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Going beyond on-pitch success:
Fan engagement as a catalyst for growth

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Abstract

This research investigates the case of fan engagement as a strategy for long-term growth for football clubs. Through an exploratory methodology this study gains a valuable insight into the current perceptions and usage of fan engagement, with a particular focus on social media. Whilst the subject of social media is growing in academic journals, there is very little understanding of how sport organisations are using this platform. 14 semi-structured interviews with key industry personnel and a fan focus group in addition to a content analysis of the Twitter feeds of 10 Premier League football clubs was undertaken to offer new insight to the academic conversation in this subject area. The research findings suggest that clubs need to develop ways to build and create long-term loyalty through fan engagement in preference to unsustainable growth strategies based exclusively on winning and on-pitch performance. Since winning is only possible for a select few every season, a strategy that places the fan at the centre of the club will prove beneficial to most clubs at all levels in the long term. With the incoming financial controls being implemented across the English football leagues in addition to UEFA's Financial Fair Play legislation, the significance of developing long-term profitability has never been more evident. Those clubs which place Customer Relationship Management (CRM) as an overriding philosophy throughout the organisation and develop social media platforms effectively as part of a CRM strategy are best placed to improve their understanding of fans and adapt their marketing strategies to build loyalty and advocacy to the brand, which in time will deliver profitability and long-term growth.

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1. Introduction

'There is tremendous power there to engage with customers but quite what the optimum solution is at the moment remains unclear. As sport marketers we really have to get to grips with realising the potential of social media'.
(Peter Willems, In Chadwick, 2012:164)

Today's world of instant communication provides football clubs with ample opportunity to engage with their fan base. The development of social media has positioned conversation at the heart of communications, allowing successful social strategies to deliver greater loyalty, affiliation and, as a result, increased revenues. Whilst the subject of social media is growing in academic journals, there is very little understanding of how sport organisations are using this platform. Combined with the author's interest, this was the primary reason for undertaking this research.

A strategy that offers sustainable growth for a sport like football, which has been mired with financial instability and supporter discontent, is gaining weight. Bankruptcies and liquidations have swarmed British football for the past decade, offering a compelling reason to seek a more customer-centric approach; a sustainable alternative to the way clubs have been run. Sloane (1971) described the nature of the owners of football clubs, specifically in Europe, as utility maximisers where utility is largely related to success on the pitch, as opposed to profit maximisers. With the incoming financial controls being implemented across the English football leagues in addition to UEFA's Financial Fair Play legislation, the significance of developing long-term profitability has never been more evident.

This exploratory research was carried out by a series of semi-structured interviews with key industry personnel in addition to a content analysis of the Twitter feeds of 10 Premier League football clubs. A focus group with seven fans supporting a variety of clubs ranging from Premier League to non-league was also conducted. The combination of these methods has delivered valuable insight into the current perceptions and usage of fan engagement, specifically on social media, as a catalyst for growth.

The focus of this research is centred on the following research questions:

1: Are clubs using fan engagement as a catalyst for growth?

2: Are clubs successfully using social media to engage with fans and increase loyalty?

3: Are customer loyalty and long-term association often overlooked for short-term revenue growth by football clubs?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Relationship Marketing to Customer Relationship Management and Customer Loyalty

The purpose of business, according to Drucker (1954), is to create and keep customers. He advocated that organisations should have a guiding philosophy that puts the customer as the focal point of the entire company. Successful firms work to build long-term relationships with their customers through the concept of relationship marketing (RM) (Zikmund et al, 2003). RM goes back to the basics of determining what customers need and want as well as concentrating on the development of ongoing relationships with these customers, as opposed to traditional (or transactional) marketing which focuses on the seller achieving their objectives. RM communicates the idea that the key objective of the company is to engage with customers over the long-term (Zikmund et al, 2003), placing commitment to customers higher than maximising short-term profits (Groenroos, 1994). For Zikmund et al (2003), selling a product should not be considered as the end of the marketing process, but rather as the start of a relationship with that customer. According to Groenroos (1994), RM is not just a strategy for business; rather it is a philosophy that is held by all within the company. However, the implementation of RM is often unsuccessful because the firm often sees RM as a strategic concept to be tested instead of a comprehensive set of beliefs that shape the mission, vision and direction of the company (Adamson et al, 2005).

The modern marketing concept is the 'achievement of corporate goals through meeting and exceeding customer needs better than the competition' (Jobber and Fahy, 2012:5). The three conditions set out by Jobber and Fahy (2012) to establish a successful marketing strategy is of particular relevance to this research since it highlights the importance of a customer orientated strategy to business. Their first condition states that the company's activities must be focused on customer satisfaction rather than simply producing products. The second condition communicates the importance of an integrated effort from all departments of the business, whereby the responsibility of the implementation of the concept lies not just within the marketing department. This supports Groenroos (1994) belief that RM

is the very essence of the business. As Mangold and Faulds (2009:357) explain, integrated marketing communications (IMC) is the 'guiding principle organisations follow to communicate with their target markets' using the various elements of the promotional mix to produce a unified customer-focused message. Jobber and Fahy's (2012) third condition states that management must believe the vision and mission of the business can be achieved through satisfied customers. By adopting an outside-in focus, or market orientation, companies can understand what customers value and how to consistently innovate new sources of value that keep them coming back. Benefits to organisations which develop and maintain strong customer relationships include increased purchases, lifetime value gained from the loyal customer and the generation of additional business due to the importance of word-of-mouth promotion (Jobber and Fahy, 2012).

Raab et al (2008) explains that a comprehensive framework involving CRM is an essential requirement for businesses in today's global economic landscape in order to succeed. Knowing your customer and knowing what you represent as an organisation are essential requirements to succeed in today's business world (Raab et al, 2008). For Zikmund et al (2003) CRM is a business strategy that provides a comprehensive, reliable and integrated view of an organisation's customer base via information technology systems.

Increased competition in all business sectors, higher customer standards and replaceable products has resulted in the rise and appeal of CRM for successful, modern companies. Customer expectations are increasingly becoming the centre of attention for organisations and consequently CRM is frequently top of companies' agendas (Raab et al, 2008).

Customer loyalty is a significant focus in RM strategies (Jobber and Fahy, 2012). It is considered that a company's marketing activity revolves around trying to move customers up the loyalty ladder until they become advocates of the company. Advocates are vital to an organisation since they not only purchase products but also recommend it to their family and friends (Jobber and Fahy, 2012). Whilst many of the loyalty schemes implemented by organisations aim to attract and retain customers purely on a financial basis, Jobber and Fahy (2012:185) argue that true loyalty only

occurs when an organisation has a deeper understanding of its customers' needs and shows a 'willingness to meet those needs on an ongoing basis'. Furthermore, the link between customer loyalty and profitability is essential in marketing. The associations that have been identified between a small increase in customer retention and a large increase in profitability have been explained by the 'propensity of loyal customers to spend more with the organisation and the decreased cost of serving such customers' (Jobber and Fahy, 2012:185). That said, other research concludes that this relationship is more complex as in some instances, long-standing customers are only marginally profitable while some short-term customers have been highly profitable (Witzel, 2005). This serves to reaffirm the significance of loyalty compared to the length of time customers have been with a company.

Adamson et al (2005) explain that there is a high rate of failure within conventional business attempts at implementing CRM, with a key problem being that companies are installing CRM applications software without knowing what the aims are. The confusion surrounding CRM implementation stems from the transaction-relationship marketing argument. In other words, are organisations principally concerned with using CRM tools for improved targeting, creating propositions and direct selling? Or, do they want to generate a genuine two way dialogue, make and keep long-term commitments and nurture trust? (Adamson et al, 2005)

2.2 Social Media

The concept of social media is not groundbreaking, yet there seems to be confusion amongst managers and academics about what exactly should be included under this term (Kaplan and Haelein, 2010). Kaplan and Haelein (2010:61) define social media as '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'. They argue that the current trend towards social media is developing back to the internet's roots since it transforms the World Wide Web into what it was originally created for; 'a platform to facilitate information exchange between users' (Kaplan and Haelein, 2010:60).

The influence of social media on our society is increasingly evident. Traditional media took more than a decade to reach 50 million users, whereas it took Facebook less than nine months to reach 100 million users (Patel, 2010). Social media has

become a powerful tool for marketers, entrepreneurs, advertisers, and public relations professionals. According to Drury (2008) marketing with traditional media was about delivering a message, whereas marketing with social media is a two-way process building a relationship and conversation with the audience.

Mangold and Faulds (2009) highlight that tools and strategies for communicating with customers have changed significantly with the emergence of social media. Content that is transmitted through various social media platforms has become a 'major factor in influencing various aspects of consumer behaviour' (Mangold and Faulds, 2009:358), such as awareness, opinions, purchase behaviour and post-purchase evaluation. However, they assert that many business managers 'lack a full appreciation for social media's role in the company's promotional efforts' (Mangold and Faulds, 2009:358), and that methods for shaping consumer-consumer conversations have not yet been fully developed. Social media has two key interrelated roles which should be implemented in successful integrated IMC strategies of any organisation. Firstly, social media enables organisations to talk to their customers, which is consistent with the use of traditional IMC tools such as advertising and PR efforts, via online platforms such as social networks (e.g. Facebook), microblogging (e.g. Twitter), blogs, message board, forums, video sharing (e.g. YouTube) and many more. The second role of social media is the unique way in which customers communicate with one another. Whilst it can be seen as an extension of traditional word-of-mouth communication, the sheer magnitude of communication that social media provides makes it a unique form of IMC (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Consumers now have the ability to communicate with hundreds or thousands of other consumers quickly and effortlessly.

In the past, companies were able to control the information available about them through strategic PR, whereas in today's media-landscape the power is held by the consumers (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). However, according to Mangold and Faulds (2009:359) the question marketing managers should be asking themselves is 'how can this power be harnessed for the benefit of the organisation?' Whilst they do not have direct control over the consumer-to-consumer messages, they do have the ability to influence and shape these consumer discussions in a way that is consistent

with the organisation's mission and goals, which has long been a crucial element of successful IMC strategies.

Mangold and Faulds, (2009) consider social media as a hybrid element of the promotion mix because it enables companies to talk to their customers as seen in traditional media, whilst also allowing customers to talk directly to one another. They describe a 'new communications paradigm' which incorporates social media into the traditional promotion mix of advertising, PR, direct marketing and sales promotion, and affirm that marketers need to recognise the 'power and critical nature of the discussions being carried on by consumers using social media' (Mangold and Faulds, 2009:360). The more an organisation engages with the consumer the more likely it is that the consumer will want to communicate through both social media and word-of-mouth, which helps to build brand awareness, loyalty and equity.

Foux (2006, In Mangold and Faulds, 2009:360) argues that social media is perceived by consumers as a 'more trustworthy source of information regarding products and services than corporate-sponsored communications transmitted via the traditional elements of the promotion mix'. Therefore, social media can play an important role in strengthening brand awareness and loyalty if organisations can successfully shape these consumer-to-consumer conversations and adapt to this new communications paradigm. If companies do want to generate a genuine two way dialogue, build long-term relationships with their customers and nurture their trust, implementing an engaging social media strategy is an important step.

2.3 The Football Industry: The Business Case for Fan Engagement

For conventional businesses the biggest challenge is converting their customers into fans and advocates of their brand. However, for football clubs whose fans are already loyal to the brand the challenge is to convert these fans into long-term customers. A report from the BDRC Continental Sports and Sponsorship consultancy (2012, In Gourley 2013) revealed that Premier League clubs lost millions of pounds on seat revenue each season due to clubs failing to maximise match day sales, resulting in empty seats and lost cross-selling opportunities from food and retail. Figure 1 suggests that for some clubs the failure to reach capacity on match days is having serious financial consequences.

Figure 1: Top ten Premier League clubs based on lost revenue as a result of empty seats

Club	Seats Used	Stadium Capacity	Average Premier League home crowd	Empty Seats	Mean ticket price*	Pie, programme and tea	Missed revenue per match	Missed revenue per season
Aston Villa	80.1%	42,551	34,084	8,467	£35.00	£8.30	£366.621	£6,965,800
Sunderland	81.9%	49,000	40,171	8,829	£31.00	£8.00	£344,331	£6,542,289
Wigan	74.4%	25,138	18,659	6,479	£27.00	£7.10	£220,933	£4,197,744
Everton	91.2%	40,394	36,874	3,520	£38.50	£7.90	£163,328	£3,103,323
Newcastle	94.7%	52,387	49,657	2,730	£36.00	£8.00	£120,120	£2,282,280
Southampton	92.7%	32,689	30,496	2,193	£39.50	£8.20	£104,606	£1,987,515
WBA	89.7%	28,003	25,080	2,923	£25.00	£8.10	£96,971	£1,838,273
QPR	93.2%	19,148	17,851	1,297	£47.50	£8.00	£71,893	£1,367,686
West Ham	97.1%	35,647	34,601	1,046	£49.00	£8.50	£60,145	£1,081,860
Man. City	97.7%	48,000	46,905	1,095	£43.00	£9.00	£56,940	£1,081,860

Sources: Football365.com, BBC 'Cost of Football' survey and FC Business. 2011/12 season.

*mean ticket price based on category B seats/published ticket prices rather than number of seats available in each category.

With the new financial controls announced by UEFA, the Premier League and Football League, profit generation is only set to become more important and clubs need to address how they can turn this lost opportunity into valuable income in order to become sustainable businesses. Mark Bradley, director of the Fan Experience Company (2012a) argues that 'it is in the quality of customer engagement that sustainability truly resides' and, therefore, fan engagement should be central to a club's growth strategy. Fan engagement has become somewhat of a buzzword recently, but Bradley questions whether the term is truly understood. For Bradley (2013) fan engagement is the process by which fans' deep love for their club is reciprocated and, when it is delivered consistently, it increases a supporter's emotional loyalty to his or her club. Fans' loyalty is paramount to clubs' survival, therefore, clubs' strategies must focus on ways to maintain and build this loyalty amongst their fan base.

While the business world has engulfed football, some clubs remain slow at embracing the customer-focused characteristics and ideas of other service sector businesses, such as CRM. However, as clubs look to develop a strong commercial foothold they are showing signs of recognising the importance of their fan base. With competition fiercer than ever, failure to invest off the pitch not only signifies a missed opportunity for engaging fans and loss in revenue, but also shows an attitude that borders on arrogance. The more fans enjoy other leisure experiences, the more clubs need to start rewarding, rather than relying on, their loyalty. A core aspect of CRM is the notion that developing relationships with customers increases their loyalty and as Adamson et al (2005) argue loyalty levels amongst football fans are assumed to be higher than conventional industries which has led to the belief that some clubs take their fans' loyalty for granted. A strategy of segmenting fans enabled by a CRM system, which was placed at the heart of the club, is paying dividends for Arsenal, who now has the ability to communicate with fans, fostering deeper, long-term connections to the club (Barnett, 2013).

Jobber and Fahy's (2009:57) proposition that understanding customers is the 'cornerstone upon which the marketing concept is built' explains why CRM is fundamental in the long-term stability and growth of organisations. However, this understanding has arguably not been transferred to the football industry since,

according to Hemsley (In FC Business 2013:17), clubs are 'missing opportunities to engage with supporters more effectively and increase revenues by not making the most of their [customer] data'. Clubs have many opportunities to collect data on their fan base through match day and season ticket sales, competitions, surveys and social media and Hemsley (2013:17) argues that this data is 'the secret weapon in the battle to improve the match day experience' so that fans come to games more regularly and spend more whilst they are there. Hemsley (2013) reiterates that clubs which do analyse this kind of data properly are actively creating more personalised and relevant promotional offers and therefore increasing customer loyalty and revenues simultaneously.

Whilst there have been clear technical advancements in CRM amongst many clubs, according to Fiona Green from Goodform CRM agency (In FC Business, 2013:18), how information collected from different sources is integrated continues to cause difficulty. Becky Grote, QPR Marketing Director (In FC Business 2013, 18), agrees that unifying all the pockets of data collected from the many interactions the clubs has with fans across into one system to achieve an accurate single customer view is a challenge. Richard Peters (2013), Head of Insight at Sports Revolution, believes more clubs need to understand the value of their data because, as said by Simon Gray, Director of data experts Lateral Group, 'there is strong evidence that the clubs who mine their data efficiently boost attendances and match day revenues' (Gray, In FC Business 2013:18).

According to Gareth Balch (In FC Business, 2013:19), Director of data analysts Two Circles, 'football has been slower than other industries to see the power of data' and clubs need a better understanding of who their supporters are. Manchester City's customer-focused data strategy leads by example. Manchester City knows what supporters are buying and how they are feeling about the club. This can affect their loyalty and how engaged they are, which strongly supports Bradley's (2012b) argument that clubs fail to understand how valued the fans feel by their club.

According to Bradley (2012a) clubs have only recently started to ask for fans' feedback on their match day experiences and they are still resisting deeper engagement with their fans by failing to ask if the club makes them feel valued. If

clubs were to ask this question and act upon the findings, they would increase loyalty and advocacy amongst fans, which would support a strategy of sustainability and growth. Whilst much of the literature within the industry agrees that clubs are becoming more customer-focused and that clubs are employing fan engagement around the match days, there is a lack of recent academic research into the strategies and CRM usage at clubs. Adamson et al's (2005) research suggested that the football industry were replicating mistakes made in mainstream business sectors and this paper goes some way to investigating if any advancements have been made.

Jobber and Fahy's (2012) three marketing conditions illustrates the argument for the pre-eminence of the customer. The view that providing customer satisfaction is paramount to simply producing products and their theory that companies should implement an outside-in strategy in order to understand what customers value is supported by Bradley (2012c) who argues that there are clear links in football between feeling valued, future attendance, off-pitch revenue generation and overall club growth. Bradley (2012d) argues that despite future sustainability of clubs depending on loyalty and growth, clubs are strategically designed to win, meaning that they solely focus on the product rather than creating and maintaining relationships with fans. Bradley (2012d) suggests that this 'confused strategy' has led to the attendance deficit, which so many clubs are now facing and is highlighted in figure 1.

The Football League supports Bradley's assertion that growth stems from customer satisfaction. Their best practice guide for match days reveals that the feedback received from supporters often indicates that only 'winning' and/or 'discounting' are the most popular long-term strategies employed by clubs (The Football League, 2013:7). Bradley (2012a) affirms that football is hamstrung by its tendency to believe in two principal growth strategies: winning and discounting. The former, he explains, is only open to a select few and the latter only serves to diminish the brand. The Football League's best practice guide states:

> *'by pursuing 'winning' to the exclusion of fan engagement, fans often see the ruthlessness necessary on the field of play reflected in their other dealings*

with the club', such as complaints being ignored and lip service being paid to real consultation and engagement. Instead, clubs that manage to grow 'share one common factor: the pre-eminence of the customer' (The Football League 2013:7)

A club focused on growth identifies what matters to fans, engages directly with supporters and involves them in determining the improvements (The Football League 2013:7). This will help to build advocacy and loyalty to the club, which are imperative ingredients to long-term stability and growth.

To contend the argument for the pre-eminence of the customer, Chadwick (2012) argues that sport is product-led, meaning that what happens on the pitch is the most important element in sport. For Chadwick (2012:147), 'whilst the needs of the customer must always play an important role of any form of marketing, in sport what happens in a game is what gives the sport product its strength'. Furthermore, in a study by Ozawa et al (2004), it was found that there was little correlation between financial performance and degree of market orientation in football clubs. However, they did note that no financially successful club had a low market orientation score suggesting that a market orientation is 'necessary but not sufficient conditions for financial success' (Ozawa et al, 2004:89). That said the authors highlighted that the results received from Premier League clubs were indicative of a relationship between market orientation and performance but the true extent of this could not be captured due to the low response rate (six clubs) from such clubs. Whilst this study suggests that it would be unwise for football clubs to develop 'the full market orientation philosophy' (2004:78), it must be highlighted that this study was almost a decade ago and only represented 28% of the Premier League and Football League combined. Adamson et al's (2005) research two years later highlighted that whilst there was an increasing awareness of general business disciplines within clubs, clearly the concept of marketing had some way to go. Adamson et al (2005) found that clubs felt they required CRM for transaction marketing, but less so for relationship building or loyalty. Whilst this paper does not intend to directly assess clubs' use of CRM nowadays, it does attempt to explain the growing momentum for fan engagement and questions whether clubs are beginning to install a CRM philosophy throughout the organisation.

The question over product or market orientation presents a dual challenge for marketers of football clubs. Angus Kinnear, Marketing Director at Arsenal, believes results are as vital off the pitch as they are on it. He states:

'We don't just want to be judged by results on the pitch. Obviously they are important and the club has to achieve, but from a business perspective, simply relying on success in this area is risky'. (Angus Kinnear in Marketing Magazine, 2009:20)

A quick analysis of Arsenal's financial record suggests that dual focus has been successful. However, without a trophy in eight seasons, it could be argued that the club have become too focused on profit, at the expense of the product. Bradley (2012b:26) further develops Kinnear's concerns regarding the reliance on success and stresses that 'clubs often see the football itself as the ultimate driver of supporter engagement', however, this is only appropriate as long as the club is winning. Whilst the quality of football and winning is a key driver of attendance, it is an aspect very few can control, therefore, it is better to focus on elements that can be influenced, such as understanding the fans' motivations, what they value and what the club means to them, which drives increased loyalty (Bradley, 2013). He hypothesises 'if clubs pursue service excellence (in preference to unsustainable growth strategies as myopic as winning and/or discounting) they can prosper in times of poor on-pitch performance' (Bradley, 2012b:26).

Bradley (2012a) also questions the understanding of the football product. He claims that through his research he has exposed the real fan experiences which 'serve to highlight the narrow view football has of what its product is and who its customers are' (2012). He maintains that 'clubs often see their product as the football where the fan sees the magic at the heart of their generational relationship' (Bradley, 2012a). It is clear that clubs need to understand the motivations and behaviours of their fans better in order to convert them into loyal customers and brand advocates. CRM enables clubs to segment their fan base and develop strategies which will encourage long-term loyalty to the brand. Whilst fans are unlikely to change allegiance from their beloved club, the growing discontent amongst supporters, especially on issues

such as ticket prices, highlights the need for clubs to work harder to convert fans into long-term loyal customers. Clubs which neglect the need for creating and increasing loyalty and advocacy to the brand by failing to engage with their fans risk missing significant opportunities to drive revenues.

2.4 Football and Social Media: A Natural Fit

Research from Beech et al (2000) highlighted that the internet was a medium by which clubs could effectively communicate and build supporter-club relationships, yet they concluded that some clubs offered very little information and few services to their supporters. Advancements in digital media since Beech et al's (2000) research have transformed the sporting landscape by providing fans with on-demand access to rich content anytime and anywhere whilst in return giving sports properties, which are continuously looking to expand their global presence, a pathway to reach a wider audience and further engage with fans. Church-Sanders (2012:7) highlights that, whilst much of the content on social networking sites is user-generated, there is a 'desire for unique and high quality mainstream content', which creates a significant opportunity for sport. However, not all sport properties have recognised this opportunity and a divide exists between those embracing social media and those who reject it. As a consequence of inappropriate use and much-publicised rantings of athletes, some sports properties believe social media does more harm than good. The very nature of this user-generated content from fans with a free rein to comment on properties or brands leads to uncertainty and fear. However, such open communication in a direct, two-way conversation between property and fan, if managed properly, can help to develop 'a great working relationship, support structure, fan engagement and marketing platform' (Church-Sanders, 2012:7). This research explores the ways in which clubs are managing their social media strategies to develop such fan relationships, build loyalty and market their brand.

Consumers now have the ability to communicate with hundreds or thousands of other consumers quickly and effortlessly. As Church-Sanders (2012) states, it is these types of open communications which many sporting properties fear since they lack control over these consumer-to-consumer messages when they have previously held such influence over traditional IMC tools. Mangold and Faulds' (2009) research suggests ways in which organisations can influence these consumer conversations for their own benefit. For example, they advise creating communities of like-minded

people by providing networking platforms where they can share interests and values. For sports properties in particular, such sites could also provide excellent sponsorship opportunities. A football club's official Twitter or Facebook page is a platform for a like-minded community (i.e. fans) to engage with one another and develop two-way conversations with the club, which can provide huge commercial and marketing benefits.

A study from Perform (In McCabe, 2013) concluded that 28% of fans who use social media are more likely to be interested in a brand that sponsors or advertises around a sport, and 25% are more likely to buy a product or service compared to all sports fans. This supports Vollmer and Precourt's (2008, In Mangold and Faulds, 2009) view that consumers are turning more frequently to social media to conduct their information searches and make their purchasing decisions, highlighting the opportunity that engaging with customers via social media can bring for the club and their commercial partners.

Taker (2012) claims that whilst some football clubs have failed to grasp the potential social media offers, others who have successfully implemented it as part of their marketing strategy are reaping the benefits in both monetary and non-monetary terms. Hanna et al (2011) suggest that whilst companies realise the need to be active in social media, they do not truly understand how to do it effectively and how and what should be measured. This research investigates the usage of social platforms amongst a selection of Premier League and Football League clubs to ascertain how clubs are building social into their marketing strategies, and, if not, why not.

Taker (2012) underlines there is a 'significant difference between presence and successful engagement' which is often as a result of ineffective policy or insufficient expertise in this area. Peter Willems at UEFA (In Chadwick 2012:165) recognises the 'tremendous power there to engage with customers' and warns that sport marketers have to get to grips with realising the full potential of social media. Worrall (2012) claims that the 2011/12 season saw football clubs take their first committed steps towards building online communities through social media and that fans' and clubs' uptake of social media sky-rocketed. Furthermore, clubs have finally 'cottoned

on to the benefits of direct, two-way communications with their fans' (Worrall, 2012:66). Benn Achilleas (2012), Founder of NEOCO (a Social CRM Agency), explains that consumer-to-consumer conversations enabled via social media, along with the unique relationship a fan has with his/her club, means that providing relevant, engaging content will allow a greater degree of loyalty amongst fans, which in turn leads to increased club revenue and fan affiliation. Therefore, social media provides a real opportunity for a club to further engage with its fans, increase brand loyalty and extend the brand to a wider audience. Goh et al (2013) found that engagement in social media brand communities leads to a positive increase in purchase expenditures. They claim that overall, user-generated content 'exhibits a stronger impact than marketer-generated content on consumer purchase behaviour' (Goh et al 2013:88). In correspondence to this, Walsh (2013) states that clubs should begin to develop deeper relationships with bloggers as a way of changing fan perceptions and improving fan engagement. This notes the importance of engaging with fans to increase and expand loyalty.

Whilst social media provides the ideal platform for clubs to engage with fans, clubs' marketers must provide fans with unique and compelling content on a regular basis in order to build up their online communities. Manchester City insist that the biggest challenge in this sphere is ensuring their social media platforms 'remain at the forefront in the field' and are constantly providing fans with the best possible behind-the-scenes content, as well as having an authentic tone of voice (Neild, Econsultancy.com 2013). For today's digitally connected world, stories, which establish emotional connections between fans and their clubs, are a powerful way of attracting new viewers, building relationships and developing long-term loyalty, according to Limelight networks (FC Business, 2013). For Limelight, words are not enough to grab an audience and keep it and, therefore, telling a story via creative social activity such as pictures, photos and video enables clubs to connect fans to the brand. It is not just enough for clubs to have a social presence nowadays, therefore, clubs need to ensure the content is relevant and engaging in order to foster loyalty and awareness amongst their fans.

Stoke City claim social media is at the core of its marketing strategy, yet they candidly admit there is much to learn in this arena. Andy Billingham (2012), Head of

Commercial at Stoke City, believes that trying new initiatives to see what works and what does not in addition to holding dialogue with other clubs from the Premier League, Europe and USA is the key to improving in this area. In discussing the benefits social media brings, Billingham explains that 'through Twitter and Facebook we can produce exclusive content in an instant, in a way that we simply can't through traditional methods' (Billingham in FC Business, 2012:24). He also argues that Twitter is already bringing the club tangible benefits and revenue such as a consistently full stadium and highlights that the commercial and marketing benefits of social media are endless so long as clubs are 'controlled and specific' with their strategy without flooding the market. These benefits, which Billingham outlines, elevate a relevant and central topic for football clubs: how can they utilise social media to engage with their fans and develop deeper relationships and increase loyalty to the brand.

Social media has radically changed the way fans interact with their club and this extra profile and exposure on social media makes it even more important for clubs to know their brand and have tighter controls over it (Worrall, 2013). Social media has opened up 'international communication strands that did not exist before' (Arshad, In Wilson, 2013), allowing clubs to go beyond their locality and spread awareness of their brand globally. Desbordes and Richelieu (2009) argue that clubs have realised the power that branding encapsulates in marketing their team beyond their local market. As a result of the global digital age, clubs around the world are becoming both sporting and commercial rivals and those clubs who wish to entice the best commercial deals must have a strong and growing social media presence that can offer their commercial partners key customer insights. Francesco Calvo of Juventus, states that '10 years ago sponsors and partners were primarily concerned with buying visibility. Today sponsors are more concerned with gaining access to content and fans' (Brand Finance, 2013:16) and this could be a new twist in the future of sports sponsorship. This underlines the importance of a strong CRM strategy for clubs as they attempt to gain more revenue from their sponsors by offering key insights into their fans interests and purchase behaviour patterns. For Lucien Boyer of Havas Sports (In Campaign 2012), supplying fans with unique content and incentives ensures that the level of interest is sustained and developed, which will allow clubs to build a big enough community of fans on social platforms, resulting in huge commercial potential. In support of this view, Josh Robinson of Sports

Revolution (In Campaign 2012) argues that 'social media is the saviour of sports sponsorship', since it delivers rights holders and brands new ways to learn more about their consumers and ultimately ways of monetising from their social strategies.

2.5 Social Media as a Brand Extension Tool

Keller (2003) argues that growing a brand and maintaining brand equity can be achieved by the use of brand extensions. For organisations, extending their brand is one way to enter existing or new markets and create new revenue streams. Consumer brands use brand extensions as a strategy to grow and diversify (Apostolopoulou and Gladden, In Beech and Chadwick, 2007:196). Apostolopoulou and Gladden, (In Beech and Chadwick, 2007) argue that for clubs brand extensions can serve to connect with core consumers, expand its reach, enhance community presence, strengthen its positive image and provide more people with more opportunities to experience the brand. Emma Taylor, Head of Marketing at Tottenham Hotspur maintains that the growth in social media and digital channels allows clubs 'to extend [our] reach and open up new opportunities to attract new fans and inspire advocacy from existing fans' (In Brand Finance, 2013:18). Furthermore, 'the ability to monetise support is a seamless outcome of engagement, whether it is direct transactions or value' for partners or broadcasters (In Brand Finance, 2013:18). Once a conversation is established with those fans and the club understands their interests and behaviours in more detail, the implementation of a CRM system gives clubs the ability to interact on an individual basis and develop potential revenue streams (Arsenal, Brand Finance 2013:18). This highlights the potential long-term impact that investment in CRM and social strategies can have on clubs. Therefore, social media could be seen as a brand extension tool for clubs.

Even though brand extensions can be very beneficial for clubs, risks should be considered, such as the possibility to harm the parent brand if the brand extension performs poorly (Aaker 1990, In Beech and Chadwick, 2007). An unsuccessful brand extension could lead to negative associations towards the parent brand. Keller (2003) warns that overextending a brand to the point where it is not clear anymore to consumers what the brand stands for is a major risk. It is, therefore, crucial that the club does not 'lose its focus and that fans do not become confused about the brand's core business' (Apostolopoulou and Gladden, In Beech and Chadwick, 2007:201). As the bigger clubs continue to push their brand into overseas markets a huge

challenge is to ensure they remain focused on their core brand values and engage with local fans to avoid alienating their domestic fan-base. Following an interview with Tom Fox, Chief Commercial Office at Arsenal, Barnett (In Marketing Week, 2013) emphasises that 'the needs of loyal local fans must be balanced with a growing international following hungry for more involvement and deeper connections with the club'. Successfully managing this balancing act will ensure clubs grow regardless of on-pitch performance.

2.6 Going Beyond On-Pitch Success

Brand Finance (2013:16) argues that 'commercial and on-pitch [success] are intertwined', therefore, it is vital that clubs understand the significance and value of the brands they control. In 2013 Bayern Munich overtook Manchester United to become top of the brand value league to prove that 'silverware and profitability are not mutually exclusive' in football (Brand Finance, 2013:8). Lessons should be learned from the Bundesliga, which states that their DNA is 'performance on the pitch, lots of German players and financial behaviour off it' (Seifert, In FC Business 2013:9). On and off pitch activities need to work in tandem so that football success is founded on a financially stable brand.

McGraw (1998) asserts that customer loyalty and long-term association are often overlooked for short-term revenue growth. This is supported by Apostolopoulou and Gladden (In Beech and Chadwick, 2007) who stress that creating brand equity is no easy task, especially because of the short-term approach that clubs have often adopted with the almost exclusive focus on winning. Moreover, Aaker (1991) asserts that building a strong brand is a long-term process. In order for clubs to grow their brand they need to realign their focus from short-term results to long-term design which will enable them to develop a brand that goes beyond on-pitch success (Apostolopoulou and Gladden, In Beech and Chadwick, 2007). Key to this strategy are the fans. Speaking about the fan ownership model in Germany, Chief Executive of the Bundesliga states:

> '*Nobody loves a club more than its members. We think it gives clubs stability because nobody can come in overnight and buy it'*. (Seifert, In FC Business, 2013:9)

This goes a long way to supporting Germany's model which places the loyal fan at the heart of the game. As a result German football has seen tremendous growth on and off the pitch over the past decade. Despite significant increases in Premier League clubs' revenues, largely due to huge broadcasting deals, the wages to revenue ratio in 2011/12 stood at 70% compared to the Bundesliga's at 51%. As a result, despite the Premier League's revenues dwarfing its European counterparts, Bundesliga clubs made a £161m combined operating profit compared to £98m from Premier League clubs (The Week, 2013). This suggests that Premier League clubs have based their strategies on short-term gains and a 'win at all costs' philosophy to the detriment of long-term growth, which has, for many, resulted in operating losses, despite the significant increases in broadcasting deals.

2.7: Research Questions

This study will be guided by three main research questions, which the research attempts to address. These are outlined below and will be revisited throughout the study.

Research Question 1: Are clubs using fan engagement as a catalyst for growth?

Research Question 2: Are clubs successfully using social media to engage with fans, increase loyalty and market their brand?

Research Question 3: Are customer loyalty and long-term association often overlooked for short-term revenue growth by football clubs?

3. Methodology

The objective of qualitative research is not to make generalisations to a broader population but rather to develop an in-depth contextual understanding of the phenomena that are being studied and to capture and interpret thoughts, feelings and experiences. The three research questions are more suited to a qualitative study that seeks to understand how managers within the industry perceive and interpret the role that social media can play in engaging fans and what effect this can have on the long-term growth of clubs. The nature of the research questions aligns more towards an interpretivist methodological approach, since there is emphasis on the role of interpretations with the aim of understanding rather than explaining. The interpretive approach allows an insider's perspective to be gained, which would be missed by a positivist approach (Gratton and Jones, 2010). The semi-structured interviews allowed for a phenomenological approach to the research design, which focuses on people's perceptions, perspectives and interpretations of a particular situation.

There is a small but growing body of research on social media but at this stage there is little understanding of how sport organisations are using this platform. Therefore, this research is exploratory since it aims to gain an insight and familiarity into this phenomenon and its inductive approach develops theories or patterns from the data collected without any preconceived ideas or explanation (Gratton and Jones, 2010).

3.1 Data Collection Methods

3.1.1 Research Stage 1: Interviews

The first stage of the study consisted of a series of semi-structured interviews with individuals at various clubs throughout both the Premier League and Football League, in addition to individuals working within the football industry. Myers (2008) states that qualitative is the best form of research for business and management studies to become both rigorous and relevant, since it is holistic and contextual, allowing researchers to study real life situations and actively engage with people in real organisations. By interviewing such a varied sample it allowed for the subject to be viewed from different but equally relevant perspectives. A semi-structured

approach to the interviews was important as it allowed for probing of views and opinions so that respondents could expand on their answers, which often lead into new pathways of conversation which, whilst not originally considered, helped to meet the final research objective. Whilst it was important to remain flexible when interviewing, interview schedules were developed to ensure that the question content concentrated on the research objectives. Due to the brief time period afforded to the study, participants were limited to those individuals who responded to interview requests. This led to the number of interviews being fewer than originally intended. It was the author's intention to conduct all interviews face-to-face, however, due to the time pressures of the study and the busy schedules of participants, four of the 14 interviews were carried out by phone. Face-to-face interviews were tape recorded and transcribed (see appendix section one) to aid the organisation and analysis of the data.

Figure 2: List of interviewees

Interviewee (Position)	Organisation	Date of Interview
Social Media Manager	Premier League Club	28.05.2013
Multi Media Officer	Championship Club	15.07.2013
Media Manager	League One Club	05.08.2013
Marketing Manager	Championship Club	24.05.2013
Marketing Manager	Championship Club	23.07.2013
Social Media Manager	Premier League Club	25.09.2013
Customer Services and Supporters Liaison Officer	Premier League Club	05.07.2013
CRM and Digital Marketing Manager	Championship Club	19.07.2013
Chief Executive	Championship Club	23.07.2013
Chief Executive	League One club	23.08.2013
CRM Services Director	CRM Agency	12.07.2013
Managing Partner	Sports Digital Consultancy	07.08.2013
Managing Director	CRM and Data Agency	08.08.2013
Head of Club and Supporter Services	The Football League	08.07.2013

Interviews were conducted with individuals occupying various positions within clubs and the industry, including Social Media Managers, Media Managers, Marketing

Managers, CRM Managers, Customer Service Managers and Chief Executives. Figure 2 shows the interview schedule with details of interviewees and their role in the industry; all of whom were central to marketing and social media strategies at their respective clubs or within the industry. Fisher (2007:168) describes this as 'purposeful sampling' since it identifies individuals who have answers to the researcher's questions. Prior to each interview the author ensured the participant understood the research topic which enabled them to fully comprehend the nature of the research and provide more informed answers and opinions. Each participant was then supplied with a consent form guaranteeing confidentiality and explaining their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

3.1.2 Research Stage 2 – Focus Group

Focus group interviews has been described as the 'explicit use of group interaction as research data' (Morgan, 1988). This focus group consisted of seven fans of clubs in the Premier League, Football League and non-league, which ensured that the information gathered was from fans with a variety of experiences from their involvement in football. The interaction between these fans allowed the author to collect data that is a true reflection of fans' feelings and beliefs around the research topic. This interaction allowed for a greater depth of discussion, which provided richer information to be gathered than if the fans were asked individually. The focus group was recorded to aid the author in the data analysis.

3.1.3 Research Stage 3 – Twitter Investigation

The second stage of data collection was in the form of an investigation into 10 Premier League club's Twitter accounts in order to analyse the types of content, frequency of posts and engagement with followers that the clubs had. The investigation took place on one day and captured the most recent 20 tweets for analysis, which resulted in a valuable dataset of 200 tweets. Each tweet was documented for each club and is provided in appendix section two. In the absence of many participants from research stage one being social media experts, this stage allowed the author to investigate the regular use of social media by a selection of Premier League clubs and draw together conclusions on best practice and recommendations for fan engagement via this media channel. The use of this

additional data from stage two is important within qualitative research to provide an alternative perspective to information gathered through the first stage of data collection. Despite not being able to generalise to broader populations, by gathering data from such a wide variety of people and clubs, this can be related back to theories and used to make analytical generalisations.

By using two different methods of research, it allows the researcher to triangulate the interview data with the data from the Twitter investigation. Triangulation is one of the best ways to explore the same topic from different angles, which increases confidence in the conclusions drawn. Triangulation also improves reliability and credibility, since the findings can be cross-checked.

3.2 Data Analysis

In contrast to quantitative research, there is no clear distinction between data collection, data analysis or data interpretation in qualitative research, since the researcher develops initial ideas and identifies themes throughout the process of data collection. The first stage of the data analysis, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), was data reduction in the form of organising and coding the transcriptions from each face-to-face interview[1] and written notes from the four phone interviews. The process of coding is vital in the data reduction stage as it organises the raw data into conceptual categories and provides a form of logical structure to the data. The data reduction stage was completed as soon as possible post-interview so that any irrelevant data was discarded and emerging themes were highlighted. All data was kept in the transcriptions so that it was retrievable if the author considered it to be relevant at a later stage. Throughout the interview process the themes which did emerge were then considered and used to adapt the questions asked to participants. Upon completion of all interviews, transcriptions and coding of relevant themes, initial conclusions were developed.

Figure 3 shows the Premier League table ranked in order of Twitter followers from highest to lowest. There is a clear drop off in followers from 6th placed Tottenham

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[1] One face-to-face interview was not completed in time for a full transcription to be made. Hand written notes were taken and used in the coding process.

Hotspur to 7th placed Newcastle United, therefore the top six teams were selected for analysis in addition to the bottom four, which contained the three newly promoted teams for the 2013/14 season.

Figure 3. Twitter Followers. Figures correct: 31/07/13

Premier League	Followers	
	Volume	*% Change in last month*
Arsenal	2,553,053	4.6%
Chelsea	2,495,350	9.5%
Liverpool	1,826,351	5.4%
Manchester City	1,046,541	11.8%
Manchester United	609,574	50.9%
Tottenham Hotspur	549,411	10.5%
Newcastle United	265,284	6.2%
Everton	223,346	7.6%
West Ham United	196,700	7.0%
Aston Villa	188,214	8.0%
Fulham	150,958	8.4%
Sunderland	149,924	9.4%
Swansea City	138,766	10.7%
Norwich City	129,973	9.0%
Southampton	127,202	10.2%
Stoke City	123,383	8.8%
West Bromwich Albion	87,236	9.0%
Cardiff City	53,601	18.9%
Crystal Palace	49,648	15.9%
Hull City	42,041	23.1%
TOTAL	**11,006,556**	

Source: Nineteen Eighty Four, in FC Business (2013)

20 consecutive tweets were analysed for each club to investigate the content of tweets and categorise them into 3 groups:

· **Informative Tweets:** Statements, links to the website for news/information

- **Engaging Tweets:** Questions, surveys, competitions, offers/discounts to fans
- **Creative Tweets:** Imagery (pictures and photos), videos, interview quotes from players/staff, links to blogs

Any retweets from the club and direct replies to other Twitter users were also logged as this shows a level of engagement with fans.

The frequency of posts per day from two selected clubs (Manchester United and Hull City) was analysed over a seven day period to understand whether engagement with their audience was consistent throughout the week or simply on a match day. To draw conclusions from this content analysis the data was displayed in tables, charts and graphs to help compare between clubs' use of Twitter.

3.3 Limitations

Within this research it would have been useful to have obtained further interviews, particularly from dedicated Social Media Managers from clubs to produce richer data from experts in this field. Despite contacting the few clubs that had dedicated staff to social media there was limited response, which could suggest that, not only is there a lack staff performing this role, but that those who are were reluctant to be interviewed. This potential reluctance could be explained by the lack of clear job description and objectives, which was one of the findings from this research.

Due to the time limitations of this study the content analysis was based on the selected clubs' tweets on one day only, with the exception of Manchester United and Hull City which had their content analysed for a period of seven days. It should be noted that the day which the content appeared was during a non-Premier League weekend (International break), which may not be wholly representative of the norms of these clubs' social media usage. Despite this, the difference between clubs' Twitter content was evidently captured in the valuable dataset of 200 posts. This study only investigated one social media channel (Twitter) and, therefore, future research should examine other social media channels such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. In addition, the coding process for both research stages was

completed by one individual, which might produce biased categorisations and themes due to the level of subjectivity which is associated with qualitative research.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Gray (2009) explains that a central issue for qualitative research is that respondents are not harmed or damaged by the research in any way. Informed consent is, therefore, of paramount importance. Prior to the interviews the author contacted the participants to ask for their voluntary involvement. At this stage all participants were informed of the research topic and final objectives. Before each interview the objectives were explained once more and all participants signed an informed consent form. Where interviews were completed over the phone, the consent form was sent via e-mail to be signed and returned to the researcher. Due to the flexibility of qualitative research design, questions and focus can change during the research process. Therefore, it was important to revisit the question of informed consent on an ongoing basis to ensure the participant was comfortable with the process at all stages of the research. All signed consent forms can be found in appendix section three.

4. Analysis

In total 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted, made up of 10 interviews with club employees including two chief executives, three interviews with senior employees at sport agencies and one interview with a member of staff from the Football League. A focus group consisting of seven fans supporting a variety of clubs ranging from Premier League to non-league was undertaken to give a fan's perspective across the topics. The second research phase was in the form of a small Twitter investigation of 10 Premier League clubs to analyse the content of their tweets, retweets and replies and to compare and contrast clubs with the highest number of followers to those with the lowest. Several themes arose from the interviews, many of which were issues discussed in the literature review. The next section analyses these themes in more detail.

4.1 A More Customer-Focused Approach for Clubs

All participants articulated the view that there has been a genuine awakening in the industry, albeit a long overdue one, that football is now about more than just the product on the pitch for 90 minutes. Several interviewees discussed the importance of the 'customer journey' from when a fan decides to buy a ticket to when they get home and that this overall fan experience has become a crucial element to clubs' marketing strategies. It was generally agreed by most interviewees that many of the new fan experience initiatives which we are now seeing have been in Major League Soccer (MLS) for several years and that the influx of American owners into the UK's football industry may have been a catalyst for the improved fan experience.

A Media Manager from a League One club admitted that whilst in the past football clubs were taking their fans for granted, they have now realised that across all other industries customer service is an important issue for consumers and that it is imperative for clubs to become more fan-centric. A Social Media Manager for a Premier League club believed that the emergence of social media has prompted clubs to become more fan-focused.

> *'Going back five or 10 years ago there wasn't that direct avenue to contact a company…it's good that there is that direct avenue now as it has made*

companies be transparent and clubs are realising that they now have to listen'. (Social Media Manager of Premier League club)

The significance of engaging with fans was echoed by all participants, and this particular quote from a Championship club's Chief Executive emphasises why fan engagement is so vital to clubs growth:

'I think fan engagement is critical because a lot of football clubs, their attendances ebb and flow on their results, so if the team is doing well attendances are high, if the team are struggling attendances drop. Whereas if you focus on fan engagement and the fan experience then you can even out some of that fluctuation and that gives you a better chance of having a much more stable business, gives you a better chance of maintaining your revenue levels and actually it gives you a better chance of having a better relationship with your fans'. (Interview with Chief Executive of Championship club)

He argued that by making the whole experience more important and enjoyable it actually reduces the impact of bad results on the pitch. He revealed that improving the match day experience at his club made a big difference to their revenues. For example, the match day catering revenues were higher for this Championship club than at Old Trafford or Wembley. He attributes this success to engaging with fans at a basic and commercial level. When discussing the decision to keep the stadium open longer after the match, he explained the commercial benefit to the club:

'If they stay longer they'll spend more. If they spend more our revenues are in better shape and if our revenue is in better shape than we can invest more on the pitch. I mean, this is a virtuous circle, if you get it spinning in the right direction. If it goes in the opposite direction it becomes a vicious circle, so you constantly have to strive to improve that fan engagement which keeps the virtuous circle turning'. (Interview with Chief Executive of Championship club)

As highlighted in the literature review, the definition of fan engagement varies across clubs. For some clubs fan engagement is primarily a brand extending exercise in an attempt to monetise from fans all over the world, whereas for others there is genuine

consultation and engagement. Whilst it is welcomed that clubs have finally recognised the need for engagement, there is a danger that clubs are becoming too focused on commercialising and monetising from fans to the detriment of building fan loyalty and truly engaging with their local fan base. A customer service manager for a Premier League club questions the understanding of fan engagement amongst clubs:

> *'is fan engagement around getting people in to spend or is fan engagement about having a level of consultation, having a level of mutual trust and how the club can benefit supporters and how supporters can benefit the club?'*
> (Customer Service Manager and SLO of Premier League club)

There are clear financial benefits from engaging with fans and these monetary gains are rightly critical to clubs' sustainability and success. However, when engagement becomes solely about making money out of fans to the detriment of consultation, transparency and trust, this only serves to diminish fans' loyalty, endangering the long-term success of the club. This links to the transaction-relationship marketing theory which Adamson et al (2005) explains leads to confusion in conventional business.

4.2 Lack of Resource for CRM Strategies

A second theme discussed by the interviewees, which was introduced in the literature review, was the need for improved CRM strategies and technologies at clubs. There was clear agreement amongst all participants that becoming more fan-centric required improvements in CRM for almost all clubs. It was also highlighted that many clubs in the Football League did not have any CRM technologies, which served as a disadvantage to them when it came to marketing strategies. Managing Director of 4sight agency estimated that 20%-30% of clubs do not implement CRM into their strategies at all and that whilst 40%-50% have CRM systems in place they are not being used properly. Only 10%-20% use CRM effectively but compared to other industries it is only for basic marketing techniques. This suggests that the vast majority of clubs are yet to understand the full potential of CRM.

Two club employees described the notion of implementing an integrated CRM system which included ticketing, hospitality, catering, retail and social media as the 'holy grail' for clubs. However, it was noted that not a single club is known to be able to integrate all those platforms onto one integrated CRM system yet. This is something which interests many of the big clubs and it is expected that in a few years with further technical advancements the big Premier League clubs will have such systems in place. Interestingly, all interviewees stated a lack of financial or staff resource meant that they either did not have a CRM system at all or that they had one but it was not used properly. Managing Director of 4sight agency stated that it is the insight that is so important for successful CRM but most clubs do not have the staff to understand it. This is supported further by CRM Services Director at the CRM Agency who explained that it is often the case that some clubs have bought CRM software and not resourced it or they have resourced the department without giving them the relevant software:

> *'There is a general conception: if we invest a load of money in CRM, we want to plug it in and we want our world to change. But you can't. You can plug CRM software in but unless you've got the ethos and the building and the staff in the building to drive that culture throughout its worthless'.* (CRM Services Director at CRM Agency)

This supports the theory in the literature that successful firms view RM and CRM as a philosophy and culture, rather than a strategy or IT tool.

Despite all participants stating the need for CRM at clubs, it is evident from the interviews that the majority of clubs are still unwilling to properly invest in CRM. An employee from a League One club explained that any surplus money generated goes into the manager's budget to buy players rather than marketing tools. This was echoed by a former Premier League club employee who claimed clubs like to spend every penny they have on the first team which goes someway to supporting the argument highlighted in the literature that clubs base their strategies on winning on the pitch, as opposed to growth off it. The importance of CRM in long-term growth and the current short-term mentality in clubs is further emphasised by the CRM Services Director at the CRM Agency, who explained that:

I think everything has to be long-term. I think everything has to be done for a reason, not a short-term gain. I'm talking to a championship club at the moment that has spent a ridiculous amount of money on a pre-season camp, is throwing money left right and centre at players. Will it invest low levels on CRM? No, we haven't got the budget for that. (CRM Services Director at CRM Agency)

This suggests that the lack of CRM resources in football clubs is the result of an unwillingness to invest in it above the players, rather than an absence of available finances. The CRM Services Director at the CRM Agency prefers to re-define CRM to 'insight and engagement' because for him the concept is about truly understanding and scientifically building strategies around the core needs of the customer base, which is an essential requirement for businesses in order to succeed according to Raab et al (2008). In addition to this, Managing Director of 4sight agency explained that a key characteristic of CRM is that it is long-term in nature whilst, critically, football is characterised by strategies based around short-term gains, which again reflects the argument highlighted in the literature review that clubs adopt a short-term approach with almost exclusive focus on winning.

4.3 Vision, Mission and Direction: The Key to a Successful Strategy

This short-term approach was discussed indirectly amongst the majority of participants through the theme of building successful strategies. The two Chief Executives who were questioned emphasised the importance of having a clear vision, mission and direction, which provided a philosophy that engulfed the entire club. One Chief Executive from a League One club, who confirmed that 'most clubs do not spend the time or money in ensuring all their staff understand the philosophy of the club', has recently employed an external consultancy to help all club staff develop and understand the club's identity and philosophy. The other Chief Executive (Championship club) had implemented a philosophy around the club which was communicated to all staff. Upon arrival at the club's offices there is a large creative explaining the philosophy of the club, which serves to remind each staff member of the strategy in place at their club. One participant stressed the importance of executing a plan properly and engaging the club staff on what the

club's brand and identity is so that 'you will all get out of bed in the morning knowing what you're trying to achieve'. However, it was suggested that most clubs do not dedicate enough resource to developing a structured, long-term vision and consequently most clubs do not understand their own brand or identity and are based on confused, short-term strategies. If everyone in the club understands the vision, mission and direction of the club then a strategy can be formed to ensure long-term stability and success whilst on the journey to reach that vision.

All club staff were asked to describe the vision, mission and direction or brand of their club in order to ascertain whether the club had a clearly communicated philosophy and identity. For all the Football League clubs there was a clear philosophy surrounding community and locality. One interviewee from a Championship club stated that whilst there is a vision, mission and direction at the club it was above their head, suggesting that such planning and strategies do not filter down to the staff members and instead remain with the senior management. This supports the belief of the Chief Executive mentioned earlier that not enough resource is invested in communicating an overriding ethos throughout all levels of the club.

However, it was acknowledged that 'it is difficult to have too long-term a plan in football just simply because how quickly things can change on a pitch' and that 'because sport is so emotional and it's based on what happens at the weekend, it's very difficult to have a solid strategy'. This supports the notion that football is heavily affected by short-term strategies based exclusively on winning. If a club is unsuccessful then, because of the short-term characteristic, ownership and management are removed and new ones come in with a different ethos. The CRM Services Director at the CRM Agency warns that 'until you stop that culture, you've got no chance'. He also revealed that in his experience clubs often do things 'to gain a quick buck to sign some players and then the money is gone and you're left with a legacy of problems', which again confirms the theory that clubs tend to employ a short-term, win at all costs, approach to strategy.

4.4 Uncertainty around Social Media

The interviews revealed a great deal of uncertainty around social media and football perhaps unsurprisingly given the speed social media continues to evolve at and its recent conception into the football industry. Amongst the dedicated social media employees at clubs there was the belief that a social strategy should be placed at the heart of the club and if harnessed in the right way it can really add value to a club. This view was echoed by other participants working in the industry who warn clubs that social media should be ignored at their peril. Whilst a handful of clubs, namely Manchester City and Liverpool, were praised by almost all interviewees for their social strategies and ground-breaking engagement with fans, it was evident from the interviews that the participants felt the majority of clubs are failing to grasp the potential of social media. A Social Media Manager from a Premier League club alludes to the fact that an older generation of senior management who 'are entrenched in the same old ways of doing things' has stifled the use of social media. He argued that to actually build social within a football club it needs people from a very top level to believe in it. Instead, he revealed that most clubs recruit juniors, often recent graduates, for the role of Social Media Manager and expect them to educate upwards to senior management and board level rather than being influenced and managed by their seniors.

The Social Media Managers who were interviewed as part of the research were all asked to explain their job description and key objectives when they first joined their clubs. Interestingly, most responses highlighted a lack of job description or clear objectives for their role:

> *'It was very much a keeping up with the Joneses like we needed to get someone to do social. It wasn't communicated like that but it became very obvious that was the case. I think they felt that they had to get someone in to do it, but they didn't realise what they wanted to do with it and what impact it would have'.* (Social Media Manager at Premier League club)

This was supported by several of the other participants who stated that whilst most clubs now have a social media presence on at least one channel, they are simply following a trend, rather than using the platform to truly engage with fans. The

Marketing Manager of a Championship club confirmed that this was the case when he first set up their Facebook account 6 years ago and had very little activity until it was revisited as recently as last year when the club was re-structured. The Media Manager for a League One club stated that a key objective of its social media presence is to 'make the club seem approachable' and using it as a customer service tool. However, he believes some clubs 'use it to say here's a story on our website' and 'they don't really interact with fans on social media' which 'kind of defies the point of it really'. This was supported by a Championship club's Multi-Media Officer who emphasised that clubs that interact with fans generate more positive thoughts and feedback since 'fans see the interaction as getting more value from their money'. However, in direct contrast, a Football League employee stated that 'it does not need to be interactive', because 'the more seen you are to be doing that the more followers you get who want a response, and it does grow'. They warned that for clubs with little or no resources this could then become a strain on other staff members to the detriment of other departments within the club.

The focus group confirmed that the uncertainty surrounding social media is not just with the clubs, but also from the fans. Whilst most of the attendees are active users of social media and follow their club on Twitter and/or Facebook there were two members who stated they had no interest in following their club on social media, preferring to use more generic sport websites such as BBC Sport, SkySports.com and Football365.com to keep informed. This suggests that these fans assume clubs' social media content is purely informative and offers nothing exclusive or engaging to them. This reaffirms the need for clubs to ensure content is unique and creative since it is more likely to attract fans to using social media to engage with their club. Five attendees follow their club on social media and all agreed that it is a great way of accessing news, players and interacting with other fans. One fan of a Championship club stated that when he goes to matches he regularly tweets pictures to his club's official account because he enjoys receiving responses from them, ultimately making him feel 'more engaged and more involved'. In contrast one fan stressed that 'when you support a bigger team the chance of having that interaction back, or feeling part of it, are probably quite limited'. Figure 4 from the Twitter investigation shows that only four of the analysed clubs replied to fans. MU, Arsenal, Liverpool and Chelsea did not respond to any fans, which supports this fans'

assumption that the bigger clubs tend not to respond to fans. A Social Media Manager of a Premier League club described replying to fans on social media as 'vital' but stated that 'it all depends on the resource available' as to whether or not responding was possible. Nevertheless, he believed 'having dedicated staff to directly respond to tweets is something clubs should aim towards'.

Another fan stated that whilst he enjoyed watching videos and seeing other creative content, he would normally access these via the club's website. This could be because of a lack of awareness of the creative content clubs supply via social media, which again questions fans' understanding of how their clubs use social media and suggests clubs need to do more to promote their social channels, clearly explaining the benefits of engaging with them on such platforms.

The majority of fans agreed that if the club or players directly engaged with them then they would feel increased loyalty to the club. However, the belief that players are strictly controlled and content is mediated seems to have made fans sceptical of clubs. One fan stated that 'bigger clubs do not care about fans as it is all about money and if you think anything different then you are naïve'. He explained further than with fewer English players within his club and the more global they become, the less he cares about them. Another fan supported this stating 'you can understand why local fans feel disenfranchised'. Findings from the focus group suggest that loyalty and advocacy can be built with whom the clubs engage and interact. However, it appears that fans are unaware of the benefits following their club on social media can provide, since they consider the platform to be yet another information tool which does not offer them anything different that a generic sports or official club website. The focus group also emphasised the growing discontent amongst domestic fans as a result of the almost exclusive focus of money, as opposed to history, traditions and values.

4.5 Monetising from Social Media

Due to football's tendency to prioritise short-term gains above long-term growth, the question of monetising from social media came up in all interviews. It was emphasised by all interviewees that whilst monetisation was something they all

wanted to be able to do from their social strategies there was agreement that clubs should not always expect a return on investment tangibly from this social activity:

'There is no doubt social media done the right way is doing exactly that, engaging. Can you quantify and monetise it? Not necessarily. Does that make it wrong? Not necessarily. You will bear the fruit in a different way'. (CRM Services Director at CRM Agency)

Communication and interaction through social media assist in building brand awareness, loyalty and equity, which in the long-term can justify clubs' social activity commercially. The next step for clubs using social media is to create a correlation between their social activity and purchase behaviour. Creating advocates for the brand is another potential benefit of successful social strategies, as the Media Manager from League One club highlighted:

'If you actually take the time and put a bit of humour in or take some time to reply to them you can probably win those people round and then they end up being stronger brand advocates than people who were kind of on your side anyway. Like if you can spin someone round 180° then they're bang on your side after that'. (Media Manager from League One club)

Whilst direct monetisation from social media is not yet expected to be an outcome of clubs' social strategies, it was discussed in several interviews that the future of social will be heavily linked with sponsors and commercial partners. As stated in the literature review sponsors nowadays are concerned with gaining access to content and fans and this was supported by a consultant in the industry who stated:

'Sponsors only want to partner with clubs that can prove their global reach. The club is a gateway to sponsors accessing more people around the world. Clubs need to be savvier in their social strategies and increase the value of their brand to new and existing sponsors. That is why brand value is so important'. (Managing Partner of Digital Agency)

Whilst all clubs are at different stages of their social media maturity, almost all clubs have now taken the step to have a social media presence. The next step for the majority is to understand what types of content and engagement drives loyalty and expands the brand. For a handful of the bigger clubs the question over sponsors' access is not far away and whilst it does pose a threat, if handled properly, this can clearly be a key way to monetise from clubs' social activity.

4.6 Analysis: Twitter Investigation

Despite advancements in social media amongst football clubs in the last 12 months, many clubs still ignore the greatest aspect of this phenomenon, which is the ability to transcend the usual barriers of location, wealth and language to connect people. Consequently, content from many clubs remains one-way broadcasting. This investigation aimed to show and compare the variation in content amongst the clubs.

Figure 4. Graph showing types of tweets from 10 Premier League clubs.
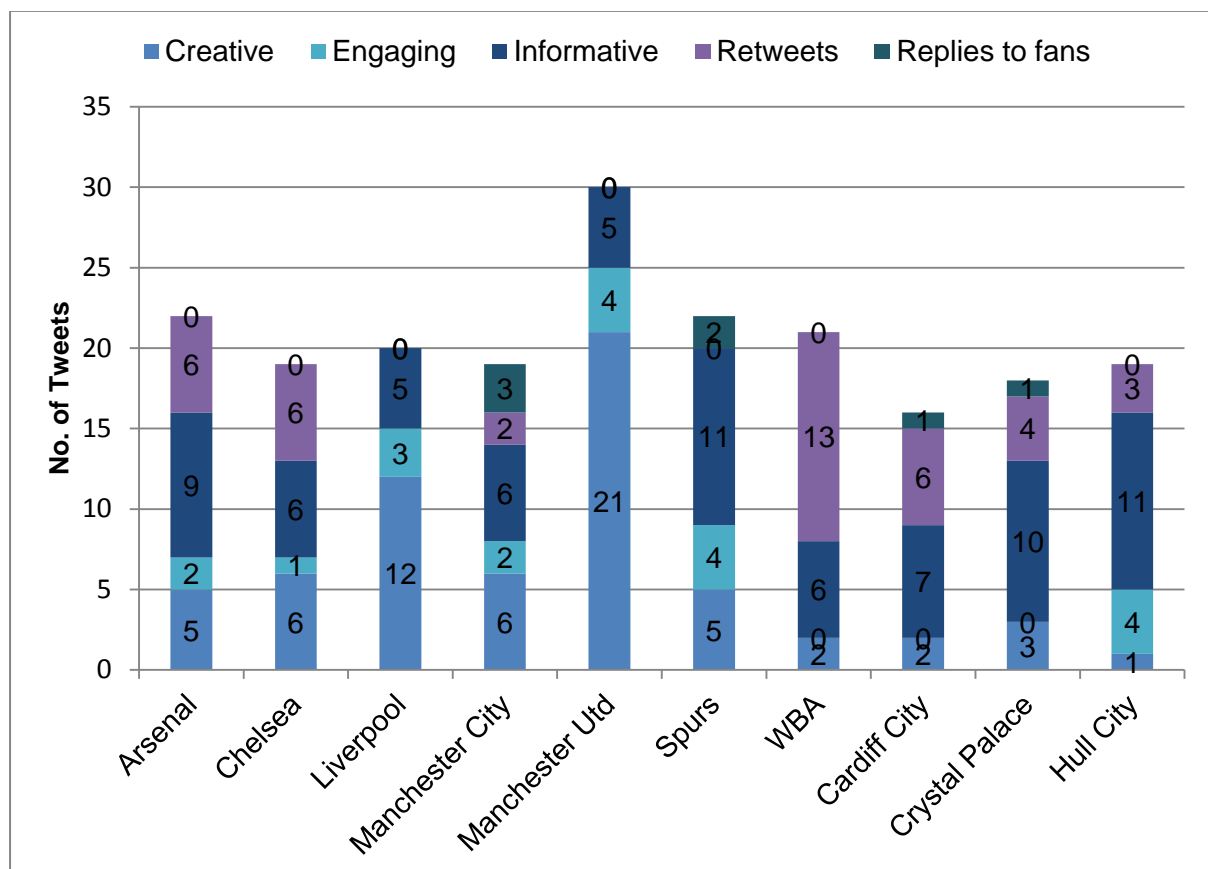
Manchester United has only been active on Twitter since July 2013 and, such is the power of the brand, is experiencing rapid growth in its follow figures, as Figure 3 highlights. Whilst this expansion can be largely attributed to the huge global following of the club, it is also noteworthy that the content of Manchester United's tweets is mostly creative with a strong focus on imagery. Liverpool's content was also imagery driven with a steady stream of iconic photos which provided succinct storytelling of the club's rich history. Whilst they both contained informative tweets, it was clear the emphasis was on creative, engaging content for their fans.

In contrast, the Twitter accounts of Hull City, Crystal Palace and Cardiff City contained very little creative content and focused primarily on informative content and retweeting players' tweets. The selection of Hull City's tweets did not contain any imagery apart from a link to a section of their website with one, very poor quality photo, which was only retweeted three times. Further analysis into the number of retweets from clubs' followers indicates that creative content achieved many more retweets than tweets with an informative substance. For example, two informative tweets sent by Arsenal achieved 86 and 114 retweets respectively, whereas a tweet containing a photo gained 522 retweets. Likewise for Liverpool, two informative tweets achieved 247 and 80 retweets respectively, whereas two tweets with creative content generated 1,414 and 900 retweets. In a similar analysis with two of the newly promoted clubs Hull City and Cardiff City only gained an average of five and 16 retweets respectively, which suggests that fans of clubs who tend to communicate informative messages via Twitter are less likely to retweet and, therefore, feel less engaged with the club. It is not only the content that varies amongst the analysed clubs since this investigation also highlighted that there is a variance in the frequency of tweets. Figure 5 compares frequency of tweets between Hull City and Manchester United, highlighting that whilst the two clubs are particularly active on match days, there is a sudden drop off in engagement from the day after the game.

Figure 5: Frequency of tweets for one week period (30th August – 6th September) for Hull City and Manchester United.
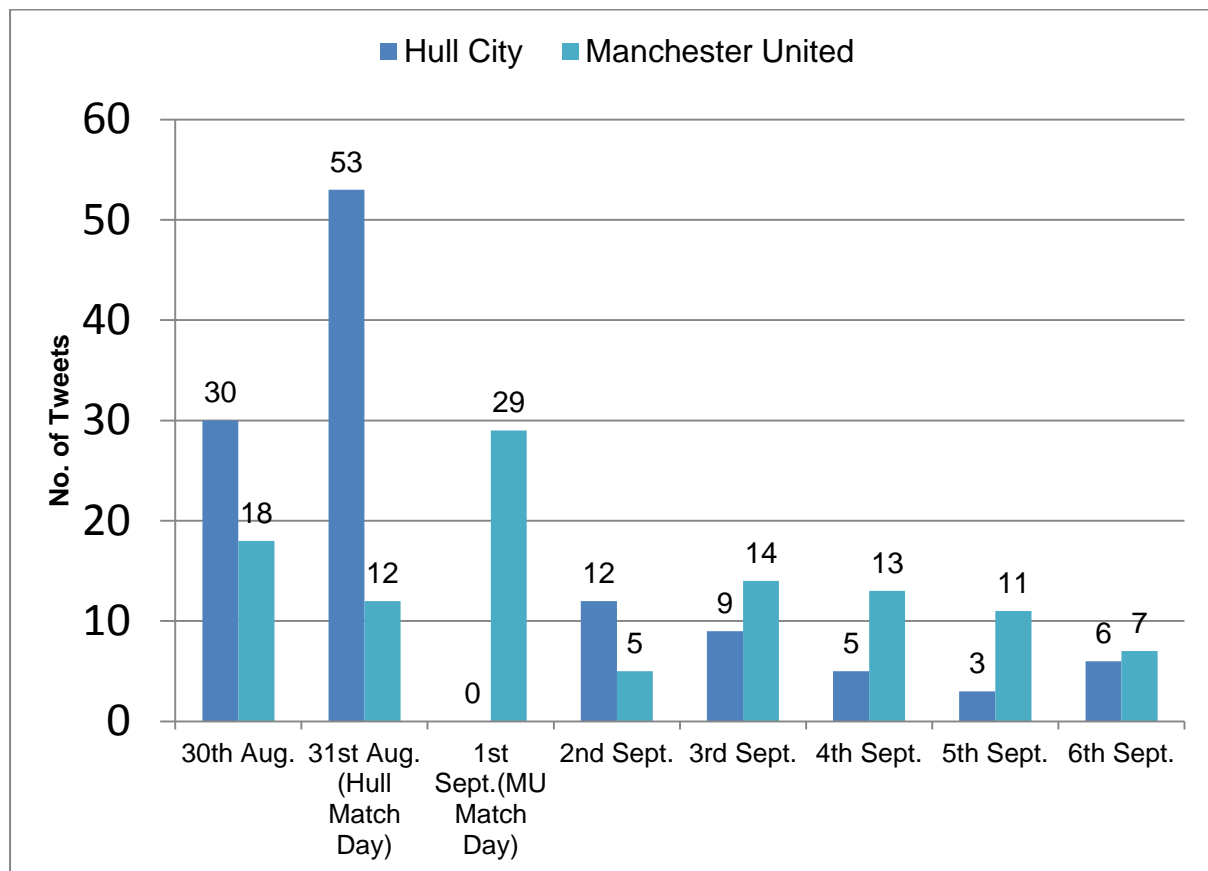
Whilst HC tweet regularly on the match day, the majority of this content is informative with minute by minute commentary on the game. In contrast to this, Manchester United do not tweet any match commentary, preferring to only tweet engaging and creative content, such as photos and interview quotes from players or staff.

4.7 Other Notable Findings

Following the research findings from Goh et al (2013), which claimed that user-generated content (UCG) 'exhibits a stronger impact than marketer-generated content (MGC) on consumer purchase behaviour', it seems odd that not all interviewees stated that their club is engaging with influential fan bloggers, as this could be a way of changing fan perceptions, driving engagement and building brand advocacy and loyalty. A Social Media Manager from a Premier League club highlighted the current lack of connection between clubs and fan bloggers:

'We have got all these really engaged bloggers who are talking about the organisation but there is no real connection'. (Social Media Manager of Premier League club)

It was evident from the interview process that there was apprehension amongst clubs over the use of social media and engagement with bloggers:

'I think that if they could, they wouldn't engage at all. If they could get away with it, they wouldn't want to be anywhere near these conversations. I think they wish they could be like that'. (Social Media Manager of Premier League club)

This assumption was supported by a Media Manager of a League One club who stated 'I think some clubs are almost afraid to respond to fans'. Another Media Manager from a Championship club revealed that they actively seek fans' feedback on social media content but agreed that most clubs do not do this as they are fearful of the feedback they would receive. The evident fear that these findings highlight goes some way to explaining the lack of consultation between clubs and fans which has been apparent over previous years and remains an issue that needs to be addressed across the industry.

5. Discussion

This section will further explore the findings from the interviews and Twitter investigation and combine them with the current body of literature in order to answer the three research questions outlined. The discussion will also identify aspects that the author believes may benefit from further research.

5.1 Are clubs using fan engagement as a catalyst for growth?

A large body of research around RM and CRM has stated that organisations' success is built on the foundations of long-term relationships with their customers, which leads to increased purchase, lifetime value and new business through word-of-mouth promotion (Jobber and Fahy, 2012). However, it has been argued that the football industry has been late in adopting such a customer-focused philosophy. For the football industry, Bradley (2012a) argued 'it is in the quality of customer engagement that sustainability truly resides' and, therefore, engaging with fans ought to be the focal point for all clubs. This study highlights that there is a genuine belief around the industry that clubs are finally becoming more fan-centric as they realise the importance placed upon customer service and experience in other industries, against which football is now competing. Nevertheless, the research raised the critical issue of lack of resource for developing stronger marketing strategies such as implementing CRM systems and social media, which, as emphasised in the literature and through the findings, is a key requirement if clubs are to become more customer-focused. This serves to support the argument made in the literature that failing to invest off the pitch has resulted in missed opportunities for clubs to engage with fans and, therefore, learn more about what they value and their consumer behaviour, which in turn will lead to long-term loyalty and increased revenues.

Previous research found that clubs used CRM for more transactional marketing purposes, as opposed to relationship building or loyalty, and this study discovered that this largely remains the case since most participants agreed that clubs, with a few exceptions of the larger, wealthier clubs, are still unwilling to properly invest in CRM. The findings from this study suggests that even some of those clubs that do have CRM systems in place do not use them to their potential since they lack enough resource to gain the valuable insight from the data.

However, whilst wide scale improvements in CRM have not been discovered, the research has found that there have been attempts at improving the 'customer journey', such as the match day experience and increased fan consultation via the implementation of the SLO role and fan forums. As the findings highlighted, improvements in these areas has allowed clubs to develop stronger relationships with their fans and to generate more revenues, regardless of winning or team success. This supports Bradley's (2012a) assertion that in pursuing fan engagement as a strategy for growth in preference to winning or discounting; clubs can remain prosperous even in times of poor on pitch performance. A strategy that promotes sustainability in a sport riddled with debt is not only gaining precedence but is also bearing the fruits for those clubs who have turned their focus to fan engagement, as proven by the Chief Executive of a Championship club that highlighted the increased revenues and improved fan-club relationship, regardless of team success.

The research also found that the concept of fan engagement is practised in different ways, particularly between Football League and Premier League clubs. As highlighted in the literature review, the Football League state in their best practice guide that clubs centred on growth identify what fans value and consult with them to determine the improvements. Consequently, there have been great improvements from the majority of Football League clubs in the match day experience, making the stadium a more family-friendly environment. For Premier League clubs, however, fan engagement strategies have a clear focus on monetisation and commercial benefits through global brand extension. These differing strategies are expected, since the vision, mission and direction of clubs will vary depending on their size and potential reach. However, the findings from the fan focus group raised the pertinent issue of growing discontent amongst fans from big Premier League clubs whose global fan engagement strategies appear to be disengaging their local fan base. The SLO of the Premier League club explained a strategy that is 'purely commercialised, driving the market and essentially monetising the fans that you have got is not always the way to engage fans', which strongly supports the views from the fans that were questioned.

Such findings serve to emphasise the importance of real consultation in fan engagement. Whilst it is recognised that monetisation is a key objective for clubs and

is, quite rightly, paramount in the journey towards growth, the study suggests that clubs need to be aware of the risks that focusing exclusively on monetisation and brand extension rather than true consultation with fans can bring, as proved by comments made by fans in the focus group and by the SLO of the Premier League club. The challenge for clubs is to ensure that their fan engagement strategies do not result in disengaging any segment of their fan base, whilst attempting to extend their brand to other areas of the UK or overseas markets. Clubs that have engaged with fans to develop a deeper understanding of their needs and have shown the willingness to meet those needs on a continuous basis have increased the loyalty and advocacy of their fans towards the club. As highlighted by Jobber and Fahy (2012) the tendency of loyal customers to spend more with an organisation and the smaller costs of serving such customers, emphasises the financial benefits to clubs of building loyalty amongst their fans. Therefore, clubs that view fan engagement as building long-term relationships with their fans will reap the financial and commercial rewards through increased loyalty to the brand. However, those clubs that consider fan engagement primarily as a monetisation tool to the detriment of real consultation, will feel the effects of lost loyalty and disenfranchised fans. It would be interesting to see how the concept of fan engagement develops with the implementation of financial regulations which provides an opportunity for similar research to occur.

5.2 Are clubs successfully using social media to engage with fans and increase loyalty?

Within conventional business Mangold and Faulds (2009) argue that most business managers are yet to fully appreciate the role social media can play in their organisations and have particularly failed to develop methods for shaping the consumer-consumer conversations that social media facilitates. Both stages of this research provide evidence to suggest that the majority of football clubs are also failing to grasp the opportunities social media presents, which is also highlighted in the literature by Church-Sanders (2012) who states that a desire for unique and high quality content signifies a huge opportunity for sport, which has yet to be recognised. The findings demonstrate that whilst clubs realise the need to be active in social media, the majority do not truly understand how to effectively implement social strategies in order to drive engagement and build loyalty. This is highlighted through the revelation that job descriptions and objectives for Social Media Managers at

clubs were very unclear or even non-existent. Interestingly, only two interviewee's jobs were dedicated to social media. For the others the implementation of social media strategies and updating of the social channels was combined with other media or marketing jobs. Moreover, it was expressed by the social media staff that recruitment for such positions tended to go to juniors or even graduates and that to build social strategies into a club it required top level management to support it. This could serve to prove Keynes' theory (1935, In Drexler, 1987:231) that 'the difficulty lies not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones'. This indicates the unwillingness of senior management within clubs to invest more money and resources in social media and CRM strategies.

There is a significant difference between presence and successful engagement, as argued by Taker (2012), and this research concludes that only a handful of the bigger, richer clubs, with sufficient resource, are able to implement engaging social strategies. The findings from the Twitter investigation demonstrated that amongst the smaller clubs in the Premier League the content they provide is mainly informative, which generates little interaction and engagement with fans and does little to foster loyalty and build awareness amongst their fans. This supports the statement from the Media Manager of a League One club who believes a lack of interaction on social media defies the point of it.

Although the investigation showed that those clubs providing creative, exclusive and engaging content delivered more retweets from fans, there were still very few direct replies to fans from these clubs. Interestingly, Manchester United has not directly engaged with a single fan since they opened their Twitter account in July 2013. This suggests that, whilst the top clubs are providing relevant, engaging content, they are not using social media as a tool for fan consultation. This raises the topic as to whether clubs are using social media as a transaction marketing tool in preference to a relationship marketing tool. Whilst the literature suggests that relevant, engaging content allows a greater degree of loyalty amongst fans, the findings from the fan focus group suggest that it is the direct interaction from their club, in the form of replies or retweets, that makes them feel more engaged and involved, leading to increased loyalty and long-term relationships with the club. Therefore, there is a

particular concern for big Premier League clubs, who, despite providing creative content on their social channels, are failing to actively interact with their fans.

When it comes to social content, it is clear that creative and engaging is more effective than informative substance. The Twitter investigation shows it creates more buzz around the official club communications and, as proven by the number of retweets for creative versus informative tweets, can drive awareness and reach of the brand. However, the findings from the fans suggest that a certain level of direct interaction is required in order to really develop a long-term relationship with the fan base, since it can provide a platform for consultation and genuine two-way conversation. The study suggests that clubs are yet to understand how to use social media as both a relationship and transaction tool, which serves to build a long lasting relationship and conversation with the audience with the dual aim of creating loyalty and advocacy in addition to driving revenues. As a result of the evident uncertainly surrounding social media in the football industry, this topic warrants further research in order to build upon the very little body of existing literature and understanding of its use and potential for football and other sports organisations.

5.3 Are customer loyalty and long-term association often overlooked for short-term revenue growth by football clubs?

The failure to invest in modern marketing strategies in the past has resulted in clubs' inability to sufficiently engage with fans and, consequently, fail to deliver customer value. This research suggests that there is genuine appetite amongst marketing and media specific club employees for a more personal approach to their fans, since the benefits of CRM and improved relations with customers has shown to pay dividends in other industries. However, the findings raised a key issue since all participants stated a lack of resource meant they were restricted in the implementation of the modern marketing strategies that are required to reap the rewards of a fan-centric model. The findings emphasised the need for senior management of clubs to support these advancements in marketing in order to fully adopt a customer-centric approach. However, this support from senior management is not often granted. This finding supports the other discovery that many clubs have confused, short-term strategies due to the lack of a clear vision, mission and direction, which the whole club fully understands and supports. It was expressed that most clubs are unwilling

to invest in educating their staff around the philosophy of the club, which highlights the lack of a structured, long-term vision.

Given the huge increases in revenues over the past few years it is remarkable that many clubs still fail to invest in adequate marketing strategies and technologies in order to further engage with their fan base. Whilst the bigger Premier League clubs, such as Manchester City, Liverpool and Arsenal, have invested heavily in internal resources, this study implies an approach focused on customer loyalty and long-term association is still rare amongst smaller Premier League and Football League clubs. This is further supported by some interviewees' comments that clubs prefer to spend any surplus money on the first team rather than marketing tools.

Opportunities clearly exist for all clubs, regardless of their size, to improve match day experience and build sustainable and profitable relationships with fans. This study reveals that more clubs need to recognise the commercial gains that can be reaped from adopting an ethos that puts the fans at the very heart of the clubs' business strategy, which places long-term, sustainable and profitable relationships above winning.

6. Conclusion

It can be recommended, from these research findings, that in order to adopt a customer-centric approach that aims to create long-term sustainable and profitable relationships, clubs must be willing to invest in CRM and social media strategies. In the fight to win consumers' leisure time, organisations that are properly equipped with tools allowing them to segment and target their customers on an individual basis are better placed to build customer loyalty and long-term relationships. Football clubs can no longer ignore the need for more targeted and engaging marketing strategies. It must also be recommended that a clear vision, mission and direction is developed and shared with the entire club staff so that the identity, philosophy and brand is understood by everyone involved from senior management to match day staff. Without this shared understanding, the inconsistent communications from the club will restrict the growth and extension of the brand.

A key recommendation from this research in the context of social media is to ensure that engagement is prioritised above presence since it is the creative, engaging, exclusive and relevant content which builds loyalty, advocacy and interaction amongst fans. Engagement must also be regular and not sparse in order to create a large, strong audience. Importantly, social media allows fans to gain access and insight into his/her beloved club, players and fellow fans and, importantly, it provides clubs with a platform for consultation. Direct interaction with his/her club increases loyalty and, therefore, every effort should be made to interact with fans via social media as much as possible. Understandably, not every tweet from a fan can be answered, however, with more investment into resources clubs would have the ability to interact on a regular basis which would lead to increased loyalty and long-term association and, in turn, maximise profits.

For football clubs to truly utilise the potential that engaging with fans can bring, the evident fear of social media and correspondence with fans has to be confronted. Social recommendation and word-of-mouth is salient in modern marketing and social has become ever present in the way content is written and circulated. It is no longer enough to simply broadcast messages to an audience, so clubs must find a way to leverage their online communities and empower their fans to help build their own

social presence. Allowing fans to create content for the website, match day programmes and social channels shows a clubs' willingness to talk and listen to fans, which not only helps the club understand more about their fans but also develops stronger, long-term relationships with them, providing a stable route for growth.

Though it is clear that winning trophies and on-pitch performance are important in clubs' development, this research argues that a strategy based exclusively on winning is not the optimal way to ensure that profits are generated on a regular and sustainable basis. Since winning is only possible for a select few every season, a strategy that places the fan at the centre of the club will prove beneficial to most clubs at all levels in the long term. Those clubs which place CRM as an overriding philosophy throughout the organisation and look to develop social media platforms effectively as part of a CRM strategy are best placed to improve their understanding of fans and adapt their marketing and sales strategies accordingly. This study has highlighted that a fear and unwillingness to invest off the pitch amongst senior level management has hamstrung clubs' opportunities to maximise profits. It is evident that an inbuilt conservatism exists at the top of many clubs, which provides a critical barrier to overcome if they are to grow into sustainable and profitable businesses.

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