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Supervisor Howard Nothhaft

Examiner Charlotte Simonsson

**Football Clubs Uses Of Social Media:
A Case Study Of Newcastle United FC
From A Fan Perspective.**

ÁSGRÍMUR SIGURÐSSON

Lund University
Department of strategic communication
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Abstract

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Although the communication aspects of sport and football organizations are receiving increased scholarly attention, research from the perspective of fans of such organizations has mostly been neglected. This study problematizes the gap that exists between the current social media communication of football organizations, that tend to be guided by commercial interests, and the expectation of fans that call for increased engagement and interaction. The purpose of this study is to gain more in-depth knowledge and understanding of how football fans view their clubs social media, and the types of interaction they strive to attain through communication on social media. To address this purpose, a case study was conducted on Newcastle United FC and the fans of that EPL football club. The analysis showcase that football fans can be critical, and are valiant in expressing their opinion on everything they do not appreciate concerning their beloved football clubs. Nevertheless, fans show a deep sense of affection towards the team they follow, remain optimistic that the football clubs communication can be advanced, and are appreciative of every improvement that is made. This study embodies a pragmatic philosophy and in keeping with that tradition provides an extensive practical recommendations chapter based on critical findings.

Keyword: social media, organizational communication, fans, interaction, football clubs, Newcastle United.

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1. Introduction

Since the early 2000's the emergence of social media has had a tremendous effect on peoples daily lives and how they use the internet (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Social media has, almost from its inception, been recognised to play a large part in the daily routine of its users (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) and has for more than a decade overhauled email as peoples preferred mode of online communication (Nielsen Media, 2009). Despite this seemingly ever-growing nature of social media, and the increased scholarly focus on social media and its impact, a universal definition of the various social media platforms has not been attained (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Instead, in lieu of the broadness of the term, this paper follows a convention that considers social media to be "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social media platforms are in that sense seen as interactive, where users, individuals, communities and organizations "share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content" (Kietzmann et al., 2011, p. 241). In light of the variety of platforms that fall under the broad hat of social media, platforms such as Twitter, Youtube, Facebook and Instagram, that can be classified separately as blogs, micro-blogs, social networking sites, and photo- and video-sharing communities, it therefore seems pertinent to maintain a broad definition that incorporates the underlying common aspect of interaction and user-generated content.

In the past decade or so, social media has increasingly become seen as a new venue for marketing and advertising among corporations and organizations. Likewise, football clubs that following increased commercialization and professionalization, have started to view themselves as brands, are now more and more focused on their brand presence (Nufer, Bühler & Chadwick, 2016). Select, large corporations, such as Apple have successfully shown how social media can be utilized to enhance brand presence through engaged online communities (Harrigan, 2015), and sporting organizations, football clubs included, are starting to see the potential in engaging, and perhaps growing, their fan base through innovative use of social media (Larkin & Mckelvey, 2015)

However, although operating in an increasingly business-like environment, football clubs are very rarely just seen as an ordinary business. For, football fans are known to enjoy a relationship with their favourite team on a scale unknown in most other areas (Abosag, Roper & Hind, 2012) with very high levels of emotional attachment, identification and engagement (Yoshida et al., 2014). That would seem to suggest that football clubs are in a favourable position to benefit from the use of social media to engage with their fan base (Vale & Fernandes, 2017) given the big part, their fandom of the football club, plays in the daily life of many people (Popp et al., 2016). An aspect that football clubs are in accordance with being an important part of their commercial interests.

Football clubs, in general, seem to have been slow to address this issue and fully engage with social media. There seems to be, on the part of the football clubs, a level of uncertainty on how to best utilize social media and to what extent, in addition to certain misgivings for losing control of their brand communication on public social media platforms (Mccarthy et al., 2014). The irony is that, while figuring out this balancing act of catering to commercial interests, and at the same time fostering their relationship with their fans, football clubs seem to be losing out. For, the fans seem to have long fully appreciated the potential of online communication and communities of football, as seen by the popularities of unofficial web sites and forums. (Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015) There appears to be a division or a gap between what levels of engagement fans are looking for and what clubs are providing to their fans on social media. Professional football clubs are accordingly wrestling with the Strategic Communications issue of balancing their contents, to keep their fans happy while at the same time safeguarding commercial interests and the revenue generating potentials of social media (Mccarthy et al., 2014).

Even though scholarly research on football clubs use of social media seems to be growing gradually, the focus has mostly been on managerial bearings, of maintaining a social media presence (Meng, Stavros & Westberg, 2015). Hitherto research on football clubs use of social media from a fan perspective is limited (Vale & Fernandes, 2017; Stavros et al., 2014), and that along with football clubs apparent unfamiliarity with their online followers, as well as concerns for the impact of unhinged fan discourse on commercial feasibility (Mccarthy et al., 2014) represents the problematic aspect of football clubs use of social media. Where, it is argued that there exists a gap between what fans expect, and to what degree the clubs are willing to let go of their control of brand communication. This study maintains

that, from a strategic communication perspective, football clubs need to increase their understanding of what appeasements their fans seek on social media.

1.1 Purpose

This study aims to address the purported division that exists between the professional football clubs presence on social media platforms and the expectation of fans that follow said clubs. Moreover, in that way add to the little research that has been done on football clubs use of social media from a fan perspective and benefit the understanding of the stimulus, or catalyst, for football fans engagement with their clubs on social media, a topic where further insight has been called for by researchers (Stavros et al., 2014). Based on the purpose of this study, the aim is to add to the knowledge of what drives football fans usage of social media. Moreover, from a communication perspective, address potential shortcomings by professional football clubs on their social media platforms. In order to attend to this purpose, the following research questions have been formulated:

What does football clubs social media communication mean to its relations with the fanbase?

What manner of interaction with the club are the fans looking for?

What sort of interaction on social media helps fans feel part of a community of fans and the club?

How are football clubs able to adapt their social media communication to increased fan interaction?

The research questions are directly related to fans use of professional football clubs social media platforms, their expectations and the fulfilment they seek from using such platforms. Thus, to answer the research questions, Newcastle United FC was selected for a case study. One of the few studies of football clubs use of social media platforms, the landmark multiple case study of Mccarthy et al. (2014), covers Newcastle United's social media endeavours from a managerial viewpoint. Hence, this study aims to shed light on the issue from the other side of the table.

1.2 Delimitations

Research on fan engagement among sporting institutions is spotty at best. Particularly on the usage of social media and as mentioned in the problem statement, research from the fan perspective is severely limited (Vale & Fernandes, 2017; Stavros et al., 2014) This study endeavours to address that gap by focusing a case study on what the fans of Newcastle United FC are looking for when visiting the clubs social media. Focusing on the fans perspective and the level of engagement they seek from their club, how welcome they feel their input is on the clubs social media and whether the clubs social media presence helps them feel connected to the club. This case study, as any other, has well-known limitations regarding generalizability and ethical sensitivity and integrity of the investigator (Stake, 2005) that will be addressed further in the methods chapter of this thesis. Due to time limitations, the case study interviews were conducted during four days on location in Newcastle with a random selection of interviewers. The complexity and scope of the matter at hand could easily warrant more significant time and resources for further studies. However, such limitations can also be seen through a positive declination, such as Flyvbjerg (2006) points out, where the intensive nature of such a short study hopefully equals and accurately reflects the emotional context of the fans that are the subjects of study.

1.3 Disposition

The scope of this study is organized as follows. The following chapter will examine and reflect on previous studies on football clubs and social media, noting the gap this study aims to confront. The third chapter delves into the theory that both guides the outlook of this study but will also assist with the analysis of what levels of engagement football fans are looking after. The fourth chapter introduces the case organization, Newcastle United FC. Following on, the fifth chapter addresses the research strategy and methods undertaken in this study. The sixth chapter presents the analysis and findings from the case study. The seventh chapter provides managerial recommendations based on integral findings. Finally, the last chapter is devoted to a discussion of results, potential contribution to theory and suggestions for further research.

2. Previous Research

This chapter provides an overview and discusses previous studies on the topic of football clubs use of social media. The first section discusses the evolving field of digital marketing and sports organizations use of online communication, where social media and mobile technology is increasingly beginning to dictate its practice. The following section narrows the field and reflects on previous studies of football clubs use of social media, where it becomes apparent that both the increased effort among football clubs and some recent scholarly interest in the subject, still has some way to go before it has caught up with the technological advancements. The third section introduces the tribal nature of sports fandom, where researchers have well documented the expressly great emotional connection between football fans and their club of interest. Lastly, the fourth section provides a brief synthesis of the state of affairs, tying it with the topic which is the focus of this study.

2.1. Digital Marketing & Sports

The emergence of social media, its variety, fast-paced evolution, and the rapid rate of adoption by the general public, has prompted a relatively newfangled and increasing academic interest in the subject (Mccarthy et al.,2014). It could be argued that the scholarly world is still playing catch up to the sprightly makeup of social media. One response is the evolving academic field of digital marketing, that has been defined by Smith as the "practice of promoting products and services using digital distribution channels via computers, mobile phones, smartphones, or other digital devices" (2012, p. 86). This definition is grounded on the modern expediency of smartphones and other digital devices that lead to present-day consumers as being "always on", using these devices at all times to "search, enquire, interact, complain, buy and pay" (Stone & Woodcock, 2014, p.4). These elements, of enquiry, interact and complain are of foremost importance for this study, for they represent some of the core components of social media, that has also been noted to be a paramount part of digital marketing (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2016).

Digital marketing, or e-marketing as it was formerly referred to, has come to be seen as a predominant marketing avenue for organizations (Taylor & Strutton, 2010) and Wymbs (2011) has argued that it is essential for both scholars and businesses alike to cater to the needs brought on by the 21st century digital landscape. As social media and digital marketing have continued to progress, appearing omnipresent in people daily lives (Carley & Babb, 2015) businesses have seen the essential value in maintaining a social media presence (Fenton, 2018). Social media communications have perhaps not received adequate scholarly attention (Jussila et al., 2014) even though the platforms noted importance as an open forum where the public is free to express their opinion (Branthwaite and Patterson, 2011). Claims, such as social media is providing brands with direct access to consumers (Drury, 2008), and the empowerment of consumers, where calls for further scholarly research inherently follow co-creation of meaning and the possibility to voice their understanding of a brand, different from what the brand itself is maintaining (Christodoulides, 2009), and interestingly, incitements for businesses to truly investigate in full the capabilities of social media — giving the impression that the ownership of social media discourse, is still an issue that is up for grabs.

Social media platforms show no signs of slowing down their growth, and digital marketing appears to be no nearer to satisfy its insatiable appetite for digital content (Lin and Yazdanifard, 2014). Hence, sporting organizations are increasingly investing time and resources in establishing a social media presence (Filo et al., 2015). Scholars have agreed that the use of social media can be beneficial for sport organizations (Meng et al., 2015; Wallace et al., 2011) yet more research is needed in what drives social media engagement among sport fans (Meng et al., 2015), the research that has been conducted on the issue is limited and inconsistent in perspective (Filo et al., 2015). With a minimal number of researches adherent to a fan perspective (Vale & Fernandes, 2017) a greater understanding of what motivates sports fans on social media is recommended (Stavros et al., 2014). Thus, the gap in the research field still exists while the number of digital and mobile platforms continues to rise.

2.2. Football clubs & social media

Social media can be viewed as an integral part of football clubs digital marketing and fostering of their online presence (McCarthy et al., 2014). Where football fans all over the world have increasingly been shown to interact with each other on social media (Parganas et al., 2017) and football clubs, irrespective of their degree of professionalization, are incorporating numerous social media platforms for their online communication efforts (Helleu, 2017). However, academics likewise point out that although most football clubs are nowadays maintaining a social media presence, they are rarely utilizing its full capacity, given how active emotional bond fans have with their clubs (Kuzma et al., 2014). Instead, studies have found that football clubs are agnostic in entirely giving in to the social media gospel (Vale & Fernandes, 2017), hesitant of diminishing their control of the dialogue, fearing potential damage of commercial interests (McCarthy et al., 2014). Thus, studies have found that many football clubs are enjoying low levels of fan engagement on their social media sites (Araújo et al., 2014) and that even the top tier clubs in Europe could be doing more to engage with their fans on social media (Kuzma et al., 2014). Leading many researchers to conclude that football clubs are still resolving how best to operate in this evolving digital landscape (Rowles, 2017).

Nonetheless, as social media platforms continue to expand and proliferate, a ream of recent studies pertains a somewhat more positive declination and focuses on the vast potential of social media. Fenton (2018) notes that sport and football, in particular, are becoming more and more fixated on social media, on a global scale where fans are interacting and accessing content from anywhere in the world. Lawrence and Crawford, (2019) have noted this evolution, pinpointing the role millennials have had, in that a generation that has known social media for all their adult lives have now begun to form a fair share of football fans worldwide. In light of this development, digital video content has become increasingly popular as clubs have begun to experiment with live streaming, and the video capabilities of Youtube and Facebook (Parganas et al., 2017). Such videos and the clubs overall use of social media are helping connecting fans with their club, especially the many fans that do not manage to attend games at the stadiums (Fenton, 2018). Anagnostopoulos et al., (2018) found that some top football clubs had been successful in creating an engaged community of users, through posting images and other content on Instagram. The creation of this kind of engaging content

for their fans has come to be seen as a way for the fans and football clubs, to establish and demarcate their identity (Chanavat et al., 2017).

Comparative to the divergent nature of social media, football fans come in many shapes and forms. Tapp (2004) conducted a study that segmented fans into different groups, based on the level of their fandom. Although giving useful insights into the emotional connections, fans have with football clubs; the study does not take into account the role of social media. Instead, the sparse studies of football clubs use of social media are generally subject to various limitations. Several pieces of research have only focused their attention on the same number of top tier football clubs in the world (Fenton, 2018), similarly, the perspective of the majority of studies have been that of marketing, and therefore focusing on the brand management of football clubs (McCarthy et al., 2014). Likewise, Filo et al. (2015) have called for more studies that expand the scope beyond that of North America, where the majority of sport based studies have been conducted. Very few studies have looked at the relationship between football clubs and its fans, from a fan's perspective (Vale & Fernandes, 2017). Since the seminal study of four UK football clubs use of social media by McCarthy et al. (2014), where they determined both the potential for clubs to use social media to improve their connection with their fans and highlighted how meagre the clubs investment in said potential had been to date, there remains a void that necessitates further research.

2.3. The tribal nature of fandom

Significant support behind the assertions that football clubs have a vibrant and mostly untapped potential in their use of social media is the unique and exceptional, emotionally driven relationship fans have with football clubs (McCarthy et al., 2014; Vale & Fernandes, 2017). A study by Crawford (2008) has substantiated these unique relationships and found that fans of sports teams are categorically different in their affiliation than for instance people who follow celebrities or pop music. Arguing that the affiliation with the football clubs is stronger and longer lasting than any affiliations fans might have with individuals associated with the club. For the club remains, even though its football players get bought and sold. Thus, a substantive body of work has linked football fans with tribal behaviour. A study by Kozinets (1999) has stated that fans of football clubs are predisposed to tribal behaviour, notably those converged upon consumption of goods affiliated with

the club. Strong disposition to wearing the clubs colours has been noted, as several studies point out, the strong sense fans feel about being a part of a group, of belonging to that group (Abosag et al., 2012; Cova & Cova, 2002). These fans are likely to progress to tribal behaviour (Cova & Pace, 2006) through a secure emotional connection with the club and other like-minded fans, seeking social interaction and acquiring recognition within the group, through using symbols and tokens that express the fans strong feelings for the football club (Dionisio et al., 2008; Popp et al., 2016).

For all that football is being described as inherently tribal in nature (Tapp & Clowes, 2002), the different uniforms that are associated with each football club are prominent examples of that nature. It is also significant to note that tribes are a collection of diverse individuals (Kozinets, 1999), unified by a common interest, and as for football fans, the common denominator is always the team (Dionisio et al., 2008). The fans and their chosen team are bound by a different and secure emotional connection (Bühler & Nufer, 2010) that is not always constrained by logical boundaries on the side of the fans (Abosag et al., 2012). Nonetheless, granted the hedonistic relationship fans have with their football team on an individual basis, researchers have also pointed out that tribal behaviour can also manifest itself in collective movements where the tribe can be seen as advocates (Cova and Cova, 2002). Thus, the strong notion of a community among football fans necessitates consideration again. It is this diversified nature of football fandom that this study aims to address, arguing that the multiple layers of social media, from a communicative perspective, give football clubs manifold ways to address better the fans need for an engaged coterie among fans and the club itself.

2.4 Synthesis

The literature review establishes that although social media can be a capable platform to build and foster relationships and communities, engage in direct communication with followers, it is still a mostly under-researched arena. Due to the continually evolving nature of social media, that may be understandable, yet despite several compelling claims that social media ought to be a highly useful tool for football clubs, and their fan communities, little can be stated in absolute terms about the impact and the issues of social media on the football industry. The apparent solution by the academic community is to call for further research and

studies on football and social media (Meng et al., 2015; Filo et al., 2015; Stavros et al., 2014; McCarthy et al., 2014; Kuzma et al., 2014). Whilst, the complex nature of fandom is another field where studies from the perspective of the fans themselves are severely lacking (Vale & Fernandes, 2017) and especially where qualitative studies are few and far between, despite Branthwaite and Patterson (2011) asserting its beneficial traits when studying social media in conjunction with complex human behavioural elements. The convoluted dilemma football clubs are facing, emerges in the question of how best to balance commercial interests with the need to keep the fans happy simultaneously. (McCarthy et al., 2014; Christodoulides, 2009) Social media has increased the influence of fans, for they can venture out to unofficial sites if the content and discussion the football club is providing them is not deemed adequate. Thus, football clubs are faced with a communication issue that relates to the control of the brand image. This study argues that there exists a division between what the fans want on social media, and what football clubs are at present willing to provide, endeavouring to add valuable insight into this subject that has previously been shown scant academic attention.

The following chapter will present the theory in which the mid-ranging theoretical framework approach of social capital as the strategic management of intangible resources, is seen as a significant component of football clubs use of social media.

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter begins by presenting social capital theory and its theoretical framework, giving a brief description of the theories principal authors, essential concepts and criticism of the theory. After that, introducing Lin's (1999; 2001; 2008) more recent and significant contribution to the theory, which highlights social networks and the inherent social capital resources that are based on relationships. Pointing forward, towards the theoretical standpoint, of a social capital model of public relations, that constitutes social capital as the strategic management of intangible resources. Such a framework is of particular interest to this case study, for it provides an appropriate frame for the analysis of football fans perception of football clubs use of social media. Moreover, the framework is aligned with this studies argument that organizational social media communication, is better served fixating on the creation of a brand identity, rather than solely emphasising direct marketing endeavours.

Social capital can be seen as emanating from the boundaries of sociology and economics, and the broadness of that spectrum has yielded different approaches and definitions. As Lin (2001) has noted there remains a rather simple unifying presumption behind all of the different propositions, that it consists of "investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace" (p. 19). The underlying assumption is that there are substance and value in the relationships between people (Field, 2008) and that insistence of the significance of social factors and relationships has proved intriguing to many disciplines, within different contexts. It is, however, beyond the scope of this thesis to give an exhaustive account of the sometimes polemic discourse on social capital. In lieu, this chapter notes some of the foundational authors, concepts and critique behind the social capital theory, before addressing how the framework is of significance for this study.

3.1. Social Capital Theory Foundations

Pierre Bourdieu has been credited with instigating the notion of social capital in the 1970s and 1980s, where he, in a Marxist tradition saw social capital as a representation of power and

social relations (Fenton, 2018; Dodd, 2016). Bourdieu (1986) came to define social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (p. 248-249). Thus, for Bourdieu (1986) social capital is best understood through the social affiliations people have with one another, and being a member of a specific group can be of value in itself, while at the same time economic capital is the bedrock of all capital, and that has implications on the various other fields.

Another principal author that is acknowledged by some scholars to have had a more extensive influence than Bourdieu is James Coleman (Field, 2008). Coleman advanced social capital theory from a rational choice theory perspective, that assumes people motivations being governed by logic or rational decision makings. The community held paramount importance for Coleman, that considered the linkage between social and human capital (Field, 2008). According to Coleman (1988), human capital consists of talent and competence of people, while social capital is more intangible in nature. Even though it very much exists in relations amidst people. Trust becomes an essential concept for Coleman (1988) who claimed that a group that retains both internal and external trust is in a position to accomplish more than a similar group that does not enjoy trust among its members. Social capital, thus, has the clout that can be used for the benefit of the group (Fenton, 2018).

It has been alleged that the work of Robert D. Putnam, first his article (1995) and later on developed into a book, *Bowling Alone*, has done much to popularize the notion of social capital both in the popular media and among regular citizens in the United States (Dodd, 2016). Putnam's work that is indebted by Coleman is influential in that it goes on to claim a substantial scale effect of diminishing social capital in society. With dwindling participation in echelons of society such as church activity, political parties and bowling leagues, as a consequence of the rise of TV in America — thus leading to a decline in social capital (Fenton, 2018; Dodd, 2016). Putnam's expansion of social capital theory, to impact large scale social structures has been criticised, while not dismissed, for leaving essential elements unaccounted for (Portes, 1998). It is not within the purview of this thesis to reflect further on the large scale implications of social capital theory, it is, however, pertinent to note Putnam's more detailed notes on the impact of online networks on social capital. According to Putnam, the impact of the internet could go both ways, it could help solve the decline of social capital, or it could heighten the problem, depending on how the internet

would develop (Fenton, 2018). Putnam's influential work has coincided with increased attention of communication academics on social capital theory (Dodd, 2016), and that context will be addressed further in chapter 3.2 of this thesis.

3.1.1 Different confines of social capital

Since this study focuses on social media interconnections and online communication, it becomes appropriate to narrow the field and devote closer attention to social networks and view social capital from within that context. The network view of social capital builds on the work of Granovetter (1973) that defined social structures in the forms of its network ties, that provide resources emanating from connections (Dodd, 2016). Noting that connections are made both from vertical and horizontal associations amidst public entities, Granovetter defined such ties as either strong, weak or absent. A notion that social capital scholars have expanded because of connections, that consist of bonding, bridging and linking capital (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000).

Bonding social capital, corresponding to strong ties, has been defined as "the strengthening of internal ties among people and organizations sharing similar values and interests" (Gittell & Videl, 1998, p. 15). These strong ties suggest that there exists a strong tie between people, that they are of similar age, similar background and have similar beliefs. The family then becomes an important concept, as Woolcock (2001) notes, depicting bonding social capital as the relations between families, friends and acquaintances. As regarding football fandom, bonding social capital can, e.g., be witnessed in the relationship between the most dedicated, "hardcore", fans. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, refers to ties that are frailer than bonding. The links created by bridging social capital are therefore more distant and not as strong as bonding, referring to connections that are outside of the close-knit family, - to different groups or remote friends and colleagues (Woolcock, 2001). The context of bridging capital becomes meaningful for this study when looking at the many divergent views among football fans about the clubs outlook, even though they are united in their support.

Weak ties, or linking social capital, refer to the looser connections among people from different walks of life. Although a weaker tie, it nonetheless represents significant resources, social capital that consists of more comprehensive assets that are existent within closely connected communities (Woolcock, 2001). Such "sparse networks with fewer redundant ties

offer more benefits because of the diversity of potential resources" (Dodd, 2016, p. 298) and can, therefore, encourage the dissemination of information that ultimately aids the growth of the network (Granovetter, 1973). Linking and bridging social capital has, therefore, been cognate with the advancement of new ideas, beliefs and mindsets (Hawkins & Maurer, 2010). That relates to this study, for it enables the connection of different football fans, and groups, especially on the internet and on social media, where the vast majority of users have weak ties, are not that engaged, but yet remain valuable assets (Fenton, 2018).

3.1.2 Delimitation of Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory can be seen as a multi-faceted, convoluted and ever-changing phenomenon, that for decades has led scholars to ponder the theoretical rationale and premises of the theory (Häuberer & Jeřábek, 2011). An elusive methodological foundation and inherent ambiguity within the bounds of social capital have led to some criticism. For, as likewise "no single definition of social capital exists, no single measure has demonstrated the benefits" (Dodd, 2016). Thus, the different foundations of the social capital theory have faced various theoretical critiques. Bourdieu has been accused of taking a too blinkered, one-sided, typically euro-centric standpoint in his focus on the economic class divide (Field, 2008). Coleman has been critiqued for remaining overly positive regarding social capital and omitting the potential negative consequences that are equally evident, from his work (Field, 2008). Whereas Putnam has faced criticism for isolating single factors and needing more theoretical refinement in his large scale conceptualization of the theory, that expands social capital from the boundaries of individuals to that of communities. (Portes, 1998).

Despite some criticism scholars continue to claim the potential for social capital to provide a penetrating understanding of social networks, societal norms and trust among other things (Widdop et al., 2016). Widdop et al. (2016) further state that there is an expanding arena around research between sport and social capital. The prominence of that connection has been part of the literature from the early work of Bourdieu (1986), and Putnam (1995) recognised that team sports, such as football, have vast potential to increase social capital. Hence, despite an argument that social capital theory might have fraught methodological implications, from a solely pragmatic perspective it can likewise be argued that the utility of a theory is predominantly to facilitate and aid the research (Nothaft et al., 2018). From that standpoint, this study argues that the meso-level approach taken by Lin (2001)

in a proposed framework for social capital built around online social networks, and Dodd's (2016) conceptual, a social capital model of public relations, are valid and useful theoretical frameworks that will be of benefit to this study.

3.2. Social Networks & Benefits of Intangible Assets

In his works, Nan Lin (1999; 2001; 2008) proposes a network theory of social capital which is based on online social networks or cybernetworks, that is according to Lin substantial sources of social capital. Lin counters Putnam's earlier concept that social networks are stronger when they are closed and that social capital was recessing in general. Instead, Lin (1999) indicates that social capital is on a critical rise because of increased use of online social networks, so that despite at present not everyone having access to the internet, that is rapidly changing, and therefore the empowering elements of increased access to information are available to more and more people. "There is strong evidence that an increasing number of individuals are engaged in these new forms of social networks and social relations, and there is little doubt that a significant part of the activities involves the creation and use of social capital" (Lin, 1999, p.46). The availability, size, scope and level of interaction in online networks, or social media as the platforms are more commonly referred to today, has done nothing but profoundly expand since the foundations were laid of Lin's social network theory. Therefore, Lin's notion of social resources being a product of social connections, that ultimately leads to social capital (2001) has increased in relevance.

Dodd (2016), contingent on Lin's networks theory of social capital, conceptualizes a meso-level (organizational) social capital theoretical approach to public relations. Dodd (2016) argues that social capital, as a resource- and exchange based function of intangible assets, is best conveyed through "strategic, goal-directed communication behaviours" (p. 290) that public relations professionals are ideally positioned to manage on behalf of the organization. Dodd notes the various contexts social capital can be applied to before emphasising the social factors, relationships, communication and economic values that relate to the profession of public relations. Arguing that because of the expertise public relations practitioners have in dealing with, gauging and evaluating, the value of intangible elements such as trust, reputation and relationships, that are inherently tied to tangible,

economic, results within the field of public relations, they are uniquely positioned to manage the intangible social capital resources on behalf of organizations.

Noting that interactions are an essential feature of social capital, Lin (2001) states that such interplay is logical, and inspired by the desire to fulfil specific objectives. Likewise, Portes (1998) acknowledges that "social networks are not a natural given and must be constructed through investment strategies oriented to the institutionalization of group relations, usable as a reliable source of other benefits" (p. 3). The vagueness of the term other benefits, falls perfectly in line with the broad categorization of intangible resources, that scholars have stated to be of ever-increasing importance for businesses and organizations (Dodd, 2016). An important distinction is that intangibles have real value, but are not made of solid, palpable materials. Therefore intangibles become apparent throughout a diverse spectrum such as "management credibility, innovativeness, ideas, brand identity, reputation, customer loyalty, trust, ability to attract talented workers, access to networks, research, leadership, social and environmental responsibility (Dodd, 2016, p. 292) Intangible assets, such as these, become social capital when they impact organization outcomes in the long term, and it is this reliance on intangibles, that to a great deal sets social capital apart from other forms of capital (Dodd, 2016). Despite difficulties in measuring organizational advantage, caused by intangible assets, in traditional managerial terms, the understanding of the importance of such resources is increasing. Aided by scholarly work, that identifies the social capital involved in both homophilous and heterophilic interactions, that alternatively bond the organization with its current stakeholders, or serve as a bridge towards more loosely connected stakeholders, in both cases affecting the perception of the organization, the trust, the reputation and the credibility of the organization in the eyes of the stakeholders (Dodd, 2016).

3.3 Reflections

This chapter has aimed to present an overview of social capital theory, noting its complexity and multiple conceptualizations, before introducing Lin's social network theory and Dodd's conceptual, social capital model of public relations that utilizes intangible resource management as a point of convergence. It is important to note that the conceptualization of the proposed theories by Lin and Dodd are both at a meso-level and that they actively call for

more empirical, in the field, research to be conducted, in order to strengthen the theoretical insight. Given that the purpose of this study is to examine the perception of football clubs use of social media from the perspective of fans, it is argued that the conceptualization of the social capital theory by Dodd (2016) and Lin (1999; 2001; 2008), provides a useful framework for the analysis of this study. Particularly, since this as a study regarding social media platforms, there is ample evidence that there is a growing membership among online social networks, and such online activities rest on the use, creation and engagement of social capital. Furthermore, from a strategic point of view, the fandom of football fans in online networks is a significant base of intangible assets, that impacts social capital both within the group and concerning the football club, and hence, deserves increased organizational attention. Finally, as there is a growing body of research around the relationship between sport and social capital, the concepts of bridging and bonding capital are of interest to this study, as the exchange of capital, the increase or decrease that are the results of social interactions will provide a useful lens that will aid the analysis chapter of this study.

4. The Case Organization

Newcastle United Football Club (NUFC) is a longstanding member the English Football League, having joined in 1893 after the merger of two disparate entities, Newcastle West End and Newcastle East End in 1892. It was decreed that the city of Newcastle was not big enough for two football clubs and in 1894 the club changed its colours to the well known black and white stripes (United's Victorian start, n.d.). Throughout its history, Newcastle has won the English League four times and the FA Cup six times, but its most recent bout of domestic silverware came in 1955 (Honours and records, n.d.). Like most football clubs Newcastle has experienced mixed fortune on the football pitch, but in the modern era it is most commonly associated with the period in the '90s when the "entertainers" came close to winning the league title and captured the audience with its excitable fast flowing form of football (The Entertainers, n.d.). Newcastle United remain a part of the EPL, the top tier of English football, but have not come close to reaching the summit of the league for several years. Nonetheless, Newcastle as the northernmost representative in the EPL, and the only football club in the city, still enjoys a dedicated and numerous following in the area.

4.1 Newcastle United in Numbers

Newcastle United have been profitable in the seven of last eight years, with the exception being the year that they spent in the second tier in 2016/2017, yet their profits are in large part due to the vast increase in the TV broadcasting revenue of the EPL. The clubs commercial income has only increased by £0.5m in the last eleven years (Ramble, 2019) while other EPL clubs have increased their commercial revenue manifold. Thus, even though Newcastle is in a strong financial position the gap between the club and the elite clubs of the division continues to rise.

Newcastle United FC (NUFC)

League: Enjoying EPL status after promotion in May 2017 (Ramble, 2019).

Attendances: The average for the 2017/2018 is 51,992, the 7th highest in the EPL (Ramble, 2019). St James' Park capacity is 52,387 (NUFC.co.uk)

Revenue: 2017/2018 revenue increased by £53m from its last season in the Premier League, 2016/2017, entirely due to the new TV rights deal that started in 2017.

The 2017/2018 revenue of £178m is the 8th highest in the Premier League and 19th in the world. 71% of Newcastle's revenue comes from the TV deal while other forms of commercial income have fallen flat and have grown significantly less than other EPL sides (Ramble, 2019).

Web site: Official club website, www.nufc.co.uk

Facebook: 2.165.232 fans (as of May 1, 2019)

www.facebook.com/#!/newcastleunited

Twitter: 1,369,168 followers (as of May 1, 2019) <https://twitter.com/NUFCOfficial>

Instagram: 272,551 followers (as of May 1, 2019) <https://www.instagram.com/nufc/>

Youtube: 42, 343 subscribers (as of May 1, 2019)

<https://www.youtube.com/user/NUFCOfficial1892>

Box 1. Newcastle United in Numbers

4.2 The Ownership of Newcastle

Newcastle United FC is owned by Mike Ashley, a well known UK based businessman that earned his fortune through founding the low-cost sports retail empire, Sports Direct, as a young man (Maidment, 2014). Ashley, who is known as an impulsive but shrewd businessman acquired the club in 2007 and initially enjoyed a good relationship with the fans, which he often accompanied to local bars and pubs (B., 2008). The owner's reputation with the fans was further bolstered by the new owner granting the club substantial interest-free loans, due to the clubs perilous financial position at the time of his takeover (Ramble, 2019). Ashley's relationship with the fans quickly unravelled as tales of his unconventional running of the club became public knowledge, in addition to the resignation of the football manager, the often idolized Kevin Keegan who had also been the clubs manager during their revival in the '90s. Keegan cited unacceptable interference from board room level (E., 2008) which lead

to fans criticizing the unprofessional running of Newcastle. Ever since, Ashley has appeared detached from the club, putting it up for sale on several occasions (B.,2008; Taylor, 2017) and very rarely makes public appearances attending Newcastle United matches.

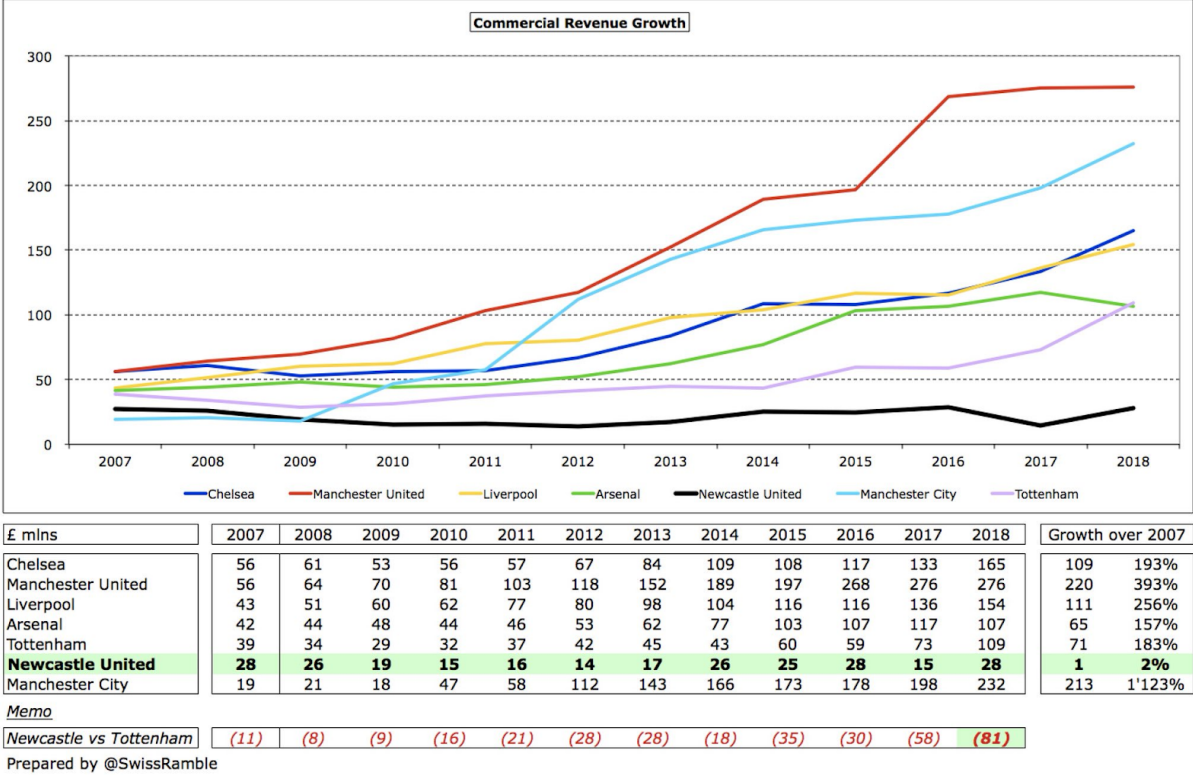


Image 1. Commercial revenue growth of Newcastle United 2007-2018 (Ramble, 2019).

From a purely financial perspective, Mike Ashley has run Newcastle United well. Nevertheless, that is not all that matters to the fans of Newcastle. As image 1. shows, the gap between Newcastle and the top level EPL clubs has significantly increased during Ashley’s running of the club. The outlays on new players, and the wage cost of the club is near the bottom of the EPL (Ramble, 2019), despite Newcastle enjoying a more massive fanbase, and significantly higher income than that position suggests. Indicating a lack of ambition to strive to do well in the EPL, on behalf of the owner, but rather remain content with having access to the continually growing TV broadcasting income (Conn, 2018).

Consequent, the research design of the study will be presented. The following chapter will feature a description of the research methods chosen to conduct a mixed-method case study about professional football clubs uses of social media, from a fans perspective.

5. Methodology and Research Design

The purpose of this study has been to gain better insight into, and aid understanding of the perception of professional football clubs use of social media from a fan perspective. With that in mind, a mixed method approach has been undertaken within the confines of a case study. Consisting of a short quantitative survey, 23 semi-structured interviews conducted on location in Newcastle, and extensive desktop research, to attain a more holistic understanding of this complex phenomenon that is online- engagement and communication of football clubs and their fandom. This chapter will begin with a description of the epistemological approach of this study, then continue with a presentation of the selection of the case, describe the methods chosen for this study, the selection of interviewees, interview proceedings, continuing with a discussion of ethical and practical issues, before concluding with a discussion of the analytical process.

5.1. Epistemology and Ontology

When facing a complex multi-dimensional issue such as sports fandom and the corresponding communication efforts of football clubs, the researcher at the outset is faced with the fundamental social sciences questions of whether the truth is out there, or whether it is all a part of the individual's mind. This study leans to the latter and has contemplated the philosophical paradigms of interpretivism and critical realism (Saunders et al., 2012) before opting for a pragmatic perspective, that at its essence is devoted to the understanding and selection of the most relevant and applicable methods to answer the research question (Creswell, 2013). This study, therefore, leans towards the side that believes in social reality being the creation, and co-creation, of people, but from a pragmatic standpoint does not commit to one definitive philosophy or reality. Instead, pragmatists devote themselves to multiple interpretations of the world and believe there are multiple ways to undertake any given research. For pragmatists, there is no single point of view (Saunders et al., 2012). Pragmatic perspective is beneficial for this study, that aims to gather insight on football fans perception of how football clubs use their social media. For it endeavours at the same time to

maintain a more holistic frame, one that pertains to the issue being a communication matter from the clubs viewpoint. Therefore it is argued that the external, multiple angle position of pragmatism is beneficial to this research.

Furthermore, from a hermeneutical angle the inherent pragmatic aspect of social science means that the research cannot aim to mirror an independent object, for "the objects of human and social science are not independent of, but rather constituted by, human understanding" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009, p. 257)). In this light the epistemology is imbued with moral values that pragmatic scholars should aim for "improving the practices under consideration" (ibid). Hence, a flexible mixed method approach has been adopted by this study, that maintains to remain adaptive in regards to both the research question and methods. Flyvbjerg (2001), influenced by Aristotle's concept of phronesis, has argued for getting close to the practices studied, concentrating on values, conducting case studies and employing narrative in order to contribute insight "to the ongoing social dialogue and praxis in society, rather than to generate ultimate unequivocally verified knowledge" (P. 139). In a similar vein, Schultz and Hatch (1996) have argued for the strategy of multiple paradigms in research, where the interplay of paradigms creates tension that leads to new forms of understanding. Thus, it can be argued that this mixed method case study is not only treading a popular case study design, where the utilization of mixed methods is a secure application (Yin, 2003) but it is also situated within a valid pragmatic perspective. Further emphasis on the practical nature of this study is the inclusion of a recommendation chapter, that follows the blueprint that a pragmatic perspective should lead to actions (Saunders et al., 2012; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009).

In terms of this thesis study, insight and knowledge are derived from a pragmatic perspective. The intention has been to be explicit and present the results in a straightforward manner that could be easily interpreted and adjusted for actions. However, adopting a pragmatic perspective has led to implications for this study, for within that perspective the values of the researcher play a significant role. When interpreting the data and analysis, the researcher maintains both objective and subjective viewpoints (Saunders et al., 2012). In that way when conducting interviews, the researcher is stepping into the field, and although that can have positive results (Flyvbjerg, 2006), full awareness of the interactions are necessary. The interviewees and participants in the online study were made aware of the researcher's standpoint and goals when conducting this study. It could be argued that being a fellow

Newcastle United supporter helped in creating a bond with the participants, but at the same time to garner against potential bias and prejudice, the participants were asked open-ended questions. Giving the interviewees the impression that there are no wrong answers, and making sure that their perception of the clubs uses of social media is what matters for this study.

5.2. Selection of the Case

This research has been conducted as a case study, for it is argued that it is a way for the researcher to gain an in-depth, comprehensive and thorough understanding of the phenomenon under research. Yin (2003) argues that cases studies are the preferred strategy when the researcher has little or no control over the subject under research and "the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context" (p. 1). Furthermore, according to Flyvbjerg (2006) the "advantage of the case study is that it can "close in" on real-life situations and test views directly concerning phenomena as they unfold in practice" (p. 235). All those elements are present within the study of football clubs use of social media, and furthermore, as Flyvbjerg points out, a case study is vital in providing forthright insights of the phenomenon that is being investigated. Which seems appropriate, for a study, that is focused on capturing the insight of football fans regarding their clubs use of social media.

As stated in the literature review, there is a widespread encouragement for further research on football clubs use of social media platforms, for it is, according to scholars, an under-researched topic. The seminal study of McCarthy et al. (2014) had chosen Newcastle United as one of the chosen topics for research, in their multiple case study of English football clubs. That is useful for it gives a representation of how the management of the club views online and social media communication. Which in turn allows this study to gain a more holistic understanding of the case under study (Yin, 2003). Having followed the club for over twenty years, this researcher quickly gained awareness that the situation surrounding the clubs social media, and their efforts at communicating to their fanbase, showed different signs of potential classification as either extreme/deviant- or as critical cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Suri, 2011). It is considering, as stated in chapter 4., Newcastle's large and dedicated following in an area that does not contain other rival EPL clubs. The unresolved issue with the owner that is detached from the club, and disliked by the fans. Moreover, the

clubs apparent uncertainty in how best to adapt to current expectations that they are to maintain an engaging social media presence (McCarthy et al., 2014). This study argues that such a complicated, multi-layered situation in the background, where the fans expect more both from the club on the football field, and the owner in his running of the club, will result in an information-rich, thickly descriptive case, that focuses on the fans insight and perception of how Newcastle United is communicating on social media. This study accordingly argues that the selected case for this study has the potential for reaching generalizations (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Since it consists of fans that have a mostly troubled relationship with the clubs management, and any social media communication improvements that they identify as aiding the relationship they have with the club should likewise have implications for football clubs that enjoy a better relationship with their fans. This study furthermore argues that the selected case that respectively is fixated on social media is well suited to the research field of strategic communication, for at its core is the question of how a strained relationship between an organization and its social media followers, is best addressed through the organizations' social media communication efforts.

5.3. Mixed Methods

This case study can be classified as being a mixed method in nature for it incorporates the results from a quantitative online survey, in addition to conducting qualitative interviews. The use of a more than one strategy within a given case study, such as a survey within a case study, or a case study within a survey, are not uncommon and the strategies are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Yin, 2003). With regards to the research design of this study, the purpose of conducting a short online survey of Newcastle United's supporter's views of the clubs performance on its social media sites was twofold. First, following the impressions gained from extensive desktop research, a quick online survey provided a base for this studies proposition that Newcastle United's social media efforts, had according to the supporter's ample opportunity to advance in regards to their engagement needs. The results of the survey in that regard supported the initial assumptions made by the researcher. Secondly, the results of the survey were useful for the researcher in formulating the interview questions and highlighted the areas that could warrant further probing when conducting qualitative interviews. Even though the survey only registered 47 participants, of fans that were randomly approached through two separate Newcastle United fan sites on social media, the

initial intention of the researcher had been to enlist more participants of the survey to increase the validity of the results (Pallant, 2010). This study, nevertheless, argues that the results of the survey that are in line with the results of the qualitative interviews, strengthen the scope of this research and provide further insights to be incorporated into the analysis section of this study.

5.4 Qualitative Interviews

The quantitative survey has provided a useful knowledge foundation for this study, supplemented with desktop research of Newcastle United's social media and as stated in the literature review, secondary sources from previous research, that assist in gaining a broader understanding of the topic of this study. The primary data collection method, undertaken for this study, however, has been that of qualitative semi-structured interviews. In order to describe and analyse how football fans understand and perceive of the clubs social media communication efforts, in effect to garner insights directly from the fans themselves, qualitative interviews were deemed the most suitable approach. Semi-structured interviews inherently place the interviewer's interest at centre stage (Bryman & Bell, 2011), and the pragmatic perspective of this study further emphasize the role the researchers values have on the study (Saunders et al., 2012), yet semi-structured interviews have the potential to garner rich descriptions that were deemed necessary in this context. For in qualitative interviews it is both the researcher and the interviewees that cooperatively construct new knowledge (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). Following a further description of qualitative interviews by Brinkmann and Kvale (2009), an interview guide was proposed that ascertained the interview process as a mix of conceptual interviews "that explore the meaning and the conceptual dimensions of central terms, as well as their positions and links within a conceptual network" (p. 151). That, in turn, leads to the interviewees narrative, where the researcher gives the interviewee room for expression and aims to "ascertain the main plot of the story, the possible subplots, and the elements of tensions, conflicts, and resolutions" (p. 155). In light of this intention, the researcher enlisted a set of flexible, open-ended questions that gave the interviewees room to describe their insights in a manner they deemed appropriate and to focus on elements of the issue at hand, that the interviewees deemed vital to them.

5.4.1. Access to Newcastle United & Supporters

After the sending of several emails, it became evident that the football club under study, Newcastle United FC, was not likely to be of much assistance with regards to this research. The club stated that they did not have a dedicated person in charge of social media and were not available to answer questions regarding their use of social media (BoxOffice@nufc.co.uk, personal communication, February 18, 2019). Since this case study has aimed to attain a holistic understanding of the issue under research (Yin, 2003), the study of McCarthy et al. (2014) has been invaluable. For their seminal, multiple case study incorporates the managerial standpoint of Newcastle United as to their use of social media. Desktop research conducted for this study revealed that there had not been made significant changes to their running of the clubs social media. Therefore, it is argued that the commentary by the Newcastle United management in that study is still an accurate representation of the clubs perception of social media.

Since Newcastle was not considerate in assisting in facilitating the researcher access to their fanbase, other measures were undertaken. A research trip was planned to conduct interviews with fans on location in Newcastle in the buildup to a home fixture in the EPL. In the months ahead the researcher contacted several unofficial Newcastle fan sites but did not receive confirmation that they were willing to be interviewed for this study, except for representatives of one fan platform that was willing to schedule interviews on the day of Newcastle's home match. The researcher spent four days in Newcastle with the explicit goal of finding Newcastle supporters willing to talk about their perception of the clubs use of social media. The first few days garnered mixed results, for even though the locals were predominantly friendly and willing to voice their opinion of the city's football clubs, finding dedicated fans that more importantly also follow the club on social media, proved to be decidedly more complicated than this researcher had anticipated. The experience of these uncertain attempts at finding willing interview participants can also be seen as having been useful. For, due to the context-specific subject matter, conducting test interviews remained unfeasible prior to being on location in Newcastle. These, with varying degree of success, attempts at interviewing fans on the location provided the researcher with invaluable experience in approaching potential fans, in formulating the interview questions, and in conducting interviews with strangers in various informal settings. All in all, the researcher conducted three successful interviews in the days leading up to the matchday.

Having the majority of interviews remaining when the matchday approached, was an intimidating prospect but due to the context-specific nature of this study. That is focused on fan insight on their clubs use of social media. Being at a location where the fans are attending an event that is the pinnacle of their emotional investment in the football club, proved to be a successful endeavour and a gratifying experience for this researcher. Altogether, in the lead up to the match at St. James Park, the researcher conducted twenty interviews with fans in the streets surrounding the stadium, in nearby pubs, and directly outside the stadium. All locations, that on matchdays are full of excited fans that are specifically there to witness the football club, the subject of their emotional attachment, play a football match. The interviews ranged from a couple of minutes up to forty minutes, and this study argues that research such as this that is context specific, is aided by conducting interviews in that context-specific environment. Where the football fans are attending, full of excitement before the upcoming game, and with the subject matter of this study at the forefront of their mind, it is the experience of this researcher that conducting interviews with football fans in these settings provided deep insights of the fans' perceptions of the clubs social media, of the fans perspective that has not received adequate scholarly attention (Vale & Fernandes, 2017). The case can in that sense be seen as an exemplifying case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) where the findings of this study may reveal implications that are of significance to other organizations that are facing a similar level of uncertainty of how best to engage with their followers on social media.

5.4.2. Selection and Criteria of Interviewees

As this is a study of Newcastle United fans, and their insight into how the club is utilizing their social media platforms, there is a necessary element of purposeful sampling (Suri, 2011) that is in a way stratified, for it entails a highly specific subgroup within the general population (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Identifying the potential interviewees and finding a way to approach them was a dilemma that was primarily solved by attending a Newcastle match, where a vast number of potential interviewees were gathered in the same location for a substantial time. Since this research aims to gather fans perceptions of how they view the clubs use of social media, the criteria (Suri, 2011) used for identifying valuable interviewees was rather straightforward. (1) The persons selected for the qualitative interviews had to be Newcastle United fans, and (2) which turned out to be a little more challenging, was that the fans had to be following the clubs social media efforts. That in this researchers experience turned out to be criteria that limited the potential pool of interviewees, for the vast majority of fans over the

age of 50 for example conveyed that they did not use social media at all. However, these simple sets of criteria meant that the researcher, within the time scale of several hours before and after the match, had the opportunity to entirely at random approach fans and start a conversation about Newcastle United. Such a random approach to the selection of interview participants, despite the rather small sample of 23 interviews, allow for more potential of generalizations (Suri, 2011; Flyvbjerg, 2006). The sample of interviewees selected for this study is therefore varied in terms of age, nationality and residence, but remains all male. That is unfortunate, for the researcher was aware of potential male-centric bias and tried to approach several female supporters in the vicinity of the stadium on the match day, to no avail. Such a male-centric bias can also in part be explained by the overwhelming majority of males that attend football matches in the UK (E., n.d.).

5.4.3. Interview Proceedings

Before conducting the interviews on location in Newcastle, in order to gain insightful information-rich answers from the participants, an interview guide was prepared in advance (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). Based on the literature review, the results from the short quantitative survey, previous research and potential lack thereof, the questions were focused on the fans perception of how they view the clubs use of social media. The engagement and interaction the club is providing on social media, the sense of being a part of a community by following the clubs social media, issues that the club was refraining from addressing on social media, and quite simply what kind of content they would like to see from the club to improve their social media efforts. As previously stated, the interviews were explorative and semi-structured (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009) and further guided by the narrative chosen by the interviewee following the original open-ended question. Such an approach puts an added importance on the follow-up question and may lead to a back and forth exchange, where the interviewer is a participant in the discussion. The interview guide remained a useful tool, essential in order to open up the discussion but thereafter the direction of the interview was mostly open-ended, for the aim of this study is to gain insights of the fans perspective, and that requires a certain measure of flexibility on the part of the interviewer (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). That resulted in the interviews taking on a life of their own and thereby providing insight that the researcher had not contemplated before.

For the interviews were explorative and semi-structured the interviews were conducted in flexible and adjustable ways (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009) and the surroundings, in an exciting

pre-match atmosphere in the area near the football stadium were conducive to a relaxed, informal, discussion of the matter at hand. Before each interview, the interviewees were briefed on the nature of the study, the researcher's role as a master student, and the aim of the research project and the line of questioning. It can be argued that the researcher's position, as a fellow Newcastle fan, has aided in gaining the interviewee's trust (Flyvbjerg, 2006) as it made them see the interview as a discussion among equals. All interviewees agreed to be audio recorded on an iPhone, and conducting the interviews in such cordial settings allowed the interviewer to take note of the interviewee's expressions, both bodily and facial expressions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). When time permitted, the researcher augmented the interviews by recording his impressions of the interview proceedings.

Several ethical aspects were taken under serious consideration during the conduct of the interviews, for this is a research that strove to be transparent in regards to all participants in the study. This entailed that all interviewees were made aware of the purpose of this study, its aim, the value of their contribution and who would have access to the study after its completion. The interviewees were verbally reassured that their participation was anonymous and therefore their names are not included when quotes from the interviews are provided in this thesis. All interviewees consented to be recorded during the interview process, and they were informed that the recordings would only be used for transcribing purposes. The confidentiality of their participation means that the recordings will not be shared with other parties. Finally, the participants were reassured that this study is centred on the fans' perceptions of how Newcastle runs their social media, meaning that there are no right and no wrong answers and that this study aims to gain real insight into what the fans are looking for when following football clubs on social media platforms. The participants were offered the chance to leave their email with the researcher if they wished to obtain a copy of this study upon completion.

5.5. Analytical Process

This study has chosen an inductive approach for the subsequent case study analysis where the process of coding and then categorization, that are critical aspects of social science analysis (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009), was started early in the process. The researcher was aware that the aim was to break down, examine and compare, and identify themes, patterns and

categories (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009) when the data was collected. The purpose of an inductive analytical approach is not to test an existing theory, but rather to aid in the development of theory, and as such, the process is often iterative where the researcher goes back and forth between theory and data (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

The interviews were conducted during four days at the beginning of March, where the researcher aimed at supplementing the interviews with dictated field notes where time permitted. The interviews were transcribed early on after the duration of the research trip, as that is seen as an essential first step of the analytical process. The initial step was to conduct a concept-driven coding (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009) that aimed at making sense of the data collected, and quickly weave through and discard empirical material that was not relevant for this study. Concept-driven coding enlists the consultation of previous literature in order to deem what is paramount information for this study quickly but does not imply that the categorization of the material is done in advance (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). Instead, that process takes on a more hermeneutical nature where a back and forth process continuously occurs, between examining individual interviews and then examining the whole material collected. Such an open coding process enlists the process of carefully examining, breaking down, identifying patterns and categorizing data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). That process is time-consuming and involves constant reflection in the search for a coherent meaning of the empirical data. Similarly, there are several canons of hermeneutical interpretations, but this study found that after conducting categorization, a "good Gestalt" (p. 210) had been reached. Where the material was in unity, and the logic of the categorization leads to the identification of four major themes for analysis, that will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

As this study is based around a pragmatic perspective and aims to get close to the fans perception of the topic at hand, that context guides how the findings and the empirical data are presented in the following chapter. The four themes identified are presented in rich empirical data of interview passages that aim to capture "the native's point of view, ... finding the text's essence and truth" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 236). Where in turn, the four themes identified are discussed further in a recommendation chapter, that from a pragmatic perspective offers potential solutions to the issues at play, guided by the essence of what the fans themselves deemed relevant from their perspective.

6. Analysis

In the following chapter, an analysis is presented of how Newcastle United supporters view their clubs presence on social media, relating to the research questions of what kind of interaction, the highly emotionally invested football fans, are seeking from their clubs. The first section highlights the results from the short online survey that was conducted primarily to indicate the fans contentment with the clubs uses of social media. Following on from that insight, four key themes were identified in the aftermath of the semi-structured qualitative interviews. The key themes discussed in the following analysis are:

1. The club is providing fans with minimum social media content.
2. The fans, to a degree, feel that following the club on social media nonetheless establishes a closer connection.
3. A large number of fans seek unofficial sites that are better at fostering an engaged community among its users.
4. A strong sense of dissatisfaction with the ownership of the club is an issue that demands to be attended to.

The four themes provide an understanding of the scope of the communication issues that Newcastle United are facing, and will be discussed further in the following chapter.

6.1 The Fans Contentment with NUFC Social Media

As stated in the literature review, sports fans and principally football fans are exceptionally invested in their team's progress (McCarthy et al., 2014; Vale & Fernandes, 2017). These fandoms, abnormally, high level of emotional investment in their team of interest ought, presumably, to lead to a high number of fans using the clubs social media regularly. The Responses from the online survey were marked on a five point scale, from 1 = negative to 5 = positive.

How often do you use NUFC's social media?

47 responses

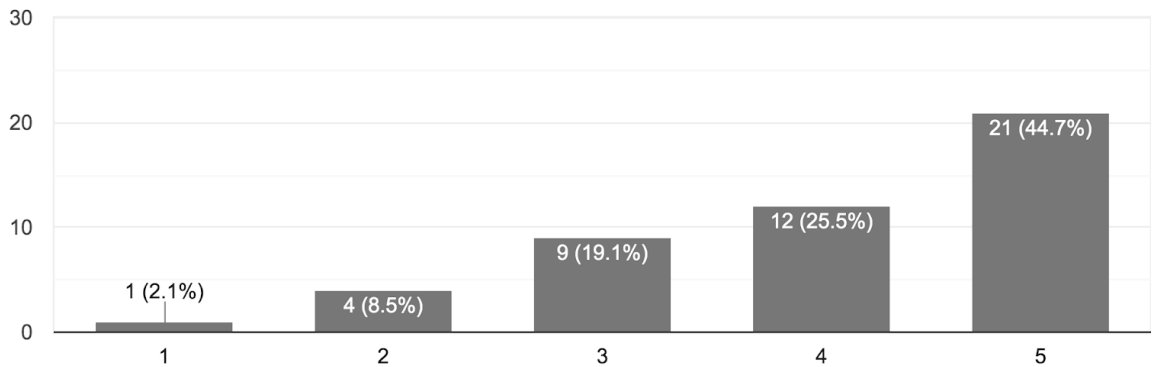


Image 2. How often do you use NUFC's social media? (Sigurðsson, 2019)

The numbers from the survey, however, show that only 44.7% of the dedicated fans that participated in the survey, use Newcastle United's social media sites daily, while the majority of participants use the sites less frequently.

Overall, how satisfied are you with the content on NUFC's social media sites?

47 responses

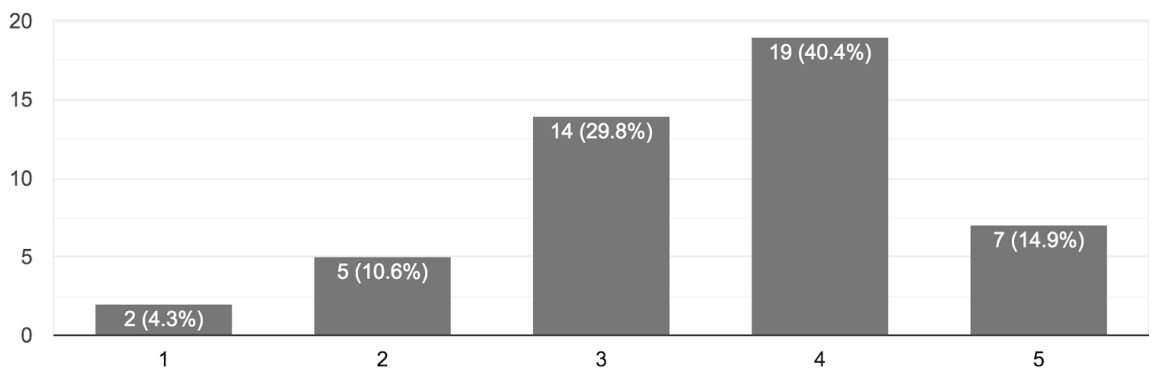


Image 3. Overall, how satisfied are you with the content on NUFC's social media sites? (Sigurðsson, 2019)

The results from the second question further show that Newcastle United fans are not fully satisfied with the content that the club provides on social media. With the majority of fans lining up on the three middle spectrums, 80.8% of participants show a varying degree of mid-level satisfaction with the content provided by Newcastle United.

Do you use other unofficial NUFC related social media sites?

47 responses

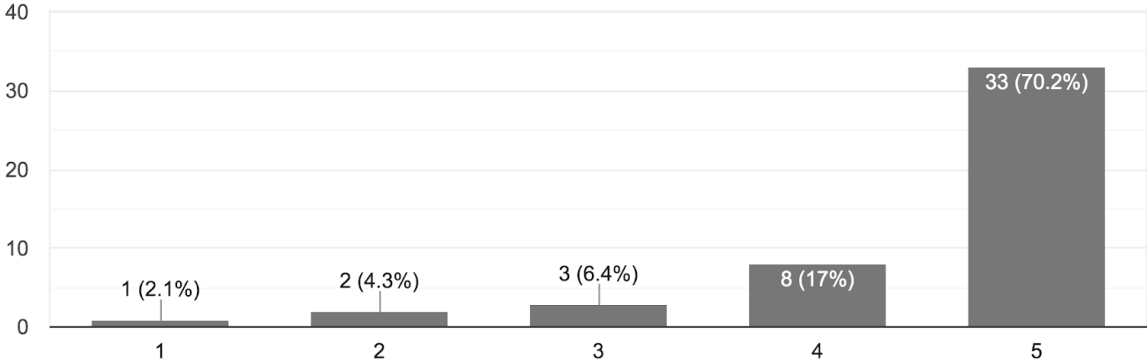


Image 4. Do you use other NUFC related social media sites? (Sigurðsson, 2019)

The results from the first two questions have given indications that Newcastle United’s social media sites are not being frequented by fans, to the degree that would have been expected by emotionally invested fans. Furthermore, the decidedly average approval rate of the content on the clubs social media sites, does seem to suggest that there is room for improvement with regards to the content being provided by the clubs social media. On the other hand, the results of the third question provide a decidedly intriguing insight, showing that a significant number of Newcastle United fans prefer using unofficial sites on social media platforms. The results from the survey, thus, indicates that a larger share of participants, 70.2% versus 44.7%, prefers the content provided by the unofficial Newcastle United related social media sites. An indication further supported by comments made by the participants of the survey:

"I feel non-nufc pages cover NUFC a lot better than the official page does. Very uninformative of what is actually going on. However, I put this down to the way the club is run. Like a Soviet dictatorship."

"Unofficial fan sites are much better. i.e. spirit of the toon, newcastle united fc fans etc. Greater range of views, more interesting articles. Proper fans taking part. With the clubs own site you get the feeling its almost forced to put things out to appease a narrative. Fun88 are a great site as well. Funny and informative."

Hence, the results from the survey seem to indicate that there exists a gap between the content that Newcastle United is providing fans on social media, and what the fans are looking for on social media — resulting in fans looking up other NUFC related content to fill their need. A result Newcastle United seemed potentially aware of and had not found a suitable way to address in a coherent manner (McCarthy et al., 2014). Thus, the insights from the survey indicated a division between what the club can provide, at present, for its fans, and what said fans seem to expect from the club. A division that expectantly will be further addressed, by the researcher, with a series of interviews with Newcastle fans.

6.2 Interviews with NUFC Fans

It became apparent quite quickly that the topic of Newcastle United Football Club is one that nearly every local has an opinion on, often differing from the next one. However, the first interview conducted set the tone for a theme that prevailed throughout. The landlord of an establishment near the St. James Park football ground, often filled to the rafters with football fans on matchdays, told how he felt that the club had lost contact with its surroundings. How it had been different some twenty years ago, and that even though he was running a bar close to the stadium, he was in no contact with anyone associated with Newcastle United. That mirrors a sentiment that was expressed by several Newcastle supporter that follow the club on social media.

6.2.1 NUFC Social Media is Providing Minimal Content & Engagement

"I live in America, and when I wake up and want to get Newcastle news, I do not go to Newcastle's sites. It is vanilla! It is what they want you to hear. There are fan sites in Amer-

ica that are really good. It is really good news, and It is a way to banter with the fans. The way the fans feel. I do not know anybody that would go to a Newcastle site to get rumours, or you know the vibe of the fans. Just because you will not get to feel what the fans feel, You get the good news only, so you do not go there as much".

As the quote above displays, the fans of Newcastle United generally feel that the clubs social media is not providing engaging content. "It is vanilla!" and that sentiment is resonant with the feeling of several other interviewees, albeit with differing emotional intonations. The fans that were interviewed, in disparate terms, described Newcastle United's social media efforts as "poor", "sterile", "terrible", "It is kind of dead", or at best as "OK". None of the persons interviewed found that the club was doing a decidedly good job operating its social media sites. Alternatively, as one devoted local supporter of 40 years summed it up, "I find it is not witty, it is not clever, it is not interesting". Such sentiments, support the overall consensus among the fans that the club, as it stands, is not prioritizing any interaction with the fans.

Two long-term supporters quite eloquently articulated the feeling that the club is putting in minimal effort in providing the fans with engaging content and interaction on social media:

"To be honest, it is corporate. There is no effort in getting the fans involved; it is just corporate. Bang out a bit of news, bang out a bit of promotion, bang out ticket information. It is more like an information site; it is not like Arsenal's social media sites where they try to have interaction. It is just PR. It is nothing special."

Moreover,:

"That is the problem to start with. They have done social media because it is the thing to do, but it is the very minimum thing they have done. And they have only done it because they feel like they have got to. But they will not have anybody to monitor it or interact with fans or anything like that. If you went on the website and asked a question on social media, you know you would not get a response."

It could be argued that on the contrary to what the fan stated, it is, in fact, more PR effort that is needed, but that is beside the main point that the fans are making, that Newcastle directly, and in contrast to some other English Premier League (EPL) clubs, are not

preeminently focusing their efforts on interacting with their fans. As Vale and Fernandes (2017) pointed out in their research, another EPL club, Manchester City, has been experimenting with automated social bots that can pass themselves off as human beings, with the idea being that no message on social media goes unanswered.

The apparent detachment by Newcastle United on social media does not necessarily come as a surprise. For, in their seminal research, McCarthy et al. (2014) report that the clubs representatives stated a nervousness about ceding control of the brand on social media, a lack of understanding of their fans through digital means and a lack of effort and capabilities to monitor the actions of the fans on their website and social media. In that research, the Newcastle United Head of Customer Operations is quoted as saying that he does not feel that anybody in the football industry is particularly adept on social media but that in comparison to "other industries and other uses of Twitter particularly (yes) I think that we're miles behind" (p. 193). A further, frank, statement by the same individual acknowledges that "You can tick the boxes of web 2.0 but we're not really doing anything with it" (p. 194). In a similar vein McCarthy et al. (2014) report that Newcastle, among the three other clubs being studied, was not producing original content for their social media platforms, but solely using social media to point their fans to stories on the official website. A not particularly useful way of engaging and interacting with their fans. The interviews conducted for this study, and corresponding desktop research monitoring Newcastle's social media, seem to suggest that there has not been a monumental shift in the intervening years. Leading to a forthright consideration, by an otherwise markedly measured and articulate fan:

"The club has slowly withdrawn themselves from, whether, it be giving interviews to the media or giving fans necessarily the infrastructure that other clubs have then progressed with. Because A), it either costs money, B), costs time which they do not want to invest in, or C), they just do not care. Which has been the case in years gone by".

In regards to social capital, the apparent failure to produce engaging content and interact with the fans on social media has implications. For, in relation to bonding capital, strengthening the ties with existing fans, a lack of interaction by the club on social media does, in fact, seem to suggest that such ties are getting weaker as fans stop to actively look out for the clubs social media content because it does not produce "interesting" material. Furthermore, not producing engaging content on social media is not conducive to supporting bridging

or linking capital, for in order to attain new social media followers one of the prerequisites is to provide content that followers are willing to share with their fanbase and therefore spreading the message.

Social capital is imperative in how social media platforms operate, for the algorithms of social media platforms measure the relationships between a brand and its fans. (Fenton, 2018) It is social not in the name only, for if there is minimum engagement, discussion and interaction with fans on a brand page, the algorithms will dictate that the content provided is shown to fewer and fewer people. Thus, the nature of the relationship between Newcastle United and its fans on social media has implications on how visible the communication efforts of the club are to regular fans that do not actively engage, i.e. like, comment, share, with the content provided by the club on social media.

6.2.2 Connection with Fans and Community

"They are running it well. It was a bit slow when I started to follow it. It was after some games, and so on, and when you look at other Premier League clubs they were more efficient and put up a lot more from the player's point of view and the fans. But now after the new year, I think it has progressed pretty good, the club site is posting a lot more so I think it has developed".

As was stated in the literature review, football fans enjoy an exceedingly strong emotional connection with the teams that they support, and the interviews that were conducted for this study support that view. There is a, seemingly, ostentatious obligation among the football fans to keep on following the clubs social media, despite the decidedly lacklustre assessment of the quality of Newcastle United's social media presence, as discussed in chapter 6.2.1. The researcher talking to fans outside of St. James Park on a matchday, accrued an awareness that there existed a strong undercurrent of faith that things might turn out for the better, despite the consensus that the clubs social media was, at present, not living up to expectations.

The interviews conducted for this study revealed a notable difference in perception of Newcastle United's social media, where the fans that either lived abroad or were otherwise not in a regular proximity to the club and the club's surroundings, showed an evidently higher level of appreciation of any material that the club provided than the local fans that are in

a better position to enjoy Newcastle matches at home with higher frequency. The opening quote, above, is an example of this stronger sense of optimism regarding the clubs social media that were being conveyed by fans living abroad. That sense of being grateful for any material the club provides that makes the fan feel closer to the club, the players and the surroundings, was further asserted by a buoyant fan from Brazil:

"I live in London, so I think it is good because in the stories they use to show something from the games, something from inside the stadium. I feel that is good because it helps us that live far away to feel inside the match and inside the atmosphere".

It is prudent to note that those mentioned above, of a more positive inclination, comments were addressing Newcastle United's Instagram account, that several interviewees agreed with being the clubs most active social media platform. Two fans even went on to note that the clubs photographer was "quite good" and that is represented on a social media platform such as Instagram, which is a visual medium that incorporates images with generally a very little added textual information. The clubs Instagram account, however, is an addition put into operation after the study by Mccarthy et al. (2014) and must be seen as a step in the right direction, in providing fans with original engaging content for social media, even though it generally consists of photos that are later made available on the clubs official website. It is the unfulfilled potential of the clubs other social media platforms that make these fans that are appreciative of all the material that the club provides, noting a hope that the club can "progress it a bit more so that we can get a bit more feeling".

Another interesting perspective was brought about by a Newcastle supporter visiting from Germany:

"In Germany the clubs they are more active on Facebook and social media, I think. I guess there is more around about the club and the city, and here it is only a little bit focused on the game. Yeah, we lost, we won. Yeah. There could be more extra information, round about the stadium, the city. In Germany, I think there are sometimes jokes about the club; it is often funny to watch the videos or something. In Newcastle it is... ach it could be more. There is more potential to reach people around the world if they do a little bit more on social media".

Nufer, Bühler & Chadwick (2016) note this communal aspect of football in Germany where the vast majority of football clubs are still owned, in part, by fans. Even though the professional football clubs in Germany are adapting to increased professional standards, this connection to the local community has still managed to prevail through fan ownership of the clubs. That is a marked difference to the situation in England, and perhaps one that is also reflected on social media as the fan alluded to where Newcastle's social media content is predominantly focused on what happens on the playing field. The German fans' comments about a lack of humour in Newcastle United's social media output were also reflected by other fans, suggesting that the vibrant emotional connection fans have with the club, and the game of football, is often creditably acknowledged through "wit", "banter" and "humour".

The international fans that were interviewed for this study revealed, as aforementioned, a vast pining for and a recognition of the content that the club has provided for them — noting every improvement that is being made. Newcastle does not seem to be investing significant resources in catering to the needs of fans living abroad, like there are examples of other EPL clubs attempting to accomplish (Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015)). Instead, it seems that task is being undertaken by local fans that in this researchers experience were extremely helpful and willing to discuss every aspect of their football club. The local fans did not seem unduly guarded about their position, from a social capital perspective worried about foreign fans taking up space on their turf, but rather mildly amused and benevolent to outsiders indicating interest in their "troubled" club. In that sense, the locals are acting as intangible assets of Newcastle United (Dodd, 2016), helping to spread the brand message, as is assuredly the case on the fan operated unofficial sites, that according to fans exceed the club in providing interactive, engaging material on social media.

6.2.3 Unofficial Fan Sites

"Plus ourselves as fans, football fans by their nature, we are incredibly fickle human beings. We will lambast and vilify footballers from one game to the other, but we will sing their praises seven days later. It is because we are emotionally involved in this football club. This is something we have been brought up with, we have been raised by. We are emotionally involved in this football club. It dictates your daily life, depending on how things go. We will fly off the handle now and then, especially after having one or two drinks".

The quote above signals to the emotional nature of sports fandom and as this particular fan is well aware of, the often irrational behaviour that follows when emotions get the better of reason. The quote also represents quite concisely why football clubs management is mistrustful of loosening the control of brand communication on social media (Mccarthy et al., 2014). Concurrently that is precisely what football fans are looking for, "more feedback" and "comment" and interaction, and that epitomizes the communication concern that many football clubs are at present hitherto trying to come to terms with. A situation which in turn leads many fans to rely on unofficial, privately run, fan-operated social media sites. For those sites "give you a lot more".

A recurring theme among the fans interviewed for this study was that they increasingly looked to unofficial sites to meet their needs on social media. Providing them with a more engaging sense of a "community" where "you can talk to each other and discuss things and vent when you are upset", proved to be a general disposition among the supporters:

“There is more information, more material, more insight and more thoughts about the club on the unofficial sites. No just a photo and that is it. There are discussions, where there is no discussion on the official sites. You do not feel a part of the community by following the official sites. Not really. Whereas there is more life on the unofficial sites, more food for thought and more stuff for you to think about regarding the club”.

The unofficial sites appear to be more productive in providing fans with information about the players and general club proceedings, yet, at the same time fans talk about the importance of "credibility" and how there needs to be a trust in the information that is being provided. The communication in this emotionally driven context, abides in a vast ambiguous yet accessible area, as a perceptive fan, that works in the media for a sports broadcaster, lightheartedly commented on:

"You get loads of rubbish, on the unofficial ones. (Laughing) When the transfer window is open you just know for a fact they are going to be, kind of, speculating on signing a 50 million pound striker, and that never happens, and it always seems to be the same striker over and over and over again. I am sure Andy Carroll has been coming back to Newcastle since 2014. Do you know what I mean?"

A lighthearted comment such as this, represents the ambiguous assessment fans have of the many unofficial football related sites. Where fans diverge in their opinion but unite in their need for a variety of engaging content about their football clubs. Such a situation represents the obscure boundaries of the attributes of football-related discourse on social media. A polysemic existence that the fans themselves seem to be aware of: "I like the rumours. Some of them are funny. But at the same time if you could have some kind of credibility behind it, then more people would use it". In that sentiment materializes the opportunity the football clubs have on social media, for they, in essence, are in control of the source of the material the fans looking for. From a social capital perspective, they are in a position to leverage that direct access to the players and coaching staff and provide the fans with enough credible content from those sources. Trust is an essential element in the formulation of social capital and in providing direct access to their resources on social media, football clubs have potentially largely untapped assets. For, the fans are asking for a community and forums where they can interact, and "sadly" in the case of Newcastle United, that is according to their fans barely being provided.

"If you had everything on one page. If they did everything, why would you have to go elsewhere?... If they did everything. If they had your lineups on the weekend, if they had your squad news, injury news, transfer news, or even just the daily running. All in one place, if they could update it constantly, then there is no reason for people to go elsewhere, above your one point of contact. If they had like a forum on, every week where they would answer your questions. That is ideal!"

For all the potential resources available Newcastle United does not seem to be particularly adept at utilizing social media for creating an active fan community. The fans cite examples of how various other clubs seem more progressive, according to them, Liverpool and Manchester United are more active in interacting with the fans, and Manchester City "do a tunnel cam, giving fans an insight into what it is like behind the scenes". The use of Newcastle's Youtube site is a pertinent example, where according to the fans a largely dormant site, appears in a stark contrast to other clubs that provide daily content on Youtube producing "little skits, and sketches with the players and that" and thereby providing the fans with content "that makes them feel a little bit more involved with the club". This apparent non-utilization of the clubs resources is a source of concern for two fans that run unofficial Newcastle sites:

"I think because of things such as ourselves, like fan media, the club cannot control it, and that is a worry for them. Because we can say what the people on the media and the TV cannot say. We can call out a player; we can say this. We can express this as fans opinions. We grab fans who are walking past. That is what they cannot control. They do not like that, so I feel that because of that reason they will not open their doors and let the fans in, to have that relationship with the club".

Those fans feel that the club needs to be a little more open to ideas, for as they say some of those fan accounts have "a massive following" and that in itself can be beneficial to the club. As Dodd (2016) argues, the intangible assets of social media followers can be a source of social capital, and a shift on social media from being decidedly focused on commercial interactions, towards an interactive communication approach would be more amenable with regards to those assets. The more enthusiastic fans even feel that these unofficial sites could be of help in aiding the clubs shortcomings: "If the club is not going to run a little thing like their Youtube channel, you know there are people that are just dying to, desperate, willing, out of their own free time, to run things like that". However, from the more constructive fanbase, a straightforward appeal for more access is called for, to grant increased access to "fan media, podcasts, fan sites". There exists an understanding that a structure is needed and that their output may need to be "watered down" for that to become feasible in the eyes of Newcastle. Yet, the fan site representative interviewed for this study stressed that they believed a better relationship with the club, from a communal perspective, was imperative and that is what they had been seeking, although the impression of this particular fan was that the club under the current regime was "trying to avoid contact with fan media as much as possible".

6.2.4 Fans Distrustful and Disliking of the Owner

"The owners and the runners of the club they have got such a detachment from the fans, they do not want us to engage with them. So, there is no engagement with the owners, the chief executives, and nothing. The chief executive never ever speaks to the fans, you never ever hear from them. They are just not interested at all".

As was noted at the beginning of chapter 6.1 there exists a disconnect between the fans of Newcastle United and the hierarchy of the club. That is a theme that was touched upon by the

majority of the fans interviewed, albeit in disparate emotional articulations. The sense of a disillusion with the owner is a delicate subject reciprocal to the passionate affinity fans have with the club. This complexity of the emotional connection fans have with the club, in conjunction with the ownership issue became apparent in an early interview with a dedicated fan on the streets of Newcastle. That fan was carrying a bag with recently purchased club related memorabilia but had to quickly withdraw from the interview because he claimed to get too upset discussing the state of the club. That fan abstains from going to matches because of the ownership of the club, whereas he still follows them on social media. Although such actions are an extreme response, of a minority of fans, it touches upon a sentiment that the majority of fans acknowledge:

"I mean, the owner, it goes back eleven, twelve years and we could go on and on about the bad things he has done at the club. There are some people that will not even come to the game's now because of Mike Ashley, whether he is present or not, they just will not entertain him. They will not entertain the club. It is not right, it is not wrong whether you attend a game or not but I am always under the impression that you support the team first, always going to support the lads first!"

In these two quotes above are emerging the divergent views among the fans about the owner, and what should be done. The fans are very much invested in the fortunes of the club, but with regards to the ownership issue, they appear to be struggling to find common ground. Many fans feel that the owner is damaging the club and that the clubs executives are not to be trusted. "They hide a lot of stuff up. They do not tell the truth, do they? They lie quite a lot". Such distrust leads to actions where fans "do not even shop at the shops that the owner owns", yet when it comes to fan actions regarding proposed boycotts of attending games, as a measure of voicing fan disapproval of how the club is being run — reaching a meaningful consensus among a large enough body of fans to be able to make a strong stand has proved to be complicated. For there is also a significant strand of fans that is more measured in their response and feels that it is paramount to "support the team first".

"I mean the club themselves could do a lot better, but I also feel that it is not as bad as other people may necessarily feel it is. It is all down to the interaction with us as a fanbase has tended to be quite polarising. If we suffer a bad loss today and the moment the club puts up anything to with highlights or player interviews, within a couple of hours afterwards

there is going to be a level of abuse on there that is just completely disproportionate to how the team played today, or even to how the club is run as a businesses".

Again, the issue is related to the extreme emotional connection fans feel towards their football club (Vale & Fernandes, 2017; Mccarthy et al.,2014) and the lack of communication, or lack of transparency in regards to how the football club is being run. A fair share of fans interviewed for this study reported on the near complete lack of communication from the clubs executives and the owner, which they say "never comes out, makes any comments". As has been discussed here is definite room for improvement with regards to the creation of engaging content on the clubs social media, but as far as the majority of fans are concerned, the more significant issue is the running of the club which the fans believe is their domain. "If it was not for the fans there would not be a club". Since the communication from the executive level of Newcastle is minimal, "there is nothing really from the board room level" with fans having very little access to "how the club is run on the inside, inside the ground, that kind of thing". There exists a strong undercurrent of opinion that the interests of the fans are not aligned with the interests of the owner. Resulting in a strong sense of disillusionment among the fans, that simply put believe "their only interest is in making money. That is their number one focus. They are not focused on us".

This apparent "detachment" from the owner towards the fans is not a recent phenomenon, but it is one that has resulted in a guarded atmosphere surrounding the clubs communication with its fans. An atmosphere that encapsulates both the high profile playing staff and how they approach fan communication, but also reaches down to the general employees of Newcastle United. "I have friends that work for Newcastle, and they are very careful about what they say because they feel the same as the locals feel, but they cannot say it publicly because they do not want to get chopped. But If you talk to the people, the people know". Such a guarded approach to fan relations has in part lead to a pernicious ambience around the club.

"It is known that the fans are not friends with the board room and you will hear the chants today against the board room. So, no I do not think the fan's voice is heard really well. Unfortunately. In the ideal world, they would listen to us and do what we ask them to do,

but they have not for many years, so we will just keep on giving them our money, I suppose".

In his remark, this perceptive fan seems to agree with Bourdieu (1986) that economic capital is the bedrock of all capital and governs implications for all other capital. It is clear that a vast number of fans believe that the owner is only interested in making money from Newcastle United. Following that perception, it can be argued that from a strategic point of view it is astute on the owner's behalf to stay out of the limelight when the fans keep supporting the team and produce one of the best attendance figures in the League (Ramble, 2019). It can likewise be argued from a strategic communication perspective that minimising engagement on social media is also a way to minimize negative comments on the clubs social media platforms. Staying silent can be seen as a strategic decision, yet it is not necessarily a feasible long term strategy. For, as this study found, there are extensive discussions taking place on various unofficial sites, platforms the club has no control over.

Moreover, as one mildly discontented fan noted: "I think no matter what, if they do not address them, then people are going to bring it up themselves. It is going to happen. That talk is not going away any time soon". Hence, this study argues that there are vast resources, that have primarily remained idle, in Newcastle United's use of social media and that using these communication platforms in more interactive ways, providing engaging content for the intangible assets (Dodd, 2016) to share, is a way for the club to bridge the gap between what exists and what the fans want.

7. Discussion

As this study has maintained a pragmatic standpoint throughout, it is reasonable that constructive recommendations follow the analysis of the empirical material produced by this case study. Since a pragmatic perspective is inherently fixated on actions, this studies aim is to lead to a change in conduct (Saunders et al., 2012; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Thus, resting on previous academic studies, results of the fan interviews and the researcher's previous experience from working in the field of social media follows a set of attainable pragmatic managerial recommendations that could function as embarkation of a more interactive social media presence by Newcastle United.

7.1. Wi-Fi and Digital Accessibility

Even though internet access does not automatically equate to social media, it is nonetheless an inherent part that is necessary for social media to function. Therefore it could be argued that accommodating a fan, interviewed for this study, suggestion about providing internet access at St. James Park for the visiting fans is a practical step with potential twofold beneficial implications for Newcastle United. The fan voiced his frustration at not being able to access a mobile network on matchdays, due to the heavy load such a large gathering in a condensed space puts on the mobile networks. It is an experience well known by concert goers, and in this instance, the fan cited the consequences of not being able to attain the team's lineup before matches and following the score in other EPL matches while attending a Newcastle game. The fan suggested the club could accommodate fans by providing the lineups in text messages, but another EPL club has attained a more progressive solution. Manchester City, a club that is acknowledged by fans interviewed for this study and by academics (Vale & Fernandes, 2017) to be at the forefront of EPL clubs social media presence, has taken the step to provide free Wi-Fi at their football ground. Therefore providing their fans with service that is in line with the increased modern prevalence to use smartphones to access the internet (Rowles, 2017). A positive step by the club that would in Newcastle's case offset the criticism that the club does not carry the fans interest at heart.

Furthermore, as matchdays at St. James Park represent 13% of Newcastle's overall £178m annual revenue (Ramble, 2019), providing the fans with free Wi-Fi does not seem like an insurmountable financial obstacle. Matchdays can be seen as the culmination of the intense emotional connection fans have with their team and providing fans with the means to share that emotion on social media could, arguably, be used in the clubs favour. Newcastle received the 8th highest broadcasting revenue for the 2017/2018 season (Ramble, 2019), where TV companies arguably prefer matches that are attended to by a large section of live audiences. Newcastle had seventh highest average attendances in the EPL, making it an attractive proposition for live TV coverage despite the team's modest standing in the league. It could, therefore, likewise be seen as an attractive proposition for Newcastle United to enlist the help of its fans to promote its biggest asset on social media. Namely that of the matchday experience.

7.2 The Position of a Social Media Manager

According to a correspondence the researcher had with Newcastle United, trying to secure an interview with a relevant person from the club in charge of social media, no such position is currently being held at the club. "Unfortunately we don't have a dedicated colleague who runs our social media pages" (BoxOffice@nufc.co.uk, personal communication, February 18, 2019), was the response from the club. Although at later stages of this research, informed fans pointed out that there exists a person in charge of communication at the club, although, not specifically social media communication. Similarly, as the analysis chapter demonstrates the fans are very much attentive to the apparent lack of investment in the operations of the clubs social media, noting how they perceive of the club as doing the bare minimum and that they do not expect to get answered back when they post questions to the club on social media. The study by McCarthy et al. (2014) remarked how Newcastle had not come to terms with how best to utilize the demands, as well as the possibilities, that social media entails. Other studies (Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015) indicate the investment in resources that are needed for football clubs that attain global following and wish to administer an engaging social media presence.

A pertinent case in point is Newcastle's Youtube account that fans have dispiritedly noted to be dormant in nature. Further desktop research shows that the account has infrequent activity, one or two videos being posted each month, and the supporter following of that

account is accordingly the lowest of Newcastle United's social media platforms. With Youtube being a social media platform that is noted for its community-building potential (Fenton, 2018) the state of that venue can be seen as a clear sign of Newcastle's lack of investment when it comes to fan interaction. A fan that works for a sports broadcaster noted the potential to remedy the situation handily. With two Universities being situated in Newcastle, that offer social media marketing degrees it is not insurmountable to offer a graduate scheme in order to attract apprentices. It is true that many businesses underestimate the resources needed to operate active social media presence, but in the case of Newcastle, it seems a prudent first step would be to assign dedicated personnel to supervise said platforms.

7.3. Strategic Social Media

As was noted in the research by McCarthy et al. (2014) the management of Newcastle United acknowledged that they did not know their online fanbase, and did not have systems in place to monitor their fanbase's online activity. A big part of the appeal of social media platforms to various business around the world is fundamental in that potential to create data about their followers through social media. Businesses all around the world want to understand more about their audience, why they are following them, where they live, what do they like on social media and what makes them come back to specific social media pages. Such valuable data is available to social media managers today, and football clubs are gradually coming to terms with the resources that are needed to manage those platforms professionally and efficiently (Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2015).

The fans interviewed for this study were adamant that it was their impression that the owner of Newcastle United was only interested in commercial interests, and that the clubs social media was commercially minded. It is, however, this researchers understanding that those interests do not necessarily have to exclude the fans interest in engaging content. Since clubs sponsors and advertisers on social media are interested in the quantity and quality of the fan base on social media, the data generated on the numbers of social media followers have value for these partnerships. There is, therefore, a commercial value in providing commercial partners with the potential benefit of getting access to a emotionally connected and dedicated fanbase on social media. The two interests go hand in hand, and the data generated by the social media platforms can likewise be utilized in creating content that the fanbase

appreciates. For the data can indicate what is working, and what is not, on social media and therefore a bulkier digital presence can be created by selecting appropriate digital content.

As has been stated in this study, social capital has a significant effect on social media visibility and should, therefore, be taken into account by social media managers. The data provided by the social media platforms provide an opportunity to understand fans better, choose the right social media channels and produce relevant digital content for the relevant audience. The fans interviewed for this study had some suggestion of engaging content that inadvertently involves the building of social capital between the club, players and fans. They suggested material that is interactive such as behind the scenes access, exclusive live Q&A with the manager of the team and players. Such engaging content creates interaction, and that as previously mentioned involves the number of intangible assets that modern businesses are increasingly starting to become more aware of (Dodd, 2016). This study, however, advocates going even further and actively encourage fan-created digital media. Those fans were actively calling for access to the club, and by providing increased access, the club would generate increased social capital through the appropriation of those intangible assets. The fans can, and will, say things the club cannot say and does not necessarily endorse, but that should be accommodated and welcomed by the club. For this study argues that these influential fans help the club build social capital, and in the long run, have more positive influences on the football clubs growth on social media, rather than cause damage to existing commercial interests.

7.4. Reaching Out to the Community

The fans disliking of the owner of Newcastle United Football Club has been well documented, and this study has postulated that these cynical sentiment fans feel towards the owner are a component in the clubs minimal social media presence. This research's findings do not support that being the inevitable conclusion. The fans interviewed for this study were appreciative of any improvement made on the clubs social media sites. Similarly, one fan noted the importance of the clubs football manager, Rafael Benitez, in having a transformative effect of the relationship between the fans and the club. By actively going out and interact and engage with the community. Attending football schools and football tournaments with local kids. The fans credit the manager with engaging with the fans

at a base level and are appreciative of the effort. That relates to the modern realization that economic gain brings with them community-based responsibility. Following these findings, this study argues that the current animosity towards the owner does not necessarily preclude the club from being proactive on social media. Rather, the fans do differentiate between general employees of Newcastle and the owner, and in that light, a more proactive interaction on social media with the local community would be generally appreciated by Newcastle fans.

7.5. Social Capital

This study contributes in a modest way to the expanding arena that exists around research between sport and social capital. Presently, few studies have applied social capital as a theoretical framework for the study of social media and football clubs. This study found that social capital is an essential element with regards to social media interaction between fans and the football club and that social capital can be built in online communication. The international fans that participated in this study are looking to belong and are seeking interaction with the club and the fan community. This study, therefore, found that social capital can be built through social media interaction, which in this case led to fans pursuing unofficial venues that were more adept at using social capital at interaction and the creation of an online community. The findings of this study in that regard support claim that social capital is a decisive element, where social media algorithms are guided by social capital and render weakly connected organizations near imperceptible on social media.

This study that contains a pragmatic essence furthermore contributes with findings that add to the evolving theoretical framework of social capital, as a resource- and exchange based function of intangible assets. The communication issue of the selected case that revolves around a strained relationship between fans and the football club is found to show elements where the strategic communication behaviours of the organization are nominal. The findings discussed in the preceding chapters reveal ways to utilize the social capital of these intangible assets, by suggesting practical steps towards a more interactive communication approach. This study suggested a shift in the case organizations social media model, noting the relevance of social capital theory as a way to better understand and engage with online fans.

8. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how football fans view the social media efforts of their chosen football team. To gain insight into how such fandoms view social media as platforms to engage and interact with the source of their emotional affection, and how social media offers fans a possible way to feel more involved with the operations of the football clubs. In a sense how social media affects the creation of a community, both among the fans themselves and with regards to the unifying element that is the football club. This studies interpretation is that the fans appear more adept at dealing with the vagaries of social media, show more understanding of, both the possible positive and negative repercussion, the fluctuating nature these platforms may entail, and are, therefore, quite frankly more willing partakers of social media platforms than the actual football clubs. The results of this study, however, broadly indicate that football fans are continually seeking more interaction with their football club, and are at the same time highly appreciative of any improvements made in that regard by the football clubs.

8.1 Contributions of This Study

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to findings that describe how football fans view their interaction with football clubs on social media. This thesis, therefore, contributes to the evolving literature in that area, and within the confines of the case study, rose to the calls that appealed for increased understanding of how fans view, and advance, their engagement with football clubs on social media. This study that highlighted the football fans constant pursuing of more significant interaction with football clubs contributed to the understanding of the benefits and challenges football clubs attend to with their social media communication. The extreme, and complicated nature of the communication issue at hand, in the selected case, according to Flyvbjerg (2006) lends it increased generalizations potential. Therefore, the findings of this study can be applied to the social media management of other football clubs, and insights are drawn more widely for other organizations with substantial social media following.

This study has aimed to garner a better understanding of how social media is used by professional football clubs and the interaction football fans are seeking from the clubs social media communication. The research problem outlined in chapter 1., accentuated gaps in the literature within football, sports and social media research. The case study provided Information-rich first-hand accounts from fans that allowed this study to shed light on the research questions. The findings display the deep sense of affection fans have towards their football clubs and their propensity to remain optimistic in their belief that things can get better, despite at present there were several aspects the fans are not afraid to firmly criticise in the clubs operations. The fans are continually seeking interaction and highlight their need to be granted more access, and involvement with their football clubs. This study concluded by providing practical recommendations that demonstrate how increased fan interaction on social media can be aligned with other commercial interests. Hence, this study has aimed to contribute to the literature from both academic and pragmatic perspective.

8.2. Suggestions for Future Research

This study is based on one organization and a limited number of participants in the qualitative interviews. Therefore, an obvious suggestion is for a more comprehensive, longitudinal, study that incorporates more participants over a more extended period. Even though the insights provided by the participants in this study were information-rich, they consisted of interviews conducted at one point in time. It would, therefore, be recommended to conduct a study over a more extended period to see what results that has on fans, as this study found that they were highly emotionally attached to the football club, it would be beneficial to study whether the fans perception is static or whether it fluctuates. This study has attempted to address a gap that calls for qualitative research from a fan perspective, but the complex nature of fans relationship with football clubs is nevertheless an under-researched topic that warrants further scholarly attention.

Much in the same manner, academics have yet to catch up with the continually evolving landscape of social media. Hence, there is room for further research on several aspects relating to sports and social media. New technologies such as virtual reality, the increased prominence of sport e-games in modern daily life, the increased use of bots on social media,

and a constant flurry of new smartphone apps and even social media platforms mean that academics have material for almost infinite new studies. As this research found, football fans have a seemingly unrelenting appetite for engaging football related content on social media. The prominence of fan-operated unofficial sites was surprising to this researcher, and that is a topic that remains mostly untouched by scholars. Incorporating fan-based sites in future research would yield valuable insight into the elaborate makeup of sports fandom.

8.3 Concluding Remarks

This research has attempted to examine the online interaction between fans and professional football clubs from a fan perspective. Following football teams solely through the internet and social media, is nowadays very much possible, and it is an endeavour that fans from all around the world are increasingly experiencing. It is to be hoped that the findings of this study contribute to an increased interest in that phenomenon and that the football clubs themselves will be quick to acknowledge the current expectation of its fanbase. The pragmatic aspect of this study means that several features in football clubs shortcomings in social media communication were asserted, meaning that there is room for immediate improvement. The delightfully charming element of football fandom, as this study found, is that the fans are appreciative of everything the clubs give them. Moreover, every little improvement the clubs will make will be noted. Instantly.

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Appendix

Appendix 1.

Survey on supporters use of NUFC's Social Media

Disclaimer: Thank you for participating. This survey is a part of a master thesis in Strategic Communication at Lund University where the focus of the study is Newcastle United's use of social media. Please note that the survey is anonymous.

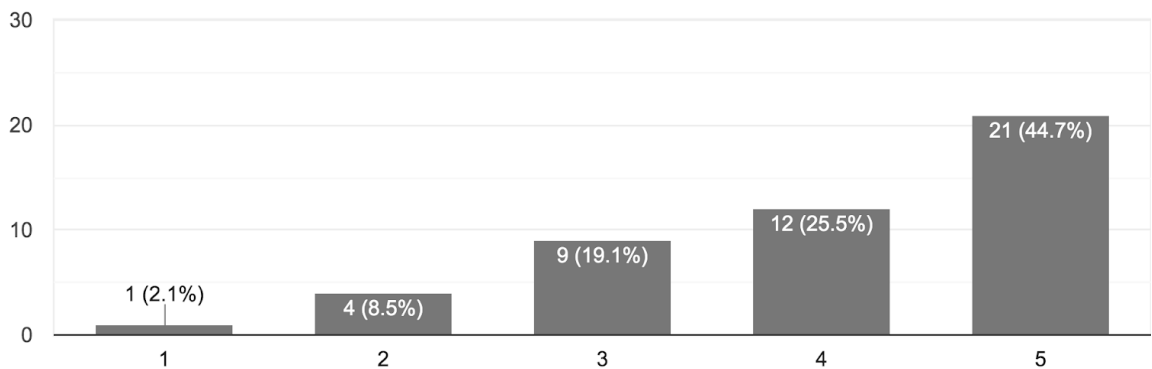
Please mark your response on the following 5 point scale. 1= Negative, 2 = Somewhat Negative, 3 = Neither / Nor, 4 = Somewhat Positive, 5 = Positive.

Survey:

1.

How often do you use NUFC's social media?

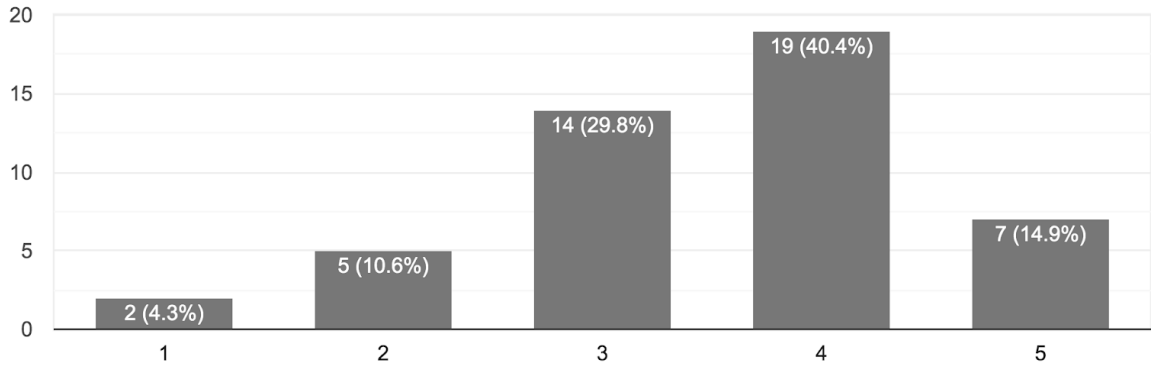
47 responses



2.

Overall, how satisfied are you with the content on NUFC's social media sites?

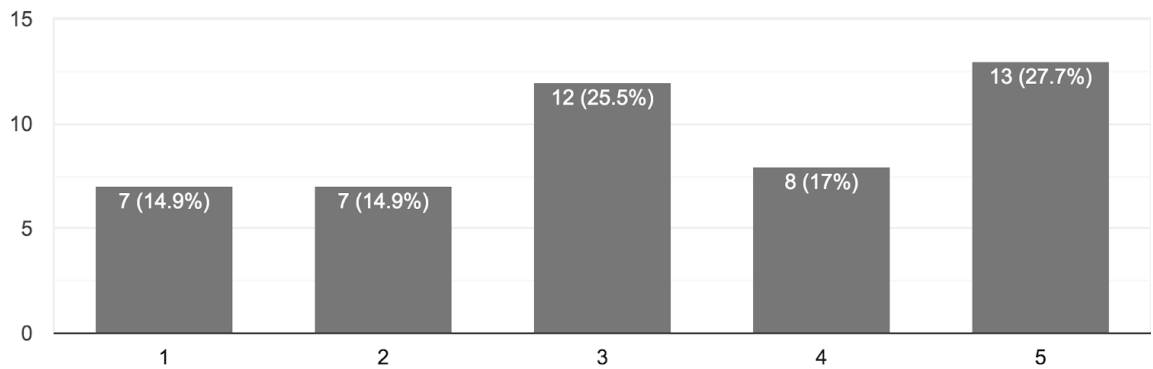
47 responses



3.

How likely are you to engage in the clubs social media (i.e. post, comment, like)?

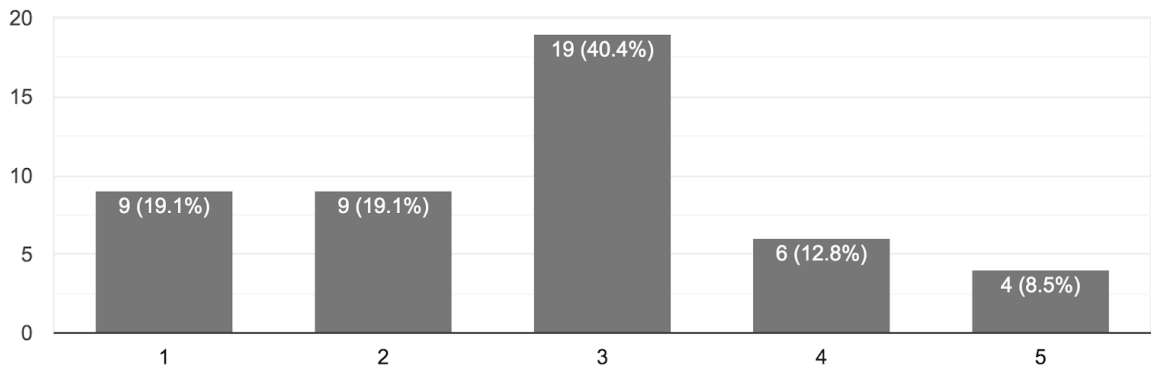
47 responses



4.

How welcome do you feel your input is on the clubs social media?

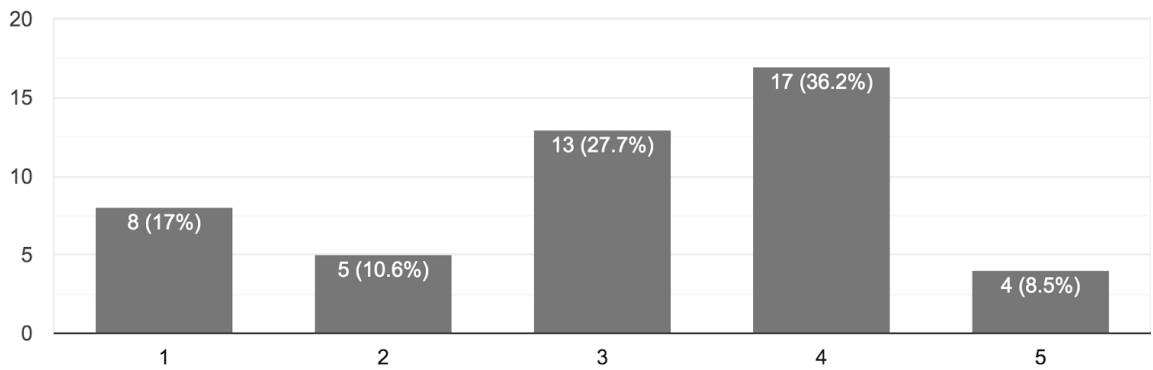
47 responses



5.

Do you feel you have complete freedom to say what you want on the clubs social media?

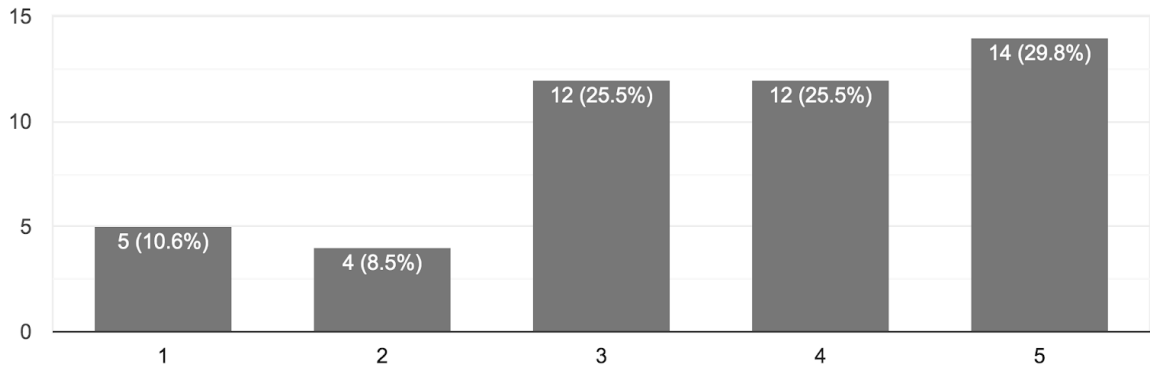
47 responses



6.

Do you feel that the content on the clubs social media is informative?

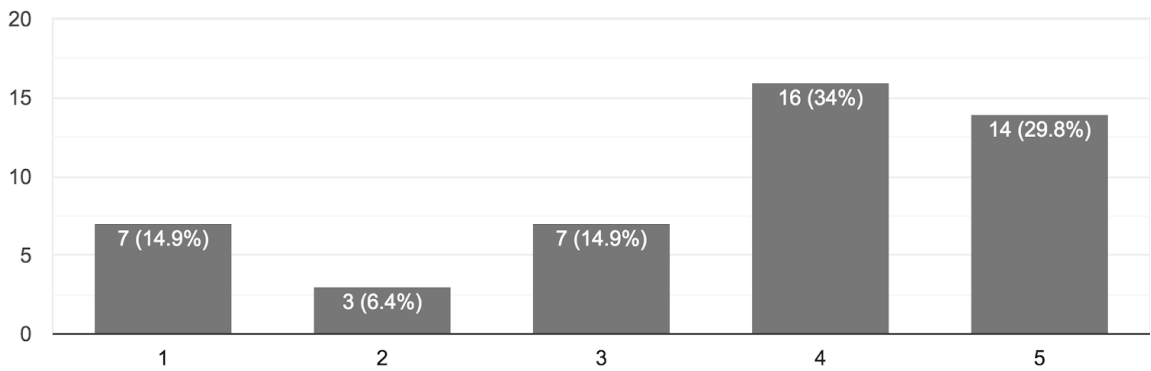
47 responses



7.

Do the NUFC social media help you feel connected to the club?

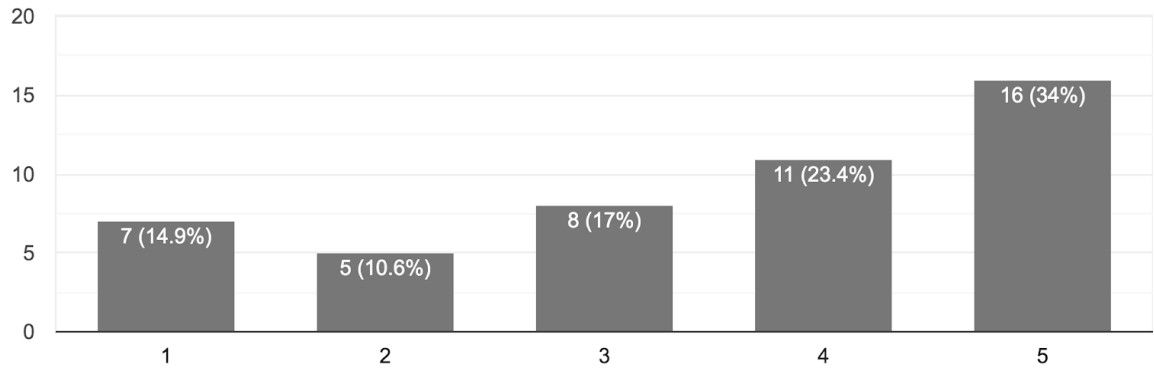
47 responses



8.

Do you feel like a part of a community when using the clubs social media?

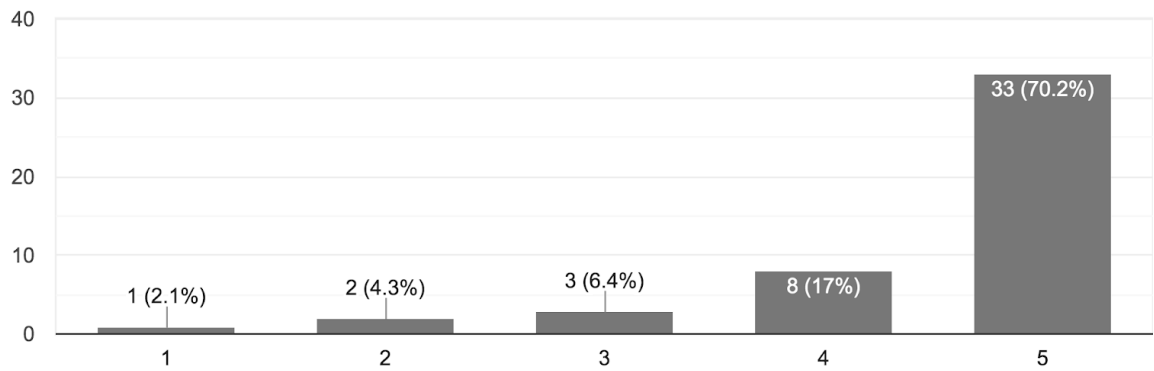
47 responses



9.

Do you use other unofficial NUFC related social media sites?

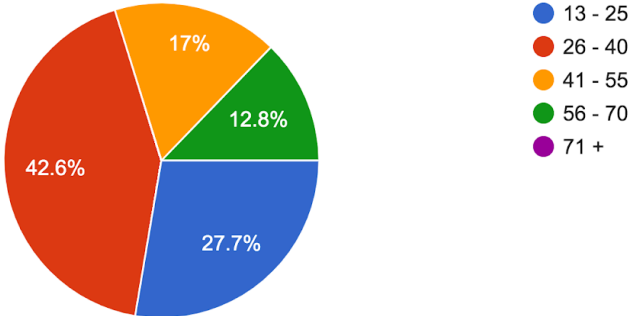
47 responses



Control Variables:

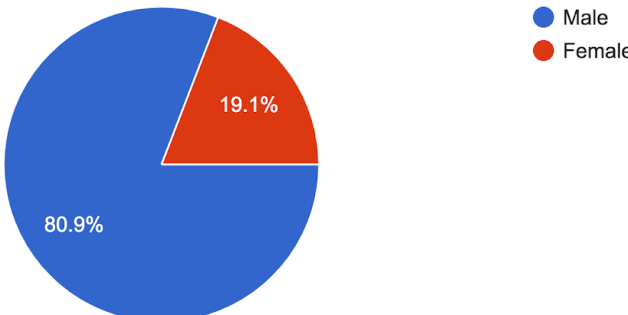
Age

47 responses



Gender

47 responses



Any comments you want to add of your impression of NUFC social media sites? Both positive and negative?

I feel non-nufc pages cover NUFC a lot better than the official page does. Very uninformative of what's actually going on. However I put this down to the way the club is ran. Like a soviet dictatorship.

Unofficial fan sites are much better. ie spirit of the toon, newcastle united fc fans etc. Greater range of views, more interesting articles. Proper fans taking part. With the clubs own site you get the feeling its

almost forced to put things out to appease a narrative. Fun88 are a great site as well. Funny and informative.

There is too much hidden from us fans. All we want to know is what is going on with our club but that will never happen while Ashley is in charge.

“Cockney Mafia out”

The social media that have fans as their target audience help fans to feel like they have a voice and that they're listened to. The club's own official SM could not give a single shit about the fans. All the best for your studies, mate!

The Facebook page you posted this on is mostly good but there are the odd stupid remarks from people!!! Mostly you get a very good overall view from fans. The NUFC Instagram is very good, up to date pictures and latest news.

A lot of supporters are far too impatient for change and or success. I have been waiting since the sixties for this so I know how to be patient
Interesting

Certain people can be abusive/ personal to people if they don't agree with a post.

They could be a lot more interactive. Often there's not much detail. However NUFC's sponsors Fun88 are very good on Twitter.

Positive: Rafa is a god. Negative: Joselu couldn't hit a barn door from 5 yards out.

Nice to read it but always feel there is an ulterior motive/undercurrent to the content provided.

They could release more content about almost everything related to the club, future plans, developments around the area of the stadium, the site is used by many who are not physically in Newcastle anymore and this is a major link to the area

Appendix 2.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

I am conducting a study on Newcastle United's social media accounts for my master thesis in Strategic Communication at Lund's University, Sweden. I am interested in the fans perspective on how the club is running their social media, and would, therefore, like to ask you a few questions. I will record our conversation on my iPhone and the interviews are anonymous, meaning the recordings will not be used in any other way than for this thesis. I am interested in your take on the matter and you can choose to answer, or not answer, any question the way you see fit. You can stop at any time and feel free to ask me any question you would like before we start the interview.

GENERAL BACKGROUND

- 1) Age of interviewee?
- 2) Gender?
- 3) Location, place of residence?
- 4) Years following Newcastle United?

PERCEPTION OF NUFC SOCIAL MEDIA

- 5) What is your opinion on NUFC's social media?
- 6) What is your impression of the content NUFC provide on social media?
- 8) Is the club providing engaging content?
- 9) Do you interact with the club on social media?
- 10) How welcome do you feel your input is on the clubs social media?

COMMUNITY ASPECTS

- 11) Do the clubs social media help you feel connected to the club?
- 12) Do you feel like a part of a community when using the clubs social media?
- 13) In what ways can the club better create a community on social media?
- 14) Does the club need to address the ownership issue on social media in order to create an engaging social media community?

UNOFFICIAL NUFC RELATED SOCIAL MEDIA

- 15) Do you use other non-official NUFC related social media sites?
- 16) Why?
- 17) Do you feel they are better at engaging an interacting with the fanbase?
- 18) In what way?

FAN RECOMMENDATIONS

- 19) What kind of content could the club provide on social media to better engage/interact with the fans?

INTERVIEW CONCLUSION

20) Are there any significant topics that have not been discussed that you would like to add to?