

Community building and fan relationship maintenance of football clubs through social media interaction on non-Match days

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Abstract. This article focuses on social media platforms such as Facebook rather than traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, and radio. Additionally, match day in these articles is defined as a day on which a football club has a league, cup, or relevant friendly match. Because during the season, in general, the same football club has two round time intervals in 7 days or less, the non-match days between two games for this research is not typical, so in this article, the authors will only analyze the non-match days which contains the winter break, international football match days, times between two seasons as well as the special period (such as the league during the lockout due to pandemic).

Keywords: Football clubs, Social Media, Social Media Marketing, Non-match Day, FC Barcelona, Fans relations.

1. Introduction

According to data from Exploding Topics.com [1], which has a similar function to Google Trends, the term “LaLiga” searches increased between July and May, while January was at the lower end of the line, over the past five years. By contrast, June and July were the lowest for the year. This is because June and most time July are non-match days, and clubs are in the winter break in early January. Similarly, football clubs continue to make news on match days by creating influence online through their social media accounts, while this influence declines on non-match days. This essay will explain how to build a football club community and maintain fan relationships through social media interaction on non-match days. Through this survey, we hope to find out what factors affect fan engagement with football clubs on non-match days. How often fans interact on non-match days is important to clubs. Fans' attention on non-game days is a better indicator of whether they really like a club than on game days. Just like the fans in the entertainment industry usually pay attention to their idols. In order to explore the interaction between fans and clubs on non-match days, we use the formula of Socialbakers [2] to calculate the interaction rate of fans on non-match days on some social media platforms.

Until now, no club has studied online marketing strategies using media during non-match days. Instead, they focus more on football game days and offline marketing strategies. This article will focus on La Liga clubs, exploring how FC Barcelona uses social media to maintain and build fan relationships on non-match days. The authors will summarize attractive content and effective interaction methods for football clubs to release on their social media accounts on non-match days

Our study filled out both non-game day and online surveys. Through this survey, it will be revealed what marketing strategies clubs can use to further maintain and increase fans' attention to them on non-match days. We will also use an online questionnaire survey to understand the public's basic understanding of football. However, the main target audience of our questionnaire is Chinese, and the influence of cultural differences may lead to some errors in the research results.

2. Literature review

2.1 Social media has already become a non-dividable part of everyday life

Social media has become an essential part of everyday life. Many people cannot live without their electronic devices, which is more specifically their social media platforms. According to the digital 2022 [3]: Global Overview Report released by Datareportal together with We are social and Hootsuite, over half of the population are global social media users, and the percentage is constantly growing, with a 10% increase last year (2021). The length of social media use has climbed to 2 hours and 27 minutes for the average user per day. Whatsapp, Instagram, and Facebook occupied the top three rank: favorite social media platforms, each having nearly 15% of supporters. Twitter and TikTok, are also having more than 3% supporters. Meanwhile, all five social media platforms that have been mentioned above, have Android users spending over 10 hours per month except for Twitter (5.1 hours per month). All of these indicate that social media marketing strategies are becoming much more important for companies and clubs that we mentioned in this passage, as it contains a large audience. Having suitable online advertisement would allow clubs to build strong fans relationship efficiently and easily; more importantly, it could also mean more potential spectators may be transferred into fans with this type of marketing strategy. If clubs do not adapt to this new trend, it will not take long to get out of the market.

To build a healthy relationship with viewers, marketing strategies are important. Thus, understanding the connection between followers and publishers is necessary. According to Simmons' [4] marketing in the internet environment model, establishing brand awareness is dependent on the four elements, which are understanding customers, content, interactivity as well as the interaction between them.

As one of the four elements mentioned, the type of content is an important part of marketing strategies. Maderer, Parganas, and Anagnostopoulos [5] divided the content that football clubs released on their social media into two parts when studying how European football clubs use social media. Product-related part includes club success, star players, and head coach, while non-product-related includes management, brand mark, club's history, and tradition, as well as club's culture and values. Many researchers found that some football clubs have noted that their target people may view social media as their private space; it's pressure to take them as a commercial area [5]. Therefore, the publishers should avoid making viewers feel that the content of the release is commercial purposes.

2.2 The difference between game day and non-game day and the reason why they should be traded differently

Non-match days allow clubs to show their strengths and attract fans. Non-game days are also a time for athletes to train and manage injuries. For fans, unlike on game days, non-game day fans can interact with their idols online at most. Non-game days are definitely more boring than game days. Since fans don't have much to do on non-match days, other than occasionally following their team or club via social media, the rest seem to be waiting for match day [6].

Therefore, it is obvious that non-match days require different marketing strategies from match days, and different marketing methods are conducive to responding to different target groups and needs [7]. The club needs to establish a feasible action plan, which should include business objectives, ideal customers, and a plan to reach them. Successful marketing is about building an identifiable, trustworthy brand. Having a clear marketing strategy can avoid wasting energy. It ensures that your budget is planned and allocated efficiently. Each activity aligns with your overall goals and aims to achieve both short-term and long-term results [8].

2.3 Methods of retaining fans and expanding fan groups and methods of distinguishing them in the past.

For clubs, there are two groups of the audience that have to care about, which is spectator and fans [9]. Fans would internalize winning of the team as their own success and externalize losing as the

team's loss. However, if the fans deeply identify themselves as the team's follower, then they may find reasons for the loss of the team [10]. Meanwhile, fan identity can bring physical reactions, and loyal football fans release more cortisol when they watch live football matches [11]. At present, football clubs can use modern technology to promote and build relationship between football teams and fans. For example, different forms such as advertisement, email, and mobile apps can effectively attract the attention of fans.

On social media, targeted advertising can be used to attract new fans and reconnect with existing ones. Without advertising, it will be difficult for club fans to find you, learn about your events, or connect with sports teams. Previously, billboards and newspaper ads were the only way to attract fans, but technology has helped transform advertising. According to the Harvard Business Review, studies have shown that ads that use data from targeted consumers have higher response rates than ads that don't. In addition, using advertised specials and promotions can increase page views and ticket sales, thereby increasing fan interest in the club team [12].

Although, according to the research on ticket sales of Guangzhou Evergrande Taobao FC [13], even if the sports club did not use many advertising methods to expand its popularity, fans' loyalty and team's good records enable them to keep their fans and hold up their ticket sales. Thus, if the team has a good reputation and high consumer satisfaction, the advertisement may not be considered with priority. However, these two factors are initially built by fans' experience with the team, including experience in and out of the stadium. If the club builds positive links with fans consistently, there will be a virtuous circle where positive links between fans and the club will enhance and build together with the marketing of the club.

However, new fans are not interested in what's on TV. Generation Alpha and Generation Z are streaming content. In fact, they like to watch online on new social media and streaming platforms, such as Twitch and others [14]. Therefore, clubs can cooperate with these high-traffic media to promote themselves.

With the help of social media platforms, clubs could build several kinds of links with fans [15]. One of them is digital strategy. With this strategy, fans could communicate as a community, but the difference between this new form with traditional forms of sporting society is it is on the internet. Thus, fans could communicate with global fans in an instant [16]. Another one would be to build a virtual experience economy so that fans could feel like they are at the stadium watching the game while they are just online using the clubs' website and applications. This could also build an online fans community [17].

Medium notes that "there is more and more content to grab the attention of the player, but more recently, a new form of interaction has emerged that puts the player (and their opinions) at the center of the game" [18]. Focus on the content that fans are interested in and improve the satisfaction of fans (fans). Make sure that at all times, in all circumstances, fans can interact smoothly. So, promoting virtual reality and augmented reality is a good way to do that. As technology advances, watching games in virtual reality will become increasingly important. The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated that process. If the experience of watching at home gets better, viewers will be prepared to choose that option. Then, AR and VR technology will advance so quickly that watching a game in a virtual environment will no longer be an exception. For clubs, this means additional revenue and a reliable way to enhance and expand fan engagement [14].

In addition, clubs usually have a long history. For football fans, going back in time to relive old or neglected memories and browsing through old memorabilia can be very nostalgic. People like that experience and history can play an important role in this. Old and young fans can get what they like. Museums serve as hubs for science, history, and sports [14].

2.4 Past investigations and recommendations

Specific measures have been put in place by clubs that have entered social media platforms to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. "The most popular response strategies expressed were a concern, compassion, ingratiation, and support." as reported by Anna Pacak [17] in her research: sports in the

time of coronavirus crisis. It also found that clubs are trying to reduce the negative impact by releasing information about their past success.

Based on relating investigation above, many people have already spent time and money on this kind of online marketing, and there is a lot of experience. For example, when using TikTok to do the advertisement, the length of the video should be controlled within 15 seconds. Meanwhile, the sound should match the video, and humor is a great spice for videos. The language of the content, popular style of video, and editing software are also important [19].

3. Methodology

In this study, researchers choose a variety of data acquisition methods. As for qualitative research, researchers used questionnaires and collected information from football clubs' Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and other social accounts. In terms of quantitative research, researchers use the Socialbakers [2] method to calculate the interaction rate of each tweet or post from football clubs' accounts on non-match days.

It's essential to isolate the target group. For the first the section of Simmons' model, which is understood customers, the researchers hope to make a judgment on this through the questionnaire. The first nine questions of the questionnaire are used to obtain the respondents' knowledge of football: one point for each correct answer in questions 1-3, two points for each correct answer in questions 4-6, and three points for each correct answer in questions 7-9. Finally, the respondents will be divided into three categories. Respondents who scored 0-3 belong to level 1; 4-9 is level 2; 10-18 is level 3. The content part in Simmons' model in this research will also be obtained through the questionnaire about what content football clubs release by social accounts on non-match days is most likely to maintain existing attention and attract new attention. Researchers have referred to Maderer, Parganas, and Anagnostopoulos' [5] way of classifying the content published by the social accounts of the football clubs. In addition, through this questionnaire, researchers can also draw the most effective way for football clubs to interact with their followers via social media.

Researchers used the number of responses to FC Barcelona's Facebook posts on non-match days during the last season (2021-22) to measure the popularity of the content generated during that time. Among them, the elements that measure the number of responses a post gets include like, comment and share. Finally, researchers used the formula from Socialbakers [2] to calculate the interaction rate:

$$\text{Interaction rate (\%)} = \frac{\text{number of fan reactions per post}}{\text{number of total fans}} \times 100$$

Figure 1. Interaction rate calculation

This method has been documented previously as an appropriate technology to measure social media for the sports topic. (e.g., Gibbs et al. [20]; Kassing & Sanderson, [21]; Pegoraro, [22]). In the case that results obtained by this method are consistent with that from the questionnaire, on the one hand, the rationality of the questionnaire design and the accuracy of the results can be proved. On the other hand, it can make the conclusion of this paper more complete.

4. Result

4.1 Social media is an effective way of online marketing.

how much time do you spend on social media per week (doesn't include video games etc.)

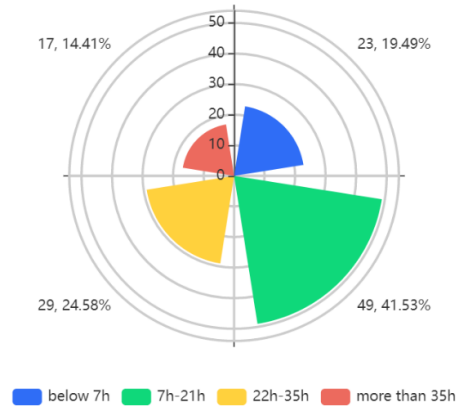


Figure 2. How much time do you spend on social media per week

There is 19.49%, 41.53%, 24.58%, and 14.41% of people using social media for below 7h, 7h-21h, 22-35h, and more than 35h, respectively (Q20 and Q21). The social media platform that they use mostly is Wechat; more than 90% of respondents use it, with TikTok, Weibo, and Red Book following with more than half of the respondent used. Other platforms such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram, Twitter, and others also the countable number of respondents used, even though the number is relatively low for the highest, not having one-fourth of respondent used.

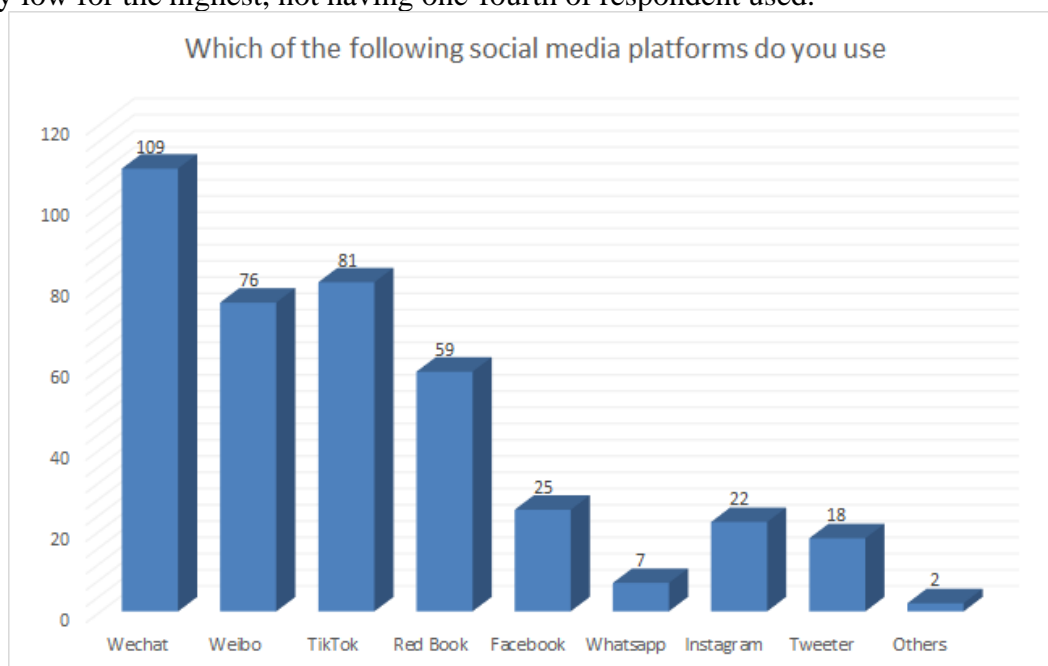


Figure 3. Which of the following social media platforms do you use

Moreover, the correlation of over four-fifths of respondents shows a strong connection between self-identity as fans and whether they follow the social media account of football clubs or players. (Q3 and Q5)

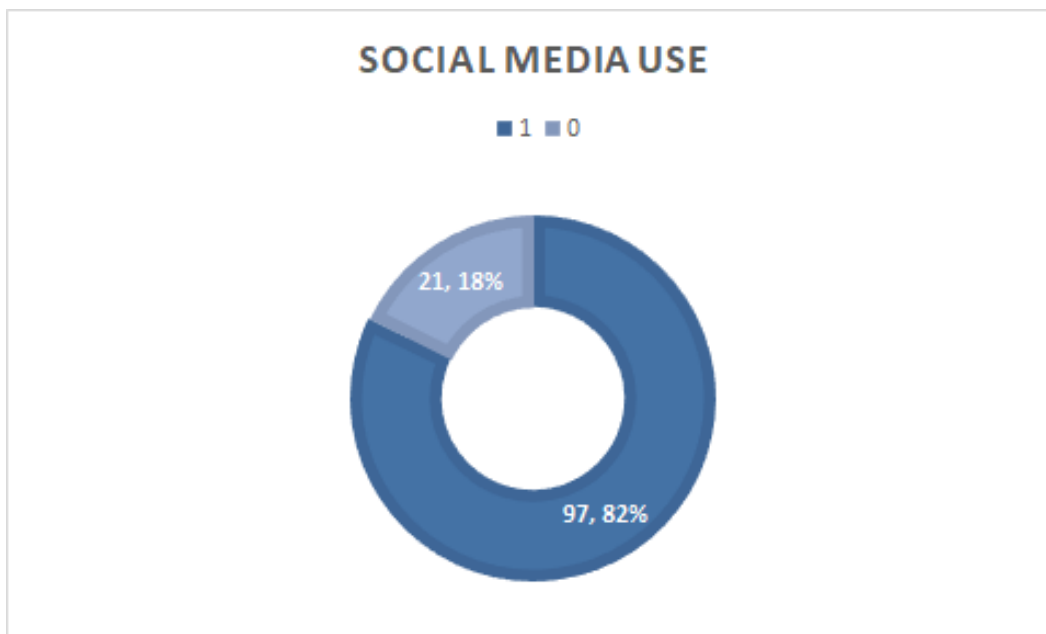


Figure 4. Social media use

4.2 Structure of respondents and valid data

A total of 118 respondents participated in this questionnaire, among which there were 7 invalid data. Data with an incorrect answer to one point question (Q6, Q7, and Q8) but the total score come within 10 to 18 are considered invalid. The results of Q2 showed that among the 111 valid data providers, there were 30 persons (27.03%) who were 17-20 years old, 46 (41.44%) of them were 21-30, 17 (15.32%) of them were 31-40, 13 (11.71%) of them are 41-50, and 5 (4.50%) of them are 51-60. In addition, females accounted for 44.14% (49), and for males the proportion was 55.86% (62).

The result of Q6 to Q14 provides data as follows: in accordance with the methodology mentioned, the number of b who scored 0-3 (level 1) and 4-9 (level 2) is 52, which accounted for 46.85% of the total.

4.3 Most popular type of information

In general, spectators are less focused on almost every kind of content that the clubs released, except for the option "club's attitude towards social issues." Researchers have set a series of content, including "attitude towards social issues," "transfer of players or the club made a new signing," "daily life of the player or coach," "past club honors, game scores or highlights video," "photos of club's next season's jersey," "progress of player contract extension," "player salaries or salary increases/cuts" and change of the club's management" (The order of options are in order of popularity). More than half of the respondents agreed that the first three options would make them pay attention. The focus on no option is less than 18%.

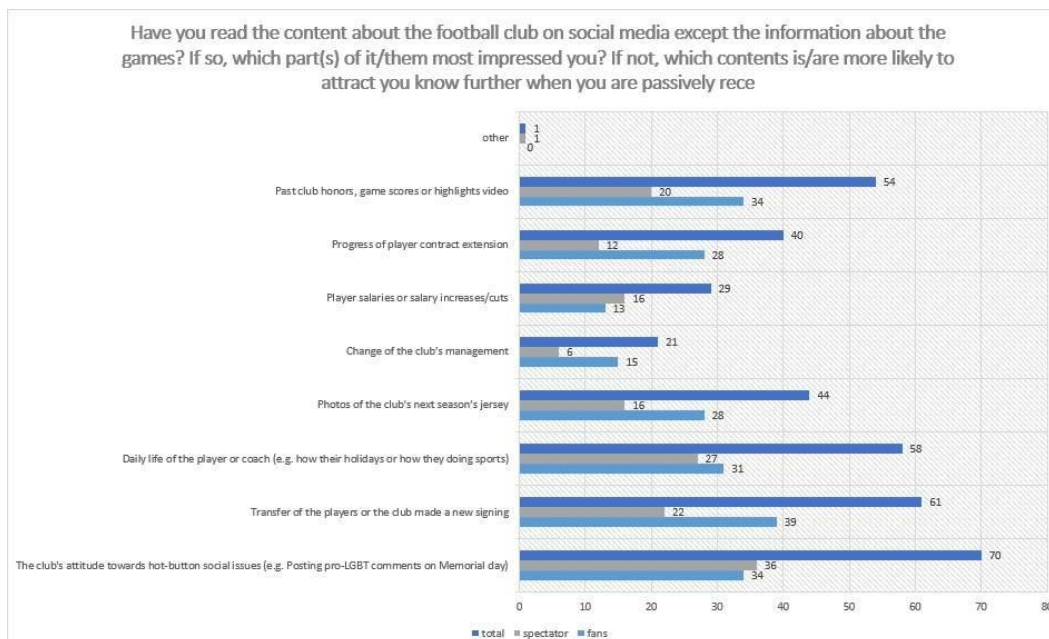


Figure 5. Most popular type of information

4.4 Opportunities for respondents followed the account.

Of the 52 level 1&2 respondents, 42 of them did not follow any of the social accounts of a football club. Eight of them followed their account in order to watch the real-time broadcast of the match or to see the replay of highlights in the first instance, and one of them did so because of the exciting clip of the match. Another one of them followed PSG because Messi transferred there.

According to 59 Level 3 respondents, 13 of them did not follow any football club’s social media. Four of them followed the account because that club is on trend as they got a big win; 15 of them followed the accounts after watching a game online or live; 3 wanted to watch the real-time broadcast of the match or to see the replay of highlights in the first instance; 5 of them desire to know the club's schedule. Besides, five respondents wanted to learn about coaches and players' daily lives outside the game; 2 because of player transfers; 6 because of the star players for specific football clubs; 1 for a player's training video; 3 followed them because they are followed by their friends online or net friends; 1 is interested because his/her child likes that club; 1 of them indicates he does not remember the reason for that.

4.5 Most attractive interactive method

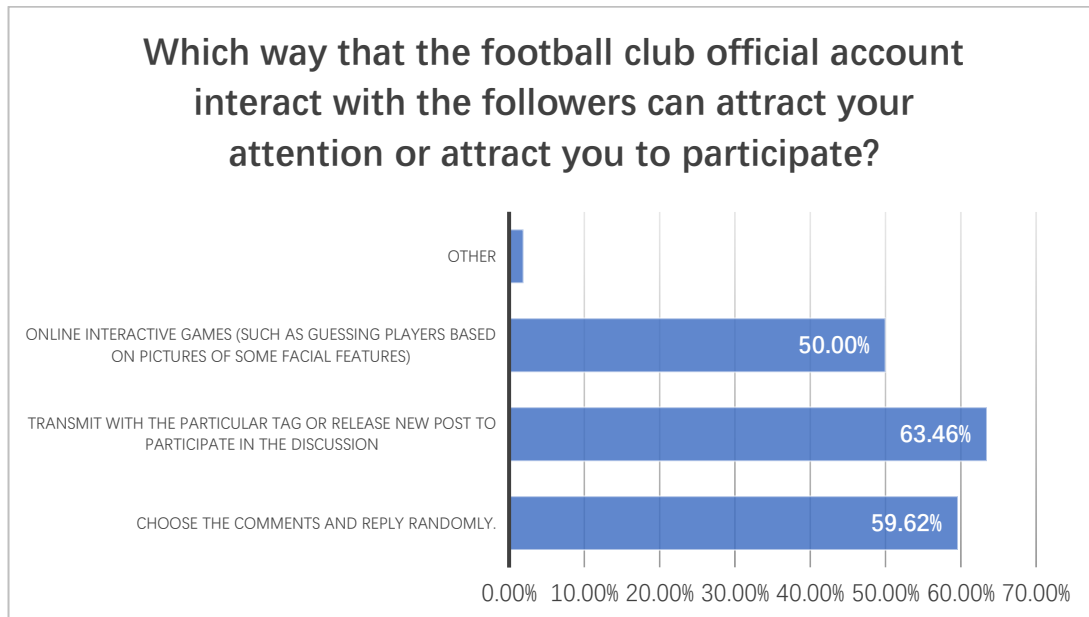


Figure 6. Most attractive interactive method

As for the Q18, which is “Which way that the football club official account interact with the followers can attract your attention or attract you to participate?”, 59.62% of respondents think if football clubs can choose comments and reply randomly on social media, they are more likely to participate; 63.46% of them support “Transmit with the particular tag or release new post to participate in the discussion” is an effective way to attract their attention; 50.00% of them also think “Online interactive games” is attractive. Additionally, the respondent who also chooses others thinks if football clubs could give the tickets as a gift on social media to their followers, it would also be charming.

4.6 Offensive content

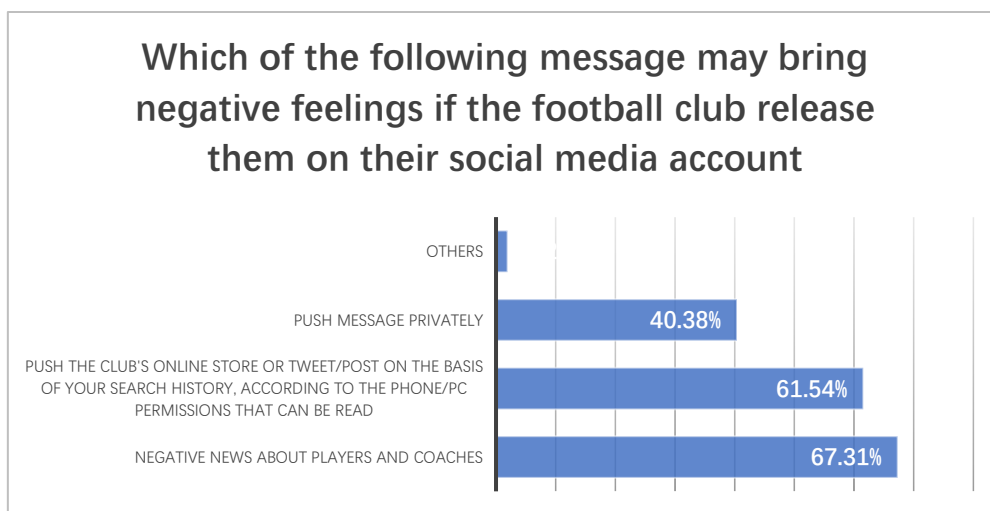


Figure 7. Offensive content

In the question that “Which of the following message may bring negative feelings if the football club release them on their social media In account?”, 67.31% (35) of respondents chose the option that negative news about a player or coach that football club's account send would cause them disgust; 61.54% (32) of them believed that "Push the club's online store or tweet/post on the basis of your search history, According to the phone/PC Permissions that can be read " would cause them disgust, while “Push message privately” would cause aversion is supported by 40.38% (21).

4.7 Interactive rate

According to Socialbakers' [2] formula, the researchers calculated the interaction rate of 50 posts on non-match day from Barcelona's Facebook in the last season, which from 12th December, 2021 to 2nd, January, 2022 and 26th March 2022 to 13th, July.

(1) Totally 36 posts relate with players and coaches, which include coach in the training field photos, players' birthday, video of players training highlights, the new season number of players, live broadcast of players training, rent players to other club and sign new signings, players' performance in the national team. The interaction rate of them fluctuated between 0.064% and 0.414%, with 29 of them between 0.100% and 0.197%. Coach Xavi's photo had the highest interaction rate on the training ground (0.414 percent), while the post about player Sergio Busquets' performance in Spain national football team, its interactive rate up to 0.265%.

(2) There are 4 previews for the new season friendlies, including 2 for Manchester City (0.190% and 0.104%), 1 for inter Miami (0.024%) and 1 for New York RB (0.020%).

(3) There are 10 posts are videos that related to the club's past matches, and the interaction rate fluctuates between 0.124% and 0.377%.

5. Discussion

5.1 Social media marketing and fan identity

The result confirms the literature review's conclusion that social media use has become a large part of people's lives. As figure 2 shown, there are more than 14% of people use social media for more than 35h per week, which is more than 5 hours per day. Excluding the average time that people spend sleeping (using 7 hours here), the amount of time that they spend on social media has accompanied nearly 30% of the rest of the day. Most of the candidates choose the option "7h-21h," which is 1-3 hours of use per day, which is still approximately 6%-18% of the rest of the day. Overall, more than 80% of candidates spend more than 7 hours per week on social media, so the influence of it on people cannot be neglected and can be fairly strong. This confirms the idea that social media have already become an important part of peoples' life, and it could have an enormous impact on them, as the literature review have discussed.

Because social media plays an important role in people's lives, it is necessary for football clubs to attach importance to the operation of network social accounts in order to build links between fans and spectators and clubs to improve long-term profits. Running social media accounts in the right way can help clubs attract attention outside of games.

Although the candidates that responded to this questionnaire is mainly resident of China, it shows that except communication applications such as Wechat, other social media apps that everyone can release message on also account for a lot of people's online social time. Thus, it confirms the result published in the Digital 2022: Global Overview Report discussed in the literature review, and applications such as Whatsapp, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok have a high possibility to account for a very long period of time in people's everyday life.

The correlation between question 3 (Do you consider yourself a big fan of a particular football club or player?) and question 5 (Do you follow a football club or a football player on a social media platform) was analyzed. As both questions have two choices, "YES" or "NO," the result is compared using application Excel's function "exact". In figure 4, number 1 represents the number of candidates who have the identical answer for these two questions, and it accounts for 82%, which indicates that there is a strong connection between fans' social media notability and the sense of identity as a fan.

5.2 Structure of respondents and valid data

Young people are the biggest group using social media. People between the ages of 17 and 35 are more likely to be social network users [23] According to the results of the questionnaire, people who use social media most (17-20 years old and 21-30 years old people) account for 68.47% of the total

number of respondents. Besides, the ratio of males (44.14%) to females (55.86%) is relatively even. Therefore, the structure of respondents is reasonable.

It can be concluded understand customers part in Simmons' Model [4] based on the results of these questions that 46.85% of people need clubs to develop strategies in order to attract their attention, thus increasing the popularity of football clubs' social accounts on non-match days. Therefore, the data provided by these respondents will be mainly analyzed from D to F. Researchers believe that respondents who belong to level 3 are passionate about football, and the social accounts of their favorite football clubs will get their loyalty and attention at all times. Therefore, the data they provide will only be discussed briefly in the following part if necessary.

5.3 Most popular type of information

According to the research, almost every type of information would catch the attention of the public, as shown in figure 5. Even the least chosen choice, except for the option "other," has about one out of five (21/111) people paying attention to this message. Thus, every message published to the public should be carefully managed as all of them would influence the public attitude toward the football club.

Of all kinds of content, there are some that caught more attention. The top four options that people pay attention to overall are: "Attitude toward social issues," "Transfer of players or the club made a new signing," "Daily life of the player or coach," and "Past club honors, game scorers or highlight video," respectively. As a result, the marketers should focus more on these types of content, and they should also be released more often than others.

Comparing loyal fans and spectators, we see the differences between their focus. As figure 5 shown, fans focus most on the "transfer of players or the club made a new signing" compared to the spectators who focuses more on "The club's attitude toward social issues." Putting it into a broader category, fans focus more on what is happening inside the club, while spectators focus more on the role of the club in society.

In general, fans are paying more attention to all types of content, except for "player salaries or salary increases/cuts." This is reasonable as fans consider themselves connect with the club and the team. Clubs' success could be viewed as its own success, and team's loss may also influence its confidence, as the literature review mentioned [10].

5.4 Opportunities for respondents followed the account.

Only ten people in Levels 1&2 follow social accounts. And whether the respondents have been loyal to a team is likely to have little impact on the result or why they followed a particular football club's account, so the data of Level 3 people are also discussed here. The content part of Simmons' Model [4] is discussed below. 80.00% and 58.70% of Level 1&2 and Level 3 followers can be determined to follow the accounts because of the content posted on match days, which proves football clubs should attract more people's attention on non-match days once again. The rest of the reasons refer to contents that are considered possible to post on both match and non-match days. According to the data, among these reasons, the mentioned rate of content related to star players and coaches is the highest, with a probability of 68.42% among Level 3 groups. Therefore, the social accounts should publish more content related to coaches and players, especially star players (such as player transfer, players, and coaches in their daily lives on a non-game days). At the same time, encouraging followers to release content related to the club should not be ignored, which will also be mentioned in 5.5.

5.5 Most attractive interactive method

These covers the interaction part of Simmons' Models [4]. Among the Level 1&2 respondents, 63.46% prefer to post new posts with a tag or retweet the original post, so this is the effective interactive method which need to be considered. On a related note, followers' posts will be seen by their followers, which could bring new attention. 59.62% of the respondents believed that they are glad to comment if can get the reply, which means that after a post was sent out its mission is not

over, football club needs to find positive contents (support the team's comments or reasonable Suggestions) to reply to, which would encourage similar content of comments. "Online Interactive Games" was also chosen by 50.00% of respondents. Unlike the first two options, game designers need to consider the different group of followers. For new fans, especially in Asia, the game of guessing players based on their facial features may be difficult, and guessing players new season number may be more appealing to them.

5.6 Offensive content

The social accounts of football clubs should avoid any behavior that may cause opposition to followers when developing marketing strategies. Although the negative news of players and the coach is more likely to be widely discussed, 67.31% of respondents believe that in the non-match day, the players or the coach cannot through excellent performance in a competition to reverse the views of their followers, these contents may cause followers' negative attitude to the club. Besides, how football club's account pushes their post also should be chosen carefully. According to the mechanics of some social platforms, like Facebook, football club can pay for the push function to non-followed users based on their search history, which seem to increase the likelihood that they will like the post. But more than 60% of people think it violates their privacy in some way and are likely to block football club's accounts as a result. Moreover, pushing message privately is also a controversial method on. Football club should note when followers follow their account that if they do not want to receive the pushing information, they can set up to reject the private message from the account (applicable to Instagram, Twitter and Facebook as well as Sina Weibo).

5.7 Interactive rate

Consistent with the results of the questionnaire, there was a higher interaction rate of post related to players and coaches. It should be added that Xavi, the current Barcelona coach, was a player in FC Barcelona and brought honors to the club, so that post about him has higher interactive rate, which suggests that publishing content about players with "club DNA" is an useful way to increase interaction rates. In addition, the propose of friendly match between Barcelona and Manchester City on 25th August is to fight against with ALS. One of the posts about that released on 23th August had an interaction rate of 1.006%. If the club had promoted its charity value before the start of the new season, it might have attracted more people to interact on non-match days.

6. Conclusion

Matches are important for football clubs' social media accounts to attract attention and keep it engaged, and on non-match days, this attraction diminishes dramatically. Nearly half of social media users are potential followers on non-match days. The questionnaire and interaction rate in this paper suggests that the content related to players and coaches can attract the attention of people or be remembered most, for instance, pictures of the players or coaches who have clubs' DNA, players' performance during the national match day, players training videos or live-streaming before the start of the new season. In addition, support for social activities such as charity-related content has also been widely welcomed. For interaction, clubs can choose to reply to comments, play online games and encourage followers to forward their posts. It is worth noting that negative news is likely to take away the club's image. On the other side of marketing, pushing messages privately and pushing messages based on the search record of Followers is likely to antagonize them.

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