The purpose of this study is to examine the role of social media as marketing tools in professional team sport organizations. Focusing on the English Premier League football club Liverpool FC, an exploratory case study design using one-to-one interviews with the club’s senior social media managers was adopted. The findings highlight the need for integration of all media channels of the club in order to allow for a more targeted and engaging approach towards its fans, and suggests that further development of social media strategies has potential to deliver increased commercial gains both in the short and in the long term. However, given the peculiar nature of sports fandom, a major issue for social media managers is to find the appropriate balance between content that increases fan interaction and engagement and content that deals with purely commercial purposes.
Introduction

During recent years, a new set of online tools began to attract millions of users worldwide. Social media and their tremendous worldwide proliferation turned the online environment into the most prominent place where consumers meet and exchange information (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011; Keller, 2009; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2010; Ozsoy, 2011), and substantially impacted their way of thinking, acting and communicating (Wallace, Wilson & Miloch, 2011). Facebook –perhaps the most popular member of the social media family– announced on October 2012 that it passed the one billion mark of subscribed users, and in June of 2014 reported over 1.32 billion active users (Facebook, 2015). Social media are powerful mediums that offer several marketing opportunities to businesses, and companies from various economic sectors have integrated social media into their business model (Constantinides, Romero & Boria-Miguel, 2008).

Nowadays, football (soccer) has evolved to a business sector of its own. The latest report into football finance shows that the cumulative revenue of the “big five” European leagues (the top-tier football leagues of England, Spain, Germany, Italy, and France) for the 2013–2014 season grew 15 percent, to €11.3 billion (Deloitte, 2015). The English Premier League (EPL) alone accounted for €3.26 billion. Football clubs have strong fan bases, which contribute to their success through brand support and commercial transactions. Thus, football in particular is ideally positioned to use social media in order to reach fans (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Wallace et al., 2011), to disseminate sports-related news (Hambrick et al., 2010; Ozsoy, 2011), and to establish and foster an interactive and long-term relationship (Ballouli, 2010; Wallace et al., 2011; Williams & Chinn, 2010).

All major European football clubs maintain their presence on Facebook (Socialbakers, 2014), while football-related content is the single major driver in the growth of online discussion (Stoll, 2014). However, one of the main challenges of professional football clubs nowadays is to monetise the high number of online followers and online interactions (Nicholson, 2014). Today, given the financial controls being implemented by UEFA’s Financial Fair Play legislation, the significance of developing long-term profitability is more compelling than ever. Thus, football clubs need to rethink their marketing strategies altogether in order to remain relevant and maintain their customer base.

Research to date has mainly focused on the use of Facebook and Twitter by athletes and organizations as communication tools (Hambrick et al., 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). Others have examined the use of Facebook as a brand management tool in college athletics (Wallace et al., 2011), or the use of Twitter as a fan engagement tool of professional football clubs (Allison, 2013). Finally, the study of McCarthy et al. (2014) provided an understanding of the is-
issues sport organizations must face as they seek to promote their brand online. This study extends the current literature by examining why and how a professional football club uses Facebook as part of its overall marketing strategy.

**Literature Review**

**Social Media as Marketing Tools**

Social media encompass a wide range of online tools including blogs and microblogs, discussion boards, and social networking websites (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Filo et al. (2015, p.167) defined social media as “new media technologies facilitating interactivity and co-creation that allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between organizations and individuals.” Facebook is perhaps the most prominent exemplar of the social media family and has become extremely popular amongst brands and individuals alike. Facebook has long passed the one billion mark of active users (Facebook, 2015), with over 85,000 brands using this platform (Socialbakers, 2014). Facebook is particularly prominent amongst sport teams and athletes; EPL clubs, for instance, add together over 130 million Facebook fans and are amongst the most popular clubs in the world in terms of online followers (SocialBakers, 2014).

The proliferation of social media tools has significantly affected the way people communicate and get informed (Filo et al., 2015). According to Drury (2008), while marketing with traditional media was about delivering a message, marketing with social media is a two-way process of building a relationship and having a conversation with the audience; that is, social media can play two different –yet interrelated– roles when implementing the marketing communication strategy of an organization. Firstly, social media, similar to traditional communication techniques such as promotion or advertising, enable organisations to talk to their customers via online platforms such as social networks (such as Facebook), microblogging (such as Twitter), video sharing (such as YouTube), and many more. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, social media offer increased interaction, communication, and collaboration between organisations and individuals. While this is comparable to the traditional word-of-mouth communication, its magnitude through social media makes it a unique form of marketing communications (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Understanding the capabilities of social media allows businesses and brands to reap significant benefits in both monetary and non-monetary terms (Taker, 2012). The ability to directly communicate with consumers alters perceptions about the given product (Kwak, Kim, & Zimmerman, 2010) and influences vari-
ous aspects of consumer behaviour, such as awareness, opinions, and purchase behaviour (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). One of the major challenges marketers face is converting their customers into fans and advocates. However, this is not the case in sport: sport fans are more passionate than ordinary consumers (Richelieu, 2004), become loyal at an early age, and rarely change their loyalty in order to support a competitor team (Beech & Chadwick, 2007). Through attending games and purchasing team-related merchandise, fans are a major stream of revenues for the sport club. Moreover, without fans there would be no demand for televising matches, which would subsequently affect the value of broadcasting rights and sponsorship value (Ginesta, 2013).

Thus, team sport organisations need to use social media to encourage fan interactions and increase engagement with the sport product as well as with the team in general. For Bradley (2013), fan engagement is the process by which fans’ deep love for their club is reciprocated, and when delivered consistently, increases a supporter’s emotional loyalty to his or her club. Geographical barriers of traditional media outlets do not apply to social media tools, and hence engagement with fans can be established in a worldwide basis. Cova B. and Cova V. (2002) suggested that social media have become the perfect toolset for brands to collaborate with their most loyal consumers and co-produce “linking value” (that is, value that is jointly created by the brand and its consumers) for the brand, which in the professional sport industry is the club itself. In other words, while traditional marketing communications allowed companies to control any marketing information related to them, the power in today’s media landscape is held by the consumers (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). However, marketing managers need to find ways to harness such power for the benefit of the organisation (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Whilst managers do not have direct control over the conversations held between consumers, they do have the ability to influence and shape these discussions in a way that is consistent with the organisation’s mission and goals. This is a major challenge particularly for big sport clubs as they expand their brand into international markets. Clubs need to find the right balance between core brand values shared with domestic fans and financial benefits expected by overseas moves. Although it is unlikely that fans will change allegiance, it is clear that clubs need to better understand their fan base in order to convert them into long-term, loyal customers.

Method

This study adopted an exploratory approach, based on a single case study design. Case study research is common in football-related marketing studies (Mc-
Carthy et al., 2014; Tapp, 2004; Tapp & Clowes, 2002) and is suited to evaluating the ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions of exploratory research in under-investigated areas (Yin, 2009).

Given football’s worldwide reputation, it was considered that a football club with a worldwide reputation and fan base as well as an extensive use of social media would be more appropriate for the purposes of this study. Accordingly, the top EPL clubs (Arsenal FC, Chelsea FC, Liverpool FC, Manchester City, and Manchester United) were considered as ideal candidates, as they enjoy worldwide visibility and brand awareness (Premier League, 2015), high brand value (Deloitte, 2015), and are successfully implementing social media as part of their communication strategies (Premier League, 2015). Given its relatively low sporting success during the last years, Liverpool FC (LFC) was selected for this study in order to examine how the social media strategy of the club was adapted to deal with such circumstances.

**Data Collection**

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with two senior social media marketing managers of LFC. Semi-structured interviews have been widely used in the sports marketing context (Allison, 2013; McCarthy et al., 2014; Richelieu & Pons, 2006) and provide flexibility to changes both prior to and during the interview, adapting to the flow of the conversation (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Both managers were contacted prior to the interview and were informed about its content. The first interview took place on July 8, 2014 and the second on December 3, 2014; both interviews took place at the club’s headquarters in Liverpool and were recorded with the consent of the interviewees. During the interviews, LFC’s social media managers were asked to comment on the club’s rationale in its use of social media, to describe the club’s social media strategy as well as its integration with the overall marketing strategy, the particular role of Facebook, and the relation between social media and club revenues. While the aim of the interviews was to address the research purpose, interviewees were given the opportunity to openly express their views and thoughts. Through this qualitative research design (Bryman & Bell, 2011), the researcher could gain an overall picture and understanding of the meanings the interviewees attached to marketing issues and social media.

Both interviews were transcribed on the same day they were conducted, and accuracy was confirmed by the interviewees. Thematic analysis was performed on the interview transcripts. Each interview was visited separately in order to identify
emergent themes and concepts related to the research aim. At a second stage, both interview transcripts were revisited in order to allow for common themes to emerge (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Data analysis was completed manually in order to maximise researcher interpretation of the data.

**Results and Discussion**

The next sections elaborate on four key themes that emerged from the interviews with the social media managers: getting closer to fans; engaging fans; monetizing; and dealing with challenges. However, it should be noted that these four thematic labels and their associative meanings should be regarded as tentative and in need of substantiation through further research.

**Getting closer to fans.** LFC’s digital strategy is part of its overall marketing strategy to put fans on the centre of interest and can be summarised as “thinking global, acting local.” LFC recognised that it is a well-known football brand worldwide and that it has to address a multi-million fan base across all continents. Given the huge worldwide dissemination of social media, LFC adopted Facebook very early: it was the second English football club to become active in this platform, as per Manager A, as part of its marketing communications arsenal. This gave the club the opportunity to penetrate foreign markets and establish the awareness of the brand in this platform in such a way that in several Asian countries the online following of the club exceeds the total number of UK-based online followers. However, they key for the club is to increase and maintain the level of engagement of the fans. This view was echoed by both interviewees:

*You need to have a relationship with those [worldwide] fans ... social media is about getting closer to fans and letting fans getting closer to you, it is about having a conversation.* (Manager A)

*We use those platforms because this is where our fans are ... so we are trying to make our fans part of our life, of the life of the club, we are now giving them this opportunity, we are trying to make them have their voice, we don’t only talk at them, we talk to them as well.* (Manager B)

More important, because of its huge worldwide fan base, the club recognised that language as well as cultural differences are inevitable, as is a lack of interaction with fans of foreign countries where the English language has been a barrier. Therefore, LFC aims to provide tailored posts to fans across the world by segment-
ing its fan base either by language or by country (culture). Accordingly, the club has set up several different Facebook accounts in the local language of those countries where the following is high or where the English language is not widespread. While a certain amount of the content posted in the main Facebook account is replicated in those accounts, LFC’s strategy is to offer customer-tailored posts, trying to be as culture- and language-relevant as possible:

*We try to be culture-relevant and to post things which are not insulting the different cultures. So, where language isn’t a barrier, we try to be cultural relevant. Translation is easier but less effective but localised content demonstrates cultural recognition.* (Manager A)

*So for example, we have social media accounts across the world, we try to do something relevant to them, it is not only content in Greek for example, it is relevant content for Greek fans, it is not only translated content … Not all messages which go out on our main [Facebook] account, go also out to other accounts. Just what is relevant for Greece, for Brazil, for Thailand and so on.* (Manager B)

At the same time, Facebook posts, as part of the overall marketing strategy, originate from every department of the club, such as retail, sponsors or public relations; inevitably, the content of the posts reflect this strategy:

*Social media is a product for the entire club, a service that we offer to all the parts of the business … it is for engagement, for our fans, but also to leverage all other departments across the club. So every day we have a fixed agenda of themes coming from different business departments of the club.* (Manager B)

**Engaging fans:** The second key theme is related to the implementation of the strategy through Facebook and the engagement with fans. In a link with tribal literature (Cova B. & Cova V., 2002), the way to drive traffic was to engage fans through their passion for the club. While both interviewees highlighted the lack of a common definition of the term ‘engagement’ in the sport industry in relation to social media, for LFC engagement is defined as increased interactivity between fans and the club’s posts through Facebook’s features. In other words, while the number of online followers (those who “Like” LFC’s Facebook page) is indicative of the awareness of the club’s brand, it is the responses to the posts (that is, those who “Comment” or “Share”) that matter in terms of engagement. In order to maintain engagement, the club undertakes periodic surveys aiming to identify the preferences of its social media followers in terms of communication features (such as pictures, videos, etc.) and content of posts (such as the team, players,
history, sponsors, etc.). The literature suggests that visuals (pictures and videos) have greater capacity for fan involvement and interaction than any other communication type (Clavio & Kian, 2010; McLaren, 2013) and that such offerings enhance the feelings of fun and excitement and shape brand image (Wallace et al., 2011; Williams & Chinn, 2010). The managers confirmed the attractiveness of visuals, while going a step further and constantly analysing the effect of posts on fans in terms of number of comments, clicks on links, or views of videos. What is more, the club does some benchmarking in order to see what other football clubs post on Facebook and how it affects the engagement of fans.

*Facebook is not about having the most fans; the number of followers doesn’t tell the full story, you need to have a relationship with those fans. We do undertake some studies to see what kind of posts generates the most engagement, [To see which] kind of posts are producing the most likes for example, or the most comments, the most interactivity.* (Manager A)

*[We analyse] how many people clicked on a video, how many of them saw the video from start to the end and we constantly look at Barcelona or Real Madrid, or Italian clubs, we try to get ideas from other clubs as well.* (Manager B)

In addition, LFC tries to integrate the messages posted on Facebook with the club’s official television channel, as well as with the club’s official website. There are two reasons for this: first, the website provides a significantly larger space to expand on the message and to offer much more information; secondly, the website is the place where information about the team, its history, its sponsors, and even commercial activities (e-shop) are taking place. Thus, unlike other football clubs who appeared concerned about the lack of engagement through their current website (McCarthy et al., 2014), LFC takes action and aims to increase the number of visitors to its official website, and influence either directly or indirectly the number of purchases made by the visitors. However, LFC’s current customer management system is inadequate to integrate all information regarding preferences, interrelation of online platforms, and overall online customer behaviour. This has implications to the club’s revenues, as explained next.

**Monetising.** There was a common belief between the two managers that a social media strategy should be placed at the heart of the club, and if harnessed appropriately, it can add value to a club. However, both interviewees agreed on the difficulties to establish a clear connection between social media usage and revenue increase, and that when such a connection is established, it cannot be translated into specific tangible benefits. For instance, while the club saw an increase in
its turnover in all countries where a localised Facebook account has been set up, the amount of revenues that can be traced back to this usage can only be implied. This is particularly due to the lack of a customer management system that would integrate fans’ online behaviour and provide a sophisticated analysis to guide the club’s marketing process. Previous research has also found that clubs used such systems for more transactional marketing purposes, as opposed to relationship-building or loyalty, and that they lack resources to gain valuable insight from the data (Allison, 2013; McCarthy et al., 2014).

We see an increase in web traffic, in engagement, we see sales increase in countries such as Thailand and Malaysia, in Australia we had 95,000 people attending our football match. (Manager A)

We don’t have the information to say for instance that each fan is worth such amount for us, we can’t say we have a social media channel and this will increase sales that much, there is no such system in place right now, but we can imply from the information we have, that the channel actually helps leverage sales. (Manager B)

While direct monetisation from social media is not yet expected to be an outcome of clubs’ social media strategies, it was discussed that the future of social media will be heavily linked with sponsors and commercial partners. In fact, LFC sees that posting messages from or about its official sponsors can affect its revenues twofold: at first, in line with the literature, sport fans express higher levels of loyalty towards those companies that financially support their favourite team (Kerr, 2008); more importantly, the expert interviews confirmed that the high worldwide diffusion of Facebook attracts the attention of sponsors and commercial partners, which can be then translated into revenues during the foreseeable future:

We can have some better sponsorship deals in these countries [of Asia and Australia], local partners campaigns perform better when measuring on a click-through rate. (Manager A)

I can say that our sponsors are increasingly more interested in our digital activities. It becomes part of the deal. We offer them some space in our social media channels to advertise their products and it is becoming increasingly important to them to get advertised in our digital channels. (Manager B)

Social media advertising as part of a sponsorship agreement was considered important among LFC’s sports marketers because sponsors nowadays are increas-
ingly concerned with gaining access to content and fans. This underlines the importance of a customer management system for clubs in order to offer key insights into their fans’ interests and purchase behaviour patterns.

**Dealing with challenges:** The first concern of LFC’s managers dealt with how to design an appropriate social media strategy that on the one hand achieves the commercial objectives of the club, and on the other hand meets the expectations of its fan base. As social media platforms are used to serve simultaneously fans and business activities, there is a high risk of losing the interest of fans. This is a common problem for all clubs communicating through social media. Particularly with regard to European professional football clubs, there is a conflict between the role of football clubs as profit-maximising institutions and football clubs as utility-maximising social institutions (Morrow, 2003). As a result, there is a sense of moral ‘ownership’ of the club by its fans, and it has been brought up during the interviews that certain levels of tension between fans and the club can be created in relation to the level and focus of communications about the football brand. Therefore, an appropriate balance must be found between promotional or commercial posts and posts focusing on the team, as the former should not take place at the expense of an opportunity to engage with fans.

*This is a challenge for us because at the one hand, these channels [i.e. Facebook] exist to support commercial activities, but on the other hand we do not want to over-commercialise these channels because they are for fans, for engagement, not to sell things. It is a sensitive topic. So over the next few months we must find ways to do things maybe on separate pages, or using separate themes, so we will have two teams, one looking after fan engagement and another one looking after promotion.* (Manager B)

The second issue raised during the interviews concerned the control of the conversations held in social media settings. It was stated that Besides LFC supporters, rival club supporters often follow LFC on Facebook and take part in online conversations (as much as LFC supporters become followers of rival clubs’ online channels). Such involvement, which is common in the sports context (Price, Farrington, & Hall, 2013) and related to the tribal nature of football support (Tapp & Clowes, 2002), results in negative or even offensive comments about the clubs’ players, coaches, management, or sponsors, and might potentially damage the club’s brand image and ultimately its revenues. This is particularly the case after a non-successful match, where emotions and frustration overflow and comments are made in the heat of the moment. While no particular set of regulations and rules exist regarding how to deal with such concerns, several clubs acknowledge
the problem and pointed out the need to take collective action to mitigate it (Price et al., 2013).

We do not have a profile of our fan base, but we have a sense because of what the fans post and what they comment. There are other fans on our accounts, it is not only Liverpool fans, we also have rival fans following Liverpool as much as Liverpool fans are following other clubs. And there are fans who do not like everything we are doing, especially when the club is not doing well on the pitch, so we must be careful of when and what we post or what they post as well. (Manager B)

Conclusions, Limitations and further Research

The present study examined the use of Facebook by a worldwide professional football brand (LFC), seeking to understand the reasons behind using it, and how such use fits into the overall social media strategy of the club.

Liverpool FC recognised fairly early the advantages offered by social media in communicating and nurturing relationships with its worldwide fan base. It adopted a customer-focused social media strategy that accounts for differences in terms of language or culture regarding its fan base. Such ‘cultural recognition’ seems to be the reason for the huge increase in number of followers, especially in Asian countries, the most promising market according to the interviewees. In addition, Facebook is capable of giving fans a more active role, and therefore fosters the links between fans and the club. As brand exposure and fan engagement increases, the impact on revenues is twofold: directly, by offering an additional outlet to sponsors and commercial partners to promote their products to millions of fans instantly; and indirectly, through the facilitation of two-way communication and the building of long-term relationships with fans, which can be translated into revenues in the long term through increased merchandise and ticket sales.

LFC recognised the need to integrate the information from all media channels (social media, TV, website) in order gain more useful insights into their customers’ profile. However, the research raised the critical issue of the lack of a sophisticated customer management system, which is a key requirement if clubs are to become more customer-focused and develop long-term profitability. Given the financial controls implemented across European football clubs by UEFA’s financial fair play legislation, the significance of long-term profitability (and of particular tools that assist to do so) has become more evident than ever. Nonetheless, LFC’s social media strategy is integrated into the overall marketing strategy of the club, and Facebook’s communication features allow the club to communicate content from different business departments.
The main challenge for LFC – and all sport clubs, for that matter – is to successfully manage the balancing act of fan engagement and commercial activities. Fans, despite acknowledging that the club must operate as a profit-oriented business, generally do not appreciate promotional campaigns or heavy advertisement in social media. Therefore, such posts must be used with caution, as they can discourage or even irritate fans, who see social media communities as ‘their’ space (McCarthy et al., 2014) and such messages as commercial intrusion. In other words, while there are clear financial benefits from engaging with fans, if engagement becomes solely about making money from fans to the detriment of conversation and trust, this only serves to diminish fans’ loyalty, consequently endangering the long-term success of the club.

It can be recommended from this study that those sport clubs that want to survive economically must adopt a customer-centric approach, both internally and externally; that is, information collected from different user platforms must be consistently organised into a customer management system which will be then used to provide tailored content that drives fan engagement and loyalty and expands the value of their brand. For such purposes, it would be very interesting to analyse how fans actually engage with social media posts and how they evaluate LFC’s overall social media presence and approach. In addition, while the study’s results can be transferred to other professional clubs similar to LFC in terms of brand value and fan following, the use of a single case study approach is still problematic for generalisation purposes. Thus, additional research in football clubs from other leagues or countries – or even other types of sport – would offer a significant extension to our knowledge.

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