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Social media, s-commerce and social capital: a netnography of football fans and organisations

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Abstract: Social media channels allow brands to establish meaningful social relations with customers. This paper evaluates the role of social capital in building these online relationships for the benefit of commercial value and s-commerce for brands. Extensive empirical data was collected over a two-year netnography study using the social media channels of a football club in the UK as a vehicle for the study. A blended methods netnography (Fenton and Procter, 2019) was employed that included online participant observation, social network analysis, and semi-structured interviews with football fans and social media managers. The majority of brand social media followers are often found to be lurkers. These are weakly connected, social media followers – listening but not interacting. Finding ways to strengthen social capital with social media followers have significant brand and commercial implications. Positive interactions are critical to building social capital to strengthen and sustain the brand. Social capital can be successfully built and nurtured through engaging content and positive interactions through social media channels.

Keywords: netnography; social capital; social media; s-commerce; lurkers; social network analysis; cyberbalkanisation.

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1 Introduction

Brands around the world have embraced social media as a way to attract fans, build their brand and establish a sense of community. Brands of all sizes around the world maintain a social media presence across multiple platforms, engaging through posts, photos, and updates. This study uses football as the world’s most popular sport in order to explore the role of social capital, brands and engaging global customers. Football clubs have some of the most engaged social media fanbases, making them highly suitable for studies of social media and brands (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018).

The scale of fanbases on social media is visible when evaluating football brands such as Real Madrid, which is the most popular on social media and has a large following: 33 million, 84 million, and 111 million on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, respectively (Football Predictions, 2020). Like most brands, football clubs are seeking to maximise and grow their social media fan base and promote sustained interaction. Boardman et al. (2019) highlight that there has never been a more important time to build engaged audiences using social media. Increasingly, social media channels enable customers to purchase items from brands and branded products, a phenomenon known as s-commerce. Brand building through social media therefore has very important commercial implications (Heinze et al, 2020).

Research has examined social capital and its intersection with sports (Walseth, 2008) as well as social capital and social media (Finkbeiner, 2013). More recently, Fenton et al. (2021) have explored social capital, social media and sport but there remains a gap in the literature when it comes to studying how customers build and maintain social capital with

brands via social media engagement, and the role of lurkers and bridging social capital specifically.

The present paper contributes to both the academic and practitioner understanding of the use of social media channels and content to support the growth and increase the brand connection to weakly connected international customers through the development of social capital. The study also contributes to social capital theory in relation to social media and s-commerce. Previous studies have questioned the potential for digital channels to foster social capital (Putnam, 1995; Bauernschuster et al., 2011; Fenton and Proctor, 2019). The current study therefore contributes to social capital theory and addresses gaps in the literature by answering the research question, how does interaction through social media channels support the growth and development of social capital between brands and their global fan bases? From a practice perspective, one of the participants of this study summed up the relevance of this study to social media managers:

“We want to understand our audience more, why they are following us, where do they live, what do they want to see from us on social media, how do we make sure that they keep following, keep coming back, keep communicating? Once we understand our followers, that’s where the value can be realised for all. We want to have a meaningful relationship with our fans.”

This value also relates to brand building and s-commerce with Baethge (2016) highlighting that this type of social process research is critical for the understanding of s-commerce.

The research question was addressed using a netnography: an online ethnography conducted over a period of two years which included a combination of social network analysis (SNA), interviews and online participant observation. This combination of methods and social media data to understand audiences is also critical for s-commerce research. Boardman et al. (2019) highlighted that SNA is particularly relevant for s-commerce research to understand individuals, sub-groups and social media influencers and Baethge (2016, p.283) highlighted great opportunities for s-commerce and social process research particularly including SNA. Furthermore, Kozinets (2020) highlights the great potential for SNA as part of a netnography to explore the structures and patterns of social media users in a network.

The case study focused on Salford City Football Club (SCFC) in the UK. Although every brand and football club have unique properties, SCFC is typical of an English football club that uses social media to develop a national and international fan base. SCFC’s social media presence and global fan base substantially increased from 2014 under new ownership of the ‘Class of 92’. The new owners included former popular and successful Manchester United players Gary Neville and David Beckham. This takeover and the geographical proximity of SCFC being situated a few miles from Manchester United’s ground created a strong connection between the clubs. The new owners are strongly connected to Manchester United, had a strong social media following themselves and even changed SCFC’s kit to the Manchester United red colour. The methodology section highlights the size of SCFC’s social media following at the time of study and this has continued to grow over time. Understanding how the fan base increased and how the community evolved provides important insight for brands wanting to maximise their social media efforts. Following a review of the relevant literature, we explain in detail the methodology we adopted, and our findings. Our conclusions suggest that creating a

greater understanding of social media fans, building relationships, and interacting with them to build social capital is critical to maximising value to the club through brand building and s-commerce.

2 Literature

We will start by reviewing the social capital concept and outline the different types. Then, we will review the literature on social capital and its intersection with social media communities.

2.1 *Social capital*

To further explore how sports fans interact online and the community they establish, this section focuses on social capital. Definitions of social capital abound. Bourdieu (1977/1998) describes it as the accumulated actual and potential resource to which individuals have access through their membership in groups and connections to networks. Social capital, thus, is the sum of valuable resources that can be obtained through a person's relationships with friends and relatives and the social networks that these relationships form online and offline (Quan-Haase et al. 2017).

Woolcock (2001) distinguished three types of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking. These reflect both the strength of the connection and the trust that exists between people (Helliwell and Putnam, 2004). Helliwell and Putnam (2004, p.1437) described bonding social capital as "links among people who are similar in ethnicity, age, social class, etc." Bridging social capital refers to ties that are weaker than bonding. It has been described as, "distant ties such as loose friendships and workmates" [Woolcock, (2001), p.10]. Bridging social capital creates links between different groups including "links that cut across various lines of social cleavage" [Helliwell and Putnam, (2004), p.1437]. Finally, linking social capital was described by Woolcock (2001, p.13) as reaching out to unlike people in dissimilar situations in order to leverage a wider range of resources than are available within the community. This type of social capital is particularly pertinent to the current study where social media followers of SCFC come from around the globe. Furthermore, linking social capital is an important concept and underexplored.

Linking social capital is generally associated with the weaker ties between people of different backgrounds and cuts across formal institutional boundaries and power bases (Szreter, 2002), levelling the field to some extent. It offers the "capacity to leverage resources, ideas, and information from formal institutions beyond the community" [Woolcock, (2001), p.11]. This type of social capital could be particularly important to brands where fans want to feel closely connected to each other. This makes it particularly important to develop linking social capital among community members.

Hawkins and Maurer (2010) studied the effects of bonding, bridging and linking social capital after a natural disaster. They found that whilst bonding capital was important in the short term, reaching out into wider networks through linking social capital was important for long-term survival. The authors highlight that linking capital is also associated with the development of new ideas, values, and perspectives. Finally, Heinze et al. (2020) stress the need to develop social capital with social media lurkers to grow the brand. Social capital can be fostered through social media and weak ties can potentially be strengthened and interconnected over time.

2.1.1 Online social capital

A long-standing debate exists as to whether social capital is in decline. A central part of the debate focuses on the role of technology and specifically the internet in the decline of social capital (Wellman et al., 2001). Discussing online communities and a general decline in social capital in the USA, Putnam (2000, p.23) writes, “the internet may be part of the solution to our civic problem, or it may exacerbate it.” He suggested that online communities could potentially create an effect called ‘cyberbalkanisation,’ whereby online communities are divided into specialised, fragmented subgroups. According to Putnam (2000), online silos have less scope for diversity and cross-fertilisation than their offline counterparts. He also suggested that online communities could be an important way for declining social capital to be restored depending on whether they develop as open or closed communities. Lin’s (1999) study found that online communities were a significant source of social capital. He stated “we are witnessing a revolutionary rise of social capital, as represented by cyber-networks” [Lin (1999), p.45]. Lin (1999, p.46) argued that online people would engage “in the creation and use of social capital.”

Reflecting on the evolution of social capital and online communities, Kozinets (2015) noted that scholars have been studying online social relations since the birth of the internet in the 1970s. The “early internet environment was viewed as a social environment with leery suspicion and cynicism” [Kozinets (2015), p.26]. He went on to highlight other studies. For example, Valenzuela et al. (2009), found a positive relationship between use of Facebook, social trust and civic engagement. In a later study, Bauernschuster et al. (2014) analysed social capital levels in Facebook communities and found that due to the interactive and social nature of the internet, social capital levels of the people studied had increased; “virtually all estimates in both models and for all social capital measures point in the positive direction” (ibid, p.22). Compared to channels such as television, they found that social media was more interactive, therefore enabling and strengthening social capital rather than depleting it as Putnam (2000) had concluded about television.

Similarly, Pendry and Salvatore (2015) studied forum users and found that their online identification was strongly linked to their overall satisfaction with the forum. Their study found that forum users whose expectations had been exceeded reported higher levels of forum identification, wellbeing and engagement [Pendry and Salvatore, (2015), p.211]. They also found that “online settings that create and support the development of active and interactive communities will realise the greatest social capital benefit” [Pendry and Salvatore, (2015), p.217]. Whilst Lin (1999) and Wellman et al. (2001) and other authors highlight strong evidence that social networks build social capital, Putnam (2000) questions this. Our study builds on previous social capital theory relating to online networks in the context of social media and fans in order to contribute to social capital theory.

Filo et al. (2015) reviewed 70 sports and social media related journal articles and found that many studies did not use a theoretical framework, and only one of the 70 used social capital as a framework. Phua (2012) is the first study of social capital and sports fans on social media, using a survey of sports fans at one university. Phua (2012) recognised the limitations of the study and called for further research on social capital

and sports fans from other contexts, social networks, and sports clubs. Social capital is also fundamental to the development and growth of social media communities (Chi, 2011; Heinze et al., 2013) and is therefore an appropriate lens for this research, contributing to social capital theory and its role in building and maintaining social media communities for the benefit of s-commerce.

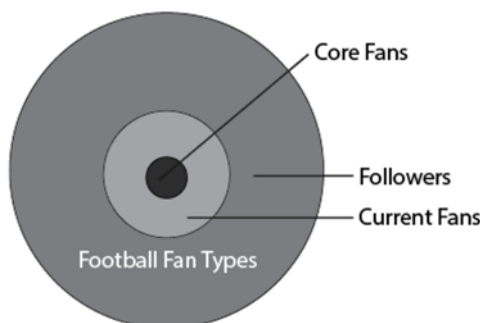
2.2 *Fan types*

In order to better understand audiences, academics and practitioners have segmented audiences to categorise them into different groups (Heinze et al., 2020). A key study of football fan types was undertaken by Kantar (Gibson, 2012) (Figure 1) and was derived from the largest global survey of fans ever undertaken. The findings demonstrated that football club Manchester United had 659 million followers worldwide, an increase of 98% from 333 million in the previous survey in 2007. They were divided into three groups:

- Core fans – Unprompted, stated the club was their favourite team. These are the most strongly connected fans
- Current fans – Those who currently support the club in some capacity but are weeklier connected than core fans
- Followers – Weakest connected people who stated unprompted that the club was one of their favourite teams.

Kantar suggested that followers were easily the most numerous of the three groups and formed the great majority of the total as shown in Figure 1. Many of these global followers were following their favourite football clubs through social media channels.

Figure 1 Football fan types



Manchester United is one of the most followed sports clubs on social media with “73.7 million Facebook followers in 2017, 16.5 million Twitter fans and 20 million Instagram followers” (Herman, 2018). Kantar also reported that the great majority of the 659 million followers are weakly connected. This study focuses on follower fans that are less connected with the club than the core or current fans.

2.3 *Lurkers and internet culture types*

Nielsen (2006) found that internet users could be divided into three categories; creators, contributors and lurkers. The study estimated the proportions of each of these categories as follows:

- Creators – These are approximately 1% of the online community and are the people that visit regularly and actively create content for the community.
- Contributors – Approximately 9% of the community are people that actively post with some regularity.
- Lurkers – The majority, 90% will read, but almost never post or contribute to the group.

Lurkers may be widely dispersed geographically and may be from different/unlike cultures. This group was found by Nielsen to be the majority of members of online communities, making up approximately 90% of total users. Lurkers will read online posts, but almost never post or contribute to the group. Whilst lurkers are usually by far the largest segment of an online group, less is known about this group than the more active participants, which is a particular challenge for researching online communities (Kozinets, 2020). The current paper focuses on lurkers, contributing to the literature and informing practice through recommendations based on a greater understanding developed through the empirical research.

Sun et al. (2014) undertook a literature review of lurkers in online communities. They found that “the top 1% most active users created 73.6% of posts on average, the next 9% of the population accounted for an average of 24.7% of posts, and the remaining 90% of the population posted 1.7% of posts on average” [Sun et al., (2014), p.1]. This is consistent with the rule of internet culture outlined above. Lurking is essentially the normal behaviour of the majority of people online. Nonnecke and Preece (2000, p.1) were among the first researchers to identify the importance of the lesser-connected ‘lurkers’. They stated, “As online groups grow in number and type, understanding lurking is becoming increasingly important.” The authors refuted the idea that lurkers are resource-draining free-riders. They found that lurkers considered themselves to be part of a community and that “lurking was important for getting to know a community” (ibid, p.8). Muller et al. (2009, p.149) supported and built on this point saying that lurkers have sometimes been considered to be a problem; “systems have tended to focus on the creators of information, and to leave the consumers unmeasured – or to dismiss consumers as ‘lurkers’ or ‘free-riders’.” Lurkers are a vital part of an online community, and our research sought to understand more about their relevance and the influence of social capital. Furthermore, Kozinets (2020) highlighted the great opportunity to study lurkers who are less vocal but represent a significant part of a social media community.

2.4 *Social media and fans*

Football clubs and fans at all levels have embraced social media as a key channel for communication and interaction (McCarthy et al., 2014). Brands seek to understand how best to use social media in an era where smartphones have radically changed media consumption (Miah, 2017). This growth has opened up exciting new channels of communication, new communities, and increased global reach for fans, clubs and their

brands (Miah, 2017). Brands globally are using social media to innovate and [attempt to] stay ahead of the competition. Social media channels and digital content opens up new possibilities and global connections for relationships between fans and clubs (Chadwick, 2009).

In Brazil for example, football club Flamengo created an eSports league in 2018 with its own social media channels in order to attract a new and young audience of video gamers to football. In Italy, Juventus signed Cristiano Ronaldo who is the most followed football player in the world (with 75 million followers on Twitter alone). When he moved, his former club, Real Madrid, lost over 1 million Twitter followers in 24 hours (Lewis, 2018). This also illustrates the influence of celebrity players over fan bases (including lurkers) and club value.

However, developing relationships and value in online fan bases is not without its challenges. The majority of social media football fans are ‘followers’ who have little or no active engagement with the club to which they are connected (Fenton and Helleu, 2019; Gibson, 2012). As in other social media channels associated with brands, the majority of followers are often ‘lurkers’ making little or no contribution to the fora to which they are connected (Heinze et al., 2020). We acknowledge however that whilst weakly connected followers are likely to predominantly be associated with lurkers, future research is required in order to empirically test and explore this idea, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

2.4.1 S-commerce and commercial value

Boardman et al (2019) highlight that s-commerce as we know it began in the late 1990s and grew in popularity from 2004. Whilst there are varying definitions of s-commerce, it relates to the combination of social media and commercial activities (Zhang and Benyoucef, 2016).

Having a large number of social media followers is important for brands including sports brands and their partnerships (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). For example, Manchester United considered 2016/2017 to be an unsuccessful season on the pitch when they failed to qualify for the lucrative Champions League. However, through sponsorship and other deals, they were still able to achieve record profits (Hobbs, 2017). Their Chief Financial Officer Cliff Baty said, “There are lots of categories we’ve not entered into yet [which present] opportunities to attract new sponsors and partners. Partnerships are a great way to make money as our brand has so much history to be leveraged.” As Manchester United is one of the most followed clubs on social media and this adds to the club’s value. KPMG undertakes football club valuations and social media popularity and media rights contribute significantly to the brand valuations (Hobbs, 2017).

Furthermore, a UEFA report highlighted by CNN in 2017 elaborated on the connection between social media and an increase in commercial revenue. Fans “can be accessed far better through social media than was ever possible through traditional marketing in the past. It all leads to an increasing concentration of sponsorship and commercial revenue” (Young, 2017). The large numbers of social media followers are attracting a great deal of interest from sponsors; “the very nature of social media as connection platforms render them particularly valuable for consumer interaction and engagement” [Meenaghan (2013), p.387].

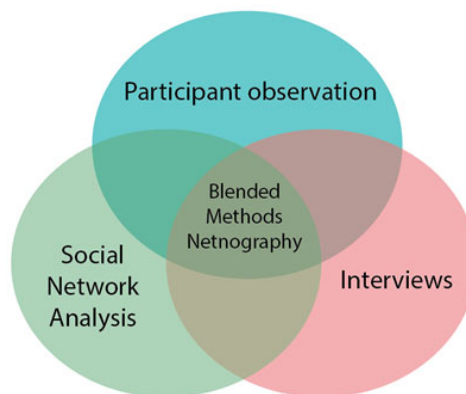
3 Method

Our research employed an interpretive paradigm (Cousins and Robey, 2015; Klein and Myers, 1999) and used netnography. Netnography is ethnography developed for the study of online communities and their dynamic, ephemeral nature by collecting and analysing trace data (Kozinets, 2020). Netnography was originally established by Robert Kozinets in 1995 and can be distinguished from other forms of online ethnography through its own specific set of instructions, guidelines, and body of literature. Kozinets' (2020, p.14) third edition of netnography defines it as a "form of qualitative research that seeks to understand the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practises, networks and systems of social media."

SCFC served as the vehicle for the netnography. The study was conducted at a critical time of change and renewal (2014–2019), which also translated into its social media strategy and fan outreach. Part of the growth included SCFC being promoted to the football league for the first time in their history.

As part of the netnography, we employed a qualitative blended methods approach, for which ethical approval was obtained by the University of Salford, that included online participant observation, interviews and SNA. The three methods allowed for the collection of different perspectives and data types to validate the findings (Fenton and Procter, 2019; Kozinets, 2015).

Figure 2 Research design used in this study included blended qualitative methods as part of a netnography (see online version for colours)



Source: Fenton and Procter (2019)

Kozinets (2020) also stresses the relevance of SNA for netnography to analyse trace data and learn about the structure and topology of the network. Using SNA is particularly relevant in our study because SCFC was undergoing a lot of changes and this is reflected in the evolution of its digital network. In this study, the digital traces are the social media posts of fans and clubs. Bolívar (2015) argues that SNA data can be triangulated with data from other methods in order to capture social phenomena in a complex and dynamic manner. In this study, SNA was also used to identify the boundaries of networks and key actors within those networks, explore weak ties, and finally to also reach out to people for further study through interviews. Furthermore, the SNA was also useful in helping to identify lurkers for additional interviewing. We also conducted interviews with social

media managers to better understand their perspectives. For Kozinets (2020, p.18), the strength of using additional methods like interviews is to “triangulate and contextualise online traces.” Interviewees were selected for their expertise and engagement online, and connection to SCFC. Another central component of netnography is online participant observation, which consisted of observing fan interactions on social media (Kozinets, 2015).

3.1 Coding

The data from the three methods outlined was first collated and then coded using thematic analysis. Kozinets (2020) highlights that coding is one of the most important aspects of netnography because it is the process of giving meaning to the data. Coding of the interview transcripts and participant observation field notes was conducted with the assistance of NVivo (version 11), a commonly used computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). A thematic coding approach was adopted to create keywords and themes. The data was then labelled and placed into categories and sub-categories to create meanings. This enabled the researchers to further break down the themes and relates them together. This approach is often used in interpretive studies and in netnography research (Kozinets, 2015). Two researchers were involved with the analysis to ensure reliability, minimise bias and to help make sense of the rich data. In terms of netnography, Kozinets (2015, p.222) states that using CAQDAS “allows much more flexibility in coding and takes an inductive, bottom-up approach to the analysis of qualitative data.”

In NVivo, folders were created within the software for each of the three methods outlined below. Interviews were transcribed as text and then coded. The same coding system was also used for participant observations and social network diagrams captured as screenshots with comments. All the data could then be coded, searched, and analysed in one place. The primary themes derived from the dataset were: social capital, lurkers, social media commercial value, celebrity and algorithms, with sub-codes created within these larger themes. Some of these were informed by theoretical concepts while others emerged through the process of coding the data (Dey et al., 2018). The qualitative strategy of Miles and Huberman (1994) was adhered to for primary data analysis. This involved taking the data, assigning codes, noting reflections, sorting and shifting to identify themes, isolating patterns to find a small set of generalisations, and then reflecting upon these through the lens of social capital.

3.2 Participant observation

The lead author spent two years as an online participant observer of SCFC. This involved interacting online with SCFC staff and fans locally and globally during the period August 2014 to April 2017. Although 2017 was the official end of this phase of data collection, it presents a relevant snapshot of a key moment in history for SCFC and provides examples of fan interactions that are still relevant to fan behaviour and social capital some years after the event. Participant observation was pivotal to develop a comprehensive netnography and deeper understanding of the community (Kozinets, 2015). Costello et al. (2017) stress that participant observation is an important aspect to gather rich data. Being absorbed in the field but being open and honest about the role of the researcher is also crucial to netnography and Kozinets’ (2015) concept of virtual

verisimilitude or authenticity. The channels selected for this study conformed to Kozinets' (2010) guidelines which state that they need to be relevant, active, interactive, substantial, heterogeneous, and data-rich at the time of study.

Table 1 Channels included in the study

<i>Channels</i>	<i>Website address</i>	<i>Number of fans</i>
Official SCFC Twitter	twitter.com/SalfordCityFC	117,000
SCFC fans forum Twitter	twitter.com/scfcfansforum	500
Official SCFC Facebook	facebook.com/SalfordCityFC/	10,000
SCFC Fans Facebook	facebook.com/groups/SCFCFANS/	2000
Fans forum	salfordcitycfans.proboards.com	200

These official and fan channels were selected because they were the primary online vehicles of communication for fans. Screenshots of key moments, relevant online conversations, and participant observation notes were all stored in a secure document. Identities of fans were anonymised, and appropriate permissions were sought in line with the ethical standards of netnography (Kozinets, 2015).

3.3 SNA

SNA relies on relational data and studies social relations, and the structure and topology of social networks. SNA was used qualitatively in this study to “identify bounded social networks for netnographers to engage with and investigate” [Kozinets, (2015), p.63]. In this way, SNA helps identify the community boundaries. We also relied on SNA to identify influential nodes in a network to create a deeper understanding of the connections and flow of information (Fenton and Procter, 2019). It also provided a complimentary method to the collection of data through online participant observation and interviews. To visualise and examine the network structure and influence of fans, it was important to use a variety of SNA tools – NodeXL, MentionMapp and Followerwonk (Jarman et al., 2014).

SNA was also instrumental in revealing other influential fans as well as weakly connected international fans from countries such as India, Russia, the USA and Africa. Identifying these fans generated new leads and opportunities for additional participant observation and interviews. It is notable that even weakly connected international fans identified through the SNA and social media searches were open to the idea of being interviewed as part of the study.

3.4 Interviews

A reflexive approach to interviews was adopted to better understand the multiple levels of meaning derived from these complex social situations and link to social capital theory to form the interview guide (Alvesson, 2011). In this research there were 35 semi-structured interviews with 25 participants which enabled exploration of the themes and bringing new ideas to light from an inductive perspective. Some of the participants were interviewed more than once to discuss what (if anything) had changed over time. There were three primary phases of interviews at different stages of the study:

- Phase 1 in 2015 – initial interviews
- Phase 2 in 2016 – new and follow-up interviews
- Phase 3 in 2017 – a final set of three verification interviews with social media and football brand managers and experts to validate the findings and triangulate the data across sources.

Table 2 The interview participants in this study

<i>Participant ID</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Number of interviews</i>
P1	Football Social Media Officer, semi-professional	Salford, UK	2
P2	Football Webmaster, semi-professional	Salford, UK	1
P3	Football club Project Manager, semi-professional	Salford, UK	1
P4	Communications professional	Blackburn, UK	1
P5	FA communications official	Manchester, UK	1
P6	Football Fan	Salford, UK	1
P7	Football Fan & social media volunteer	Salford, UK	1
P8	SCFC Follower from Ireland	Ireland	1
P9	SCFC Follower from India	India	3
P10	Head of Communications of a semi-professional football club	Manchester, UK	1
P11	Football journalist and academic	Liverpool, UK	1
P12	Football Fan / forum user	Salford, UK	1
P13	Football Fan and photographer	Salford, UK	1
P14	Football social media officer	Salford, UK	3
P15	Social Media expert and football fan	Manchester, UK	1
P16	Managing Director and social media expert	London, UK	1
P17	Manager of Digital Sports Company	London, UK	1
P18	Football social media officer	Salford, UK	2
P19	SCFC Fan from Venice, Italy	Italy	2
P20	SCFC Follower from Florida, USA	USA	2
P21	SCFC Follower from Russia	Russia	2
P22	Owner of SCFC	Salford, UK	2
P23	New current fan of SCFC	Salford, UK	1
P24	Founder of Digital Sport Company	Derby, UK	1
P25	Social media manager of a Premier League club	Manchester, UK	1

The dates of interviews varied depending on the phase of study and the availability of participants. In some cases, interviews were conducted as conversations with fans through social media direct messaging, which could span over several weeks. The

interviewees were chosen because of their connection to SCFC, football, and social media. All of the participants were football fans who used social media to communicate about football and SCFC. Social media managers used social media and websites as part of either their job role or voluntary role in order to communicate with fans about the official club brand.

To provide multiple perspectives, interviewees were fans based locally as well as internationally. Each participant however was chosen to provide their specific and unique perspective about how football fans use of social media to create community. Table 2 depicts the role of each interviewee, the location of the participant, and the number of interviews that took place.

4 Findings and discussion

Five themes emerged from the data analysis: the impact of social capital, the value of lurkers, the impact of social media influencers (celebrities), social media algorithms and social capital and s-commerce and commercial value.

4.1 *The impact of social capital*

Social media interactions are an extension of the actual game and the ties formed at the game. SCFC fans use Twitter to acknowledge the importance of the interactions with a wide range of community members and to create a digital trace of interactions that occurred offline. For example, a SCFC fan tweets about the experience and this gets further validated through a retweet by the club:

“Love going to @SalfordCityFC been away for a few months, players, players’ family and officials still make time for a quick hello and chat.”

Players and club officials ‘making time’ at the game builds positive connections and social capital with the club, which then translates online. This is expressed online by the fan through a public tweet and retweeted by the club creating a positive image of the club and thereby adding value to the club brand.

Issues around trust and mistrust relating to social capital were seen as a recurrent theme emerging from the participant observation. An example of this can be seen in the following exchange. An international fan joined the SCFC Facebook group to ask about trials. Core fans respond negatively, accusing this person of being a fake account. The international fan responds to say that their comments are painful.

“It’s really painful that someone thinks my profile is fake and is telling me to leave the group. Guys whoever wishes me out of the group just give me a genuine reason and I will quit the group in good faith!!!!”

This case illustrates that there is mistrust of a new fan by the existing core fans. This was eventually diffused as the conversation went on and it became clear that the new fan was genuine.

The importance of relationships was a key factor mentioned by the interviewees with regard to social media. Those relationships were built up both through interaction and getting to know other fans online, and through the social capital built up with connected

celebrities. This is further demonstrated with comments such as this from P9 who described how he became a Manchester United fan from overseas:

“My father is a football fan and always liked to watch England play and especially David Beckham. So ManUtd fascinated him as well. I watched with him too.”

The connection to his family, in this case his father, is also notable. With regard to social capital and social media, P9 also said, “The players seem closer than they are through the Twitter feed.” Through social media fans feel connected to players and club officials and this strengthens the ties.

Fans internationally have been following football clubs from a distance for many years. The ability to follow a club and feel more connected from any location is now very easy through social media. Distant fans may be highly loyal ‘superfans’, or they may have a more passive interest and be weakly tied. If a fan is following a club on social media, it is a connection. This social capital connection can grow as the club grows. Social media means that the individual can interact with the club, other fans, or their friends. This helps to develop a stronger connection with the club.

4.2 *The value of lurkers*

We begin the findings with an SNA graph from Twitter created using NodeXL and Gephi (Figure 3) to examine the Twitter network topology of SCFC.

Figure 3 SNA Twitter diagram of the Twitter network of SCFC showing outlying weakly connected followers and connections to influencers (gnev2) (see online version for colours)

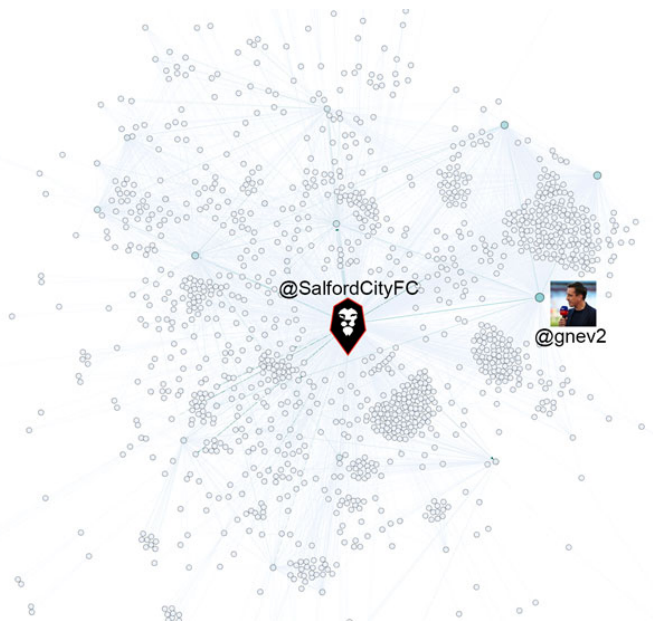


Figure 3 is presented as an example of the macro view of the shape of the SCFC Twitter network and to identify influential accounts and lurkers. Each node of Figure 3 is a

Twitter user who is connected to SCFC to become part of the network. Whilst SNA labels can be difficult to display fully without the use of a software zoom feature, in Figure 3, it is also possible to see influential accounts and their networks such as gnev2 (Gary Neville) and their connection to more weakly connected users. Figure 3 shows that the network is sparsely-connected, and that most Twitter followers are interconnected with a single central node within a few clusters. This is an interesting feature of the network and suggests that fans are as interested in the club as they are in conversations with these central nodes. Sparsely-connected networks are the norm on Twitter (see Yang et al., 2017) and demonstrate that interactions among fans are usually limited.

SCFC had acquired a lot of new fans on social media when the Class of 92 took over the club from 2014. Many of these new and international fans were weakly connected followers as demonstrated in our SNA analysis (see Figure 2) and were using Twitter or, to a lesser extent, Facebook. P1 and P14 commented on this group of fans (Table 2).

Table 3 Interviewees comment on follower fans

P1, Football Social Media Officer	“If they are people showing an interest on this group and willing for the club to do well, but supporting another team, my other employer would call them followers. The majority on Twitter are followers, they are interested, they’re hoping we do well, they’re watching the scores, if they were in the area, they would probably come to the game, they might buy a shirt to add to the collection, but it’s not going to ruin their weekend if the club get beat.”
P14, Football social media officer	“Followers who aren’t local to the club are going to use the digital platforms to engage and connect with the club because that’s their only option. Whereas local fans can engage with the club both offline and online.”
P22, Owner of SCFC	“You can have as many followers as you like on social media, but if you are not talking to them or vice versa, then the value of these numbers can be questioned.”

Lurker fans were found to be important and engaging with them was vital to increasing interactions and growing the fan base. Therefore, building linking social capital with weakly connected lurker fans through social media was increasingly seen as an important commercial strategy by the interviewees. Clubs were striving to nurture their global fan base through social media, which ultimately helped them to increase their commercial revenue. The findings of this study showed that lurkers should be personally addressed to engage them, tweeting at them, getting owners, players and other fans to directly interact with them through social media. P22’s comment highlights that fan engagement on social media is vital. The findings indicate that brands are becoming more proactive in engaging fans and building social capital through social media. It was possible to see core fans helping new fans, who were asking questions such as ‘how much are tickets?’ and ‘where is the ground?’ through social media. This suggests that weak ties are often benefiting from information resources exchanged on social media which are perceived as valuable forms of fan exchange.

Interviews with weakly connected fans highlighted that they value connecting to players and the recognition that these top players are real people:

“Most, if not all fans appreciate the recognition. Interaction with supporters would be a big plus for us to keep coming back. I think the owners can contribute too. By maybe showing a bit of a positive interaction with the supporters.”

The literature concurred with the findings in this study to show that weak ties and linking social capital can be built up between fans globally. Brands should reach out to lurkers, engage the wider audience using social media and leverage the benefits of this wider audience through interaction. We have seen that a large percentage of social media followers are made up of weakly tied lurkers and that these are vital to the success of the online group (Muller et al., 2009; Nonnecke and Preece, 2000). Our findings support prior research (Heinze et al., 2020) concluding that engaging social media lurker followers increases the strength of their connection by growing social capital between the brand and its audience.

4.3 *The impact of social media influencers (celebrities)*

Tweets coming directly from celebrities can carry a powerful message within their networks of followers. A good example can be drawn from SCFC club Gary Neville (@gnev2) advertising match day times and events. He uses his large social media following and the social capital in this network to reach out to fans. Current and new fans responded to these social media posts directly asking questions such as ‘how much are tickets?’ and ‘where is the ground?’. Social capital is particularly influential in deciding whom to support and follow online for international fans. For example, fan P19 described how influential meeting a friendly person at a game was:

“I think connection with [a core fan] was important (he also sent me a match programme when I got back to Italy), he made me feel real passion for non-League football and for your local team.”

P19 also noted the power of the Class of ‘92 abroad,

“I think there are some Italians fan of English football in general who feel connected to Salford City just because they know that has been acquired by Giggs, Neville brothers etc.”

Over time, P19 followed Salford from abroad but had watched the SCFC documentary on YouTube. Gaining an insight into the lives of the players and people associated with the club seemed to increase their connection and social capital to the club. P19 said

“You can know better players and the community of Salford otherwise everything is limited to the football pitch and sometimes is very interesting knowing all the background!!”

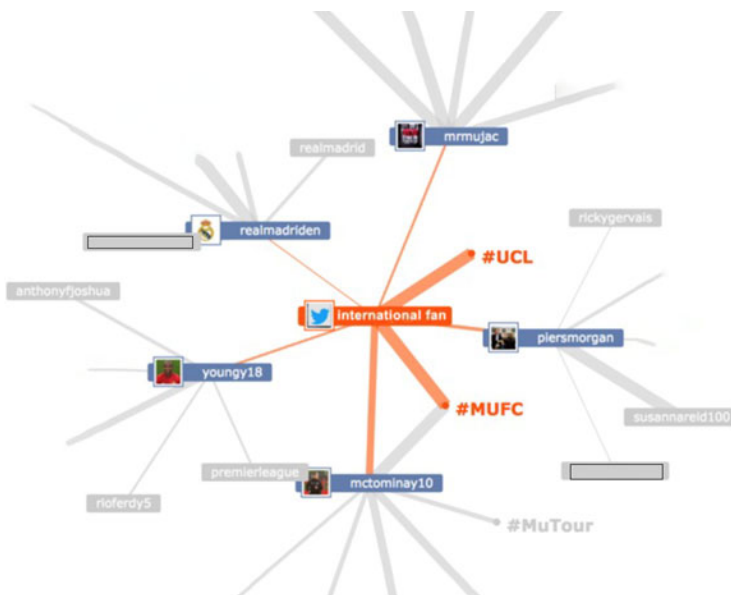
Discussing social media and social capital, P20 agreed, saying that social media “has the potential to strengthen your relationship. Essentially it allows one to make friends w/o [without] physically meeting them.”

This connection to people, players and clubs can be established and strengthened online. Another international fan, P9 commented, “Knowing players personally isn’t possible. So social media does it.” Reinforcing this point, another weakly connected international follower commented on how it made him feel to interact with other fans he didn’t know on social media “I’ve found it appealing and/or exciting that ones you don’t know ‘like’ a positive comment such as how you found me.” This comment also refers to the fact that the researcher found the interviewee through social media, which was also another positive connection to the club for this international fan and increased social capital.

“Constant media updates from the club always let me stay up to date with the Club. Salford FC is owned by our Legends, as you know. I came to know about Salford FC through @ManUtd (Manchester United). They are a Local club which can nurture talent at the grassroots of English football under the guidance of legends like Scholes and Giggs.”

P20 said, “I’m a ManU fan and have been for years.” The other international fans interviewed shared this sentiment. They were following SCFC on social media and supporting Manchester United. It is interesting also to note the @ symbol when the fan refers to @ManUtd. The relationships built up between the online connections to this club now meant that the fan referred to them by their Twitter username as opposed to their official name or other shortened versions of that brand name. In this case, the brand had become interwoven with the Twitter username. Figure 4 used an SNA approach to map out the Twitter network of P9 as an international Manchester United fan. It can be seen that they are connecting with Manchester United players and hashtags, but also other fans, celebrities, football brands and football clubs such as Real Madrid. The names of connected individual have been anonymised.

Figure 4 Mention map SNA diagram of the Twitter interactions of an international SCFC follower who supports Manchester United (see online version for colours)



Note: The thicker lines show more conversations.

The social capital between friends and family and the perceived connection to social media was also considered to be important by those interviewed. Some of the international fans were strongly connected with clubs such as Manchester United by following them through TV and social media. The use of the words ‘our Legends’ demonstrates the social capital bond that the fan felt to the Class of ‘92, which was strengthened through social media. They found SCFC through their connection with @ManUtd. The use of @ManUtd also demonstrates the connection forged through social

media and brand associations. The brand name was fused with the Twitter username in the mind of the fan.

4.4 *Social media algorithms and social capital*

Carah (2017) noted that the more a user's connections discuss a club and create content, the more the social media algorithms deliver, ensuring that club information dominates timelines, increasing the sense of connection to the brand. However, algorithms can also work against brands. Over the course of the study, a second interview with P9, a year after the first, highlighted that their interest had waned, "Not much life on social media. I mean not many of my followers are Salford FC fans. So not many RTs (retweets) come thru to my TL (timeline). I do follow them... but I'm not aware of their schedule most of the time. They need a better image on social media. A bigger image." Because none of P9's Twitter followers or accounts P9 followed were also linked to, and discussing topics related to, SCFC, the Twitter algorithm delivered less about SCFC to their timeline, and this had an impact on their view of how active the club was on Twitter. In Figure 3, we can see P9 interacting with other clubs through Twitter, so therefore less about SCFC was reaching his timeline due to the way Twitter's algorithm works.

Lurkers that did not develop online identification were feeling less satisfied. The lack of social capital developed was therefore having an adverse effect on the visibility of the SCFC brand.

Table 4 Interview quotes regarding social media algorithms and social capital

P25, a social media manager	"If they [the brands] want algorithms to give them what they want, they have to find their place, within the social capital in order to build up and get what they want from the platforms"
P9 (International follower of SCFC)	"I would like to see frequent media updates from Salford city football club on Twitter and Facebook, maybe interaction with supporters would be a big plus for us to keep coming back. I think the owners can contribute too by maybe showing a bit of a positive interaction with the supporters"
P17 (Manager of Digital Sports Company)	"The way the algorithm works is, all systems have some kind of profiling or are working on it. On that basis, it's important from the club's perspective to have all those different types of people engaged because then the more people who are engaged the more it proves to the algorithm that there's a distribution of net worth, that people are relevant and therefore it raises the profile." "Unless you're putting a lot of videos and doing media spin behind it, basically your stuff is never going to get seen. And that's obviously a problem. Connecting those fans up is also a good thing, because the more connected they are on social the more the system recognises the value and then rewards the club appropriately." "The relationships are essential. They call it social media for a reason."
P25, Social media manager of a Premier League club	"Going in there building strong relationships is something that I'm really keen to do. Building individual relationships will be super valuable with people and resonates particularly at a new fan level." "We're going to look this season to be a little bit more inspired by the general election, knocking on doors. So rather than sitting back and expect fans to interact with our output, proactively go in there and give them individual experiences, which harbour a more valuable relationship with the club. Deep down there are numbers and people in there and not just commodities and resource at your disposal as an audience"

Table 4 highlights that P9 was feeling a lack of social capital and social media interactions and content. An increase in social media activity and positive interactions between fans and the SCFC owners, board members and players would strengthen his connection to the club, increasing interest and loyalty. P17 also highlighted the link between digital content and the algorithm and the connections this creates. Social media in this case are tightly bound with the social capital that exists around football clubs as brands. If there is no discussion and no connections, then the social media algorithms show less content.

P25 verified that reaching out to more weakly connected fans directly by commenting on their profile pictures was something that they wanted to do more of, but it would require more staff resource. P25 also outlined their plans to engage more lurkers by reaching out to them. This is a key point. Not only is this social media manager advocating for engagement, but P25 is also recognising the importance of reaching out directly to weakly connected fans. This resonates with the views of the lurker fans interviewed. In summary, the algorithms used have a significant impact in amplifying the effect of social media engagement.

On social media, there are often a large numbers of followers who are weakly tied to the club brand. These represent the wider fan base of weakly connected follower fans that in many cases are not interacting with other fans or the brand. However, with pro-active social media engagement and building relationships between sports clubs and influential people on social media, such as celebrity players, social capital can build and strengthen weaker connections and increase the number of followers (Heinze et al., 2020). This can be aided by social media algorithms (Carah, 2017). As fans interact more with each other and with the club and associated celebrity players, social media algorithms deliver more content (Bucher, 2012). This increased interaction and number of social media followers, ultimately enhances the commercial value of the sports club (Parganas et al., 2017). A lack of social media engagement and failure to engage the weakly-tied followers reduces the potential for increasing commercial value. The impact of social capital on social media engagement was therefore found to be significant in engaging different types of fans including weakly-connected lurkers.

4.5 S-commerce and commercial value

The number of social media followers that a club such as SCFC has is very significant in negotiations for future sponsorship; a fundamental part of contemporary football business (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Parganas et al., 2017). In Draper (2016, p.89), Paul Scholes was critical of this approach, "It's all about sponsorship and money in England these days rather than football, rather than entertainment." It seems that on the one hand the Class of '92 and SCFC aimed to try and get 'back to the heart of the game' but on the other, to meet their ambitions of bringing SCFC to the football league, required commercial deals which are influenced by social media numbers.

The actual cash value of a lurker follower from India, Italy, the USA or Russia to a brand is difficult to estimate. However, as we have seen, a greater number of social media followers can have great value to brands such as football clubs. This also adds value in terms of sponsorship, broadcast rights and value to the brand. Table 5 highlights this.

Table 5 Interview quotes highlighting the role of social media and commercial value

P17 (social media expert)	“[if] they live in the Falklands or far flung or whatever, they’re never going to come to a game. But if you can build a relationship with them, maybe they’ll buy a shirt, maybe they’ll just become part of your audience and if you’ve got the audience, then you have the ability to monetise it through advertising and sponsorship.”
P3 (football club project manager)	“I think they will be massively important if we crack the digital club side of things because in the long run, and again broadcast rights and red tape and everything else, if these people around the world can watch Salford City and can engage with them on the website and through apps then I think they would be massively important.” “I think the digital and the brand, definitely global spread is massively important.”

In the literature review, we discussed s-commerce and how the valuation of football club brands takes into account media rights including popularity on social media. Digital media content is key to this success (McCarthy et al., 2014; Heinze et al., 2020). This ties in with the findings of this research; for example, one interviewee said, “Managed correctly, digital media should be hugely powerful for any football club – no matter how big or small – it just needs to be targeted correctly.” Social media content and interactivity should be used by brands to increase fan bases locally and globally. Building a strong, global social media following was found to be important in order to increase commercial potential including s-commerce and partnership deals which make brands more profitable and financially sustainable.

5 Conclusions

This paper contributes to the debate around the relationship between social media and social capital by specifically examining bridging and linking social capital. We found that while there is a group of core fans, the majority of social media followers are lurkers with bridging and linking ties, with little active engagement. We argue that lurkers are of great value to s-commerce for brands in that they contribute to the discussion. The social media contributions of lurkers are less common but they create a critical mass, and they also create commercial value through their numbers, which creates sponsorship and s-commerce purchase opportunities. The number of followers and particularly the number of lurkers is not static. Given the international reach and prevalence of social media, new followers are constantly joining and leaving. The degree of engagement with the club determines whether they become more actively involved or leave. Social capital, amplified by the algorithms deployed by social media, is critical in this process. Greater social capital therefore enhances the engagement of followers, strengthening the club brand. The influence of celebrities in this process is significant, and this growth can in turn create commercial potential.

Brands should therefore produce the appropriate social media content for the online channels that fans use and develop social capital through interactions with fans of different segments. In this way, clubs will create stronger connections over time to create more engaged and loyal hyper digitalised fans. More strongly connected fans (those with higher centrality and control over the network), can become positive brand advocates and influencers for the club and increase the brand value. Fans interacting and creating digital

content create a positive sign for the social media algorithms, leading to additional interaction and brand exposure.

This paper also contributes to social capital theory and concurs with the studies of Bauernschuster et al. (2011) and Lin (1999) who found that online engagement is important to the growth and maintenance of social capital. Although some evidence of echo chamber effects was found in this study, Putnam's (2000) suggestion that online communities could lead to cyberbalkanisation was found not to be the case. The open nature of social media channels such as Twitter allow for a wider international set of fans to follow and interact with SCFC and other fans. Further, building linking social capital with lurker fans was identified as an important commercial strategy. This enables clubs to nurture their global fan base through social media, which ultimately helps them to drive commercial revenue.

In order to explore the value of social media fans further, future research should test these findings with sectors outside of sports (e.g., the music industry) through longitudinal netnography. Equally, the study could be extended through other methods to understand more about the link between social media followers, social capital types, algorithms and s-commerce. This could also include statistical analysis of SNA and financial or purchasing data and the connection between followers, lurkers, and linking social capital. Finally, the challenges of social media fan interaction, echo chambers, cyberbalkanisation and the darker side of social capital relating to sports fans and social media is under researched, offering fertile ground for future studies.

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