revenue hits a new high] In the past year, Bayern Munich once

again submitted a delightful answer...)

- **Sponsor or owner:** related information of sponsors and owners, also including guests such as famous people from other areas.

(e.g. 🚩 *National Derby invites mysterious guests to be officially announced!*)

😁 *He has a lot of knowledge, good writing skills and excellent ball comments.. He is @ 某 张佳玮! Next, Mr. Zhang will go to Barcelona to watch the national derby, and communicate with fans online. Want to see what Zhang Gongzi takes you to know, let us know below the comment!)*

- **Club's culture and values:** contents about culture and values of the club.

(e.g. *Today in 1968, our slogan #MesQueUnClub # was born! We are not just a team with shining stars; nor is it a stadium where dreams are intertwined; the goals scored on the court do not represent all of us; even all the trophies won in history are not completely represent our value.*

*Barcelona, not just a club!*

*MÉS QUE UN CLUB!)*

- **Brand mark:** the logo, colour, or mascot of club brand.

(e.g. *Red represents enthusiasm, symbolizes the flame, and represents our eternal Manchester United. #ManchesterDerby #Manchester United#)*

- **Call for action:** call for certain non-club-related or non-promotion related action.

(e.g. 🔥 *You vote, I vote, Barcelona laugh! @Weibo Sports Team Account annual selection, click the link to cheer me up 🙌*

(e.g. *The CSL annual best team vote started! Come on vote for Wuhan Zall! 🔥*)

- **Offline activities:** contents about club's offline activities such as in-stadium match watching and public welfare activities.

(e.g. *Beyond football and sports, Wuhan Zall cooperate with CSL, walking into a school for deafmutes in Wuhan ❤️*)

- **Club's history and success:** past success, records, legendary games and players, historical events of the team, as well as past data, score video and pictures.

(e.g. *Goal So easy!*

*Bayern data of the 2010-2019 #Bundesliga # shooter king! #Lewan # and #Muller# ranked 1st and 3rd)*

- **Assets and product:** promotion of related assets such as stadium, youth camp and football




academies; promotion of product of the club including jerseys, tickets, and other products.

*(e.g. The Double 12 Shopping Festival is coming, discounted jerseys, training clothes, peripherals, and winter clothing are all prepared, and when you consume over 900 RMB, there will be 120 cash return. It will make you enjoy the purchase at one time. Click quickly: [web link](#))*

*(e.g. Tomorrow morning, tickets are available! More seats will be increased! Be prepared!)*

*(e.g. On January 10th, Beijing time, the Asi Sports Event Expo and the 2020 First Sports Event Fair opened in Taiyuan, China. Bayern Taiyuan Football School participated as an invited institution.*

*Ruben Caspar, President of the Bayern Munich Club Asia Pacific, visited the scene and was invited to introduce the current development of the Bayern Taiyuan Football School and the club 's youth training in China at the forum.)*

*(e.g.  Today's Camp Nou wallpaper has arrived, please check it out. #Barca Super Topic#   #ForçaBarça #)*



# Appendix-2 Interview consent form (English & Chinese)



College of Arts  
Research Ethics

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE**  
**参与许可**  
**AGREEMENT TO THE USE OF DATA**  
**数据使用许可**

I understand that **Yue Wu** is collecting data in the form of **audio-recorded interviews** for use in an academic research project at the University of Glasgow.

我理解 武岳 将以 录音访谈 的形式收集数据，并适用于格拉斯哥大学的学术研究项目

This research project is about Chinese football fans' experiences of using Sina Weibo. By conducting the interview, this research aims to explore the social media (Weibo) strategies of football clubs, to further explore how do they engage with fans and what are the influences on fan experiences.

此研究项目关于中国足球球迷使用新浪微博的用户体验。通过本次采访，此研究旨在探索足球俱乐部的新浪微博使用策略，并且进一步探索球队是如何与球迷建立密切关系，以及球迷的用户体验。

In keeping with the University's obligations under the terms of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), participants retain the rights to access and objection with regard to the use of data for research purposes.

根据格拉斯哥大学《通用数据保护条例》(GDPR)，参与者保留查阅及反对使用资料作研究用途的权利。

1. Access requests and objections can be submitted via the UofG online proforma accessible at: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/dpfoioffice/gdpr/gdprrequests/#>. Right of objection applies where participants have reason to believe data has been misused or used for purposes other than those stated.

访问请求和异议可以通过 UofG 以在线形式提交，网址为：<https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/dpfoioffice/gdpr/gdprrequests/#>。如参加者相信资料被滥用或用作其他用途，则有反对使用的权利。

2. The fact that access and objection are formal procedures is not intended to intimidate participants into not raising issues, but rather reflects the fact the University is legally required to respond to requests and address concerns.

访问数据和反对使用是正式程序，这并不是为了恐吓参与者不要提出问题，而是反映了根据法律要求，大学会对所有意见作出反应并解决。

3. Anyone submitting a request is required to provide proof of their identity. Again, this is not intended as dissuasive, but rather reflects the University's duty to guard against fraudulent approaches that might result in data breaches.

任何提交申请的人都必须提供身份证明。再说一次，这并不是要起到劝阻的作用，而是反映出大学有责任防范可能导致数据泄露的欺诈手段。

**I consent to participate in the interviews on the terms below:**

我同意参加这次采访并知晓以下条款和权力:

1. I can leave any question unanswered.  
我可以拒绝回答任何问题
2. The interview can be stopped at any point.  
采访可以在任何时间中断

**I agree to the use of data for purposes relating to the project on the following terms:**

我同意数据被用于以下关于此次研究的目的

1. Use and storage of research data in the University of Glasgow reflects the institution's educational/ research mission and its legal responsibilities in relation to both information security and scrutiny of researcher conduct.

格拉斯哥大学研究数据的使用和存储反映了该机构的教育/研究使命及其在信息安全和研究行为审查方面的法律责任。

- a As part of this, under EU legislation (General Data Protection Regulation [GDPR]), I understand and agree that the 'lawful basis' for the processing of personal data is that the project constitutes 'a task in the public interest', and that any processing of special category data is 'necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research'.

根据欧盟立法(通用数据保护条例[GDPR]),我理解并同意在合法基础上的,个人数据的处理,是因为项目构成“公共利益任务”,和任何特殊类别的数据处理的归档是出于“所必需的公共利益目的,或科学和历史研究”。

- b I understand that I have the right to **access** data relating to me or that I have provided and to **object** where I have reason to believe it has been misused or used for purposes other than those stated.

我明白我有权查阅与我有关的资料或我所提供的资料,并有权在我有理由相信资料已被滥用或用作其他用途时提出反对。

2. Interviews will be transcribed, and the recordings deleted when the dissertation is submitted.  
采访资料会被记录下来,录音会在整篇论文提交后被销毁
3. Project materials in both physical and electronic form will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage (locked physical storage; appropriately encrypted, password-protected devices and University user accounts) at all times.

项目数据,包括实体版和电子版都会被当作机密文件对待,并且一直保管在安全的存储中(上锁的保险箱,适当加密的、有密码保护的设备和大学用户帐户)

4. Interview recordings will be transcribed at first, and the recordings deleted once the transcription has been finished.

采访录音将会被记录，并且在记录完之后录音会被删除

5. The transcript will have a participant number assigned to it (e.g. 'Participant 001'). This will be recorded separately from this consent form so that I cannot be identified.

记录文档会被标记上数字（例如 ‘参与者 001’），这将与这份同意书分开记录，这样我就不会被认出来。

6. My name and all identifying information will be removed or redacted. All other names and other material likely to identify individuals will be treated likewise. This process will be completed by 10/03/2020. I understand I may withdraw from the project prior to this date.

我的名字和所有个人信息将会被抹掉或者修改。其他所有可能涉及到辨认个人信息的内容都将会被同样方式对待。这个过程将会在 10/03/2020 之前完成。我理解我可能在这个日期之前退出该项目。

Once the process of redaction has been completed, the data will be anonymised. Once anonymisation is completed for all transcripts, the record document linking participant numbers to consent forms will be destroyed and the transcripts aggregated by being pasted into a single document. This will leave all responses anonymous and mean particular remarks cannot be attributed to an individual.

一旦这个模糊化处理过程被完成，数据会匿名化。一旦所有的录音记录被匿名，将参与者编号与许可书联系在一起的记录文件将被销毁，而转录本将被粘贴到一个单独的文件中。这将使得所有的回复都是匿名的，并且恶意的评论不能被归咎于个人。

7. I understand that once the data collected is anonymised, in accordance with EU legislation (General Data Protection Regulation/ GDPR), it may be used for the purposes of the project without further reference back to me. However, I understand that I may request access or raise an objection if I have legitimate grounds for concern that I remain directly identifiable from it or that it has been used for purposes other than those stated.

本人明白，根据欧盟法例(《通用资料保护条例》/《GDPR》)，所收集的资料一旦以匿名方式提供，便可用于有关计划，而无须再向本人告知。然而，我明白，如果我有合理的理由，担心我可能被识别，或者它被用于上述目的以外的目的，我可以请求访问或提出反对。

8. Project materials will be retained in secure storage by the University for ten years for archival purposes (longer if the material is consulted during that time). Consent forms will also be retained for the purposes of record.

项目资料将由大学安全储存十年，以备存档(如在此期间查阅资料，则可保存较长时间)。同意表格亦会保留作纪录之用。

The anonymised data may be used in future research and be cited and discussed in future publications, both print and online.

这些匿名的数据可能会用于未来的研究，并在未来的出版物中被引用和讨论。

**Tick as appropriate:**

认同请打勾

I consent to take part in the interview.

我认可并参加这次采访

I agree to the terms for processing of data outlined above and confirm I have been given information about how to exercise my rights to access and objection.



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我同意上面相关的数据条例，并且确认我已经收到了关于如何践行我的访问权和拒绝权的信息。

Name of Participant (参与者姓名): \_\_\_\_\_

Date (日期): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature (签名): \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's name and email contact (研究人员姓名和联系方式):**

YUE WU---- y.wu.2@research.gla.ac.uk

**Supervisor's name and email contact (导师姓名和联系方式):**

Raymond Boyle----Raymond.Boyle@glasgow.ac.uk;

Gillian Doyle----Gillian.Doyle@glasgow.ac.uk

**Department address (研究部门地址):**

CCPR, 13 Professor Square, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, G12 8QQ, UK

# Appendix 3-Interview Participant Information Sheet (Manager)



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## Interview Participant Information Sheet

### Title of project and researcher details

#### 研究项目名称和研究人员信息

Title: Second screen in China: football viewing experience and Sina Weibo

标题：中国的第二屏幕：足球观看体验和新浪微博

Researcher 研究人员: YUE WU 武岳

Supervisor 导师: Prof. Raymond Boyle and Prof. Gillian Doyle

Course 课程信息: PhD in Media and Cultural Policy 媒体和文化政策博士

### Why have I been chosen?

#### 为什么我被选中参加这个研究项目？

You are being invited to take part in a research project into the social media (Weibo) using experiences regarding on football related contents. A research project is a way to learn more about something. You are being invited to take part because you are a professional who are working for football club. For better understanding the experiences of fans, we aim to explore the social media strategies of football clubs.

Before you decide if you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the information on this page carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

我们邀请您参加一个研究项目，关于足球类内容的微博使用体验。研究项目是一种深度了解事物的方式。你被邀请参加，因为您是足球俱乐部的专业人员。为了更好的理解球迷的体验，我们同时旨在探索俱乐部的社交媒体策略。

在你决定是否要参加之前，了解为什么要做这项研究以及它将涉及到什么是很重要的。请花点时间仔细阅读本页上的信息，如果愿意，请与其他人讨论。问我是否有什么不清楚的地方，或者你是否想要更多的信息以决定你是否愿意参加此研究。

**What will happen if you take part?****如果你参加会怎么样？**

The purpose of this study is to explore the social media strategies of football clubs. Certain questions may be asked such as the contents strategies and fan engagement strategies. The whole interview may last for 40 minutes to 1 hour. It will be held in a comfortable and safe place such as café or your office if you want. You can also choose to accept the phone interview, if you cannot meet with us.

You do not have to answer any questions that you don't want to.

Your answers will be recorded for transcription, for avoiding any details of your opinion since they are important to us.

The information gathering process will be finished by 31 December 2020.

本研究旨在探索足球俱乐部的社交媒体策略。问题关于内容战略和球迷关系战略可能会被问到。整个采访过程可能会持续 40 分钟到 1 个小时。采访会选在一个舒服安全的地方进行，例如咖啡馆，或者您的办公室，如果您愿意的话。您也可以选择电话采访，如果您不能与我们见面。

**Do I have to take part?****我必须参加吗？**

You do not have to take part in this study, and if you decide not to, you will still be free to do what you were planning to do today. If, after you have started to take part in, you change your mind, just let me know and I will not use any information you have given me.

你不是被强制参加这项研究，如果你决定不参加，你仍然可以自由地做你今天原本计划做的事情。如果你在开始参与之后改变主意了，请告知我，我不会使用你已提供给我的任何信息。

**Keeping information safe and private****确保信息安全和保密**

I will keep the information from the interview in a locked cabinet or in a locked file on my password protected computer.

When I write about what I have found out, your name will not be mentioned.

If you like you can choose another name for me to use when I am writing about what you said. No one else will know which name you have chosen.

I will destroy all of my recordings when the project is finished. I will keep the notes without your name in and the consent form so that we can prove we asked you whether you wanted to take part and that you said yes.

However, because this research is about how football clubs operate on Weibo, you have the right to refuse to provide any business contents. I will also avoid to mention any controversial political contents, since this research may be related to how foreign clubs operate in China. I want to mention it again that you own the right to object any questions that are related to important business information; that may make you feel uncomfortable or that you just do not want to answer. All the interview materials will be safely kept and not used for any purposes in addition to this academic research.

我会把访谈所采集的信息保存在一个锁着的柜子里，或者保存在我受密码保护的电脑上的一个锁着的文件里。

当总结研究发现时，你的名字将不会被提及。

如果你愿意，你可以选择一个昵称作为姓名的指代。你的真实姓名不会被得知和透露。

项目完成后，我将销毁所有的录音。我会保留不带你的名字笔记和同意书，这样我们就可以证明我们问过你是否愿意参加并且你表示过同意。

然而，因为这个研究关于足球俱乐部如何在微博运营，所以你有权拒绝任何商业机密相关的内容。同时我也会尽量避免有关政治敏感的内容，因为此次研究也关系到外国俱乐部如何在中国运营。我想再重申一遍，你有权拒绝任何关于商业机密的问题，或者让你觉得不舒服，或者你就只是不想回答的问题。所有采访内容将会被安全的保存，且不会用于任何除了此次学术研究以外的用途

### **What will happen to the results of the research study?**

#### **研究结果会如何处理？**

This is an academic research, and all the gathered information will only be used for academic research. When the researcher has gathered all of the information from everyone who is taking part the research, the researcher will write about what have learned in a PhD thesis. This will be read and reviewed by my supervisors and other academic staffs at the university.

本研究是一项学术研究，所收集的所有信息将用于学术研究。当研究者从每一位参与者那里收集到所有信息后，这些数据和信息将出现在研究者的博士论文中。这将由我的导师和大学的其他学术人员阅读和评判。

**Who has reviewed the study?****谁审查了这项研究？**

This study has been reviewed and agreed by the College of Arts Research Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow.

本研究已由格拉斯哥大学艺术研究学院伦理委员会审核同意。

**Contacts for further information****联系以获取更多信息**

If you have any questions about this study, you can ask...

如果你对这项研究有任何疑问，你可以问通过以下联系方式与我或研究相关人员取得联系

- me 我, Yue Wu (y.wu.2@research.gla.ac.uk)
- or my supervisor 我的导师, Pro. Raymond Boyle and Prof. Gillian Doyle (Raymond.Boyle@glasgow.ac.uk; Gillian.Doyle@glasgow.ac.uk)
- or the Ethics officer for the College of Arts 文学院研究伦理办公室, Dr James Simpson (arts-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk)

**Thank you for reading this!**

**感谢您耐心地阅读了此信!**



# Appendix 4-Interview Participant Information Sheet (Fan)



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## Interview Participant Information Sheet

### Title of project and researcher details

#### 研究项目名称和研究人员信息

Title: Second screen in China: football viewing experience and Sina Weibo

标题：中国的第二屏幕：足球观看体验和新浪微博

Researcher 研究人员: YUE WU 武岳

Supervisor 导师: Pro. Raymond Boyle and Prof. Gillian Doyle

Course 课程: PhD in Media and Cultural Policy 媒体和文化政策博士

### Why have I been chosen?

#### 为什么我被选中参加这个研究项目？

You are being invited to take part in a research project into the social media (Weibo) using experiences regarding on football related contents. A research project is a way to learn more about something. You are being invited to take part because you are a Chinese adult who are using Sina Weibo for football related contents.

Before you decide if you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the information on this page carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

你被邀请参加的项目是关于用社交媒体（新浪微博）浏览足球相关信息的使用体验研究。一个研究项目是让我们进一步学习的过程。你被邀请参加是因为您是一个经常使用微博浏览足球信息的中国成年人。

在你决定是否要参加之前，了解为什么要做这项研究以及它将涉及到什么是很重要的。请花点时间仔细阅读本页上的信息，如果愿意，请与其他人讨论。问我是否有什么不清楚的地方，或者你是否想要更多的信息以决定你是否愿意参加此研究。

### What will happen if you take part?

**如果你参加会怎么样？**

The purpose of this study is to explore the user experiences of using Sina Weibo for football related contents. Certain psychological questions may be asked such as your motivation of using Weibo for football contents, the gratifications of your utilizing. You will attend this interview with other participants in a safe environment. The whole process may last for 1 hour.

You do not have to answer any questions that you don't want to. This will take about 1 hour.

Your answers will be recorded for transcription, for avoiding any details of your opinion since they are important to us.

The information gathering process will be finished by 31 December 2020.

本研究旨在探讨使用微博浏览足球相关信息的用户体验。一些心理学上的问题可能会被问到，例如你使用微博看足球内容的动机，你使用微博的愉悦感在哪。

你不必回答任何你不想回答的问题。访谈过程大约需要半小时到一个小时。  
你的回答将会被记录。我们不想错过您回答中的细节，因为那对我们很重要。  
我们将在 2020 年 12 月 31 日前完成信息收集工作。

**Do I have to take part?****我必须参加吗？**

You do not have to take part in this study, and if you decide not to, you will still be free to do what you were planning to do today. If, after you have started to take part, you change your mind, just let me know and I will not use any information you have given me.

你不是被强制参加这项研究，如果你决定不参加，你仍然可以自由地做你今天原本计划做的事情。如果你在开始参与之后改变主意了，请告知我，我不会使用你已提供给我的任何信息。

**Keeping information safe and private****确保信息安全和保密**

I will keep the information from the interview in a locked cabinet or in a locked file on my password protected computer.

When I write about what I have found out, your name will not be mentioned.

If you like you can choose another name for me to use when I am writing about what you said. No one else will know which name you have chosen.

I will destroy all of my recordings when the project is finished. I will keep the notes without your name in and the consent form so that we can prove we asked you whether you wanted to take part and that you said yes.

However, if during our conversation I hear anything which makes me worried that you might be in danger of harm, I might have to tell other people who need to know about this. The interview may arouse your negative memories about using Weibo, which may include debates, assaults and other unhappy experiences on Weibo. If any parts of the research activity make you feel uncomfortable, sad, or any negative emotions, I will do what I can do to help you get through this, which including ask for medical help. Or, you can also leave the research on any time.

我会把访谈所采集的信息保存在一个锁着的柜子里，或者保存在我受密码保护的电脑上的一个锁着的文件里。

当总结研究发现时，你的名字将不会被提及。

如果你愿意，你可以选择一个昵称作为姓名的指代。你的真实姓名不会被得知和透露。

项目完成后，我将销毁所有的录音。我会保留不带你的名字笔记和同意书，这样我们就可以证明我们问过你是否愿意参加并且你表示过同意。

然而，如果在我们的谈话中我听到任何让我担心你可能受到伤害的事情，我可能不得不告诉其他需要知道这件事的人。这次采访可能让你联想到使用微博的消极经历，例如经历过争吵，羞辱以及其他不愉快的经历。如果研究活动的任何部分让你觉得不舒服，难过或者任何消极情绪，我会做我所能做的一切帮助你。包括寻求医疗协助。或者你可以选择在任何时间离开采访。

### **What will happen to the results of the research study?**

#### **研究结果会如何处理？**

This is an academic research, and all the gathered information will only be used for academic research. When the researcher has gathered all of the information from everyone who is taking part the research, the researcher will write about what have

learned in a PhD thesis. This will be read and reviewed by my supervisors and other academic staffs at the university.

本研究是一项学术研究，所收集的所有信息将用于学术研究。当研究者从每一位参与者那里收集到所有信息后，这些数据和信息将出现在研究者的博士论文中。这将由我的导师和大学的其他学术人员阅读和评判。

**Who has reviewed the study?**

谁审查了这项研究？

This study has been reviewed and agreed by the College of Arts Research Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow.

本研究已由格拉斯哥大学艺术研究学院伦理委员会审核同意。

**Contacts for further information 联系以获取更多信息**

If you have any questions about this study, you can ask...

如果你对这项研究有任何疑问，你可以问通过以下联系方式与我或研究相关人员取得联系

- me 我, Yue Wu (y.wu.2@research.gla.ac.uk)
- or my supervisor 我的导师, Pro. Raymond Boyle and Prof. Gillian Doyle (Raymond.Boyle@glasgow.ac.uk; Gillian.Doyle@glasgow.ac.uk)
- or the Ethics officer for the College of Arts 文学院研究伦理办公室, Dr James Simpson (arts-ethics@glasgow.ac.uk)

**Thank you for reading this!**

**感谢您耐心地阅读了此信!**

## **Appendix 5-Semi-structured interview question list (for managers)**

Q1: Please simply introduce your social media strategy.

Q2: Can you introduce your strategy of content management particularly? / Can you introduce your strategy of fan engagement particularly?

Q3: What is your objective for the Weibo operation? What goals do you aim to achieve?

Q4: What kinds of posts do you use most, such as Text, Image or Video? Why?

Q5: What kinds of content do you use most, such as player-related information, match highlight? Why?

Q6: Do you have any special strategies? If you do, can you share it? If not, what competitiveness do you have on social media operation?

Q7: Is there any special features for Chinese fans? How do you satisfy the needs of Chinese fans?

Q8: How do you branding on Weibo and enhance the relationship with your fans?

Q9: What approaches to fan engagement do you have?

Q10: Do you directly interact with fans, such as replying the comment? Do you interact with fan groups or fan representatives?

Q11: How do you manage your relationship with fan organisations?

Q12: How do you view the Key Opinion Leaders or fan-formed accounts? How do you manage your relationship with them? Are they helpful in improving the branding outcomes and your relationship with

fans?

Q13: What changes will you have to your strategy? Why?

Q14: Do you have something to add?

## **Appendix 6-Semi-structured interview question list (for fans)**

Q1: How long has it been since you became a football fan?

Q2: Why do you like your club?

Q3: What is the role of your club in your life?

Q4: On a 0-10 scale, 0 for not loyal, 10 for extremely loyal, please rate yourself. Why?

Q5: How frequently do you use Weibo for football? Why choose Weibo?

Q6: What do you use it for?

Q7: What content do you like most? Why?

Q8: Do you usually interact on Weibo? Why?

Q9: How do you feel when using Weibo?

Q10: What do you think Weibo can bring to you in terms of football information?

Q11: Do you usually view the club's official account? Do you like it? Why?

Q12: Would you like to provide some suggestions for the official club account?

Q13: What would you like to see in addition to the current content?

Q14: Taken as a whole, how do you comment on the experiences of using Weibo for football information?

Q15: Do you have something to add?



## Appendix 7 The example and result of Cohen's Kappa test

In order to ensure the reliability between two coders on the content analysis data coding process, the Cohen's Kappa test was conducted. The result was at 0.923, higher than 0.7 which means the result between two coders was reliable.

	coder1	coder2	fre	var
1	1	1	842	
2	1	2	0	
3	1	3	1	
4	1	4	0	
5	1	5	1	
6	1	6	2	
7	1	7	5	
8	1	8	2	
9	1	9	0	
10	1	10	0	
11	1	11	5	
12	1	12	2	
13	1	13	0	
14	1	14	0	
15	1	15	0	
16	2	2	118	
17	2	3	1	
18	2	4	1	
19	2	5	1	
20	2	6	0	
21	2	7	1	

### Symmetric Measures

		Value	Asymptotic Standardized Error <sup>a</sup>	Approximate T <sup>b</sup>	Approximate Significance
Measure of Agreement	Kappa	.923	.006	100.096	.000
N of Valid Cases		2144			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

## Appendix 8 Work example of the ANOVA analysis

Results of the ANOVA analysis between post types and different interaction types.

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Like	Between Groups	2930795901985 .688	5	586159180397. 138	26665.099	.000
	Within Groups	2073054733522 4.008	943058	21982261.256		
	Total	2366134323720 9.695	943063			
Comment	Between Groups	18735783411.7 04	5	3747156682.34 1	10931.361	.000
	Within Groups	323270452881. 410	943058	342789.577		
	Total	342006236293. 114	943063			
Share	Between Groups	1835283840183 .051	5	367056768036. 610	21214.593	.000
	Within Groups	1631687317908 5.516	943058	17302088.715		
	Total	1815215701926 8.566	943063			
Total	Between Groups	2860728613002 .018	5	572145722600. 404	10771.789	.000
	Within Groups	5009071394909 6.530	943058	53115199.647		
	Total	5295144256209 8.550	943063			

## Appendix 9 Translation protocol

In this research, all the materials were collected in Chinese. Thus, in order to ensure the accuracy of expression that interviewees conveyed in the qualitative interview, a scientific translation protocol is necessary.

Before starting the translation process, the researcher thoroughly read the interview materials in the source language (Chinese). There were three purposes in this step: Firstly, to generally understand the contents; Secondly, to eliminate useless content (such as some normal chat before and after the interview) and prepare the valuable materials; Lastly, to identify the semantic and cultural elements that may lead to misunderstanding.

Then, during the translation process, efforts were paid to solve emerging challenges. One major problem in translation is ensuring the semantic and semiotic integrity between two kinds of language. In that case, I adopt the rule that uses not only equivalent words but also further replaces them with a particularly appropriate word according to the situation. For example, when translating the interview of a fan, they mentioned that the official team account like to ‘transport’ (搬运) content from Twitter. The word ‘搬运’ is a usual internet slang to describe the behavior that directly copies contents from other sources. Considering the word ‘copy’ here implies the behavior of using other’s contents without permission, which was not suitable to use here since the Chinese official account was operated under the instruction of headquarters and kept certain consistency of contents in every region globally. Therefore, ‘translate’ could be a more appropriate word to convey the meaning of ‘搬运.’

Another major challenge that usually occurs in translation is cultural barriers. Translators need to have a deeper understanding of the source language and target language to find consistent terms in explaining some special cultural expressions. In that case, the rule of translating the implied meaning instead of the semiotic meaning was applied. For example, an interviewee mentioned that they loved content that is ‘干货’ (‘dry cargo’ for direct translation). The word in Chinese refers to dry foods that can store for a long

time, such as dry spices. Nowadays, it is used to describe content that can be repeatedly read due to such content containing valuable information. Considering there is no alternative word in English and it would be confusing if I translated it naturally. Thus, I use the term 'high-quality' to describe its actual meaning in the background, rather than the surface word 'dry cargo' or 'dry foods,' which were with strong cultural features in this case.

Furthermore, the third main problem is ensuring the equivalence of idioms in the target language. Facing a problem like this, I chose the rule of naturally simplifying the original term by expanding its meaning. For example, a manager interviewee used the term '下功夫' (use Kung Fu) when describing their content strategy for fitting in the Chinese market. The word 'use Kung Fu here refers to 'try the best' or 'work hard'. Although there is the word 'Kung Fu' in English, direct translation here can still be confused. Therefore, I naturally translate it as the simple phrase 'work hard'.

Finally, after every transcription was translated, a review process was applied to examine potential mistakes and misunderstandings. Although it is hard for a translator to convey the meaning of the original text absolutely precisely, re-examination can ensure maximum accuracy of the translation. Special attention was paid to slang, dialects, and cultural expressions to further avoiding misunderstanding.