

DURBAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

**THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL IN THE
KWAZULU-NATAL FOOTBALL INDUSTRY**

ASANDA DZELWA

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**THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL IN THE
KWAZULU-NATAL FOOTBALL INDUSTRY**

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ASANDA DZELWA

FEBRUARY 2025

Supervisor (Affiliation): _____ Date 07/02/25

Co-Supervisor(Affiliation) _____ Date: 07/02.25

DECLARATION

I, Asanda Dzelwa, hereby declare that the research reported on this study, unless otherwise indicated, is my original research and it has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university or institution. All the pictures, graphs, tables, data and other written information sourced from other researchers has been referenced accordingly.

I hereby give consent for this dissertation to be made available for inter-library loan, photocopying, and made available to outside interested organisations and students.

07 February 2025

Signature

Date

DEDICATION

“When the time is right, I the Lord, will make it happen”

Isiah 60:22

I firstly want to thank God almighty for His assurance that everything will fall into place in His perfect timing and for encouraging me to trust Him at all times.

I dedicate this thesis to my family for always supporting me. To my friends who encouraged me to keep going every time I felt like giving up, thank you. To the Almighty God, thank you for carrying me through and holding me up every time I battled my anxiety and depression and considered giving up on myself and my studies, I see your goodness and mercy in what you have done for me.

A special dedication to my late grandmother, MaSkhosana Dzelwa and my late little sister, Nomsisi, I will always carry you in my heart. I love and miss you so much. May you continue to rest in eternal peace.

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ABSTRACT

The football industry has over the years revolutionised into a modernised game through social media platforms (Wang, Cheng, and Sun 2021: 102). Social media platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter) have been used globally among soccer stars, fans, and footballing clubs to communicate (Weimar, Holthoff, and Biscacia 2020: 335). Football clubs and marketers are exposed to advanced technology opportunities, transformations, and integration opportunities because of the development of social media platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, LinkedIn etc. (Nairaine 2019: 223). Communication plays an integral role in the sporting industry. Communication is an important element that needs to be incorporated into an organisation's communication strategy. Effective and well-managed communication is an essential component of any organisation.

The aim of this study was to establish how social media is used as a communication tool in the KwaZulu-Natal football industry by three selected teams in building and maintaining healthy relationships with their stakeholders. A mixed research approach was applied consisting of a combination of qualitative and netnography techniques. A sample of 150 social media posts from three different social media platforms of the different teams were analysed and three social media managers of the teams were interviewed. The staff members of the teams were assessed through interview questions and the social media posts were assessed through non-participant observation by the researcher on social media platforms. The software (NVivo version 12) was employed in the data analysis process.

The findings indicated that social media has become part and parcel of everyday life. Social media platforms such as Facebook, X, and Instagram have revolutionised communication, which makes it easier and more efficient for the teams to engage with their stakeholders and gauge their feelings and perception about the team. In the football industry, social media has been adopted by clubs as a tool to communicate and disseminate information, particularly to their fans. Although there may be initial barriers to a sports team's use of social media, research has shown that it can serve as a powerful tool for addressing social issues and fostering communication with fans.

For instance, studies have demonstrated that teams leveraging social media platforms effectively to raise awareness about important social issues, engage with fans on a more personal level, and ultimately strengthen their community presence. McCarthy, Rowley and Keegan (2022: 513) stated that the use of social media as a communication tool by organisations can be a clear example of affiliation marketing. You and Hon (2019: 110) argued that the use of social media consists of gaining access to the individual directly, in real time and through interaction and engagement which helps the organisation to shape the affiliation they seek to establish with the customers to make sharing of information easier. According to Hellsten, Jacobs and Wonneberger (2019: 35), social media platforms are differentiated from other forms of communication because social media encourages interaction and engagement on a large and collective scale.

The study recommended that teams should make it a point to be consistent with their posts on their social media platforms. Another recommendation was that teams must invest in establishing a team that will work on their communication strategy for their social media so that they can engage effectively and actively with their audiences online.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

KZN- KwaZulu-Natal

LGA- Lamontville Golden Arrows

PR- Public Relations

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

This study explored how social media is utilized as a communication tool in the football industry, specifically examining three football teams in KwaZulu-Natal. The aim was to understand how these teams use social media to build and maintain relationships with their stakeholders, particularly fans. The research highlighted that platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram have modernized the industry by enabling real-time interaction and engagement, making communication easier and more efficient. This, in turn, helps the teams strengthen their community presence, foster affiliations with fans, and address social issues. A mixed-method approach was used, combining qualitative methods of semi-structured interviews with netnography. The researchers analysed a sample of social media posts across various platforms and conducted interviews with social media managers and staff members from the selected teams.

This chapter provided an overview of the different aspects that were covered in this study and provided a structure of the dissertation and the research problem that was explored with relevant data, examples and references.

1.2 Background of the study

The resolution of this study is to research the use of social media in the context of the KwaZulu-Natal football industry. The KZN football industry will be used as a case study. The overall aim of this study was to explore the use of social media as a communication tool in the football industry.

This section includes an overview of the key study variables as a starting point which includes:

- Social media as a communication tool
- Football industry as a brand

- Communication within the football industry
- Communication barriers in the sport industry using social media platforms.

The football industry has over the years evolved into the modern game through social media platforms (Wang, Cheng and Sun 2021: 102). Social media platforms such as Facebook and X have been used globally by sport stars, fans, and footballing clubs to communicate (Weimar, Holthoff and Biscacia 2020: 335).

Football clubs and marketers are exposed to advanced technology opportunities, transformations, and integration opportunities because of the development of social media platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, LinkedIn etc. (Nairaine 2019: 223). Communication plays an integral role in the sporting industry. Communication is an important element that needs to be incorporated in an organisation's communication strategy. Fenton, Keegan and Parry (2023: 313) stated that effective and well-managed communication is an essential component of any organisation. Therefore, it is critical to assess the function of communication tools and their efficiency in sport. Given that it has evolved into a global trend, social media is increasingly considered to have a significant role in society (Fenton, Keegan and Parry 2023: 313). Dhanesh and Duthler (2019: 42) also affirm that although scholars have argued that there has not been enough research in this area, a significant number of studies have examined social media's impact and influence within the sporting industry. Furthermore, authors such as Abeza, O'Reilly and Reid (2013: 56), Stavros *et al.* (2014:98), Williams and Chinn (2010:72), and Witkemper, Lim and Waldburger (2012:102) have researched the contribution that social media platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube can have towards building relationships between organisations and consumers within the sport industry. Football was invented in England in 1863 and is currently played by both genders everywhere in the world, surpassing all other sports in terms of popularity (Price, Wagstaff and Thelwell 2020: 10). Sport popularity has always remained high because of how well covered it is in the media and its large following, but in the past 10 years the connection between football and social media has grown significantly. This has led to the conduct of research that explores the use of social media as a communication tool in the football industry.

Nairaine (2019: 223) stated that previously the use of traditional media such as sport talk on radio, print media, and television coverage meant that fans had few opportunities to communicate with their favourite athletes and teams. This however is changing with the introduction of new media as now fans have access to their favourite sport personalities and there is immediate feedback for both the organisation and their stakeholders. Social media platforms have greatly expanded in reach in recent years and have become a vital digital gathering place for friends, family, and co-workers (Wang and Yang 2020: 104). The increase in the use of and popularity of social media has completely changed the way football organisations communicate with their stakeholders (Fenton, Keegan and Parry 2023: 313).

Social media represents a type of digital communication occurring on online platforms that enables interaction, content creation, and sharing within virtual communities (Frederick, Sanderson and Bass 2016: 285). This form of communication encompasses various formats, such as text, images, videos, audio, stories, posts, and live streams, providing diverse ways to connect and engage (Hutchins and Rowe 2019: 976). Social media has become a significant tool for businesses, facilitating the promotion of products, services, and brand identity. It also allows businesses to inform, entertain, and interact with customers at a substantially lower marketing cost (Anagnostopoulos, Parganas and Chadwick 2018: 2).

According to Fenton, Keegan and Parry (202: 313) social media is a crucial platform for engaging with customers, gathering meaningful insights, and building brand presence. Choosing not to utilize this influential communication channel means missing a valuable opportunity to connect with a broader audience (Eagleman 2013:488). Leveraging social media for business enables companies to craft and disseminate content that raises brand awareness. By consistently posting relevant and compelling content, businesses can enhance their visibility online, potentially generating organic word-of-mouth about their products and services (Armstrong, Delia and Giardina 2014: 145).

Chaffey and Smith (2022: 88) stated that social media offers businesses the advantage of establishing a direct communication channel with their customers, fostering a sense of immediacy and personalization that often surpasses traditional email interactions. Through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X, companies can engage directly with their audience in both private and public settings, promoting relationship-building and social selling. Additionally, social media provides targeted advertising capabilities, allowing businesses to reach specific audiences based on demographic information, interests, and behaviour, ultimately supporting the development of a robust pool of sales leads (Naraine, Hayduk and Doyle 2022: 102).

Over the years the football industry has transformed into a technological game through social media platforms such as Facebook and X that have been used globally among soccer stars, fans, and footballing clubs to communicate (Abeza, O'Reilly, and Seguin, 2019: 80). Thompson, Martin, and Geurin (2018: 235) emphasised that the growth of social media in the football industry and the communication between football teams, players, and fans has evolved as a result of more coverage on social media platforms such as X and Facebook. The change in social media allows interaction and communication which provides two-way communication between fans, football clubs and players. Users of social media who love football can now use social media platforms to look at live scores, check news and receive updates (Kang *et al.* 2019: 40). Achen *et al.* (2020: 358) state that many sport fans are online users and often turn to the internet for sport-related reasons.

Organisations who successfully adopt the internet as a communication strategy to interact with their important stakeholders, such as fans, are perceived to have a competitive advantage in what is thought of as a very crowded market (Wilson, Brubaker and Smith 2019: 43). This study adds to the body of knowledge on sport management and sports communication by providing evidence regarding how football clubs in KwaZulu-Natal communicate on social media and the way they interact with their fans. The study highlights potential directions for future research as well as managerial strategies for enhancing social media communication. Du Plessis (2018: 829) defines communication as a process of creating meaning between two or more people through the expression and interpretation of messages.

Football's connection with social media has transformed fan engagement, allowing teams to communicate directly and instantly with a global audience. Social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter), allow fans to connect with their favourite teams regardless of location, creating a sense of community and loyalty among international supporters (Weimar, Holthoff, and Biscacia 2020). By leveraging these platforms, teams expand their fan base, effectively bridging geographical barriers and fostering fan engagement in real time.

According to Wang, Cheng and Sun (2021: 57) the evolution of the communication process from traditional media like newspapers, radio, and television to the modern social media era of information and communication technologies is the outcome of consecutive developments in the information sector. Communication and social media both play an important role in the football industry. Therefore, it is important to explore social media as a communication tool in the football industry. In the past decade, the interaction between football and social media has grown significantly. Social media use has increased significantly over the past few years, which is why social media is now viewed as normal in modern day life. Fans may now connect with teams and players in new ways thanks to the growth of social media.

Joanna and Zuzanna (2020: 47) stated that social media has become an essential element of sports fandom. Numerous studies have demonstrated that there is typically no engagement between football clubs and fans because the clubs prefer to talk at them rather than interact with them. It is crucial to create a plan for a communication tool that updates and enlightens the key stakeholders on issues that affect them.

1.3 Scope of the study

This research reviewed the relationship, affects, impacts, and outcomes of social media use and engagement with three football clubs in KZN. The study examined the different types of fans and the different types of social media platforms fans and football clubs use to engage and how these social media platforms have changed over time in terms of digital and communication evolution.

1.4 Research aim and objectives

This study aimed to gain deeper insight into the use of social media as a communication tool in the KZN football industry. To achieve this aim, the following objectives were set:

- To identify the most used social media platform in the football industry;
- To assess the role of the current social media platforms used in the KZN football clubs; and
- To identify the communication barriers in the KZN football clubs when using social media.

1.4.1 Research questions

- Which social media platforms are mostly used by the three football clubs?
- What role do social media platforms play as a communication tool in these football clubs?
- Which communication barriers do football clubs experience when using social media as a communication tool?

1.5 Methodology

The study used a combination of qualitative and netnography methods. Data was collected from social media platforms Facebook, X and Instagram which were textually analysed. Bougie and Sekaran (2019: 89) define qualitative as any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of quantification. Sekaran and Bougie (2019: 90) stated that qualitative research can be described as involving descriptive data that is composed of words rather than numbers. Understanding rather than quantifying things is at the heart of qualitative research. Data collected is thereafter analysed using statistical software. Netnography, on the other hand, is the online evolution of ethnography. Defined as the “written account of on-line cyber-culture, informed by the methods of cultural anthropology”. (Kozinets 2019a: 77).

In contrast to techniques like interviews or focus groups, netnography is used to represent a context not complicated by the researcher's presence. It offers the means for retrieving, gathering, and interpreting computer-mediated textual discourse between known, anonymous, or pseudonymous contributors on a public forum such as social media (Kozinets 2020b: 65). Because netnography is a qualitative methodology that tends to depend on the requirement for human presence and personal connections online rather than on participant recollection, the reliability of the research findings is increased.

Since early in the 21st century, social media technology and habits have become firmly ingrained in many people's daily lives. Communities now refer to groups of individuals that communicate online as well as people in a shared physical place due to the rapid growth of social media platforms like Facebook, X, and Instagram (Chambliss and Schutt 2018: 89). Ethnographers are discovering that to fully comprehend how communities' function, they must monitor them online and through other electronically mediated communications. Online communities, like those made up of people who interact in real life, can form their own cultures that serve as points of identification and attachment (Kozinets 2020a: 67). Like real-world communities, researchers can investigate online communities by becoming engrossed in them for an extended length of time.

To satisfy the objectives of this study and to come to reliable and significant conclusions, a netnography approach was suitable for this study. Netnography is fast and enables the investigation of many people at once, and is cost-effective. People are much more likely to provide truthful, unbiased responses in this type of online environment.

The main purpose of this study was to collect information on the use of social media as a communication tool. For this study, the population was fans and staff members belonging to the KZN football clubs participating in the study and any football fans who engage with the football club's social media posts. The target population for this research was limited to fans and staff members of three KZN football clubs. The staff members were interviewed as they were responsible for communicating with the fans

on social media. The size of the population was small as only three KZN football clubs were selected, with one staff member being selected from each of the football clubs to be interviewed. Fans were selected for the sample using purposive sampling, a type of non-probability sampling in which the researcher chooses the participants to be sampled based on the requirement to find subjects who will be most likely to offer acceptable data, in terms of both relevance and depth (Qu, Lamm and Rumble 2017: 80). For this study, posts from fans who openly display their interest in football, football debates and engage with the selected team's content on social media-based fandoms were selected for netnography. The criteria for the selection of the football club staff members were related to their job titles (e.g., social media manager, social media specialist etc.).

This study used two research instruments, namely, semi-structured interview questions and netnography. The questions were focused and brief in order to collect enough reliable data from interviews (Shin *et al.* 2018: 278). Both of these tools offer distinct features and have their own advantages and disadvantages, making them advantageous to the study and the researcher for this reason. The use of both instruments ensured that the results were valid and provided an in-depth view of the phenomenon under investigation.

Russell-Bernard and Ryan (2010, cited in Mgweba 2017: 22) define interviewing as a common practice in society where one person asks questions and answers are provided by the next person and it is the most reactive method in data collection. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from representatives of the football organisations such as the team manager, the public relations practitioner, and the organisation's publicist. Kozinets (2020b: 72) Stated that when conducting netnography, there are two different forms of data collected: firstly, the written communication that takes place between and among contributors in the online space (which for analysis, are copied and pasted into word processor documents on the researcher's computer) and, secondly, it is the researchers self-authored field notes, in which the researcher describes, reflects upon, and analyses what they were observing during the research process.

For this study, netnography data was collected by retrieving or screen-grabbing information posted by the teams and fans on various social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Direct copy from online community members' social media postings were also collected.

The researcher sought permission from all participants for this study. The researcher communicated with the participants via social media and via email. The researcher requested that they read all the information that the researcher had gathered about them to correct any information they may not approve of.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected.

1.5.1 Thematic

Thematic analysis is the procedure of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. Clarke and Braun (2018: 107) suggest that it is the first qualitative method that should be learned as "... it provides core skills that will be useful for conducting many other kinds of analyses". The goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes, i.e. patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue.

The main research technique that used to study the social media was netnography. Ethnographic research conducted on the internet is referred to as "netnography" (Kozinet 2019: 56). Briefly, to comprehend how these fandoms, manifest themselves and to critically analyse fandom theory, this study paid close attention to fans. For this study, an interview schedule was developed and administered to the social media manager, team manager, public relations practitioner, or the football club's publicist. The results from the interview schedules and data collected on social media platforms were interpreted using thematic analysis. Common themes were identified and analysed from the interviews and the data collected from social media.

A netnographer must inevitably access an online community and its culture from a distance when conducting research on it. The netnographer needs to become a member of the community (i.e., register with the site) to have access to the community.

1.5.2 **Validity and reliability**

Joppe (2000: 598) defines reliability as:

The extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study is referred to as reliability, and if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is reliable.

- Reliability

According to Dorrell *et al.* (2018: 67) reliability refers to the data collection method being consistent and free from measurement error. Reliability in ethnographic research is dependent on the resolution of both external and internal design problems (Kozinets 2020a: 88). External reliability concerns whether independent researchers would find the same phenomena or develop the same constructs in identical or similar settings. Internal reliability pertains to the extent to which other researchers, given a set of previously developed constructs, would align them with data in the same manner as the original researcher did (Kozinets 2019b: 88). For this study pilot interview questions were administered, and questions were amended accordingly before the final administration.

- Validity

Validity is the degree to which a measure assesses what it is intended to measure (Fink 2008, cited in Mgweba 2017: 10). Content validity refers to the extent to which a measure thoroughly and appropriately assesses essential elements and ensures accuracy in specific context (Fink 2008: 4). It is intended to measure (Dorrell *et al.* 2018:67). Literature was consulted and used as a framework for content validity.

Interview questions and netnography were developed using the literature to be reviewed to ensure content validity.

Reliability is related to the consistency and validity of the data so that the research will be accurate. The use of interviews and netnography instruments ensured validity. In ethnographic research qualitative interviews play an integral role. Qualitative interviews aim to understand certain people “on their own terms and how they make meaning of their own lives, experiences, and cognitive processes” (King and Brooks 2017: 98).

As a method, “netnography” can be fast, simple, naturalistic and unobtrusive. In netnography, data comes in two forms: data that the researcher directly copies from the computer-mediated communications of online community members, and data that the researcher writes, such as explanations, observations, and interpretations that require further clarification to be understood.

1.5.3 **Delimitations and limitations**

Limitations are defined as challenges that are out of the researcher’s control.

According to Miles and Scott (2017: 131) delimitations are self-imposed restrictions.

- **Delimitations**

This research focused on how three DSTV Premiership League football clubs based in the province of KZN which use social media platforms as communication tools.

Therefore, this study cannot be generalised to all football clubs in the country.

- **Limitations**

The challenge to this study was the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a lack of engagement or content for data collection on social media since sports activities were suspended, and once sports was back on engagement on social media picked up slowly.

1.6 Thesis framework

This study comprised the following chapters (Table 1.1):

Chapter 1

This chapter presents the background and an introduction to the study. It conveys that the key objective of the study was to critically evaluate social media as an effective communication tool in football.

Chapter 2

This chapter provides a theoretical framework base for the study by discussing the principal theories that frame social media as a communication tool. Literature from previous or other studies are reviewed to support the problem statement.

Chapter 3

This chapter explains the research methodology employed in the study which included qualitative methods of data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4

This chapter presents a discussion of the results of the study. The theory and literature discussed in Chapter 2 is confirmed or challenged in this chapter.

Chapter 5

This chapter summarises the study and presents conclusions and recommendations.

Table 1.1: Structure of the study

Chapter 1: Introduction Brief overview of the study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review Theoretical concepts, models, and examples.
Chapter 3: Methodology Types and methods of research.

Chapter 4: Results

Findings from interviews and netnography observation.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and recommendations

Final conclusions from the research with recommendations.

1.7 Conclusion

The study is briefly introduced in this chapter; and a basic understanding of it is provided. The next chapter focuses on the literature related to the topic, and the theories to be used as a framework for the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The use of social media is more significant now than it has ever been before. Social media is not only used by individuals to share their private lives with their loved ones but now most companies all over the world use social media as a tool to promote their brands and interact with their clients in a systematic manner. Appel *et al.* (2020: 81) stated that social media is a new, improved and a faster medium to spread a brand's message and connect with stakeholders on a personal level. Kunkel *et al.* (2020: 201) define a brand as the combination of information and visuals that make up a sports product. A brand is frequently characterised by slogans, themes, positions, symbols, product features, and a variety of other concrete and abstract qualities. According to Woodcock and Johnson (2019: 321), one of the benefits of having a strong brand includes being able to create an emotional relationship between the brand and fans. Communication is crucial in order to create a product that is stronger than the competition, which can include other sports teams, date nights, picnics, etc. Sports communication and social media have drawn a lot of academic interest, but little research has been conducted on the subject of social media and how it affects sports communication, especially on a club's approach to monitoring social media and fan engagement. A lot of different areas of sports communication such as fan engagement and power relations have been analysed by researchers; sports fans form distinctive and interesting relationships with their favourite sports teams in real life and online (Kim, Morgan and Assaker, 2020: 5). However, research on sport fan engagement indicates there is a lack of engagement from the sports organisations side, particularly in relation to social media (Kim, Morgan and Assaker, 2020: 6).

Based on the research questions for this study, the review of literature will focus on several key areas which relate to the research topic such as communication, sports communication, social media platforms, the role of social media as a communication tool and social media communication barriers.

This chapter discusses the previous studies on the subject of football clubs use of social media. The first section presents an overview on the usage of the current social media platforms. The second section discusses and narrows down the previous studies of football clubs use of social media where it has become evident that the interest of both the football clubs and researchers has increased. The third section will introduce the nature of communication barriers likely to hinder communication between the football clubs and its stakeholders. Lastly, the fourth section provides a brief theoretical framework, relating it to the topic which is the focus of this study.

2.2 Overview

2.2.1 Social media

Social media is a term used to define the new forms of media that allow interactive participation between users. The evolution of media can be divided into two different stages, the broadcast stage and the interactive stage. In the broadcasting stage the interaction and feedback was delayed, indirect and neutral (Manning 2018: 88). Communication between users happened at a slow pace level the use of personal letters, telephone calls etc. (Manning 2018: 110). With the rapid increase of social media and digital technology, interaction has become easier with instant interaction and feedback.

The use of social media is growing rapidly; social media platforms offer their users a quick and easy way to access and develop ways to network with their friends, family and colleagues. Online communities cater to the interests of anyone who wants to use social media for communication and sharing information (Nations 2017: 2).

According to Nations (2017: 5), social media can be defined as a tool that allows users to interact with each other by sending and receiving information using the internet. With social media rapidly influencing how people communicate, social media is now the most used channel of engagement between football clubs and their fans. Fans that cannot attend games at stadiums prefer to go on social media for updates and live match streams creating a direct interaction that never existed before along with

immediate feedback or response. Social media is a new communication tool for every sport organisation. Since its inception, social media has increased in importance across the globe. The average user logs in daily to access a range of content, including that of their favourite football team (Chon and Park 2019: 73). Fans use social media to communicate and connect with their favourite club and other fans of the same football club that they are supporting, using platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Fans also communicate with fans from different clubs on these platforms. “These sites, by their nature, allow the creation and wide transmission of content that fuels interaction, collaboration and community” (Nairaine 2019: 223). For the purpose of this study, only three social media platforms will be covered, namely, Facebook, X and Instagram.

Social media is all about building the organisations brand; brand equity is the value premium a company earns based on a recognisable brand compared with a generically similar product (Hayes 2021:1). By creating memorable, readily recognisable, and superior products with outstanding quality and reliability, companies can build brand equity for their products. It is important for sports organisations to consider how to maintain fan interest and create brand value away from the field of play.

In the past fans were kept engaged by the signing of big players, match activation, player’s appearances at events, etc. Now sports clubs can manage to stay relevant by using social media daily. Hayes (2021: 1) added that if fans remain more engaged due to the efforts of the club’s social media updates, it is building the brand. Research has demonstrated that people tend to engage more with each other when using social media platforms. Sanders and Freberg (2020: 157) stated that people are not addicted to technical gadgets but they are addicted on each other. When people go on the internet, they are not isolating themselves. They are conversing with other people. To further elaborate on the statement above it is clear that people are not disengaging with each other just because they are having less face-to-face interaction, they are engaging in a completely new way. The social media operating system is personal and that idea fits in with what fans want from a social media platform of the brand they relate to because fans are considered as people who demonstrate particular

behaviours such as reading and talking about sports, purchasing sports-related products and watching sports (Na, Kunkel and Doyle 2020: 88).

James (1997: 88) stated that without fans a sport club cannot survive and that the most important questions for sports clubs to ask are “what exactly do fans want to see on the social media platforms of the clubs they are supporting?” and “Are fans interested in seeing updates on their favourite player, discount on the club’s merchandise or pictures from practice?” There are no correct answers for these questions, but they are relevant as the backbone of keeping the fans interested in the club’s social media platforms. It is important for the sport clubs to try new ideas and execute them well to see how the fans respond and how they react to the content the club is posting on their social media platforms.

2.2.2 Communication

The word communication originated from the Latin word “*communis*” which means “common”, suggesting that there must be common understanding of the message between the sender and the recipient with regards to the message being communicated (Lunenberg 2010: 3). Communication is the process of developing meaning as well as understanding it (Wirtz and Zimbres 2018: 34). According to the Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary of Current English (2004, cited in van der Meer 2018: 956), communication is defined as an activity or a process of developing ideas, feelings or providing information to people. Communication can easily be defined as a process of transmitting information from one person to the next or from one place to the next (Witzany 2017: 169). Communication is an activity that human beings do every day for different reasons and in different ways such as calling, blogging, speaking, art, body and hand gestures (Voorveld 2019: 15). Communication as an element that is focused on transmitting and broadcasting information can take place in a private setting or long distance (Van Osch and Steinfield 2018: 647). The internet is a good example of communication taking place over long distance where the process of communication attracts a number of inter- and intra-personal skills such as observing, questioning, speaking and analysing. Above everything else language is the basic level of communication between people.

Communication is how the human kind passes an idea, feeling, knowledge and requests. Awoniyi (1982, cited in Daniel 2016: 176) expressed that the world would be an unruly place without communication and also added that there are at least five elements in the communication process, as demonstrated in Figure 2.1.

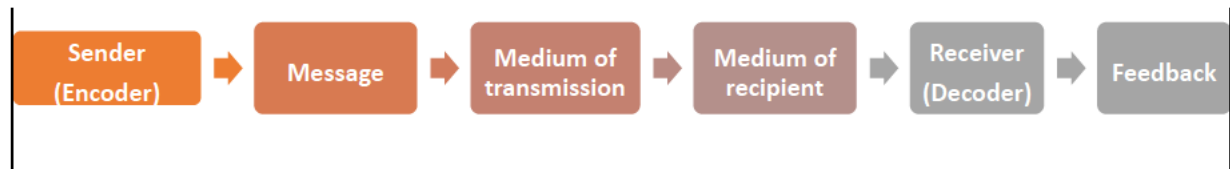


Figure 2.1: Elements of the communication process

Various elements of communication interact for communication take place. The process involves the sender encoding a message using a transmission medium, which the receiver then decodes through their own medium and provides feedback. Communication in the digital age has improved tremendously in recent years as technology has evolved in the past decades (Daniel 2016: 176). Almost all information is now readily available and easily transferred to other electronic channels.

The internet enables communication to be faster and easier through being able to send and receive feedback immediately (Thompson, O'Boyle and Meany 2018: 76). The introduction of the phone made communication easier because through the phone the processing of information and feedback is immediate even when people are geographically distant (Ewing, Men and O'Neil 2019: 110). Technology has changed the world into one global community making communication easier and faster because of the many different channels that make it possible (Dhanesh and Duthler 2019: 42). It is also important to note that whichever channel one chooses, the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are important and they come into use at one point or the other in the process of communication (Thompson, O'Boyle and Meany 2018: 76). Having the skills to communicate well is one off the most important skills a person needs to have as each and every communication process develops some sort of sequence whether it is intended or not (Dhanesh and Duthler 2019: 41). Communication is mostly effective when the communication process results in what the communication intended to achieve, it serves the purpose, and generates the

desired effect (Lemon and Palenchar 2018: 142). Communication is a key factor in the success of any relationship.

Westin (2012: 86) stated that people do not always have direct contact with each other therefore communication is a way to convey messages. Westin (2012: 88) lists the following functions of communication that can make communication more effective:

- **The information function**
Serves to offer knowledge to the people who need it for guidance in their actions.
- **The command and instructive function**
Aims to make people aware of their obligation and provide adequate guidance.
- **The influence and persuasive function**
Encourages individuals to perform or act in a certain behaviour. The messages communicated here are used to convince individuals that their actions can be personally beneficial.
- **The integrative function**
Refers to the fact that the communication message/ idea should help to relate the activities and duties a person has.

For communication to be effective, communicators must be able to express themselves clearly and correctly (Newstrom and Devis 2018: 22). It is also important for communicators to be able to listen carefully to each other and decode the communicated message correctly. Newstrom and Devis (2018: 32) also added that possible barriers to communication include physical barriers, psychological barriers, cultural barriers and language barriers.

2.2.3 Evolution of communication

Men *et al.* (2018: 83) stated that communication occurs when the sender transfers information and the receiver then modifies it through feedback and both communicators benefit from the communication. Communication may be limited as when the information transferred by the sender is perceived by the receiver's system and stored in the receiver's memory. The most challenging aspect in defining an event

as communication lies in distinguishing between signals and cues. This distinction is crucial within the communication process as it directly affects how communication evolves. Communication requires an audience, such as when a sender expects to receive feedback from the receiver of the message. Communication is thought to evolve in one of two ways: either through reciprocal adjustments in the behaviours of both senders and receivers, alternating between them, or through adjustments in the behaviours of senders in response to the perceptual abilities of receivers. A further clarification is that the description of the two process of behaviour modification refers to events at their origin (Watkins 2017: 160).

White and Boatwright (2020: 101) stated that the number of people using social media has more than tripled since 2008. Brubaker *et al.* (2018: 741) views the emergence of the internet as a significant milestone in the history of mass communication, adding that the internet has transformed the way people interact and communicate. Du Plessis (2018: 830) went as far as to call the internet revolutionary. However, Yang, Ye and Wang (2021: 58) stated that some evidence suggest that the popularity of social media especially Facebook may be fading as about 61% of social media users are voluntary taking a break from social media platforms for weeks or more and more than a quarter of the 61% advised that they planned to spend less time on social media in the future. Social media platforms such as Facebook, X and Instagram are the most common forms of social media and comprise a large part of the communication tool. Initially, social media platforms were centred around personal profiles, whereas in their more contemporary form, they are structured as personal platforms where individuals are at the core of their own communities.

Jang and Park (2016: 85) discussed how media evolution theories have been applied to online communication and argued that a theoretical shift has occurred in the social media landscape. The growth of online communication began in 1969 with arguably the first social media platform and ending in 2016 with TikTok as the latest popular social media platform. Koeze and Popper (2020:1) argued that the evolution of social media began by targeting mass audiences and social media platforms now strive to complement rather than immediately compete with other types of social media platforms. Borders (2009: 10) stated that the four theories that help explain media

evolution can be applied to social media development as a communication tool because social media is a relatively new development and a rapidly growing tool in the history of communication.

2.2.4 Football

Football is played in two levels, the national level and domestic level. On the national level only players from that country are allowed to play for the team and at the domestic level a team can have players that are not from that country. Almost all countries across the world have some kind of an official football league. The leagues might not be the same but the South African league format is the same as the European league and other leagues across the world.

In a season each team has to play all the other teams in their league twice, which is once at the team's home stadium and once away from their home stadium (Popp, McEvoy and Watanabe 2017: 64). The winner of the league is determined through the number of points a team earned throughout the season; the teams earn points by winning or drawing in their games. Three points are awarded when a team wins a game and one point is earned when a team draws in a game. The team that collects more points throughout the season wins the league. The South African National Soccer League (NSL), best known as the Premier Soccer League (PSL), is an affiliated member of the South African Football Association (SAFA) and the administrator of professional football in South Africa. The PSL was established in 1996 and the first league trophy was awarded in 1997 to Manning Rangers (Anonymous 2018: 1).

The PSL has assisted the South African football industry by raising the standards, providing the sport with much better media coverage, and generating more revenue through sponsorship deal from brands such as ABSA, Nedbank, DSTV, Telkom and the PSL official suppliers Castle, Coca-Cola and Vodacom. The PSL league also provides opportunities for players to make their mark and catch the attention of international football clubs (Anonymous 2018: 2).

The business of the sports industry directly influences how fans spend their money due to the passion and connection they have with the club; social media has been a valuable strategic asset to improve and confirm this loyalty on the part of fans (Gdovka and Chen 2021: 45) so social media has become a key market communication tool. A lot of work is needed to understand how the use of social media by both the sports club and fans translate into beneficial consumer actions, and information is required on how regular social media use on the part of fans can be advantageous to the strategic goals and growth of the sport club. This information will be valuable for understanding the effective use of social media platforms as communication tools and how these platforms can strengthen and sustain the relationships that clubs build with their fans. Winand *et al.* (2019: 209) stated that social media can be viewed as an essential part of the football clubs marketing plans through fostering an online presence for the football clubs.

Football fans have been encouraged all over the world to interact with each other on social media platforms (Guzmán, Zhang and Ahmed 2021: 72). Researchers have pointed out that even though a lot of football clubs encourage engagement from fans and maintain a social media presence, they are hardly using their full capacity to engage and bond with the fans of the clubs (Kang *et al.* 2019: 37). Vale and Fernandes (2017: 44) are of the view that football clubs are sceptical about being fully engaged in social media and that many football clubs want to keep their social media levels and engagement with their fans at low levels. This has led many researchers to conclude that football clubs are still trying to figure out how to best operate in this evolving digital space (Rowles 2017: 102). This lack of engagement may also be because of uncertainty on how to best utilise social media as a communication tool.

On the other hand, Popp, McEvoy and Watanabe (2017: 64) argue that sports clubs are becoming more and more interested in social media on a more global scale as fans can interact and have access to content from anywhere in the world. Lawrence and Crawford (2018: 45) observe that the millennials as a generation that has had access to social media for all of their adult lives and have now become a substantial proportion of football fans around the world.

When it comes to social media content, the younger generation is more interested in visuals which has led to the evolution of digital content such as videos, live streaming and high resolution pictures (Na, Kunkel and Doyle, 2020: 89). Joanna and Zuzanna (2020: 47) found that the most popular clubs have been very successful in developing and maintaining an engaged community of users through posting of videos, images and other content on Instagram. Metelski and Leszczyński (2022: 205) added that football clubs creating this type of content for their fans has become a way for the fans and the football club to establish and maintain their identity and relationship.

2.2.5 Sports communication

Sports communication is an important aspect of sports clubs because it encourages growth for the sports club. Fans enjoy engaging with their favourite athletes and clubs. According to Luker (2019: 445), effective and direct communication with sports fans is essential for all sports organisations. It is very important to have a clear understanding of how information and communicating through technology works to manage the communication process. Sports clubs need to use advanced and effective means to build and maintain a positive image (Luker 2019: 450). Nowadays sports clubs often use Facebook, X and Instagram to maintain communication with fans.

Fans are an enormous fragment of some clubs; fans are the group of individuals who decide on the success of the club in terms of commercialisation as well as the passion they possess (Martín, Toledo and Palos-Sanchez 2020: 669). Previously engagement in sports meant engaging with fans at the stadiums and through traditional media, but nowadays engagement in sports has a wider scope. Engagement is no longer limited to the face-to-face communication or one-way communication through traditional media platforms. Social media has grown to be a platform that people use to promote and market their business and brands. Football clubs also seek to use social media to promote their clubs as social media has made it easier for clubs to communicate with fans and promote their sponsorship partnerships with other brands. One of the biggest and most important advantages of using social media is that it is easily accessible (Machado *et al.* 2020: 325). It is crucial for sports clubs to make sure that all their supporters have access to the club and can communicate and send messages to the

club with no hassles. Social media has altered how organizations attract and retain customers, while also enabling customers to engage with each other and with the organization directly (Radford 2019: 2).

In the age of social media, media fragmentation increases the likelihood that customers will not make purchase decisions based on classic purchase channels but rather by relying on firm-sponsored marketing; social media is where consumers are more likely to learn about products and services of interest to them (Radford 2019: 12). According to Felix, Rauschnabel and Hinsch (2017: 119), marketing experts have identified the main benefits of social media as increased brand exposure (awareness) and traffic growth. Marketers have been focusing their marketing tools and budgets on digital advertising and social media as more and more customers spend their free time on the internet and on social media. According to Crammond *et al.* (2018: 305), the use of social media as a marketing tool is reported to increase sales in some cases, while no increase is reported by others. It is therefore important for marketers to understand how social media's effectiveness changes over time in shorter time periods (e.g., monthly or weekly) so they can promptly respond to undesirable outcomes and decide how to allocate marketing resources enhancing the overall performance of the firm.

Billions of people love sports and showcase their eagerness by acting as both supporters and fans. The rapid increase and implementation of social media is providing fans with authorised access to the leagues, teams and athletes and also proving teams and athletes the ability to communicate more effectively with fans (Martín, Toledo and Palos-Sanchez 2020: 669). Sports is a huge integral part of society and no sports in the world has achieved a greater following than football. The rate of adoption of social media by fans is increasing (Lawrence and Crawford 2018: 182). The way people access and consume sports has evolved as a result of the rapid development, advancement, and use of communication technology. Marketing plays a crucial role in retaining customers and creating loyalty, organising and conducting promotions and campaigns periodically, with the goal of acquiring more customers. The variety of the different media channels make it easier for fans to follow sports or teams even if they are not located geographically close to them, and through access

to the different social media platforms fans are able to access match updates, score updates and league news through traditional and digital media. Lawrence and Crawford (2018: 190) point out that people, businesses and organisations of any size encounter few barriers when adopting social media as a communication tool, and it costs close to nothing to set up an account on social media. The nature of social media is interactive which provides the possibility of impacting brand recognition and sales. There are different types of social media platforms including blogs, microblogs, wikis etc. For the sake of this study, social media posted on X, Instagram and Facebook will be examined and analysed.

2.2.6 Social media communication

The term 'social media' can be defined as the use of web-based and mobile technologies to initiate interactive communication on the internet between social media users (Lipschultz 2020: 22). Social media is a platform that allows the creation and sharing of user generated content. Social media interactions have influenced the way organisations, communities and individuals communicate as social media takes on many different forms such as blogs, magazines, podcasts, video, pictures etc. When we talk about social media, normally what comes into mind is Facebook and X, however, in reality, social media is more than that as social media refers to the different methods through which we can communicate with other people (Tussey 2018: 162). Over the years the nature of communication has undergone a considerable change and it is still changing. Communication messages are now shorter and more frequent; when people were still using letters to communicate, the response was not immediate (Lipschultz 2020: 22). The use of instant messages has allowed the interaction between users to be immediate, the length of messages is shorter and the manner in which people interact with each other is more conversational (Tussey 2018: 89). Online communication tools have proven to have the potential to increase the awareness of users about issues that are happening around the world. For example, X offers updates on the trend list of things that are most talked about around the world.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram and YouTube have over the years become online meeting spaces where users such as colleagues, fans or friends can engage and express themselves (Vann, Bruns and Harrington 2019: 68). These social media platforms offer different ways for users to keep in touch with communities which they already belong to in real life. Social media has also made it easier for people who are socially awkward and would not normally engage in a conversation with other people in real life to find online communities that they can belong to (Vann, Bruns and Harrington 2019: 70). The engagement that takes place on social media is around shared interest between users. The reason why people favour this type of platform is because of the engagement that takes place on social media both socially and professionally. Levin (2008, cited in Huang 2019: 66) emphasised that engagement is likely to occur between users who share similar interest and background and went on to say that shared interest in the topic often initiates word-of-mouth conversations. The rapid rise of social media led to the birth of social networking (Zhang and Sun 2019: 395). These platforms allow users to connect with each other by creating personal profiles which allow them to connect with their friends and family through sending messages, posting and commenting, etc. (Woodcook and Jonson 2019: 321). The whole idea of using social media comes from the ability of users to present themselves and their interest to other users with the same interest. The usage of social media platforms brings outcomes such as information sharing, community building and collaboration between users (Woodcook and Jonson 2019: 321).

Due to the way social media has risen over the years, it has made a significant impact on methods of communication (Kelso and Gracyalny 2020: 15). Enke and Borchers (2019: 261) state that over the years there has been a shift on how people use social media; nowadays social media is used by individuals and companies to communicate and seek information for both professional and private use. This shift in the use of social media is an opportunity for companies to learn about what their consumers need and also to influence the decisions that consumers make (Enke and Borchers 2019: 261). There are many benefits to companies for using social media as a communication tool as opposed to using traditional communication tools. One of the

benefits is the immediate feedback and engagement from consumers that can assist the company cater for the direct needs of each consumer (Brubaker *et al.* 2018: 741).

During the Covid-19 global pandemic social media proved that it is a very powerful tool with which to obtain and share immediate information, and for companies to communicate internally and externally (Sutton, Renshaw and Butts 2020: 4). Social media as a communication tool enables companies to reach and engage with their target audience (White and Boatwright 2020: 101) A new target audience segment has emerged and this type of audience is not only content with receiving and consuming information but will also make a contribution.

Companies have to determine whether social media is necessary for their brand and the type of audience they communicate with as social media is a proactive communication strategy (White and Boatwright 2020: 105). It is important for a company to be prepared for social media implementation and determine which are the potential barriers that could occur and which resources the company needs for implementation and how to incorporate the social media goals into the general goals of the company (Hayes *et al.* 2020: 22). Men *et al.* (2018: 93) further emphasised that companies can adopt social media as a proactive communication tool only if it can fulfil the company's communication strategic goal. For the social media strategy to be efficient it needs to be established within the general communication strategy and the social media strategy has to be in line with the goals and objectives of the company.

Over the years social media has risen to new heights across the globe with an average user logging in everyday to a wide range of content which includes that of their favourite football club. Fans use social media to communicate and connect with other fans of the football club that they are supporting. The nature of social media platforms such as Facebook, X and Instagram allows for the creating and sharing of content and engagement to take place between users (Sanders and Freberg 2020: 157). For this study, the researcher used Facebook, X and Instagram for the data collection.

- Facebook

According to Isaak and Hanna (2018: 514), Facebook was first created in 2003, called “FaceMash”, where two pictures of fellow students were posted side by side, and Harvard students were asked to vote on which was more attractive. The website was taken down by the university. In 2004, Mark Zuckerberg decided to make a web directory of Harvard students called “The Facebook” which became a huge success and moved from being only opened to Harvard students to being open to ivy league schools, then most American and Canadian universities, and finally to the general public (Isaak and Hanna 2018: 515). Later, in 2004, Facebook was incorporated, then “The” was removed on the website’s name and once Facebook began to develop from a university networking platform to worldwide social media platform, the company decided to change its logo (Lee, Hosanagar and Nair 2018: 105). Featuring a white lowercase font on a blue background, the Facebook logo is relatively simple and straightforward. According to Isai *et al.* (2020: 20) the colour blue was chosen for the logo due to a vision disorder Mark Zuckerberg has called deuteranopia. According to Cherney (2020: 12) a deuteranopia sufferer has difficulty discerning colours. However, someone with deuteranopia can readily distinguish blue from any other colour. The current Facebook logo is almost identical to their first logo, since the original logo has been only slightly modified over the years (Figure 2.2).

Facebook has stuck with their iconic logo despite the fact that the platform itself has undergone a significant amount of change over the years because of its simplicity and recognisability as a stable part of the company (Pegoraro, Scott and Burch 2017: 375).

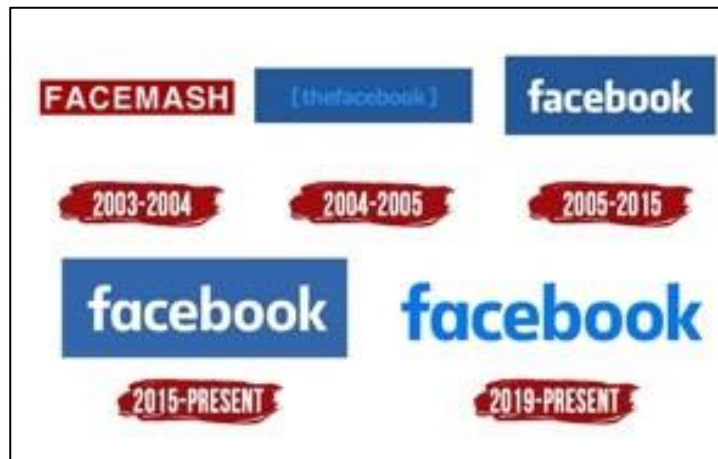


Figure 2.2: Face logos

Source: Logos World (2021: 1)

Unlike many companies, Facebook does not have a problem creating awareness about its brand. As a symbol that has remained unchanged since Facebook was founded, the logo has less significance as a marketing tool. Despite the fact that Facebook does not depend on their logo to the same degree that many other establishments do, the Facebook logo still plays a prominent role in the brand's image and has been doing so for quite some time (Parganas, Anagnostopoulos and Chadwick 2017: 149). Since establishing itself as an online photo directory, the platform has transformed into a global social media platform (Pegoraro, Scott and Burch 2017: 375). As of February 2024, Facebook has over 3.049 billion active users. With this influential platform, people can share updates with each other, post photos, join groups they are interested in and connect with organisations in completely new ways (Osokin 2019: 61). Lee, Hosanagar and Nair (2018: 95) stated that based on an average day, 15% of Facebook users update their own status, 22% comment on other people's posts, 26% 'like' another user's content, and 31% log on to the site multiple times a day (Li *et al.* 2019: 335). Along with that, 92% of people who are on a social networking sites are on Facebook. See Figure 2.3.

These numbers are backing the fact that Facebook is an active and interactive platform that has taken on a worldwide scope.

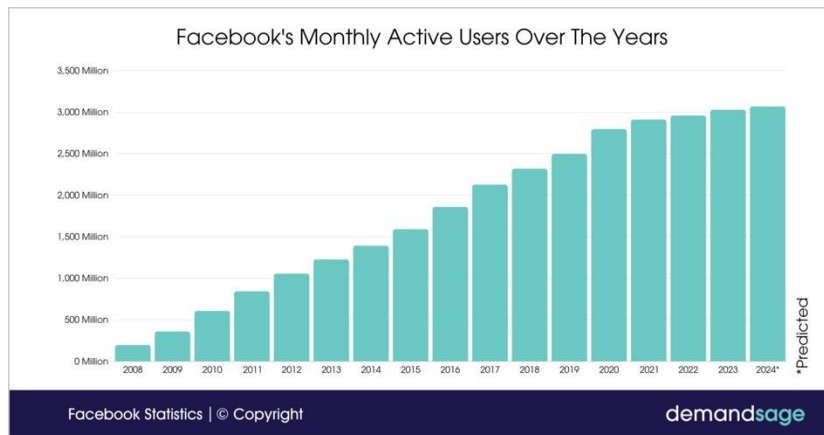


Figure 2.3: Facebook monthly statistics
Source: Shewale (2024:1)

- **X (formerly known as Twitter)**

X is one of the most popular social media platforms, and was created in July 2006. As of February 2024, the site had well over 556 million users. X can be described as a texting via the internet platform and a platform that encourages short, clear and straight to the point updates. X has a micro-blog type of set-up, which requires the maximum use of 280 characters or less which at the beginning the limited to only 140 characters (Li *et al.* 2019: 335). The number of characters was doubled in 2019. With the recent changes on X, 'Verified Accounts' have an unlimited number of characters.

This platform gets information immediately out to the audience which encourages the fast pace of notification on what's happening.

Isaak and Hanna (2018: 56) mentioned that 67% of X users are most likely to buy from brands that they follow and 76% of X users regularly post updates, compared to just 47% in 2010. These numbers are important to the football clubs because they represent the number of loyal fans. These fans do not only follow the club's social media pages, but they also buy game tickets, club merchandise and more. These people are important to the club's brand and show that X is a relevant platform to engage in with fans and followers. See Figures 2.4 and 2.5.



Figure 2.4: Twitter statistics
Source: Logo My Way (2018:1)

X User Statistics

As of 2023, there are **approximately 556 million** active monthly users on X.



That makes it the **14th** most popular social media platform by active monthly users:

Rank	Social Media Platform	Active Monthly Users
1	Facebook	2.96 billion
2	YouTube	2.51 billion
3	WhatsApp	2 billion
4	Instagram	2 billion
5	WeChat	1.31 billion
6	TikTok	1.05 billion

7	Facebook Messenger	931 million
8	Douyin	715 million
9	Telegram	700 million
10	Snapchat	635 million
11	Kuaishou	626 million
12	Sina Weibo	584 million
13	QQ	574 million
14	X	556 million
15	Pinterest	445 million

As of October 2023, X receives around **6.14 billion** visits per month.

Figure 2.5: X user statistics
Source: Duarte (2023:1)

Murphy *et al.* (2019: 622) stated that as fans learn what is happening during live events, X is typically their second and primary screen to follow the action. According to Leonardi and Vaast (2017: 150) data from X around key live entertainment and sports events, there is an average lift in unique visitors of +4.1% whereas other social platforms overall, report no significant shift in traffic. Sports events are more memorable and engaging with X. When X is used as a complementary service to television, users show higher levels of engagement (+31%) and memorability (+35%) than when watching the event exclusively on television (Murphy *et al.* 2019: 622). See Figure 2.6.

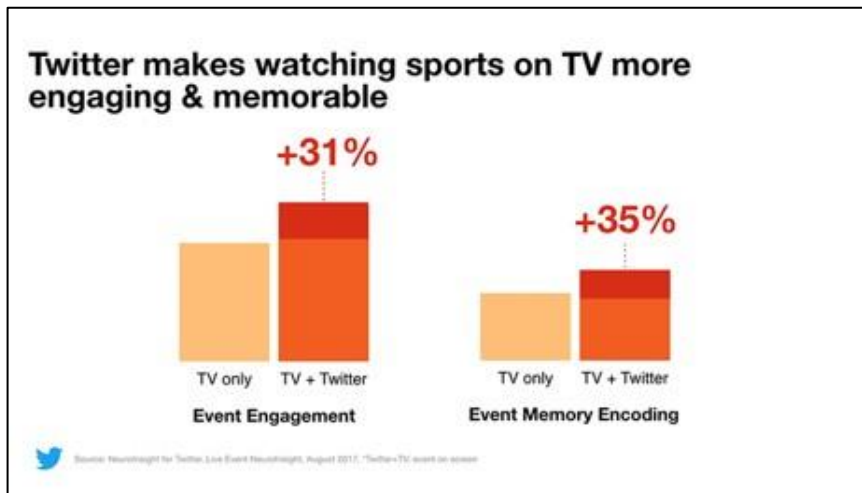


Figure 2.6: X engagement statistics
Source: The pixel.com (2021:1)

Whenever X is the only source for following a sporting event, users also have higher engagement (+60%) and memorability (+59%) compared with traditional TV viewing, reflecting the immersive experience created by curated sports timelines (Murphy *et al.* 2019: 622). X has changed the way fans and brands watch and experience live sports (Leonardi and Vaast 2017: 150).

- **Instagram**

Instagram established in October 2010 is an application which allows users to share their photos and videos with their followers (Huang and Su 2018: 82). According to Zote (2023: 1), Instagram is the sixth most popular social media app worldwide with over 2.35 billion users and with a total number of 2.4 billion monthly active Instagram users, while 500 million+ Instagram users visit at least one business profile daily. Dennis (2014:16) stated that according to Payuk and Zakrimal (2020: 63) Instagram initially offered photo editing and sharing features. Later it introduced the ability to share videos, images, and send direct messages to other users. Instagram users are able to share their content with both national and international followers and users are able to take a 15 second video and 13 artistic filters are available for users to edit their photos (Huang and Su 2018: 90).

According to Payuk and Zakrimal (2020: 63) ever since its inception Instagram has had three logos and there are few individuals who can recall Instagram's first logo, which featured the app's icon, a detailed polaroid camera, flickering over a white background. There was a rainbow stripe going through the centre of the camera's symbol (Figure 2.7). However, the Instagram founder claimed in 2010 that the app was not about taking and publishing Polaroid photos, thus a new logo was created because the previous one did not correspond to the features of the app. Although the company believed the logo designs did not relate to and match the visual identity design of the app because they were a different colour scheme and did not match the designs of the company, the second logo became more well-known and popular to the point where the majority of people believe it is the original Instagram logo (Payuk and Zakrimal 2020: 65).



Figure 2.7: First Instagram logo
Source: Spyre studios (2019: 1)

The business unveiled its third logo in 2016 (Figure 2.8). The public response was negative, and several marketers believed that Instagram had lost its most valuable branding component, the "rainbow" with the new design (Huettermann, Uhrich and Koenigstorfer 2019: 1).

However, Martins and Patrício (2018: 291) added that looking at how graphic designs have evolved over time, flat icons and minimalist designs resembling Instagram have grown in popularity, and most businesses are still rebranding to reach the "minimal and modern aesthetic". Therefore, it can be concluded that Instagram was clearly ahead of its time.

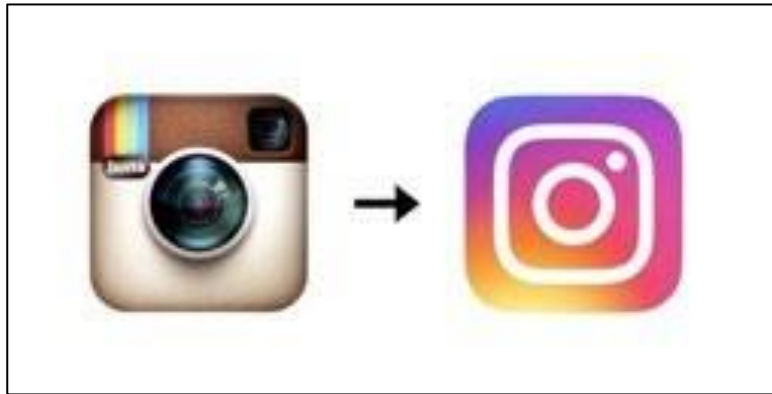


Figure 2.8: Evolution of Instagram logo
Source: Spyre studios (2019: 1)

Mackson, Brochu and Schneider (2019: 45) stated that based on the amount of time spent on the platform, Instagram has grown from a trendy hangout for teens to a marketing powerhouse and is now the second most popular platform behind Facebook. Additionally, its users support a vibrant community. For instance, Instagram posts have 120 times more engagement than tweets and 60 times more than Facebook posts.

Mackson, Brochu and Schneider (2019: 45) stated that studies indicate that people tend to engage more to images than to text (after all, an image says more than a thousand words) and visuals continue to influence the social media space. Therefore, it must not come as a surprise that many organisations are transitioning towards visual marketing and expanding their use of social media platforms such as Pinterest, YouTube and Instagram (Mackson, Brochu and Schneider 2019: 45).

In addition to capitalising on this trend, Instagram makes sharing and interacting with visual images simple (Wong, Amon and Keep 2019: 50), making it very suitable for marketing. Sport organisations might want to consider using Instagram to take advantage of this trend. According to Mackson, Brochu and Schneider (2019: 47) Instagram is one of social media platforms that is filled with people who follow and love sports and these users follow the accounts of their favourite teams. Therefore, for every football club there's a good chance that some of their fans are already on Instagram (Moon and Shim 2019: 281). According to an article published by BBC News (2012: 1) a number of global brands have started using Instagram as one of their

marketing tool. According to Kim and Kim (2019: 73) Instagram can assist organisations promote their products and services as Instagram is very different from the other social media platforms. Davies and Hobbs (2020: 67) mentioned that the difference that sets Instagram apart is that the platform applies a visual based strategy. Instagram is about visuals (Linaschke 2011: 22). Using Instagram as a marketing tool to advertise a product or service is the most effective way to advertise, as “A picture speaks a thousand words” (Wong, Amon and Keep 2019: 50). Also, the features that come with Instagram that allow editing and filtering of an image can help organisations in saving cost for brand designing (Linaschke 2011: 20). Instagram makes sharing and interacting with visuals really simple (Davies and Hobbs 2020: 67). See Figure 2.9.

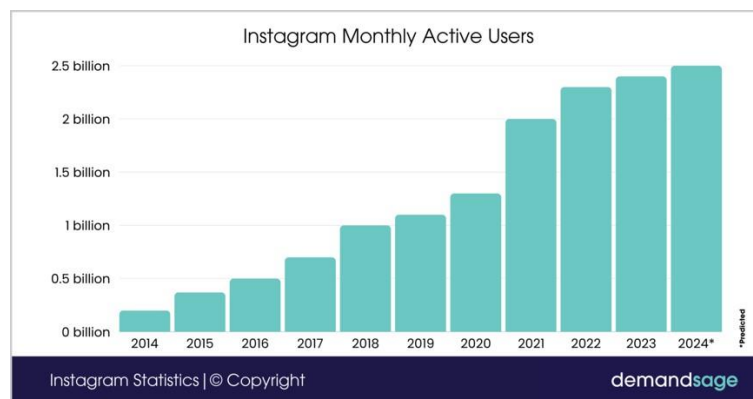


Figure 2.9: Instagram statistics
Shewale (2024:1)

2.2.7 Social media as a communication tool in sports

Watkins (2017: 163) asks the question: "How is social media used by the football clubs?" There is no correct answer regarding which social media platform is more suitable for a sports club. Social media, digital media and media as a whole have helped fans and football clubs to connect on a new level. These platforms create a demand on football clubs to consistently update their pages because if they do not provide updates it becomes stale. Social media also serves as a communication tool that gets people to interact with brands in ways that never existed before social media was established in the late 90s and early 2000s.

Naraine, Wear and Whitburn (2019: 275) affirm that social media has become the most available tool which fans use to connect to sports clubs. It is also worth noting that while social media has changed how football clubs conduct business, it has also changed the way the fans engage with their favourite clubs. Fans can now comment on what they think of a player's performance, creating a negative or positive wave of judgement from the fan's perspective for the team to receive on the platform (Pegoraro, Scott and Burch 2017: 69). Taking the discussion from a large business perspective specifically to sport, one must get an understanding on what sport communication really is. The study of communication that occurs between a club and fans is sport communication. Facebook, X and Instagram have changed the sports communication

Popp, McEvoy and Watanabe (2017: 64) define sports communication as a process by which people in a sport setting, or through a sport endeavour, share symbols as they create meaning through interaction. Existing research on sports communication has focused on how clubs can use social media to their advantage and not analysed examples of the use of social media as a communication tool in the football industry. It is important to understand the relations of sports communication and social media, and understand the impact that social media has on sports communication.

Social media comprises websites and platforms that allow users to create and share content or to participate in social networking (Gdovka and Chen 2021: 45). Social media can be viewed as an important tool for football clubs to use when fostering their online presence (Wirtz and Zimbres 2018: 30). Football fans from all over the world have shown interest in interacting with each other on social media and the football clubs have been incorporating multiple social media platforms in their communication strategies to maintain social media presence (Parganas, Anagnostopoulos and Chadwick 2017: 205).

Helleu (2017: 170) stated that football clubs are not using their social media platforms to their full capacity given how actively and emotionally fans engage with their football clubs. Before the era of the internet and social media, there was a lack of interaction between the football clubs and their fans due to the expense of game tickets,

geographical limitations, unable to watch the games on television or broadcasting issue. Now these barriers have been defeated to ensure that fans do not miss out on communication from the clubs (Gdovka and Chen 2021: 45). All social media platforms are important as they perform different functions e.g. Facebook is for opinions and messages, X is mostly used for live updates and rants, Instagram is for visuals such as photos and videos and YouTube is for match videos (Men *et al.* 2018: 83). Figure 2.10 showcases the different functions of different social media platforms such as Facebook, X, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, LinkedIn etc. using a donut as an example to elaborate on the niche of each platform.

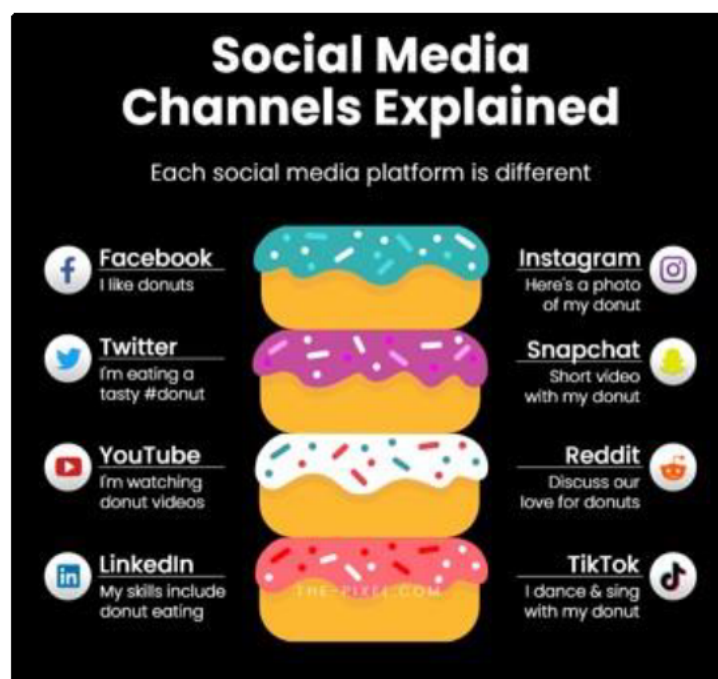


Figure 2.10: Social media channels definitions
Source: The Pixel.com (2020: 1)

Social media has changed fan culture from watching games on television, to streaming online, live videos, and live tweeting, thereby becoming involved in the club, players and management. This shows improvement in engagement between the clubs and their fans through the use of social media. This study looks into the use of social media as a communication tool in the KZN football industry. Through the use of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube, football clubs are able to provide minute to minute updates, information about games, player performance updates, transfers and injuries. This allows football clubs and fans to have two-way communication through tweets, replies and comments. The researcher

aims to explore the use of social media as a communication tool in the football industry. Vale and Fernandes (2018: 48) affirmed that research has found that football clubs are wary of totally giving into using social media and are also hesitant of giving up their control of the dialogue and fear potential damage of commercial interest. Research has found that football clubs experience low levels of engagement with the fans on their social media platforms on normal days compared to match days (Weimar, Holthoff and Biscacia 2020: 335). Nairaine (2019: 90) added that even the top clubs in Europe should be doing better and doing more to engage with the fans on social media. These outcomes have led many researchers to conclude that football clubs are still learning how to operate in this rapidly evolving digital market (Rowles 2017: 58).

Digital video content has become very popular and football clubs are experimenting with video capabilities and live streaming of YouTube and Facebook (Parganas, Liasko, and Anagnostopoulos 2017: 200). The use of such videos on social media is helping the football clubs to connect and engage with their fans especially the many fans who cannot manage to attend the games at the stadiums (Fenton 2018: 11). Anagnostopoulos *et al.* (2018: 420) established that some of the top football clubs were able to create an engaged community of users by posting pictures and other content on Instagram. This type of content that allows engagement is seen as a way for the football club and fans to establish and build their identity (Chanavat, Desbordes and Lorgnier 2017: 45).

The use of social media has allowed people to share their life experience and achievements with other social media users, meaning that friends and family can know when they are cooking dinner, on vacation, going to a concert, or sleeping. Athletes can become more accessible to fans by posting about their professional and personal life on social media (Kumar and Semetko 2018: 612). Men *et al.* (2018: 84) explained that the use of social media platforms allows people to connect and communicate with sports brands and other people with shared interests. Different types of social media platforms have been developed over the years from the ubiquitous Facebook to more niche platforms such as Instagram, a social media platform that only focuses on pictures (Mosco 2017: 77). Opportunities for sports brands to reach their target audience or fan base through social media platforms exists through creating an official

branded page on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and X (Dolan *et al.* 2016: 221).

The use of social media platforms as a communication tool offers many different advantages for brands but communicating through these platforms requires delinking from the mind-set that sports brands must control the communication context and timing.

Kumar and Semetko (2018: 612) stated that the main advantage of using social media platforms is the cheapest option compared to buying ad space in traditional mass media. A branded social media page can be created at no cost and communication can be take place at any desired time. The most common advantage is that the target audience of a brand can provide immediate feedback in a cost-effective manner that can be used to help deliver improved customer service (Tafesse and Wien 2018b: 241). Men and Muralidharan (2017: 81) listed another advantage of open communication through social media which is that customers have the ability to spread or share the word on the sports brand behalf, for example a direct recommendation such as one friend mentioning to one of their friends that they follow a certain team on social. The reach of the social media platforms depends mostly on word-of-mouth communication to promote a sports brand. The sharing of a brand's message may be perceived as genuine and more credible as a friend's recommendation and influence are more instrumental than anything the sports brand would share or say on social media platforms (Tussey 2018: 85).

Social media platforms are convenient, low-priced channels to use for engaging with fans and building a community of fans or followers, but they are not the only option for using social media (Weimar, Holthoff and Biscaia 2020: 23). Online communities are another channel for harnessing the passion of fans, online communities appeal more high involvement fans by allowing them to create and consume context about their favourite teams (Tafesse and Wien 2018a: 734). The decision to give fans a voice by creating a branded presence on social media platforms means a decision is made to give up some control over the communication content and distribution (Vale and Fernandes 2018: 42). The spirit of social media contains elements of inviting frank

expressions of views and opinions from fans and the general public even if they are negative towards the brand, players or coaches. Those comments should remain on social media platforms as long as they are not offensive to anyone or group (Zhang and Sun 2019: 395).

Davies and Hobbs (2020: 67) stated that squashing criticism is a characteristic of oneway mass media communication and is contrary to the invitation for dialogue with stakeholders. Van der Meer (2018: 980) also emphasised that new technologies attract a lot of buzz but for most people the traditional media such as television, radio, newspapers etc. remain dominant. Weimar, Holthoff and Biscaia (2020: 22) added that people consume nearly 60 hours of media content per week, more than half of that being traditional television. In this century sport clubs tend to compete with one another and social media has made it easy for sport clubs to be able to communicate with fans in an effective way (Islam, Rahman and Hollebeek 2018: 115). In the study conducted by Hwang and Park and Woo (2018: 140) the authors found that sports organisations tend to talk about products and share information such as best scenes from games, action photos, event photos, celebrations, milestones, players that have joined the team, announcements of upcoming games, player birthdays, match statistics and fan clubs via social media platforms to build professional relationships with fans. To build and maintain a positive image with the fans, sports clubs use social media platforms such as Facebook, X and Instagram. Fenton, Keegan and Parry (2023: 318) added that these social media platforms are mostly used to by clubs to inform their fans team news. Woodcock and Johnson (2019: 325) comment that during this period there has been an increase of internet based influence, and social media has become a major player in manipulating various aspects of how buyers behave.

Social media platforms and websites are popular platforms for communication, as many fans have access to the social media platforms and websites created by the sports club. According to Nicholson, Kerr and Sherwood (2017: 222), Instagram is one of the most popular platforms and is being used by most sports clubs. Instagram was launched in 2010 where the users shared pictures a variety of videos such as Reels, IGTV, Boomerang or short videos. Instagram users can follow each other to view another person's customised feed created using pictures and videos X is a more

conversational social media platform and that makes the app perfect for engagement as it is now a norm to see athletes share on social media about their private lives, social and political issues. For example, Russel Wilson has shared on social media his support underprivileged hospitalised children with cancer Kietzmann *et al.* (2011: 249). According to Mazana (2018: 5) in the past years Facebook was considered to be the most advanced social media platform with 2.96 billion users, Facebook allows users to post content such as longer pieces of content, pictures, go live and promote events. Nielsen (2017) added that Facebook remains one of the most prevalent platform alongside Instagram and X which also have seen growth in utilisation over the years.

X and Facebook are both used for engagement and information collection by sport fans (Scott 2017: 78). Social media is influential due to the fact that fans are eager to engage with the passion, hope and fandom they have for the sport clubs and athletes. Athletes should take advantage of engaging with fans to maintain good relationships (Mazana 2018: 7; Pederson, Miloch and Lauchella 2018: 88). Some stadiums such as the Etihad (Manchester City) have installed free Wi-Fi for the fans to keep the conversation going on social media platforms while the game is live (Scott 2017: 78).

The next section of this chapter presents the theoretical framework underlying this study of football clubs' use of social media.

2.2.8 Social media impact in football

Vale and Fernandes (2018: 112) stated that football fans develop distinctive and ongoing connections with their favoured football clubs both online and offline, however, study on football fan engagement is inadequate. The purpose of this study is to understand how social media is used as a communication tool in the football industry and this includes establishing how and why fans engage with football clubs and athletes on social media.

Felix, Rauschnabel and Hinsch (2017: 118) emphasised that literature on sports marketing denotes that consumers of sports have an inimitable relationship with their

teams. The sport industry has enjoyed fast growth for the past years for both participation and fan interest which have reached the maximum in the recent years (Joanna and Zuzanna 2020:47). Balk *et al.* (2020: 120) define the improvement of sports socialisation as an active process of learning and social development which occurs when fans network with one another and the sports clubs. According to Santos *et al.* (2019: 180), there is a strong and constant link between youth sports participation and fan desire for sports later in life. Becoming involved in sports occurs in very precise social context and is improved by involvement with family and friends.

A long permanent and passionate connection with a sports team is something that is common among sports fans (Vale and Fernandes 2018: 118). Dedicated and loyal fans are every sports clubs dream fan as many sport brands and athletes love fans that have strong relationships with them; with the rapid increase in use of social media it has become really easy for sports clubs to sustain communication with sport fans (Scott 2017: 120). Joanna and Zuzanna (2020: 50) stated that through the use of social media sport brands evoke sentiments and feelings that other industries wish they could have with their customers/clients. Chang, Ku and Chen (2019: 263) concur, stating that using social media as a communication tool has provided sports brands with a unique advantage over other brands outside of the sports industry, which is the ability to evoke emotional responses to create and maintain meaningful relationships. The authors go on to say that the challenge is to understand how these relations created via social media can be cultivated, developed and maintained by the sports brands. Even though emotional bonds between the fans and athletes are powerful, not all fans have that type of relationship with the sports club however they may be motivated to be loyal to the clubs by being attracted to the sports club through the experience of social media, live games or memories created with others (Fallon, Santarossa and Woodruff 2018: 433).

Researchers have assessed the athletes and sports clubs use of social media platforms such as Facebook, X and Instagram and Snapchat but little is known about the recent popular social media platform TikTok which was used as a strategic communication tool amid COVID-19 lockdown (Chen and Wang 2021: 17). Sports and social media are both powerful tools that can bring people together; families in

particular are a social unit that can bond around sporting events and connect through the use of social media. Sport attracts interest through group affiliation and social media has made it easier for the affiliated groups (Fallon, Santarossa and Woodruff 2018: 433). Fan engagement is concerned with the quality of brand communication in terms of the target audience processing stimulation of the brand. Sport brands are increasingly understanding that exposure is important to create impact with the fans but also understanding that loyalty alone is not enough to persuade fans into paying customers (Chen and Wang 2021: 18).

The main goal of brand communication is to strengthen relationships with fans. The consumption of sports is mostly influenced by an emotional connection a fan has with the sports club or an athlete (Weimar, Holthoff, and Biscaia 2022: 370). Engagement creates a link between a fan, experience, self-concept and sports. Social media has created a great change in how sports clubs communicate and engage with fans. Social media enables people with shared interest or passion to gather in a single location such as a Facebook group, Instagram live or a YouTube channel. The emotional connection fans have with sports makes social media an ideal channel for engaging fans. Instead of sports club brand management talking “at the fans” as they do with mass communication tools, social media focuses on conversations that lead to talking with the audience (Larson and DeChurch 2020: 101). According to Sigvencia *et al.* (2017: 113) labelling social media users as passive recipient of messages is actually misleading because social media users are co-creators of communication and not merely recipients. The two-way nature of communication on social media means that organisations can allow community members to give opinions, ask questions, or make suggestions (Nicholson 2017: 115).

Larson and DeChurch (2020: 104) stated that social media platforms should be managed with the same strategic consideration as more established channels because merely setting up a Facebook page or uploading photos on Instagram or writing a tweet on X does not necessarily strategic in terms of using social media to house the overall brand communications.

Another engagement tool is blogging which are web pages that contain information, photos, videos and links to other information sources on the internet. The need for online platforms as communication tools gives a voice to the audience that was limited previously to a role as a receiver of information.

Measuring the effectiveness of social media evaluates the value social media in building and maintaining relationships with fans, however measurement in traditional media channels such as television and radio tend to focus on exposure only (Ghoshal 2019: 16), the primary indicators being the number of viewers and ratings and the audience size. A more in-depth evaluation of fan engagement is possible by evaluating the conversations and the favourability of the brand mentions on social media platforms such as Facebook, X and Instagram. The indicators for the number of people reached includes the number of people who visited the sports brand page, the viewers on the page and the number of followers. The sports leagues, teams, athletes and sporting events representing sports from around the world are ranked based on a formula that takes into account the number of followers' posts and interactions/engagements. This type of methodology acknowledges that while the number of followers is important, it does not reflect a brand's social media effectiveness. Measurement of fan engagement and social media requires going beyond the number of people reached and should assess how the text posted online can be an on-going conversation and if the communication is effective and as this study looks into the role social media platforms play as a communication tool measurement of engagement and effectiveness is imperative to understand the capabilities of social media.

One of the biggest industries that has adapted to the use of social media in order to communicate and engage with stakeholders is the sports industry. According to Larkin, Fink and Trail (2015: 190) the rapid increase of social use media in the sports industry can be defined as revolutionary. Walter, Schmid and Von (2017: 551) emphasised that social media has changed the way in which sports clubs communicate and interact with fans. The use of digital technologies such as social media has improved the capabilities of sports clubs to interact and engage with a wider and greater audience by enabling access into new markets in remote areas. Cheng (2020: 105) added that

the growth of social media has had a great influence on the way companies such as the sport clubs interact and engage with their consumers or fans.

According to Zhang and Sun (2019: 395) social media platforms offer sports clubs an opportunity to understand what motivates their fans and in turn that enables the sports clubs to strengthen their relationships with the fans. Social media platforms enable businesses globally to understand how consumers perceive their brand (Stavros *et al.* 2014: 455). In previous studies most researchers observed that sports clubs tend to not engage with fans, but You and Hon (2019: 110) stated that digital platforms have dramatically improved the way the clubs interact with fans.

The use of social media as a communication tool by organisations is an example of affiliation marketing (Smith *et al.*). Social media enables access to the individual directly, in real time and through interaction and engagement which helps the organisation to shape the affiliation they seek to establish with the customers to make sharing of information easier (You and Hon 2019: 110).

CHAPTER 2: Theoretical Frameworks

2.3 Theoretical development of media representation

2.3.1 Displacement: newer media replace older media

Borders (2009: 10) stated that this theory explains the evolution of media as placement. The notion that, as new media emerges, it eventually displaces older media through competition. Displacement happens when two media types substantially overlap, meaning that they must compete since they meet the same needs and therefore compete with each other. The hypothesis of media displacement is supported by numerous studies that have been published by researchers. An example of this is online newspapers starting to replace print newspapers (Marler 2019: 155).

Watkins (2017: 171) indicated that individuals who spend more time on the internet are now less likely to watch TV news and read newspapers. Marler (2019: 160) stated that although it may seem obvious on the surface, previous study has shown that many emerging forms of media do not completely replace their more traditional counterparts. For example, media such as the telephone, newspapers and television still exist despite the invention of email and online news and none of them has been replaced.

2.3.2 Functional equivalence: new media dominate older media

According to Marler (2019: 163) functional equivalence asserts that as new media emerge that more effectively fulfil a specific function, the use of the previously dominant medium that fulfilled that function declines. Neuman (2010:12) elaborated that functional equivalence of news media is defined as providing the same gratification and gratification opportunities and as providing the same type of content. Van der Wurff (2010: 116) added that this theory means that when a new technology serves the same function as an older technology, the better technology will dominate. For example, when television was first introduced it was immediately clear that it affected other mass media that provided light entertainment therefore audiences

abandoned their radio sets, movie theatres closed and magazines that featured that type of content switched to covering television (Neuman 2010: 12). Marler (2019: 168) stated that functional equivalence is arguable the most well-known and accepted framework in which to describe and understand how new technology may affect communication and other behaviour patterns.

2.3.3 Complementary theory: newer media supplements older media

Complementary theory supports the idea that some new technologies complement existing media rather than compete with them directly (Neuman 2010:12). According to Kemp (2020: 5) media complements each other when there is a low overlap between them, meaning they serve different needs, and this may lead to new media platforms that specialise in the functions they offer. For example, the telephone originated to improve and extend the telegraph and not to be replace it.

2.3.4 Theory of the niche: newer media specialise

A niche is a segment of a broader market that can be defined by its own particular requirements, preferences, or identity, and is distinguished from the market as a whole (Sheehan 2021: 2). For example, there are numerous distinct divisions and niches within the women's shoe market. Shoes for plus-sized ladies, shoes for nurses, and shoes for vegan women would all be considered niche markets (Sheehan 2021: 1). Although a niche medium typically enhances an already-existing medium this does not mean that there is no competition in the relationship. Maderer, Parganas and Anagnostopoulos (2018: 330) added that the theory of the niche explains how media competes and coexists in limited resource environments. Therefore, unlike media that adhere to the ideas of displacement or functional equivalence, niche media compete with one another for the attention of the public but do not explicitly compete to replace one another. For example, support for the theory of the niche can be drawn from media both pre and post internet where Facebook began to outshine Myspace as the most popular social media platform and Myspace re-launched as a music platform in 2009 (Hargittai and Micheli 2019: 115). A more recent example is Instagram announcing that

they are looking at becoming a video app with content more similar to TikTok and not be a photo sharing platform anymore (Clark 2021: 1).

Media broadcasters and teams have recognized the advantages of providing fans with real-time updates and streaming content that meet fan expectations. This trend has led to a rise in the importance of streaming rights, which are increasingly embedded within broadcasting agreements to maximize revenue (Hutchins and Rowe 2019: 980). These partnerships highlight the role of social media as a dynamic tool for attracting and maintaining fans, contributing directly to the financial growth of football leagues through enhanced broadcast deals and licensing opportunities.

2.4 Stakeholder theory

Stakeholder theory was first introduced by Freeman in 1984, emphasized the importance of considering the interests of a broad range of stakeholders including competitors, communities, customers, employees, investors, political groups, suppliers, trade associations, and labour unions when making business decisions. At its core, Freeman's theory advocated for redistributing benefits and critical decision-making authority among diverse stakeholders (Torp 2015: 225). Since its inception, the theory evolved significantly, with applications and interpretations expanding across various fields, from business ethics and corporate social responsibility to strategic management, corporate governance, and finance.

Donaldson and Preston (1995: 65) distinguished three key approaches: descriptive, instrumental, and normative. The descriptive approach focuses on defining the corporation and its essential components, describing it as a network of cooperative and competitive interests with inherent value (Donaldson and Preston 1995: 66). The instrumental approach used stakeholder theory as a framework to examine how stakeholder management related to corporate performance, while the normative approach established the foundational ethical basis of stakeholder theory, asserting that stakeholders have legitimate interests in corporate activities. To establish a framework for evaluating the role of football fans as stakeholders, there is an established criteria for stakeholder classification from prior academic research.

Freeman and Reed (1983: 89) offer two definitions of stakeholders: in a broad sense, stakeholders include any "identifiable group or individual who can impact or be impacted by the achievement of an organization's objectives." In a narrower sense, stakeholders are defined as any "identifiable group or individual that the organization relies on for its ongoing survival." Freeman (1984: 75) and Clarkson (1995: 92) categorized stakeholders as primary or secondary based on their relationship with the organization. Primary stakeholders are those whose ongoing involvement is essential for the corporation's survival (Clarkson 1995: 106). In contrast, secondary stakeholders may influence or be influenced by the corporation but are not directly involved in transactions with it and are not critical to its survival.

A dedicated sports enthusiast, such as a football supporter, is referred to as a fan (Mastromartino and James 2020: 881). The fans of organised sport are like consumers. Fans form varying degrees of attachment to their chosen sport and any associated memorabilia. When a fan refers to themselves as an enthusiastic sports consumer, it suggests they are driven or excited to engage in sports-related activity and consume sports-related products (Kunkel, Daniel and Daniel 2017: 317). The associated objects might also be a specific league or team in addition to sporting figures like players, coaches, teams, or club management (Mastromartino *et al.* 2019: 332). The behaviour of fans can be different based on the object of devotion and underlying motivation of fans of which suggests that numerous types of sport fans do exist (Mastromartino *et al.* 2020: 115). According to the information process theory, fans develop into the different types of fans through the HALO process Oliver (2014: 80). Fans become enthusiastic and passionate about sports because of their memories, and when these emotions are united, they form connections with sports organisations, people, relationships, and experiences. According to Akira and Yong (2019: 135) the reservoir of memories that fans have for the sports is labelled as a schema and consists of beliefs, perceptions, and expectations. The schema is established once the fan has processed enough information to form an overall judgement (Akira and Yong 2019: 138). According to Oliver (2014: 85) the schema is likely to be formed through familiar or related information and may represent the fan's favourite object or the sport itself such as the league, the team, player or the coach for example. If the fans schema is a specific team then the fan may identify with AmaZulu

Football Club only or if the schema of the fan is a specific league then the fan may indicate a preference of the PSL league only or may be just a player at this level for example, Lionel Messi.

As indicated above there is a connection for the different types of fans at the different schema levels. The HALO effect is most likely to exist extending the schema to a more personal level (Oliver 2014: 85). Nufer (2019: 116) added that the HALO effect indicates that being a fan happens in a sequential nature, where a persona may have started as a fan of the sport, then a team and may move to being a fan of a particular player, and the opposite is also possible where a fan starts off as a fan of a player then the team and then the sport. An example of a HALO effect would be a child who is constantly exposed to the sport at a young age, and they are exposed to a certain information about the sport and the child might grow up to play the being influenced by media attention on the sport or by the parents, siblings, or friends' preferences. Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw (1999: 439) stated that different types of fans exists, and made a distinction between serious and normal sport fans. The proposed difference between these fans is that for the serious fans sport provides some sort of identification and interpretation of a social life, whereas the normal fans show interest in the sport when there is a long tournament or game. Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw (1999: 450) proposed the following types of fans:

- **The temporary fan**

The temporary fan is only interested in the sport for a certain period like during the world cup. For example, many South Africans were interested in football in 2010 when South Africa hosted the 2010 FIFA World Cup. The tournament started on the 11th of June 2010 until the 11th of July 2010 and during that month South Africans of all races and backgrounds came together and dressed in their yellow Bafana Bafana soccer jersey to celebrate and embrace the “people’s game” on “African soil”. Stadder and Naraine (2020: 124) stated that for that month fans knew exactly what plans were for the weekend, sometimes during the week and which match or fan park they would be attending. John and Bashiru (2020: 164) added that it was the most unifying moment in the history of South African because everyone was part of the World Cup, even

those who were not the biggest fans of football. The way people of South Africa were all involved demonstrated the transformability of football. The images in Figure 2.11 show South African fans during the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

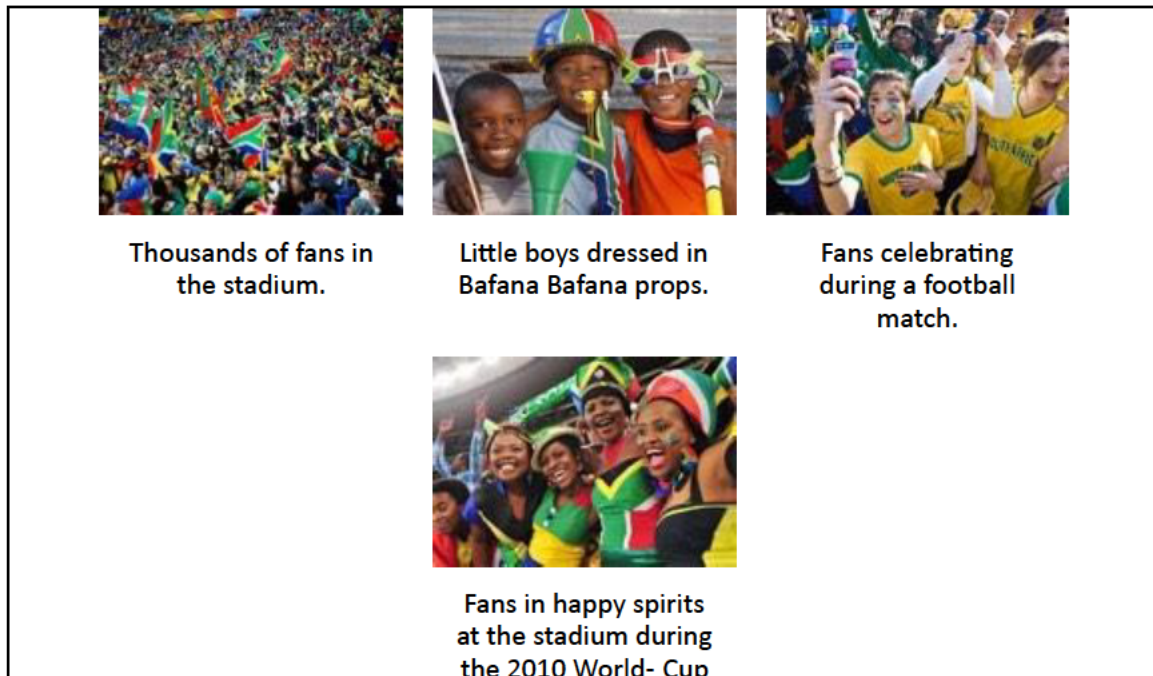


Figure 2.11: Temporary fans
Source: Alamy stock photos (2010: 1)

- **The local fan**

A local fan is a fan of the local club such as living in Durban and being a fan of Lamontville Golden Arrows (LGA) and AmaZulu FC fan, which are Durban clubs. The local fan is bonded with the sports club by geographic constraints and the fan displays fan like behaviour because of the identification of the geographic area where the fan lives or was born. Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw (1999: 444) established that the most popular reason given by the fans for supporting the local sports club are that the sports club is a local team. However, like the temporary fan, the local fan still operates under limits for example, if the fan moves from that city or local place where their schema target is located, the motivation and devotion of the fan decreases. See Figure 2.12.



Mama Joy is carrying a South African football team scarf.



Mama Joy looking sad during an Orlando Prates football match.



Mama Joy at the set of the Sports @10 show with football athletes from different PSL teams.



Mama Joy crying during a Bafana Bafana matches.

Figure 2.12: Local fans
Source: Alamy stock photos (2010: 1)

- **The devoted fan**

The devoted fan is devoted to a certain aspect of the team, for example, a supporter being a fan of a football club because they admire the striker. There are no constraints that limit the devoted. According to Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw (1999: 445) there are chances that the devoted fan started as a temporary or local fan and their attachment to the sports club developed from consuming content related to the sport such as the league, athletes, team etc. Nufer (2019: 118) added that the devoted fan remains loyal to the club or league even after any specific events such as the World Cup or even if they move from the geographical area. For example, Botha Msila is a well-known South African fan that does not miss a football game, Botha's number one team is Bloemfontein Celtic Football Club. Botha Msila walked from Bloemfontein, South Africa

to Egypt which is 6,431 km to support the South African National team, Bafana Bafana (Figure 2.13).



Figure 2.13: Devoted fans
Source: Alamy stock photos (2017: 5)

- **The fanatical fan**

The fanatical fan is a person who supports the club fully and engages in everything the team has to offer. According to Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw (1999: 450), the fanatical fan is like the devoted fan; the fanatical fan is also not bounded by time or location. The fanatical fan engages in behaviour that shows they are supportive such as attending games and can go to the extreme of painting their bodies or creating their own unique look (Nufer 2019: 122). See Figure 2.14.



Figure 2.14: Fanatic fans
 Source: Alamy stock photos (2016: 1)

- **The dysfunctional fan**

The dysfunctional fan is a fan whose life revolves around the team or the sport they are supporting. This type of fan identifies with the team or the sport. The fanatical fan sees being a fan as the primary form of self-identification. The dysfunctional fan can engage in behaviour that is disruptive to the sports rather than engage in behaviour that is supportive to the sports such as the fanatical fan (Akira and Yong 2019: 140). This type of fan is likely to excuse their hooliganism or violent behaviour by justifying it as being a fan. According to Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw (1999: 451) the assumption is that alcohol consumption increases the probability of dysfunctional behaviour. See Figure 2.15.



Figure 2.15: Dysfunctional fans
Source: Alamy stock photos (2018: 1)

2.5 Strategic communication theory

According to Nothhaft (2016: 69) the term strategic communication implies that not all forms of communication are inherently strategic. Nothhaft (2016: 69) added that communication is strategic when it is fully aligned with the organization’s mission, vision, and values and when it enhances strategic positioning and competitiveness against rivals. This view suggests that communication only qualifies as strategic if it meets certain criteria.

2.5.1 Communication as a concept in strategic communication

While human communication dates back to the earliest stages of humankind, theorizing about strategic communication is a relatively recent development. Paul (2011: 25) argued that strategic communication should encompass more than formal messages; actions themselves communicate meaning and therefore should also be considered part of strategic communication. According to Paul (2011: 28) “What we do is often more important than what we say”, underscoring the importance of both verbal and non-verbal elements. Torp (2015: 34) stated that in modern strategy theory, strategic communication should no longer be viewed as a one-way communication

process in which an organization simply delivers messages to audiences to present, promote, and execute its goals and strategy. Instead, it should be understood as a dynamic, two-way communication process that involves active engagement, collaboration, and responsiveness to stakeholders (Torp 2015:50). Shani (1997: 9, cited by Stander, De Beer and Stander 2016: 7) stated that sports fans usually have a desire for a long term association with a sports club. Maderer, Parganas, and Anagnostopoulos (2018: 320) argue that fans form a strong and emotional bond with the team that they support which in turn motivates the fans to make an investment of both their time and money to support the club's progress.

The excitement generated on social media around players and teams acts as a valuable marketing tool, boosting ticket sales, merchandise purchases, and brand engagement overall (Chaffey and Smith 2022: 65). Through these platforms, fans stay updated on games and team events while also feeling more connected, deepening their loyalty. This dynamic aligns with the principles of affiliation marketing, where social media facilitates direct fan relationships, influencing consumer behaviour and building loyalty through focused engagement (Chaffey and Smith 2022: 65).

Communication must be understood as an interactive and participatory process across all levels. Rather than being limited to a two-way conversation, Strategic communication is fundamentally concerned with how organizations purposefully use communication to achieve their mission. Communication theory encompasses the body of theories that shape our understanding of the communication process. Within this field, at least three distinct perspectives exist for examining how communication functions: (1) as a one-way process of meaning construction, in which the sender aims to construct or reconstruct a message received by the audience; (2) as a two-way process of meaning construction, where two or more individuals collaboratively create new meanings; and (3) as an omnidirectional, diachronic process of meaning construction, emphasizing the ongoing evolution and development of meaning over time.

2.5.2 Communication as a one-way communication process from sender to receiver

Shannon and Weaver (1949:72) mentioned that communication as a one-way process, directed from sender to receiver, was a central focus in early mass communication theories. According to Shannon and Weaver (1949:72) these theories conceptualized communication as a process in which a sender transmits information to one or more receivers, though the nature of this transmission was debated. Some approaches framed communication as dissemination, viewing it as an information flow where the sender conveys meaning by revealing it through the message (Shannon and Weaver 1949:72).

2.5.3 Communication as a two-way communication process

Neumann (2008: 2305) stated that when viewed through the two-way, communication is fundamentally interactive. However, interpretations of interaction vary. Originating from Latin, the term implies not only “direct reciprocal dialogue” but also “to act upon and influence each other” (Neumann 2008: 2307). Interaction may include both feedback processes and direct exchanges between individuals, as well as a more abstract notion of relational dynamics in which individuals shape their meanings in response to others' perspectives. In interpersonal communication theory, interaction often emphasizes person-to-person or group exchanges where individuals engage and respond to one another (Neumann 2008: 2307). Through the use of social media by sports clubs to communicate with fans, fans feel that their opinions are valued by the club and that the communication process is reciprocal (Anagnostopoulos *et al.* 2018: 413). This enhances the quality of the relationship a sport club develops with its fans.

2.5.4 Communication as an omnidirectional diachronic process of meaning development

According to Lindlof (2008: 944) a further approach to communication views it as an omnidirectional, diachronic process of meaning development. Lindlof (2008: 944) further stated that interaction remains central but is conceptualized differently from two-way communication models. While two-way communication approaches focus on

direct exchanges between individuals actively engaged in conversation, this perspective regards interaction as a dynamic interplay between both as senders and receivers, that shapes the fundamental outcomes of communication over time. In this view, communication is a continuous, evolving process that reflects and influences the broader context and implications of each exchange (Lindlof 2008: 944). According to Jager (2021: 598) social media platforms are differentiated from other forms of communication because social media encourages interaction and engagement on a large and collective scale. The authors added that the interaction and engagement is distributed in a form that allows users to be able to create, view and share content, which is suited to the nature of sport fans.

2.5.5 Communication barriers

Communication means distributing meaning with others. If people do not share information that means there is no communication (Rani 2019: 74). To communicate successfully with others anywhere in the world, one has to understand the barriers which inhibits the message from being sent and being received successfully by the recipient (Ghoshal 2019: 16). A communication barrier is anything that precludes effective communication and prevents obtaining and understanding the messages being communicated by other people (Luthans 2019: 65). Communication barriers can thus interfere or hinder the message a person is trying to communicate. Rani (2019: 77) stated that there are five common types of barriers to effective communication:

- **Attitudinal barriers**

Rani (2019: 77) stated that a common cause of communication breakdown between people is when people have different attitudes towards each other; it is possible for people who belong to the same community to have to have different attitudes and values. An example of an attitudinal barrier is the different perceptions that people have of supremacy and prominence. Other people may think that they should treat others or be treated differently based on what they perceive as their position or authority within their community. Effective communication is imperative irrespective of the or position you occupy.

- **Behavioural barriers**

Behaviours such as generalisation and stereotyping can cause communication barriers, harbouring such attitudes and not dealing with them is not wrong but it is bad for the individuals in the organisation as such attitudes can cost the organisation time and money. Stereotyping occurs when one assumes inexact things about others because of their cultural background (Rani 2019: 76). Stereotypical views about others might lead to communication breakdown.

- **Cultural barriers**

According to Rani (2019: 76), communication with people from dissimilar cultures and backgrounds means becoming conscious of the difference in values, beliefs and attitudes that people hold. Not having or conveying compassion towards other people contributes to barriers to communicate based on culture. Compassion is the ability to sense feelings and attitudes of other people. The important dynamics of culture are a mutual and social perceptual set of coordinated meaning, action and cultural dissent. When communication occurs between two different cultural backgrounds a cultural barrier may occur. (Kamath 2017a: 5). People encounter cultural barriers in everyday life, in this age of globalisation and digital media the whole world is performing and participating as one where mutual understanding between communicators is essential for effective and a fruitful process of communication.

- **Language barriers**

Language barriers transpire when people do not speak the same language or do not have the same level of understanding of a language, however language barriers can also ensue when people are speaking the same language (Rani 2019: 78). Sometimes barriers occur when people speak the same language or when people use inappropriate levels of language or use terminology or slang which might not be understood by some of the people who are part of the conversation. The pronunciations and parlances of people belonging to different places differs even if their language is the same. Even though the languages are theoretically the same in

people using different dialects and pronunciations, the meaning, implications and understanding of the words is different which may lead to various kinds of conflicts (Kamath 2017a: 5).

Similarly, lingo is the simplified language used between people who do not speak a common dialectal. The implications of the words and phrases can create misunderstanding. For example, the shortening “LOL” used mostly on social media used to mean “Lots of Love” which has now changed to “laughing out loud”. If a person responds with LOL, the recipient can interpret the meaning in any way they want or from their understanding as people would use both the shortenings according to the context of the conversation.

- **Environmental barriers**

Not all barriers to communication are caused by people. The effectiveness of the communication process can be affected by many environmental factors. Environmental elements such as the physical setting or the circumstances in which communication occurs can obstruct messages. Time, place, space, climate, noise etc are the major environmental barriers. Some of these aspects are easy to change whereas some may prove to be tough obstructions in the process of effective communication and these factors may cause disruption leading to ineffectiveness or totally modify the message causing miscommunication (Kamath 2017b: 7). Harb *et al.* (2019: 30) stated that social media implementation by most organisations has largely increased over the years and society has quickly adopted social media platforms for private use to create and share content. Galati *et al.* (2017: 41) emphasised that most organisations have shown extensive complications to apply social media in a premeditated custom to track determinations of the business.

2.6 Social media communication barriers

Besides the known social media benefits, a lot of companies experience barriers to social media. Abeza, O’Reilly and Seguin (2019: 80) stated that lack of management training and not enough support are among the biggest barriers. The cost of things

compared to time has been noted as a major barrier to the use of social media in companies. According to Naraine and Parent (2017: 55), the three most important challenges of social media for sports clubs around the world are: monitoring fan engagement, finding a balance on the use of social media platforms, and maintaining narrative control. In addition to the mentioned challenges, the allocation of resources and lack of control were also mentioned as challenges faced by sports clubs.

- **Resourcefulness**

The lack of resources experienced by organisations is one of the barriers to effective communication. Previous research conducted by Abeza, O'Reilly and Seguin (2019: 80) found that sports clubs mentioned that the main barrier to effective social media communication was to have enough resources to allocate to social media activities of the sports club. Saari and Touminen (2016: 109) added that it is important to enter the social media space however, but requires a professional approach with professional personnel running the social media platforms for the sports clubs. As time resources have been mentioned to be of the major barriers to the effective use of social media, because time commitment is needed for engagement with fans in real time within and outside of working hours, time is classified as barrier (Thompson *et al.* 2017: 60). Sherwood, Nicholson and Marjoribanks (2017: 513) stated that social media platforms are time consuming apps because the sports clubs must keep track of the comments, respond to the comments, respond to any questions posted and be interactive which takes a lot of time. Saari and Tuominen (2016: 111) highlighted running social media pages of big sports clubs was time consuming even though the majority of the big sports clubs have full-time staff members dedicated to running these social media pages, they still do not have the time needed to do everything. Naraine and Parent's (2017: 60) findings were that the allocation of resources such as time, money and staff members were the biggest challenges associated with the effective use of social media as a communication tool.

- **Dominance and control**

According to Ryan (2016: 78), social media users have the power of how the information is shared and the narrative being shared on social media platforms is usually controlled by social media users, unlike traditional forms of media where the content, and narrative are controlled the marketers of the media houses. Lack of control has been listed as one of the barriers that is faced by sports organisations. Saari and Touminen (2016:112) stated that the loss of control aspect is basically not having control over information or how the information is shared, interpreted, and discussed by users and other external sources which then leads to bigger barriers for the use of social media in the sports industry.

- **Lack of social media knowledge**

Lack of knowledge and training is one of the barriers in the use of social media in organisations. There seems to be confusion on what social media platforms should be used for, how to use them to their best ability, and how the use of social media can benefit the sports organization (Thompson, Martin and Geurin 2018: 239). For social media to be a success, it is very important for those working with the organisation and the communications department to have the right training, understanding and knowledge in this emerging and evolving field (Thompson, Martin and Geurin 2018: 241). Since social media is ever changing this requires staff members to constantly learn and be up to date with changes and new features (Abeza, O'Reilly and Seguin 2019: 82). Thus, according to Bryson (2018: 89), failing to train staff on new social media updates might affect the effectiveness and efficiency of the organisation social media platforms. Social media trainings are imperative to deliver effective social media presence. Even though there are barriers that come with the use of social media, there are a lot of opportunities that come with social media platforms that outweigh the challenges, and organisations should always try to use social media to its best ability as a communication tool rather than to perceive social media as something to be avoided. It is also important for organisations to adopt a social media strategy and guidelines that aim to eliminate any of these barriers.

2.7 Theoretical frameworks of social media

Social media popularity has rapidly increased over the years and that is because of the change in technological development and social change. However, there is a huge difference in how people use social media as well as in the level of their competencies (Kitchin 2007: 75). The difference between social media users is the type of skills people possess to master technology in the use of social media. When there are difficulties in understanding how social media is operated, there will be difficulties in utilising social media adequately as a communication tool and in order to overcome such difficulties, an extensive form of initiatives must deal with enhancing peoples level of social media literacy.

According to Harb *et al.* (2019: 30) social media can be defined as a collection of internet based applications that are built based on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 which enables the creation and sharing of user generated content. John and Bashiru (2020: 168) added that this makes it clear that a lot of internet based applications can be categorised as social media such as Facebook, blogs, YouTube etc. According to Safiulla *et al.* (2017: 10), social media use is becoming increasingly important and more popular, in most developed and developing countries. There is growth in the use of social media and people are becoming increasingly engaged in online content creation and participation. Social media platforms have created a lot of opportunities for users by enabling users to share information, interests or hobbies, share content of images and videos, form new friendships and build communities through platforms such as Wikipedia. Blogs, Facebook, X, YouTube etc. (Felix, Rauschnabel and Hinsch 2017: 120). In this way, social media can contribute to the empowerment of others and it encourages interaction between users on these platforms (John and Bashiru 2020: 168). Most people spend time on social media to destress and interact with other users with the same interests as them.

McLuhan, McLuhan and Zigrone (1995: 150) argued that the messages that people are communicating or sharing on the internet are not different from the messages that were being shared before the introduction of digital media. However, the interactivity and the manner of which people communicate changes the behaviour of individuals. The authors added that the effects that the media has on society is much greater than the content created and shared on social media platforms. McLuhan, McLuhan and Zigrone (1995: 155) proposed that there are two forms of media, cool and hot media:

- **Cool media**

Requires the audience to apply more effort and participation to understand the content, such as seminars or television.

- **Hot media**

This refers to the media that does not require much effort to participate in or understand the content such as radio, photography and films. McLuhan, McLuhan and Zigrone (1995: 155) emphasised that social media will change the behaviour of users not because of the content contained on social media but because of the method of communication used. For example, X is a micro-blogging service with a limit of 280 characters. Blogs have better functions than X which can perform better but even with the limit on characters X has a sprightlier and real time effect. Breaking news is often shared on X first such as the outbreak of the Coronavirus. Many people use X to find out what is happening in the world. By using all the great tools X has to offer, newsrooms can break news faster and more efficiently. Within the social media space, 'interaction' is normally messages that are sent everyday between multiple people rather than a message that is only between the sender and the recipient of the message. According to McLuhan, McLuhan and Zigrone (1995: 159) one of the biggest downside that came with social media is the probability of bringing two communication models together namely, one to one and one to all.

- **One to one**

During the era before social media existed mediated conversations existed in controlled environments through face-to-face conversations and telephones. These tools enabled conversations between a few people and when meaning was lost or misunderstanding occurred, it was easy to explain until the recipient understood.

- **One to all**

In this new era of social media, communication takes place in the public domain, making the forming of communities possible, sharing of information to a number of people at the same time through a consolidated structure. The introduction of new digital spaces makes it possible for the different forms of communication to take place. The contribution of those who interact with the creation and sharing of the content on social media is one of the biggest changes brought by the increasing growth of digital media. Societies interrelation through the digital platforms infuses digital media with meaning (Kim and Kim 2019: 150).

Another theoretical viewpoint regarding the effectiveness of social media use in the sport industry is offered by market segmentation theory which shares the view that consumers of any brand, service or product can be differentiated based on certain attributes and demographic or social characteristics (Bell, Bryman, and Harley 2019: 354). Canovi and Pucciarelli (2019: 77) emphasised that the different attributes and demographics of fans influences the way which the fans engage and interact with the club, as some consumers are likely to share similarities in their interests. As far as social media engagement and interaction in the sport industry is concerned, Anagnostopoulos *et al.* (2018: 413) argued that loyal and enthusiastic fans of a team generally seek as much interaction and engagement with their team on social media as possible and a well-designed social media platform will attract a large number of fans. The business of the sport industry has directly influenced the high levels of how consumers spend their money due to the passion and connection they have with the sport clubs. Fenton, Keegan and Parry (2021: 5) added that social media has been a valuable strategic tool to enhance and affirm the loyalty of fans. The literature reviewed

for this study has established that even though social media is capable of helping organisations to build and foster relationships and engage with their follows, more research is needed (Fenton, Keegan and Parry 2023: 323).. Vale and Fernandes (2017: 80) stated that there is little research on the impact and role of social media in the football industry due to the evolving nature of social media.

Social media has influenced the fans in a way that they have their own unofficial social media platforms to further discuss the content that football clubs share on their platforms. Due to these pages not being administered by the football club it can cause issues in relation to how this affects the image of their brand (Hwang, Park and Woo 2018: 202).

The triple revolution theory gives an idea of what is currently happening in the world of social media. Rainie and Wellman (2012: 102) discussed the philosophy which explains how social platforms work in their book, The New Social Operating System. Rainie and Wellman's (2012: 102) triple revolution theory explains three important points on what social media is currently doing to improve engagement online.

First, "Provided opportunities for people to reach beyond the world of tight groups". Rainie and Wellman (2012: 113) stated that this provides clubs with the opportunity to access a completely new group of fans that they never had a chance to attract before the time of social media. At this stage fans can now descend into a space where they are surrounded by others who feel, think and interact in a similar way.

Second, "The Internet Revolution has given people communication power and information gathering capacities that disregards those of the past. It also allowed people to become their own publishers and broadcasters and create new methods for social networking". Rainie and Wellman (2012: 116) stated that sport clubs can now tailor their communication to target specific individual needs of a fan. The regular fan can also now access more information easily than ever before, along with becoming more educated about the sport and the specific club/league. People can send direct messages to teams on their Facebook, X, Instagram or post on their wall and tweet

and can get answers back immediately. It is a new process that gives the fan power to be in the same space as their favourite sport club.

Third, “Mobile Revolution has allowed ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) to become body appendages, allowing people to access friends and information at will, wherever they go”. All sport fans now have the opportunity to engage with the clubs at a consistent level, no matter where they are in the world. Fans no longer have to wait until tomorrow’s paper or the 7 o’clock news broadcast to get the breaking news, it’s all available on their smart phone, computer or tablet.

According to Maderer, Parganas, and Anagnostopoulos (2018: 320), almost half of Facebook users use their phones to login to the app to keep connected wherever they go. Elihu Katz 1970s Gratification theory is another proposition that corresponds with sport in the social media world. The uses and gratification theory explains how people use social media for their desires and fulfilment. The theory suggests that social media users play an important role in choosing and using social media platforms in any way they desire. According to Hirst (2018: 3) users take an active part in the communication process and are goal oriented in their media use. Applying this to sport communication, fans are the users who take an important role in the communication process. Hirst (2018: 2) added that having that basic knowledge is useful as it should not be underestimated that social media can be used as a communication tool for the club.

Tafesse and Wien (2018b: 242) mentioned that fans can demand new content such as pictures or videos of their favourite player from the club. It is the fans that drive the communication and not taking note of their feedback is a mistake that no sport club should make. Rowley and Keegan (2019: 58) added that the two main connecting points for both the club and fans are star connection and place. A star connection can be a player, manager, league, or any other potentially promotable club product that fans are crazy about. The place connection defines the connection of the club’s home town. The place connection can help the club capitalise on the presence of hometown clubs, athletes, and facilities and instil in fans an alliance to the club that is in their area (Machado *et al.* 2020: 325). Star and place connections are two of the most significant links a club can have with their fans. Their fan base is always a go-to for specific

campaigns or even day-to-day operations of the social media platforms. It is important for clubs to continuously be mindful of this because drifting too far can alienate some fans (like posting about something entirely unrelated to what the fans are interested in).

For example, when AmaZulu FC and LGA have an upcoming derby match against each other fans are only interested in seeing and reading about the preparations for the match from both the teams. After the match has been played fans would still be interested in reading or seeing match reports and reviews, so anything else that is not about the derby does not interest them. See Figure 2.16.



Figure 2.16: Durban derby article
Vedan (2021: 1)

One of the elements that distinguishes social media from mass media is that social media makes it possible for participants to have any type of conversation from the position of greater equality. Mass media communication follows more of a one-way communication process and possibilities of interaction between the organisations and fans is very limited or non-existent. Digital media tools have made information and content sharing possible; social media platforms can be accessed by anyone with

access to the internet and they can create and share content and this in turn works in the favour of organisations to maintain engagement with stakeholders.

The football fan culture has evolved immensely over the years from individuals sitting in front of a television at home, to having access to all the information at their fingertips such as live videos, live tweeting and being actively involved with the football team, the players and management of the team. With the introduction of social media there has been an improvement in interaction and engagement between football clubs and football fans. This study aims to explore social media as a communication tool in the football industry.

2.16 Conclusion

This chapter focused on previous research studies that relate to this study, theoretical framework of social media, the football industry, and the development of social media. The study applied media representation theory to examine the evolution of media from traditional to digital formats, analysing content shared by football organizations to identify media usage patterns and their impact on fan perception and loyalty. Stakeholder Theory was used to assess how football clubs build and maintain relationships with key stakeholders, such as fans, sponsors, and media partners, through social media. Strategic Communication Theory guided the evaluation of communication strategies employed by these organizations to achieve objectives like branding, fan engagement, and revenue generation, using qualitative and netnography. Lastly, social media theory explored how football clubs use digital platform dynamics, including interaction and content sharing, to foster online communities, promote events, and strengthen their digital presence. The next chapter focuses on the research methods utilised in the study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design for this study. A mixed research approach was applied, which consist of a combination of qualitative and netnography techniques. The target population, sampling method and sample size, data collection instruments, data analysis methods, and lastly, ethical considerations, are presented.

3.2 Research design

Research design is the process of gathering, examining, understanding, and reporting data in research studies. It is the general plan for linking the theoretical research problems with the appropriate and pragmatic research. In other words, the research design sets the process on the required data, the approaches to be applied to gather and examine this data and how it will assist in answering the research question (Merriam and Grenier 2019: 58). This study adopted a mixed research approach which comprises qualitative and netnography data collection approaches. Sileyew (2019: 85) stated that mixed methods are defined as research in which the researcher collects and analyses data, integrates the findings, and draws conclusions using both qualitative and netnography methods in one study. Furthermore, the study looks at the philosophical assumptions such as the methodology (the process of research), ontology (the nature of reality) and specific methods of netnography as a newly emerging research approach (Tie, Birks, and Francis 2019: 78).

Sileyew (2019: 85) expressed that mixed method research involves both collecting and analysing qualitative and netnography data, where qualitative data includes information collected through interviews and the netnography focuses on information collected on social media. Researchers such as Gratton and Jones (2010: 110) share the sentiments that it is important to focus on understanding an issue and finding solutions to problems that focusing on assumptions.

3.2.1 Netnography research

Netnography is an adaptation of ethnography for the online world and is concerned with the study of online cultures and groups as distinct social phenomena, rather than isolated content Kozinets (2019b: 67). Wang (2019: 67) added that netnography is a study of beliefs, social interaction and behaviours of small groups that involve participation and observation over a long period of time and the interpretation of data collected. According to Kim and Lee (2017: 85) the difference between netnography and ethnography is that netnography focuses on studying people, programmes or an event, while ethnography studies an entire group that shares a common culture.

3.2.2 Qualitative research method

Qualitative research is a method of social action that focuses on the way people understand and make sense of their experiences to understand the social reality of individuals (Tie, Birks, and Francis 2019: 78). Qualitative research makes use of interviews, diaries, journals, classroom observations and immersions and closed-ended and open-ended questionnaires to obtain, examine and interpret the data collected. A qualitative approach is based on the opinions of participants, not of the researcher, and captures the voice of the participant to validate the information (Andrew, Pedersen and McEvoy 2019: 89).

Purposive research was deemed to be relevant and appropriate for this study. The main objective of the purposive method is to produce a sample that can be reasonably assumed to be a representative of the population (Henry 1990: 95). This is often achieved by applying expert knowledge of the population in a non-random manner and choosing a sample of elements that represent a section of the population (Hennink, Kaiser and Weber 2019: 1483). Farrugia (2019: 70) added that purposive sampling is regularly used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information that is rich and is related to the phenomenon of interest.

3.3 Target population

Target population is the group of individuals that the researcher plans to conduct research on (Crawford, Wu and Heimer 2018: 755). Asiamah, Mensah and OtengAbayie (2017: 620) explains that the population usually consists of large numbers of people so it is almost impossible to include all members in data collection due to cost and time. This is the case with football club social media posts and club officials. Therefore, in this study, a total number of 150 social media posts on the club's different social media platforms were selected to be monitored and analysed to study the interaction between fans with the football clubs, three social media managers (one from each team) were interviewed. The selected social media posts were monitored and analysed, especially the engagement between teams with their stakeholders.

3.3.1 Sampling method

The procedure of selecting cases to observe is called sampling. The sample is gathered from a large group, referred to as a population (Young and Casey 2019: 53). Young (2020: 80) further explains that the population is the large pool from which a sampling element are drawn and to which the findings are going to be analysed. Sampling methods are divided into two different types of sampling methods, namely probability sampling and non-probability sampling (Farrugia 2019: 70).

Probability sampling is a random selection method in which each component of the population has a known non-zero probability of selection (Berndt 2020: 224). This method of sampling is based on the probability that a random sample is representative of a population. Nonprobability sampling refers to any kind of sampling where the selection of elements is not determined by the statistical principle of randomness. Nonprobability sampling technique uses nonrandomised methods to draw the sample (Heather, Glenton and Lewin 2019: 8). Non-probability sampling technique mostly involves judgement. Instead of randomisation, participants are selected because they are easy to access (Young and Casey 2019: 53).

Non-probability sampling was chosen to be used in this study because in many conditions non-probability samples are more than satisfactory for research purposes. Purposive sampling was adopted for this study to hand pick the participants based on their judgement (in this case, football fans and social media managers) (Heather, Glenton and Lewin 2019: 8). With a purposive sample, the researcher is more likely to obtain the opinions of the target population.

For this research project, three PSL football clubs based in KZN retail were selected, two teams based in Durban and one team is based in Pietermaritzburg:

- AmaZulu FC- Durban
- Lamontville Golden Arrows FC- Durban
- Maritzburg United FC- Pietermaritzburg

The purpose of selecting only PSL teams from KZN from the 16 PSL teams in South Africa was so that the findings would be comparable and also to gain a wider viewpoint in this regard.

3.3.2 Sample size

A sample of 150 social media posts were used for this study to explore how social media is used as a communication tool in the football industry. Table 3.1 indicates the number of social media posts that were monitored and analysed via social media and the social media managers from football teams that were interviewed by the researcher. Table 3.1 is set out to reflect the exact number of participants selected from the three DSTV (PSL) league KZN based teams.

Table 3.1: Sampling plan

Durban Based teams	Pietermaritzburg based teams	Social media posts to be analysed via X, Instagram and Facebook	Social media Managers To be interviewed	Total number of social media pages to be observed
AmaZulu FC	Maritzburg United FC	50 x3= 150	1x3= 3	3x3= 9
Lamontville Golden Arrows		Fans that interact with the team's content		

3.4 Measuring instruments

3.4.1 Netnography

Kozinets (2020a: 80) defines netnography as a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research methods to the study of cultures and communities emerging through digital platforms. Reid and Duffy (2018: 286) stated that as the study of online communities and social media spaces has extended, understandings of the term netnography have now increased. Netnography typically focuses on communication within online communities and social media spaces rather than face-to-face groups, the extent to which online individuals accord with off-line individuals is not of concern (Reid and Duffy 2018: 286).

3.4.1.1 What is netnography?

A lot of people wonder and ask themselves what is Netnography? In simple terms, netnography is a form of ethnography with the data being located on the internet. The term netnography comes from the name ethnography and net which means 'the internet'. According to Wagner (2017: 1), ethnography is a qualitative type of research conducted by researchers who collect data within the social and cultural context that only focuses on their study. Netnography and ethnography have similar attributes such as: are adaptable to various contexts, are immersive in nature, both use multiple methods, both methods study human behaviour and are descriptive and not experimental. Netnography research is conducted in six intersecting steps similar to ethnographic research, namely: developing a research plan, establishing entrée, collect and triangulate data, analyse and interpret data, ensure ethical standards, and report on findings and associated insights (Wagner 2017: 2) (Figure 3.1).

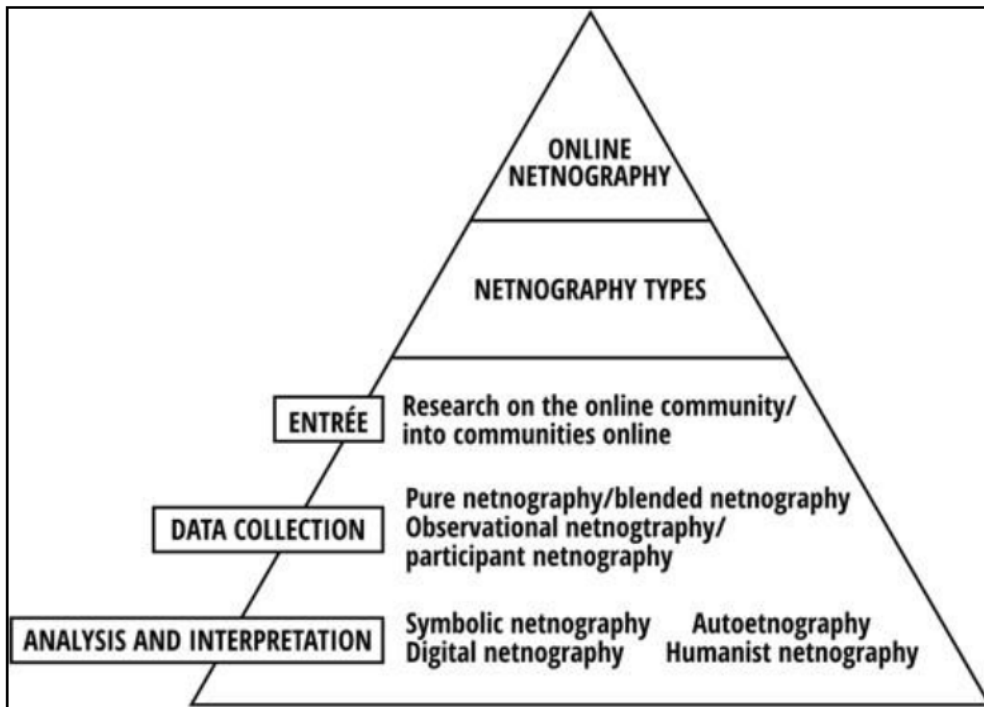


Figure 3.1: Netnography intersecting steps
 Source: Ivan (2019: 135)

According to Ivan (2019: 136), as more people turn to social media to share their daily views, opinions and experiences, netnography has become an extremely useful research method. Netnography researchers provides an easily accessible method to collect data. Netnography provides researchers with many intriguing opportunities for research, whether a researcher is examining tourism, fashion, religion or diets, there is a plenty of data available for the researcher online (Falter and Hadwich 2020: 181). With the rapid increase of the use of the internet everyone lives theirs lives on the internet and more people have managed to forge friendships online than in 'real life' (Stainton 2021: 1). These online friends discuss real life issues such as work opportunities, family issues, relationships, finances etc. With the Covid-19 people started interacting with their families online, teaching their children online and working, attending workshops and conferences online. Therefore, it makes why social media is used to conduct research.

Many researchers have used the social media for different aspects of research such as the literature review and data analysis which are undertaken using internet software and programs, but collecting data online is not very common (Falter and Hadwich 2020: 181). Even though netnography is not very common it seems like a logical and

good idea to use social media to collect data as it is there to be used and on top of that it is free, and it is readily accessible. According to Buhalis (2022: 87) analysing blogs, websites, and social media platforms is much easier than interviewing people or sending out surveys.

Robert Kozinet was one of the first people to explore the internet in the 90s when it was not as popular as it is now, and before social media started to gain traction in 2000. Kozinet (2018: 68) defined netnography as a research methodology that adapts ethnographic methods to study cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communication. Kozinet (2018: 68) went on to define netnography as a specific set of related data collection, analysis, ethical and representational research practices where a significant amount of the data collected and participant observational research conducted originates in and manifests through the data shared freely on the internet, including mobile applications (Kozinets 2020b: 81).

3.4.1.2 The transformation from ethnography to netnography

To understand netnography, it is important to first comprehend what ethnography is. According to Kozinet (2019a: 55) ethnography is a form of anthropological research about people. It is a method that studies people's daily lives and culture. Ethnography is a form of qualitative research that allows researchers to study behaviours, beliefs, and values. Ethnographic research can be conducted in the form of interviews, surveys, and participant observation. Netnography is basically an add on of ethnography as it is the examination of people online (Kozinet 2018: 56).

See Figure 3.2.



Figure 3.2: Social media platforms
Source: Zen Chung (2018: 2)

In previous years, one of the biggest issues with traditional ethnography was that it was subjected to geographical boundaries therefore researchers could not adequately observe someone who was not in their geographical area. The rapid change with modern technologies has provided researchers with new opportunities when studying people online, and geography is no longer a problem. This opens up many other exciting opportunities (Kozinet 2018: 72).

3.4.1.3 Netnographic research methods

Kozinet (2020: 68) stated that netnography is the examination of people on the internet, but how exactly do researchers do this? There are many different ways in which netnography research can be conducted and this will continue to change as we use the internet in our daily lives (Figure 3.2). Some examples of netnography research methods are:

- X observation
- Instagram observation
- Facebook observation
- Pinterest observation

- YouTube analysis
- Blog observation
- Observation of social media users
- Observation of group interactions using video calls etc.

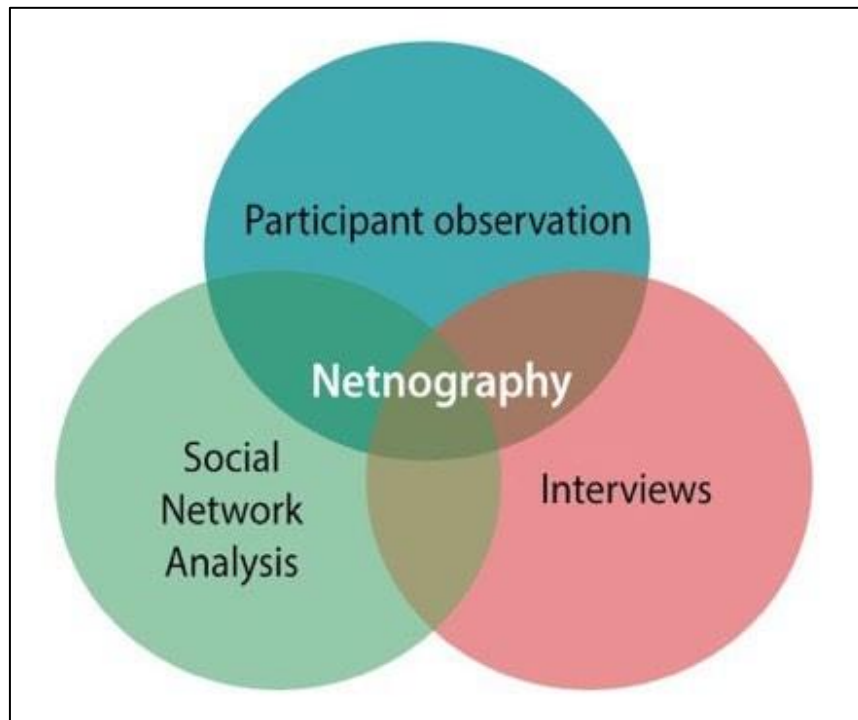


Figure 3.3: Netnography analysis methods
Source: Mark (2021: 5)

There are many ways in which netnography research can be useful and it can be pure if the research is conducted online. Netnography can also be blended with traditional ethnographic research by combining face-to-face interaction with online analysis. Netnography is one of the most important research tools that exist today. According to Tsiotsou (2019: 815), many researchers may not feel comfortable with this method of online data collection but young people commonly known as generation 'Y' have grown up in the modern day of a technologically mediated world therefore, it makes sense that this generation will capitalise on this valuable type of research method and take it to the next level which may result in many more netnographic research studies conducted in the next 10 or 20 years to come. Understanding online users behaviours and the online environment is important whether it is used as an insight into behaviours, motivations or interactions. There is a wealth of data that can be used to

enrich and improve businesses and all around the world via netnography (Tsiotsou 2019: 818). See Figure 3.3.

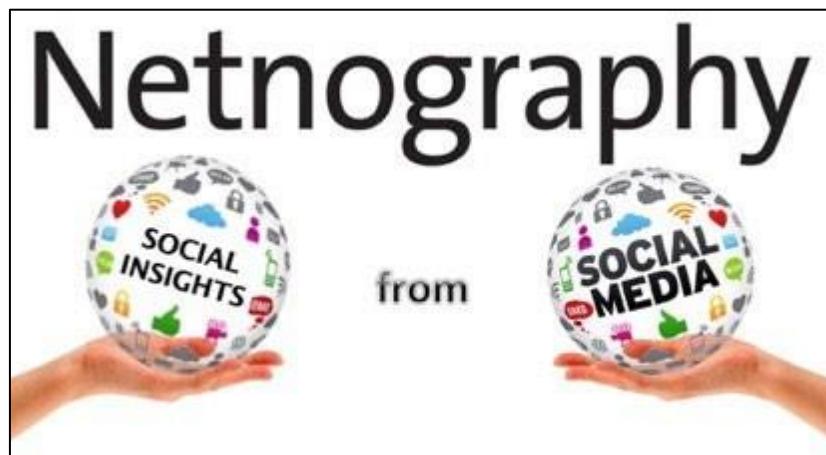


Figure 3.4: Netnographic research conduct
Source: Mark (2020: 5)

3.4.1.4 Advantages of netnography

There are many advantages of using netnography as a research method (Kozinet 2019: 52), such as:

- Data is always naturally occurring,
- Netnography overcomes geographical limitations,
- There is a high chance of discovering unexpected findings,
- Rich and valuable data may be easier access than it is in a face-to-face context.

3.4.1.5 Disadvantages of netnography

There are also some disadvantages of using netnography as a research method. Disadvantages include:

- Some researchers may not be familiar with using online platforms,
- Data collection and analysis may be time-consuming.

Ivan (2019: 133) added that netnographic research is unique because it does not observe one moment of life or a research situation but it observes things that are posted online over time. Therefore it provides a different element in research methods.

For example a lot of people are more confident and open to express themselves online than they would in person. Netnography allows for these boundaries to be overcome.

3.4.2 Interviews

An interview is a method that can assist with further interpretation of information obtained from other research instruments by probing for deeper fundamental information (Glegg 2018: 91). West and Blom (2018: 175) added that the question(s) for the interview should be as cautiously planned and as accurately worded as the questions in any other research instruments being used in the study.

Interviews should be considered as professional affairs that demand professional planning and conduct on the part of the interviewer (Glegg 2018: 95). For this study, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. A semi-structured interview is normally based on a flexible topic guide that delivers a movable structure of open-ended questions to explore experiences and attitudes (Cataldi 2018: 295). Semi structured interviews have the benefit of flexibility, permitting the researcher to enter new areas and produce richer data (Kruger *et al.* 2018: 245).

For this study the interview questions were semi-structured. The interview questions were developed based on the research objectives for this specific study and information from the literature review assisted to formulate the interview questions.

3.5 Pilot testing

Fraser *et al.* (2018: 99) stated that pilot testing is a test run, whereby the researcher pilots the interview questions with a group of respondents who have a similar background with the actual sample. A pilot test of this study was undertaken within the Sports Management Department, Durban University of Technology's ML Sultan campus. The researcher analysed the data collected from the different social media platforms used by five students to grasp the interaction and engagement between the students and one football team namely, AmaZulu FC. This assisted the researcher to determine if there were any problems within the research instrument that was to be

used to collect data. The researcher gained access to social media interactions between the team and the students through the platform X. The students voluntarily shared their social media handles with the researcher, enabling easier identification of their comments or posts related to the team.

3.6 Data collection

Data collection pertains to decision making and actions being taken regarding information needed during the process of data collection (Lobe, Morgan, and Hoffman 2020: 75), and is an important part of any problem-solving process (Fritz and Vandermause 2018: 164). In this study data was collected in a form of interviews (face-to-face) and netnography via social media. The interviews were conducted by the researcher, based on an interview guide (Annexure A).

3.7 Netnographic data collection procedure

According to Kozinets (2019b: 61), netnography generally has three types of data available for collection, namely; field note data, elicited data and archival data. The archival data contains any material that the researcher can collect from the internet that is not their own material or own creation of data.

Kozinets (2020a: 68) added that these types of data may contain cultural background, serving as an introduction to what the community was doing before the researcher made their own incursion into that social media platform. From this point, the researcher starts to deepen their knowledge of the cultural environment (Wang 2019: 638).

To start with, it can be difficult to find topic with this type of observational data (video, image or text), but once found they are relatively straightforward, easy to access and can be gathered at a very low cost (Kozinets 2018: 88). Roth-Cohen and Lahav (2018: 72) emphasised that just the analysis of texts, the researcher can also look at the way that organisations use social media platforms to communicate with their consumers who are social media users. The researcher can use text or pictures to analyse how

people express, describe and represent themselves, and can look at the various signs and interactions used by the organisations and social media users (Roth-Cohen and Lahav 2018: 752).

Kozinets (2020b: 37) stated that there are different ways to collect online data but the two most basic techniques are firstly, to copy and paste the content of a post into a Microsoft Word document and secondly, to capture screenshots of data using tools such as Windows snipping tool or the Apple screengrab tool or using a cell phone screengrab feature. The researcher can add field notes which may be generated by the researcher for the purpose of research recording, reflection and analysis. These notes of data may not be shared with the social media community, even though they may have data such as texts, screenshots, GIFs, videos and so on (Kozinets 2018: 42). To make sure the researcher analyses the most important data, the researcher should start recording reflective field notes or taking screengrabs from social media as early in the research process as they can possibly can, if possible as soon as the research begins (Villegas 2018: 243; Sim *et al.* 2018: 622).

Kozinets (2012: 45, cited by Redi and Duffy 2018: 264) mentioned that with these three types of data in mind, along with the diversity of communication media they may involve, *“it is important to remember that netnographic data collection is not simply made up of one element, but it now offers a range and continuity of different offerings with different benefits, defects, and associated trade-offs”*. This holds for almost every element of conducting netnographic research.

The online world has become enormously complex and multicoloured, and netnographic research approaches have followed suit (Reid and Duffy 2018: 270).

According to Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier (2018: 231) netnography is a relatively new research method and analysis technique and has been developed in relation to procedures of ethnography. Kozinets (2018: 42) stated that the following provide the guidelines for adapting face-to-face data collection and analysis to the new ways of collecting data through the contingencies of the internet. There are five essential consideration:

1. Preparing for data collections and cultural entrée;

2. Collecting and creating the data;
3. Performing ethical research;
4. Conducting an insightful and trustworthy analysis; and
5. Representing the data analysis in a meaningful and appropriate manner.

Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier (2018: 235) mentioned that netnography shares some functions and aspects of ethnography and because of the nature of social media and online communities, netnography places social media data and research participants within easy access of the researcher. Therefore the collection of data and the researcher's data analysis is more likely easier than it would be with other methods.

According to Lugosi and Quinton (2018: 287), the researcher has an opportunity to make use of many different elements of netnographic data collection and analysis. Even though netnography uses some of the most modern data available and benefits from the most recent technological developments, this approach to data analysis grounds the researchers in the basic of inductive methodology. Kozinets (2018: 45) stated that there are four important elements to guide researchers in conducting a netnographic data analysis, the first principle is “**ethnographic siting**” which means that the netnography researcher should site specific data that focuses on a small number of posts or set of data in order to gain a deep understanding of what is going on in that specific social media platform. Secondly, it is important for the researcher to understand the cultural background of the participant and to engage in the cultural context in an appropriate manner as a participant, a technique known as “**ethnographic engaging**”. Thirdly, “**ethnographic communicating**” is where communication is experienced, processed and understood exactly how the participant members experience them. The fourth and final element is to allow “**ethnographic timing**” to unfold so that message and posts are experienced, read, interpreted and analysed in real time as they are published rather than all at once.

3.8 Observation

Observation has a long background and history as an ethnographic research tool. It is a research method that allows the researchers to study people in their natural environment in order to understand things from their perspective (Halford 2017: 13). When adopting the observation research method, the researcher has to spend quite some time in the “field”, taking on many different roles in order to get a better understanding the people being studied. Different techniques are used to collect data (McGrath and Rudman 2019: 160). Gaining access to the group and leaving the research field are some of the important factors that need consideration. As a research method, observation seems to have no specific beginning and some researchers have found indications of its use all the way back in the late ninetieth and early twentieth centuries.

The internet introduced a new avenue of accessing knowledge and spreading information (Robert 2017: 281). This has promoted research through the development of new tools related to research on the internet or outside of the internet (Halford 2017: 15).

According to Sim *et al.* 2018: 619) literature reviews show that in the case of online research, observation is always associated with netnography as well as virtual space ethnography, internet ethnography, digital ethnography or online ethnography. The observation of social media platforms can take the form of direct observation which means that the researcher can observe participants interacting in real time which enables the researcher to gain knowledge about the dynamics of their conversations (Robards 2017: 716). Sim *et al.* (2018: 630) stated that this method allows the observation of participants behaviours in their natural settings, which ensures authenticity and greater objectivity. The main social media platforms being examined for this study serve as the sites of data collection and analysis, namely, Facebook, X and Instagram. The observation is of a non-participant and hidden nature. For all social media platforms, the observation includes data such as the content, the number of comments, likes, reshares, repost, retweets, the time and date of publishing the content, analysis of commenting users’ reactions, segment analysis.

Observation is particularly useful to gain access into certain places and to study participants behaviours. Qualitative observation is either participant or non-participant observation in a nature setting. In a participant observation setting, the researcher is part of the observed setting (Sim *et al.* 2018: 619). In non-participant observation, which was adopted for this study, the observer does not take part and is more “on the outside looking in”. The observer is present but not part of the setting so as not to try and influence the setting by their presence. Similar to the researcher in this study, who remained external to the setting and did not engage directly with the observed football teams, the researcher maintained a non-participatory role throughout the study.

The researcher can plan when to observe the participants; for example, for this study; the researcher normally observed during weekends when there matches playing, and sometimes on weekdays when there was a game or *ad hoc* (when there was a new signed player, hot topic about the team etc.). During this time of observation, the researcher took screengrabs and wrote notes of important information. The field notes can be written during or after the observation. According to Sim *et al.* (2018: 634) non-participant observation and working with archival data results in a natural data analysis which is both unobtrusive and free from researcher judgement and bias because if participants mingle with the researcher there might be a limited in-depth information or it might push the participants away.

- **The value of observation**

Anderson, Herr and Nihlen (2007, cited in Van de Port 2017: 295) stated that there are benefits and values associated with using the observation technique. These include the following:

- The researcher is better able to understand and capture the context within which people interact.
- A first-hand knowledge of the context of a study allows researchers to make inductive and discovery-based decisions rather than guessing.
- By utilising a different strategy, the research may be able to see things that a participant does not normally observe with a different method.

- It provides an opportunity to learn things that people may be reluctant to discuss in an interview.

3.8.1 Conducting observation data collection

According to Jeewa and Wade (2015: 220), observation requires the researcher to first select cases to observe and second, gain access to this group. Once the researcher has access to this group, they can start to establish a rapport with members of the group while observing, interacting with, and recording the behaviours of individuals of the group and then, ultimately, interpreting the information they collect (Jeewa and Wade 2015: 231).

For this study the researcher conducted a non-participant observation research on Twitter for over 24 months, observing fans and role-players such as social media managers as they generate new content such as daily posts, team stats, birthday posts, content analysis, competitions, football match updates and opinions about their respective football clubs, as well as the sharing of this content with each other on a daily basis. This research focused on observing three KZN based PSL (now known as Betway league) clubs within the larger universe of X, Facebook and Instagram. Because of the global reach of these social media platforms, these 'virtual communities' are always buzzing with activities or topics when these teams are playing, performing a wide range of fan activities which the researcher systematically observed.

DeWalt and Dewalt (2011, cited in Clemente, Durand and Roulet 2017: 17) said observation produces a combination of cognitive and emotional information that netnographers can use to understand the community they are studying. Twitter users, specifically fans, their conversations, tweets, and content which they chose to post on the platform, are recorded through observation as many of these fans display a passion for their fandoms through the sharing of links to pictures, interviews, fan fiction, fan art, fan videos, blogs, and various other related online content that they dedicate to their respective teams. Their posts also reflected how deeply they feel about their fandom, whether it is about player contracts or transfer windows. The researcher

followed users who were more active on their social media accounts and were engaging in with the selected three teams for this study.

The illustration in Figure 3.5 showcases the steps involved in observations Besides the first two steps, the steps are not sequential but are continuous throughout the entire observation period

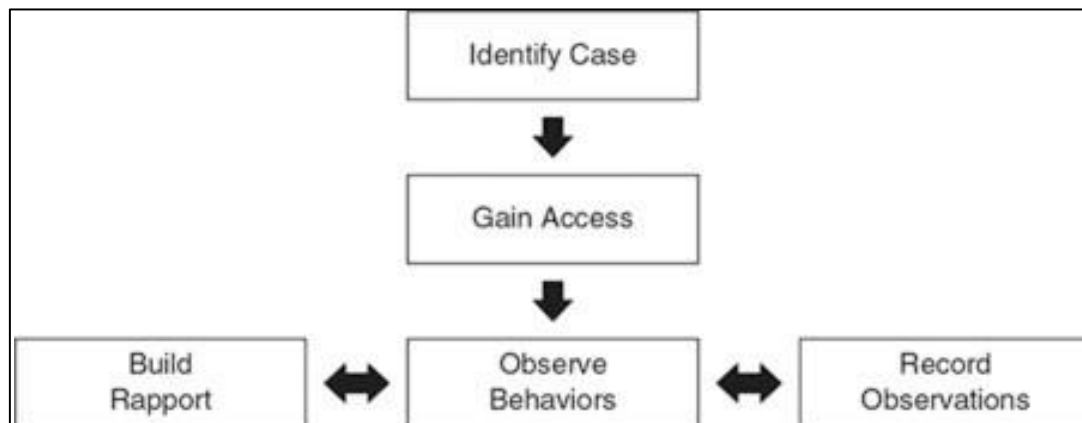


Figure 3.5: Steps involved in this researches observation

Source: Brancati (2018: 22)

- **Selecting the case**

According to Clemente, Durand and (Roulet 2017: 22) identifying the case for analysis is the first step in conducting an analysis in observation. Most of the times researchers are not able to determine if a case is distinctive or not because they do not have a lot of information about the whole universe of cases. In this case, the researcher may choose a case study that is prominent or that easy for the researcher to discover due to a personal connection to the group or a different reason (Clemente, Durand and Roulet 2017: 22).

- **Gaining access**

Clemente, Durand and Roulet (2017: 30) stated that the next step contains acquiring approval to observe the group. If the research is covert, this step is not necessary. This study is covert therefore permission was not sought from the football teams or the fans for the researcher to observe the fans. For this study permission was only sought to observe the teams social media pages but not the fans. In order for a researcher to

influence a gatekeeper to give them permission to observe a group, they must furnish this person with a letter of introduction explaining the general purpose of their research and how long they would like to observe the group (Thorne 1980: 286). In the letter of introduction, the researcher must also explain in detail the procedures they have put in place to preserve the confidentiality and/or anonymity of the group they want to study, and the way that they intend to use the information they collect (Walters and Godbold 2014: 533).

- **Building rapport**

Strudwick (2018: 185) stated in order for the researcher to convince individuals within the group such as the football club social media managers to share information with them, the researcher needs to develop a rapport with them. Rapport is built over time. To develop a rapport with members of the group, the researcher needs to listen attentively to what participants share with them without passing judgement on it, show respect, and demonstrate their ability to maintain the confidentiality of the information shared with them (Strudwick 2018: 188). For this study, building rapport with the football clubs was important to ensure collection all the relevant and important data during the interview sessions with the football club staff members.

- **Observe behaviours**

According to Strudwick (2018: 190) the researcher may not be able to observe every member of the group therefore; the researcher will have to decide about who to observe. The decision made by the researcher can affect the outcomes that the researcher draws from their study. A different set of group members might get a different conclusion. Strudwick (2018: 195) added that a different researcher observing the same group but a different set of people might reach different outcomes. For the researcher to reach a possible close representation of the group, the researcher will have to observe different types of people within the group (Strudwick 2018: 195). Ideally, to do this, a researcher would use a nested sampling frame to select individuals to observe, choosing people randomly among categories of individuals and settings (Walters and Godbold 2014: 531).

- **Recording observations**

Vinten (1994, cited in Jeewa and Wade (2015: 238) mentioned that observation requires the researcher to take ample notes, store archival data, screengrabs for online data etc. During physical observation and interviews, the researcher can take brief notes in the moment, if possible, and write down in detail what they can recall in their field notes afterwards (Jeewa and Wade 2015: 240).

- **Features of observation**

While observation by definition involves the immersion of a researcher into the environment of their participants, there are two dimensions that distinguish different forms of participant observation from each other the extent to which the researcher interacts with their participants (active versus passive observation), and whether the observation is concealed or not (overt versus covert observation) (Khan 2018: 113; Kodama 2021: 188).

- **Overt versus covert observation**

Kodama (2021: 196) stated that observations differs in terms of the level to which the observation is covert or overt. In the case of covert observation, the researcher does not make their presence known to their participants and, if they do, they do not classify themselves as a researcher.

- **Covert participant**

According to Kodama (2021: 190) restaurants, transportation hubs, stores, and online chat rooms are public places in which researchers observe and even engage with people for covert observation but the researchers do not introduce themselves as researchers or inform people that they are being observed. The key benefit of covert observation is that since participants do not know that they are being observed, they cannot change their behaviour in response to the presence of the researcher (Kodama 2021: 191).

- **Overt participant**

Awan (2017: 145) stated that when the research is overt, the researcher does not generally inform people that they encounter in the course of their research about the specific purpose of their research, or inform everyone that they meet that they are a researcher since this could needlessly disrupt the subject being observed.

- **Types of participant observation**

Jeewa and Wade (2015: 237) stated that the combination of the two dimensions of active versus passive observation and overt versus covert observation results in four different types of observation with their own unique advantages and disadvantages, as depicted in Figure 3.5.

	Overt	Covert
Passive	overt and passive	covert and passive
Active	overt and active	covert and active

Figure 3.6: Types of participant observation
Source: Brancati (2018: 22)

- **Overt and active observation**

According to Simpson (2017: 280) if observation is both overt and active, people may contribute in the activities of their subjects and experience them as their subjects would, but they run the risk of both changing the behaviour of their subjects through their interactions with them, and their subjects changing their behaviour on their own knowing that they are being studied. Examples of this form of observation include studies of different ethnic, cultural, or religious communities (Awan 2017: 142).

- **Overt and passive observation**

Simpson (2017: 285) stated that in the case of covert and passive observation, the researcher does not run the risk of their presence altering the behaviour of the groups that they study through their interactions with. However, the guinea pig effect is an issue for this form of observation unlike in the case of covert and passive observation, because participants are aware of being studied in this form of observation. Researchers are also unable to experience the world as their subjects would experience it in this form of observation (Simpson 2017: 286).

- **Covert and active observation**

There are several advantages to covert and active observation (Simpson 2017: 282). In this type of observation, the researchers may have access to a group that they may not otherwise have an opportunity to observe, and they may experience the practices of the group as members of the group would experience them (Awan 2017: 141).

The researcher may alter the behaviour of the group through their presence. However, in this form of observation, groups would not knowingly change their behaviour in response to the presence of the researcher because in this form of observation, groups would not be aware of being observed (Simpson 2017: 278).

- **Covert and passive observation**

Awan (2017: 140) mentioned that unlike in the case of overt and passive observation, the researcher is not likely to alter the behaviours of their participants in the case of covert and passive observation, because the researcher does not actively engage with their participants in this form of observation, and because their participants are also not aware that they are being observed. The researcher chose covert and passive observation for this study as it minimised the risk of participants being affected by the presence of the researcher.

3.9 Participant recruitment

Pertaining to the matter of participants' recruitment procedures, an email was sent as well as a hard copy of a consent letter to the selected football clubs with a summary of the study to request permission to conduct the practical data with their fans and football managers. The following procedures were followed:

- The researcher monitored and analysed each social media page of the football clubs selected.
- The researcher sent the gatekeepers letters signed by the football teams to the identified research participants in all the three selected football clubs which allowed the researcher to proceed with the research.
- The researcher administered the interviews with the social media managers of the football clubs and,
- The researcher identified devoted fans of the three clubs who would be suitable participants for the study.

3.10 Data analysis

This section discusses statistical techniques used to analyse data and obtain the research results. According to Harding (2018:122) the data analysis can be organised into three different stages which entails statistical inference and lastly, modelling, and multivariate analysis. This study presented data using tables, graphs, images etc. Analysis of data allows the researcher to use probability methods to review collected data with an aim of understanding the whole target population's observations and viewpoints (Jackson and Bazeley 2019: 76). The empirical data from interviews and social media (netnography) was analysed by the researcher with the assistance of a professional statistician. The software Nvivo version 12 was employed in the process of data analysis.

3.11 Analysing observation data

According to Khan (2018: 112) The researcher does not stop collecting data until they have reached the point of learning no new things. Once they stop they can begin their analysis of the data. The process of analysing data from observation is very similar to the process of analysing data collected from interviews and focus groups.

The first step involves developing analytic categories with which to organise the researcher's observations (Khan 2018: 114). Simpson (2017: 275) mentioned that since the goal of observation is usually to generate hypotheses, not to test hypotheses, these categories are typically developed inductively based on the researcher's archival data or field notes. These categories should include not only conversational data, as in the case of interviews and focus groups, but data on events as well. What these analytic categories are depends on the data. They may include types of events, interactions, reactions, attitudes, and so forth. Once the researcher has defined these categories, and coded the data accordingly, the researcher can begin to identify more systematic patterns or themes in the data. The final step is to interpret and explain these patterns (Simpson 2017: 277).

3.12 Netnography ethical procedure

Navigating information and consent is essential, especially considering the unique dynamics of online football communities and the various privacy policies across social media platforms. Social media has become an invaluable space for communication between football clubs, players, and fans, but ethical research and data usage on these platforms requires careful attention to privacy and informed consent. Football communities span from both public and private social media spaces, such as open fan pages, official club accounts, and closed groups for members or fans. Accessing data from public groups was relatively straightforward, the researcher requested permission to quote a the teams social media posts, engagements with their stakeholders and fan's public comments on the different social media platforms.

Each social media platform has unique protocols that affected how and when the researcher sought consent. On all the social media platforms the researcher sought consent through consent forms and gatekeepers letter. Although public comments or posts in football communities on social media may be technically accessible, ethical research practices suggest still obtaining consent from users, especially when sharing identifiable content like direct quotes, images, or opinions. For instance, quoting a fan's comment on a player's performance or using their photo from a match should involve a consent request, ensuring participants' comfort with how their content is used. For this study, the researcher will share the complete study and findings with the participants to ensure they are aware of how their online content was used in the study and what were the findings

3.13 Confidentiality and anonymity

Confidentiality is when the participants' personal information may have important details such as names attached to it, but the researcher keeps it secret from the public, whereas anonymity is when the respondents remain anonymous throughout the study (Wang and Kogan 2018: 10). For the purpose of this study participants remained anonymous throughout the study. The information obtained through interviews and on social media was confidential and the names of respondents will not be published.

Confidentiality and anonymity was clarified in the letter of consent prior to the participants agreeing to be part of the study and participants were informed that they have the right to participate or permanently withdraw from participating in the study at any stage.

This chapter outlined the research methodology which was employed in research study, namely, the target population, sample methods together with sample size, measurement instruments, respondent recruitment, data collection and pilot testing data analysis. pilot testing, were discussed in this chapter.

The important data of this project was obtained from social media and social media managers of the club. The target population of 300 football fan participants contributed

to the study through content sharing, interaction, and engagement with the football club on social media. The social media managers of football clubs contributed to the study through undergoing semi-structured interviews. The mixed research approach connected to the data analysis by integrating qualitative insights with netnographic observations. The interview provided an in-depth understanding of the teams experiences and perceptions, while netnography captured social media interactions in their natural context. Together, these methods enabled a comprehensive analysis by validating findings, identifying patterns and themes, and offering both personal and the football industry's perspectives on social media usage.

The following chapter outlines the research data analysis and presents the results using graphs, images, and descriptive statements.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS: INTERVIEW RESULTS

This section of the chapter presents and discusses the data obtained from the interview sessions with three representatives of the football clubs in South Africa based in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The data captured from the interviews and netnography non-participant observations were deductively coded with the aid of software (NVivo version 12). In this process, the transcribed data from the interviews were divided into different meaningful codes. The codes were developed based on the difference, similarities, and meanings that emerged from the transcribed data. This process allowed the researcher to group the data into convenient themes and subthemes. During the analysis phase, information gathered from structured interviews was verbatim transcribed, and pertinent quotes from this data were used to support the discussion on themes. To protect the participants anonymity, the study does not disclose the identities of the main participants.

Table 4.1 presents the general information about the participants interviewed on the use of social media as a communication tool in the KwaZulu-Natal football industry. All the participants worked as media personnel for the clubs with a combined experience of 43 years and an average years of 14 years. Only one of the participants indicated performing other duties within the football club they represent but a related duty to the position in the football club. In addition, all participants note that their club used social media to communicate externally with their fan base.

Table 4.1: General information of the participant

Participant	Position in the football club	Period served in this position	Other duties within this football club	Internal and external communication using social media
Participant 1	Media consultant	9 years	No	We offered packages to AmaZulu at the time and Maritzburg United as well and we developed storytelling modes and structures around their clubs based on the history of the club, the culture of the club, the fans, their colours, and their energy.
Participant 2	Media officer	13 years	Yes	A lot of things that would be communicated to the external public start internally the way we confirm or inform staff before people see it, they mustn't be shocked so a form of that communication starts from meetings and then now a bit of structured communication for the public in terms of what is happening in the team so the staff that works for the team is not shocked when they see things out in the media
Participant 3	Digital media	10 years	No	We don't use social media internally at all for communication. It's more of an external communication tool for our fan base. We have a weekly sort of set of requirements that we have for a week depending on what's happening if it's games, with its tournaments like preseason tournaments.

4.2 Emerging themes and subthemes

This section details the one-on-one interviews with three participant of football clubs in the premier soccer league (PSL) on their use of social media. The analysis of the data obtained from the semi-structured questions led to the identification of subthemes and relevant themes. Table 4.2 highlights the themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysed data.

Table 4.2: Identification of themes and sub-themes

Themes	Subthemes
1. Purpose of using social media as a communication tool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication of match information • Creating content for football clubs • Gauge public perception of the club
2. Social media usage by football clubs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media platforms used by clubs • Information shared on social media • The extent of social media usage by clubs • Developing and exploring social media by football clubs
3. Social media accounts and their benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits of social media verification badge for clubs • The most important social media followed account
4. The effectiveness of social media regarding organisational objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The perception of social media effectiveness • Measuring the effectiveness of social media • Impact of social media trends on communication strategy
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barriers to effective social media space
5. Strengths and weakness of social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strength of social media • Weakness of social media
6. The importance of social media to football clubs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing social issues • Structured communication • Growing brand • Vehicle to communicate with fans
7. Recommendation for improving social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget and resources provision • Creative content • Hiring an experienced social media team

4.2.1 Theme 1: Purpose of using social media as a communication tool

The sports industry has directly influenced how fans spend their money arising from the passion and connection they have with the club, and social media has been a valuable strategic asset to enhance and affirm this loyalty on the part of fans (Gdovka

and Chen 2021: 45). Therefore, social media has become a key market communication tool. This theme explores the purpose of using social media as a communication tool by football clubs in South Africa.

- **Subtheme 1: Communication of match information**

Participant 3 notes that social media is used by football clubs as a tool to communicate match information to fans. The information communicated includes the match games, time, and ticket sales.

In the football industry because there are so many different aspects to getting information across to our fans we take it on a day-to-day sort of basis. Uh, as I said, to communicate, possible, like you know, what games are coming up with the ticket sales online, where the ticket sales at the gates and all that small information, It's very structured info. (Informant 3)

Added to the above, the football club uses social media to give real-time updates on the game. This was found to be relevant for the clubs as some of the fans may be working during the game which could deny them the opportunity to view the match live. These fans can follow the real-time updates of the game via the various social media channels of the club.

On that side, it's more, you know, results or upcoming, but specifically during the game time I think it's a particularly important tool for us because it allows us to communicate on several different platforms as to what's happening in the game itself, so almost like a live kind of, we try and make it a live play by play online on our social channels. (Informant 3)

I mean with regards to game days or game time, we use social media quite a lot there because as I said with regards to the fans and the followers that we have, you might have someone who is working during a game and can't get to the game or doesn't have access to the DSTV. A few games are shown/played on DSTV and they follow our channels quite a lot on that to get feedback on

what's happening in the game, so that's a very important aspect of how we use social media. (Informant 3)

• **Subtheme 2: Creating content for football clubs**

Nairaine (2019: 223) notes that social media allows the creation and wide transmission of content that fuels interaction and collaboration. Consistent with this, it was uncovered from the interviews with the social media representatives of the football clubs selected for the study that social media is being used for creating content for the club. The content created was centred around the club's history, the fans, and sporting activities. Participant 1, for example, illuminated the following:

I think it's important for these clubs to put out exclusive content that no one else is putting out. So, clubs have media open days, clubs have press conferences, there are engagements with coaches and players, and post-matches were the media can create content for newspapers and for online television or radio, but people within the club have access to information that no one else does. (Participant 1)

Participant 1 notes that using social media to create content for engagement is premised on the fact that the platform gives immediate access to fans.

It's a tool that gives you access to fans immediately, a fan doesn't have to come to the club office or to the shop or to a game to connect with the team, they can literally connect with the team you know, using their cell phones or computers or whatever the case is. (Participant 1)

Sharing further, Participant 1 reveals that unlike clubs in Europe, South America and the USA, there was a gap in the PSL in South Africa in terms of how clubs were using social media to create content. To fill this void, content around the clubs based on their history, culture, fans, and colour was developed for the club and shared via social media platforms.

We thought that you know, at the time we were well placed to create a product that we could offer to PSL teams and so we offered packages to AmaZulu at the time and Maritzburg United as well and we developed storytelling modes and structures around their clubs based on the history of the club, the culture of the club, the fans, their colours, their energy and what we felt was important is to take the story of this team and carry it across to social media. (Participant 1)

The content offered was on a weekly basis with a day-to-day plan.

we develop content on a weekly basis with a day-to-day plan, but the day-to-day plan fitted into a holistic plan for the season so yeah, that was our experience. (Participant 1)

Thus, football clubs make use of social media to create content around the pre- and post-match information as well as special holidays in the country that the fans can relate to.

I think we do. You know we use it daily; we try and create questions that are relevant to whatever suits what's happening, and we do try and post almost something every single day So it might be an upcoming game image or post a story on like a pre-match story or a post-match story. (Participant 3)

We try and be relevant with regards to what's happening with public holidays, Mandela Day, Christmas, New Year, all that stuff and I think what I've just mentioned now, uh, ties in with the question. (Participant 3)

Furthermore, it was uncovered that the main purpose of content creation was to build a relationship with the fans. This could also have informed the use of fans' pictures as part of content creation. As participant 3 said, it was to create a sense of inclusiveness for the fans in the club. It thus agrees with James's (1997: 32) position that without fans, a sports club cannot survive.

We try and give the fans relevant info with regards to the club and what's happening in the club, and we do try to build that relationship with them. That's just been, you know, we posted pictures of fans and because I think that gives you like kind of inclusion in the club that you know you want to make them feel like part of the club (Participant 3).

- **Subtheme 3: Gauge public perception of the club**

Akira and Yong (2019: 135) note that the reservoir of memories that fans have for sports is termed a schema and consists of beliefs, perceptions, and expectations. The schema is developed once the fans have processed enough information to form an overall judgement (Akira and Yong 2019: 138). This could also help explain why the clubs use social media to gauge public perception of the club. Participant 2 shared the following views:

When we send out posts or we tweet, we want to know what people think of the club or whatever we're communicating so we look out for engagements, and we respond to the conversations that need to be heard. It's not about just posting and get getting it out then you forget about it, you need to give management feedback if something is working or not working. (Participant 2)

From the above narrative, it is critical to assume that fan engagement is highly important as it helps the club gauge the level of satisfaction and perception of the club by the fans. This is further reinforced by participant 2 who notes that fans tweeting back or commenting gives the club an opportunity to know how the fans feel.

Like giving in controversial subjects or interaction you look out for the concerns of people when they are Tweeting back or commenting back and then now you can say this is how our fans feel, yeah. Even if we wouldn't have had the chance to speak to them in person so. (Participant 2)

Perception of the club by fans is thus important as it helps the club and fans understand each other better.

I think as human beings' communication is the most fundamental tool because it helps us understand each other better. (Participant 1)

4.2.2 Theme 2: Social media usage by football clubs

Dedicated and loyal fans are every sports club's dream fans as many sports brands and athletes love fans that have strong relationships with them. With the rapidly increased use of social media, it has become really easy for sports clubs to sustain communication with sports fans (Scott 2017: 120). This theme explores the social media usage by football clubs in South Africa.

- **Subtheme 1: Social media platforms used by clubs**

The football industry has over the years revolutionised into a modernised game through social media platforms (Wang, Cheng and Sun 2021: 102). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have been used globally by soccer stars, fans, and footballing clubs to communicate (Weimar, Holthoff, and Biscacia 2020: 335). The current study also found that the football clubs made use of Facebook, X, TikTok, and Instagram to engage and communicate with their fans. Each of these mentioned platforms has its own unique advantage and audience they can attract for engagement. For example, Facebook has an older market which allows the club to communicate with their long-term fans.

Facebook has an older market, it allows. You have to communicate with fans who've been with the club for a long term, so you must strike a balancing act. (Participant 1)

Participant 2 echoed the same sentiments by stating that the club's true fans are on Facebook. Besides, it was revealed by participant 2 that Twitter shares similar characteristics to Facebook but with an added advantage in that the club engages with

people that are also not their fanbase. This aligns with Scott (2017: 78) who mentioned that X and Facebook are both mostly used for engagement and information collection by sports fans.

I'll say our true fans are on Facebook. Yeah, they're on Facebook and they are very interactive and yeah, you don't go wrong with Facebook and then Twitter is the same, but on Twitter, it's different because you get engagements from even people that aren't our supporters who just like what they see, and you like the vibe and like love the team basically but have their own space. So, both are effective but our supporters that attend our matches, are Facebook users. (Participant 2)

Another unique characteristic of Twitter is that the club gets more responses. This likely explanation for this may be connected to a large pool of engagement from both true supporters and non-supporters on Twitter.

... you know, so we get more responses on Twitter. (Participant 2).

The above could also help explain why participant 2 thinks Twitter is more successful and impactful than other social media due to the likes and shares.

We interact more on Twitter and Instagram, well I love Instagram because it's just a lot more image-based, you don't get the same kind of effect that you do on Twitter like you know you don't get like, people don't share, people don't all that sort of stuff so. Yeah, so if you look at it that way Twitter is more successful, more engaging, and impactful. (Participant 2)

The impactful and wide engagement of Twitter may be the reason why some of the clubs post real-time games only on Twitter and Instagram.

The game time you know the play-by-play posts we post only on Twitter and Instagram. (Participant 3)

Nevertheless, when it comes to social media content, the younger generation is more interested in visuals, therefore digital content such as videos, live streaming and high-resolution pictures have become very popular (Parganas, Liasko and Anagnostopoulos 2017: 210). Participant 1 supports this view by stating the following:

TikTok and Instagram have a fine younger audience and those platforms give you an opportunity to introduce new fans to the club and build their fan base amongst younger people. (Participant 1)

The desire to attract younger fans who most likely form the majority of football supporters might have influenced the posting of images and live scores on Instagram.

if it's an image-related post, even if it's during the game we post on Instagram because we need that image. (Participant 3)

Although LinkedIn and YouTube are also both used by football clubs to engage with their fans, however, they have their disadvantages. First LinkedIn is viewed as more professional which limits its usage by lots of football fans while YouTube requires new and fresh content.

LinkedIn, we have but not a lot of people use LinkedIn because it's more professional. (Participant 2)

YouTube as well. We've had it for a long time, but it needs new and fresh content. (Participant 2)

In summary, one could see that social media platforms had modified the relationship between the fans and the club. For instance, the clubs know that their loyal fans are on Facebook, a wider audience on X, while younger generation supporters are on Instagram. This aligns with Vale and Fernandes (2018: 37) who emphasised that the growth of social media in the football industry and the increased coverage on platforms such as X and Facebook has helped to modify the relationship between fans, football clubs and players.

- **Subtheme 2: Information shared on social media**

The change in social media allows interaction and communication where it has provided two-way communication between fans, football clubs and players. One of the major highlights is how the majority of users of social media for football expressed how they use social media platforms for looking at live scores, and checking news and updates (Kang *et al.* 2019: 40). The data gathered from the participants reveal that football clubs use social media platforms to share updates around the team, fixtures, matches, players, etc.

Fundamentally you would do a lot of team updates, fixtures updates from training, match updates are very popular, and the thoughts of coaches and players. (Participant 1)

Besides this, the charity events and other social supports the clubs rendered to the community are communicated and shared using social media.

Videos from training. Uhm, team building, travelling, that sort of thing content that is directly connected to the first team but also content that covers what the club is doing, so the club may be doing a feeding scheme or a blanket drive during winter, you know that sort of stuff goes onto the page as well because the page is for the club, not necessarily the first team. (Participant 1)

Participant 3 clarified that the information shared by the club meant any pressing newsworthy information.

I say, we try and make it relevant and it all depends on what's going down. You know, if it's again if it's transfer window time, we try and make agreements, information transfers, if something happened or someone in the football industry that has made it or is renowned in the industry has passed away. We could use it for sending condolence messages, so, it depends on what's happening at the time, and you know it's not just, we don't just randomly post, but we try and structure it so that its useful and pertinent information. (Participant 3)

- **Subtheme 3: Extent of social media usage by clubs**

While clubs have used social media to forge relationships with their fans, it was, however, found that its use by football clubs is quite poor. Participant 1 notes that most of the football clubs in the PSL have not started using social media as a vehicle for communication with their fanbase. It also supports the notion that social media usage by football clubs in South Africa is still in its infancy.

At the current stage you mean at the moment, it's quite poor in my opinion, purely because some clubs have, but most clubs don't have social media presence so I would say out of the 16 teams, maybe a few have.. (Participant 1)

Participant 1 further added that many of the PSL clubs have a social media platform for the sake of having it.

There are a few clubs that are leading the way, Mamelodi Sundowns is one of them, Cape Town City has done some very good work over the years and AmaZulu are doing some better work, but a lot of clubs have social media platforms for the sake of having social media platforms and it does the job, but it's certainly not revolutionary in any sense. (Participant 1)

The above finding agrees with Vale and Fernades (2018: 54) who said that even though most football clubs are maintaining a social media presence, they are not utilising their full capacity given the emotional bond fans have with their favourite football clubs. Added further, participant 1 notes that the majority of the PSL clubs still rely on the traditional media and their marketing teams to communicate and promote the club.

There are probably about two teams that are doing a better job than others, but the majority of teams have relied on the Media and Communications manager or media and communications or marketing team. (Participant 1)

The above revelation is concerning as it may limit the global engagement of football clubs. According to Nairaine (2019: 223), the use of traditional media such as sports talk on the radio, print media, and television coverage provided fans with limited opportunities to interact with their sporting personalities. This concern is also shared by participant 1 who said that the teams are getting the basic amount of information and therefore warned that for them to grow the brands, they must start creating content that people want to engage with and not necessarily flat content.

Teams are getting the basic amount of information out there but if they really want to grow their brand and grow their number of followers and grow their reach, they must start creating content that people want to engage with and not necessarily flat content that people just read and scroll past. (Participant 1)

Scholars note that social media holds an advantage over traditional media in that there is immediate feedback and engagement from consumers which can assist the company cater for the direct needs of each of their consumers (Brubaker *et al.* 2018: 741). This is evidenced by the views of participant 2 who shared the following:

I would say, we own the narratives on social media, so it's on us. All our efforts and then get on traditional Uh, platforms, it's indirect, it's through an opening to them, to interact with them, interviews we grant them, whereas on social media we do the insert ourselves and we control what we want people to think and so on. (Participant 2)

• **Subtheme 4: Developing and exploring social media by football clubs**

Social media is evolving rapidly and football fans' interest in engaging their clubs through the platform has significantly increased in recent years. Thus, clubs are looking for means to develop and explore social media for the growth of the club. From the data gathered, the informants shared that football clubs are not investing in copywriting as well as creating innovative content that is appealing to even known supporters.

- Copywriting

Participant 1 notes that while some teams have stepped up with the copywriting game, it has yet to meet the standard.

Some teams have stepped up with copywriting so their copywriting is a bit better, but for the most part, it seems it's incredibly poor. (Participant 1)

- Innovative content

Nevertheless, the team have become innovative with the content they put outside which is attracting lots of engagement.

We definitely also attract even other fans of other teams who maybe always had things they admire because the club also is AmaZulu, where you find that there are people who are Zulu but also following other teams, so you get those sorts of conversations being triggered and supporters now wanting to know always know going on. So, in our communication whatever we put out there, we open that as we entice them in whatever way possible. (Participant 2)

Participant 3 notes that the club has studied what international clubs are doing in order to increase social media engagement with fans.

A lot of fans don't just follow local football, they follow international as well, so we do see what they are doing. You know we have a look at what they're doing. I'm not saying that. You know, we kind of see that we have relevance with what they're putting out and then we look at other teams as well. Uh, so we look at others and other sports and see how they do things differently. It's a lot of American-based stuff. We look at the baseball guys or not, they do basketball and what they do, and we get our ideas from that and again, just make sure that we're relevant with what other sports teams are doing. (Participant 3)

However, participant 1 thinks that the content side of things is yet to improve.

I don't want to come across as someone who is being quite negative but there's been some improvements from a look and feel visual perspective. You know, graphics are a bit better, but things have become a little bit stagnant from a content point of view. (Participant 1)

The above thus implies that each club may have varying standards and or expectations. Nevertheless, there is consensus among the informants that the clubs are innovating their content through studying more reputable international clubs and engaging with copywriting.

4.2.3 Theme 3: Social media account and its benefits

Social media has enabled athletes to share content through their own social media accounts, demonstrating that it can provide a great way to stay connected and communicate. Ruihley and Li (2020: 290) found that technology has, in general, promoted social interaction between players and fans and organisational staff. According to Weyrich (2020: 210), staying connected with athletes and with fans is a priority for sports organisations with athletes across the country and around the world, which has required improvisation, and this connection has been facilitated using digital media, which transcends both geographical and physical boundaries. This theme explores the social media account of football clubs and their benefits.

- **Subtheme 1: Benefits of social media verification badge for clubs**

There is no doubt that the blue verification badge on social media accounts lets followers know that the page is authentic and credible, thus protecting the account against any impersonators. All the informants interviewed shared the same sentiments that the verified badge authenticates the source of information, promotes professionalism, and protects against impersonation.

- Authenticate the source of information

Participant 1 notes that verification authenticates the source of information. This is highly useful in the control of misinformation and fake news associated with social media.

The verification tick definitely carries some weight, but it is not the end and all You know there are a lot of clubs out there that don't have verification, but you know we do know that it does come from an official source. (Participant 1)

- Promotes professionalism

Participant 2 shared that a verified account helps promote professionalism.

There was also a team called TTM, TTM would make a statement after every game like a heavy press statement where they say maybe if they won. They would say things such as "congratulations to us, we have evolved" and at some point, their social media accounts looked like fake or parody accounts. It's their behaviour that also really, you wonder what it was, it's really chosen account and they were not verified of course. (Participant 2)

- Protection against impersonation

Participant 3 revealed that the verified badge helps protect the account against impersonation. This could help protect the fans and or the public from falling victim to fraudulent acts on social media.

I think verifications are an important aspect side. Again, specifically in South Africa, there are a lot of people trying to take advantage of youngsters trying to get into sports by creating fake accounts. Uhm, post fake information about prospective trials or something like so the verification tag is a very important aspect to have. (Participant 3)

- **Subtheme 2: The most important social media followed account**

People create social media engagement and conversions by following accounts or having other accounts following them. For football clubs, who they follow is very important as it reflects the extent and level of their influence in the social media space. From the data gathered, it was found that some of the clubs followed the official page of the PSL while others followed their sponsors, journalists, and supporters.

- Official page of Premier Soccer League

Participant 1 revealed that the official page of the PSL is the most important social media account followed by football clubs. The possible explanation for this is that clubs will have to keep in touch with the information and changes in match fixtures coming out from the PSL social media handle.

I think probably maybe the most important one would be the official account of the PSL, but no other club would be more important than the other. (Participant 1)

- Sponsors/journalists and supporters

Participant 2 revealed that the club followed sponsors, journalists, and selected supporters on social media. According to the information gathered from participant 2, the club only followed die-hard supporters. This could be a way of preventing social media bullying and abuse, and negative use of social media by some people.

I think (uhm), we follow our sponsors, we follow journalists and we do follow our supporters. We screen the supports before we follow them to make sure who we follow are real die-hard supporters. I personally don't believe in blocking. We don't block, just ignore where there's abuse, we don't block. (Participant 2)

Participant 1 explained the reason why the club does not follow many of their fans. It was uncovered that it was to ensure the credibility of the clubs' official page by

limiting the number of fans followed. Nevertheless, the club tends to follow other football clubs, sport pages, and other stakeholders.

It would be quite specific. We wouldn't follow too many fans because when you're on an official page you want the credibility of perhaps maybe just dealing with just other clubs and other sports organisations out of the federation, so we would mainly follow other football clubs there. Sports pages, government, other stakeholders, sponsors, and that sort of thing. (Participant 1)

Participant 3 clarified the reason for following journalists by revealing the following:

Journalists or magazines like Soccer Laduma or that stuff we will follow because obviously if something comes up with us, we want to be able to reference that easier. It's just an easier way to know what's being said or content that's going out from their side that relates to the club. (Participant 3)

In terms of the reason given for following sponsors, informant 3 revealed that it is to see the content the sponsors are putting out and how the club can key into it.

We'll follow our sponsors such as Durban Tourism and Aqua Water. Uh, because of some, I think it's important to see what content they're putting out so that you can be relevant with them so that if you create some content that references them there is almost like a synergy between the two. (Participant 3)

Participant 2 shared similar sentiments by noting the following:

Like Spar, for example, it's just basically for the fact that we are in partnership, the fact that we want them to know and see what, uh, the publicity we gain through the association and what they stand to gain from being in a relationship with us. (Participant 2)

- Football clubs

Additionally, informant 3 revealed that the club followed other clubs. This was to make it easier for the club to tag, post, and reference other clubs.

I mean look, we obviously follow the other teams. It just makes it easier for us to post and tag and reference them in whatever we post. So that's kind of when we started our Instagram account, for example, and even the Twitter account was kind of the first place we looked at or on who we were following. Again, we follow a couple of international teams. (Participant 3)

4.2.4 Theme 4: The effectiveness of social media regarding organisational objectives

Communication plays an integral role in the sporting industry. Communication is an important element that needs to be incorporated into an organisation's communication plan. Properly planned and managed communication can be seen as an important element in an organisation. Parganas, Liasko and Anagnostopoulos (2017: 95) advised that it is important to evaluate the role of communication tools and their effectiveness in sports. In line with their advice, this theme explores the effectiveness of social media towards organisational objectives.

- **Subtheme 1: The perception of social media effectiveness**

Gdovka and Chen (2021:46) note that for a team to achieve sustainable supporters, it must create an effective social media platform. From the data transcribed, it was uncovered that football fans have a positive perception of the club's social media platforms. This was evidenced in the level of interest and engagement of the platform by the fans. Participant 2 attributes this to the club developing a cost-effective way of reaching the fan.

I think we just put it as it's the most practical and cost-effective way of uh reaching the fan, sometimes you get things that you're saying and you particularly on Facebook and I'm sure on Instagram as well you don't count but you get where it's up to you, you see the comments sometimes of why when people are saying I'm on free mode, what are you saying or they ask someone

to screengrab or tell them, but copy whatever is there and let them see that they see what's being said. So our social media is effective but I'm sure we still going questions one on which will cover this but I don't have any other platforms. Social media is just a practical way of reaching the supporters and then cost-effective as well. (Participant 2).

Apart from the fan's perceived engagement and interest, participant 3 notes that the club players appreciate the content created on their behalf.

I think there's a natural progression, it happens, or a natural sort of process that happens here with us where we get feedback from the players saying, you know, you know the content or the way it looks or the latest stuff we're doing for the season looks great you know that kind of thing. (Participant 3)

Nevertheless, participant 1 thinks the effectiveness of the club's social media platform was minimal. In the informant's words, the centre focus of the club is football.

I do think probably it's very minimal though because the look in the grand scheme of things just what's going on in our football at the moment, the most important thing is the football and it's quite clear. (Participant 1)

- **Subtheme 2: Measuring the effectiveness of social media**

According to Ghoshal (2019: 16), measuring the effectiveness of social media evaluates the value of social media in building and maintaining relationships with fans. A more in-depth evaluation of fan engagement is possible by evaluating the conversations and the favourability of the brand's mentions on social media platforms such as Facebook, X and Instagram. The indicators for the number of people reached include the number of people who visited the sports brand page, the viewers on the page, and the number of followers. Participant 1's views support this position by the club looking at the engagement and the growth of the page from month to month as a way of measuring the effectiveness of the social media platform.

You'd look at the engagement and you'd look at the growth of the page from month to month and what each platform does, it does give you, you know, a fair number of stats for posts per video per month and then you then use those stats to then start to gauge what works, what doesn't work. (Participant 1)

Participant 3 concurs with the above view by illuminating the following:

We do obviously have a look and see that our fan base is growing, and we don't want to be stagnant, that our fan base is growing, that our following is increasing, you know that we are putting out relevant information judged by the number of likes that we have or shares or that sort of stuff, but we but we're not really statistic driven if I can put it that way. (Participant 3).

Another way of measuring the effectiveness of social media is through the metrics of its engagement and conversation. Participant 1 revealed that the club uses Hootsuite a platform used to design, schedule, and publish content for all social media platforms to generate metrics statistics on the extent and level of engagement.

There are third-party applications that you probably use like hood suites and that sort of thing that would give you kind of a more definitive metric, but you can certainly be guided by the stats from each platform. (Participant 1)

Measurement of fan engagement and social media is necessary to go beyond the number of people reached and should assess how the context posted online can be an ongoing conversation. Participant 2 reveals how to measure the extent of engagement of social media posts. From the statement, one can draw out that the club does this on a quarterly basis or from the month-to-month.

It's normally quarterly but per campaign as well, but we look. The nice thing about social media is, it's not complicated so you just check out how a post would have performed at a certain time from month to month or quarterly and you take analytics, you analyse that, and you know what you want to do next to better reach your target. (Participant 2)

- **Subtheme 3: Impact of social media Trends on communication strategy**

The emergence of social media platforms such as TikTok and their popularity among young people has disrupted the social media space. New trends and engagement via short videos on TikTok have reduced business organisations' abilities to create content. From a football club perspective, it was critical to know how the emergence of new social media trends or platforms affects the organisation's communication strategy. Two of the participants acknowledged the disruptive influence of social media platforms on the club's communication strategies. Participant 1, therefore, advised that there must be a deep understanding of the markets for each platform.

Citing as an example, the informant revealed that TikTok attracts young people with video-driven content compared to Twitter which has character limits.

I think it's important for whoever's managing the communications plan. For social media communications plan to have a deep understanding of the markets that each platform attracts. Tik Tok obviously attracts a far younger market it is video driven and would deploy a certain type of content. Twitter is short with 360 characters. Or 280, whatever the case is. So yes, the different types of social media do influence a communication strategy because they all offer, or all have different dynamics. (Participant 1)

Participant 2 concurs with the above view by accentuating the following:

TikTok can be fast, you can catch a Tik Tok moment at any time so with no doubt we all need to have proper phones and shooting equipment, so we don't miss content creation moments. We must think like Tik Tok users but also studying out how other teams, particularly overseas teams, are using that platform. (Participant 2)

On the contrary, Participant 3 did not think the popularity of TikTok among young people and the video sharing content had any impact on the club communication strategies.

I don't think it affects us really in anyway, uhm, you know, we consider the new platforms we've thought, and we've spoken about Tik Tok, but the problem is, is that the content on, look, all the content creation for Tik Tok becomes so different because it's not traditional in pictures and words if I can put it that way, it is more of a, you know, like a video based and a lot of Tik Tok's kind of humour, we just don't see that working for us at the moment. (Participant 3)

- **Subtheme 4: Barriers to effective social media space**

To successfully communicate with others anywhere in the world requires an understanding of the barriers which inhibit the message from being sent and received successfully by the recipient (Ghoshal 2019: 16). This being considered, it is important that football clubs understand the barriers that may hinder the effective communication of their brands. Luthans (2019: 65) notes that a communication barrier is anything that precludes effective communication from obtaining and understanding the messages being communicated by other people.

Communication barriers can thus interfere with or hinder the message a person is trying to communicate. From the data transcribed, the following barriers the clubs face the following barriers:

- Budget and resources

Participant 1 revealed that building a good social media space involves lots of resources and costs money.

To build really good social media spaces, you need a budget because that sort of thing it costs money to hire the right people to get the right equipment to, you know, get the storytellers in it, it costs money. (Participant 1).

The informant added that South African football clubs are lacking the necessary resources needed to build effective social media space.

If we really want it to be part of the objectives of an organisation, then we have to put the budget into it and the reality is that most clubs in South Africa don't have those types of resources. (Participant 1).

- Trending News

Participant 2 notes that trends can hamper the effectiveness of communication on social media. In the informant's view, when people focus on trending news, they lose the message the club is trying to communicate. This was thus considered a barrier to effective communication.

This thing happened then people are not going to maybe not get it because now the focus is on the issue at hand that is maybe even trending. (Participant 2)

- Football club priorities

Participant 1 revealed that the perceived priorities of the club may become a barrier to effective use of social media. As an example, the informant notes that some clubs may only see social media as a means of achieving their objectives but not necessarily for them to communicate with fans. This means that such clubs will be less effective in disseminating information to the club fans.

Sundowns, for instance, or Cape Town city will see this as an opportunity to use social media as one of the vehicles that will help them achieve their objectives as a whole but probably 70% of it merely see it as an opportunity for them to communicate with fans and keep fans in the know and for the most part that's being done well. (Participant 1)

4.2.5 Theme 5: Strengths and weakness of social media

Appel *et al.* (2020: 81) stated that social media is a new, improved and faster medium to spread a brand's message and connect with stakeholders on a personal level. Since its establishment, social media has been the mainstream for rapid dissemination of

information and engagement globally. Considering its wide use, it was vital to explore the strength and weaknesses of social media in football clubs in South Africa.

- **Subtheme 1: Strength of social media**

Social media has risen to new heights of relevance globally ever since its establishment, with the average person logging on each day to a wide variety of content, including that of their favourite football club (Chon and Park 2019: 73). From the data transcribed, it was found that social media offers numerous advantages to the football clubs among which include:

- Real-time communication with fans

Participant 1 notes that the ability to communicate in real time with football fans is the strength of social media.

I think the strength is that they can communicate with fans in real-time. Uhm, you know, in the old days fans would have to wait for the 7:00 PM News or the 7:00 PM radio or get the newspaper the next morning to find out information about I don't know, coaches being sacked, or a new player has been signed. (Participant 1)

Adding further, fans can enjoy the thrill of being informed immediately about the signing of new players which can create engagement and conversation among them.

... if a new player signs, they can publish it immediately and so that's a big strength that you know, the clubs can jump on to. (Participant 1)

- Competitive content design

Participant 3 revealed that the strength of their social media use lies in the competitive content of the club.

Strange enough our strength is that we are up there with the bigger clubs in putting out good-looking designs. We don't maybe put out as much content which might be something we need to consider looking at but yeah, I think being up there with the bigger clubs as a small club is one of our greatest strengths. (Informant 3)

- Bridging the barriers of a cultural divide

South Africa is a multicultural and multiracial country. Participant 2 revealed that the club's social media account has been able to break through the cultural and racial divide.

I think our strength has been to be able to break away from the divide of region, language, yeah, back then you would always get some people saying why you always posting in English but social media to be quite honest any person who's got a device, they are forced to have a grasp of some English, so we've been able to break away from those expectations of people that want you to nurse them according to their culture, just because we are a club in KwaZulu. I think that's good. That's been a strength, we have not been reduced to just the AmaZulu team and where a Xhosa person doesn't feel like they belong or any other speaker of other languages or cultures. (Participant 2)

- **Subtheme 2: Weakness of social media**

In terms of the weakness of the social media account, it was uncovered that the lack of editorial structure, poor fan engagement from poor club results, and poor equipment quality contribute to the challenges and or weakness of the club's social media account.

- Lack of editorial structure

Participant 1, for example, notes that the lack of editorial structure and the right people in place is a weakness.

Probably a weakness is not having the right people in place and not having editorial structures in place that can help build and protect the brand. Because I come from an editorial background, I often see stuff from big clubs that it's quite embarrassing.
(Participant 1)

- Lack of interaction with supporters

Another weakness uncovered is a lack of engagement and interaction with the club supporters, particularly when the team has suffered poor results. This is illuminated in the statement below.

I think our weaknesses there's been times when it's been a rough patch. This I don't know really but, uh, there's been times where when you are engaging with your supporters and then just not having any interaction especially when results are not going well. The weakness is that it always creates a volatile environment with what happened on the field will translate towards everyone and everything that has to do with the club, and they stay angry. (Participant 2)

- Poor quality equipment

Participant 3 revealed the lack of quality equipment hampers the club's ability to create content.

I think one of our weaknesses is that we could spend better on equipment for content creation, and we are in the process of looking at that, so I don't really see it as a weakness either at the moment. (Participant 3)

4.2.6 Theme 6: The importance of social media to football clubs

- **Subtheme 1: Addressing social issues**

Participant 2 notes that social media can be used to address social issues around the clubs, hence its importance. For instance, social media can be used to deflect rumours of conflicts within the club faster and quicker.

Social media would help in a sense where you just come from a week or a weekend of controversy and what do you do? You just need a moment, to wait and just take a photo or a video of the coach and players on a pleasant morning, just post that and you don't say there's no racism in the team, but you just post and leave it at that. That's how social media helps us with a lot of social issues that we deal with. (Participant 2)

- **Subtheme 2: Structured communication**

Social media platforms such as Facebook, X and Instagram are the most common forms of social media and comprise a large part of the communication toolkit. These types of social media platforms were first based on personal profiles and are more modern forms of social media that are structured as personal platforms with the individual at the centre of their own community. Participant 2 revealed that without the structured nature of communication, there would have been confusion in disseminating information to the public.

...it's very important because nothing would get done or there would be a lot of confusion if there aren't well-structured forms of communicating a message and anything that is needed needs to be given that respect and blend the approach to getting the message across for the other person to receive and understand what needs to happen. (Participant 2)

- **Subtheme 3: Growing brand**

Social media is all about building the organisation's brand. Hayes (2021:1) expressed that brand equity is referred to as a value premium a company earns based on a recognisable brand compared with a generically similar product. By creating memorable, readily recognisable, and superior products with outstanding quality and reliability, companies can build brand equity for their products. Informant 1 notes that social media usage by the club can help them build their brands.

... from a commercial point of view grow their brand. (Participant 1)

- **Subtheme 4: Vehicle to communicate with fans**

Social media has made it easier for people who are socially awkward and would not normally engage in a conversation with other people in real life to find online communities they can belong to (Vann, Bruns and Harrington 2019: 70). The engagement that takes place on social media is around shared interests between users and the reason why people favour this type of platform is because of the engagement that takes place on social media both socially and professionally. For football clubs, social media has been used as a vehicle to communicate with their fans.

It is a vehicle to communicate with fans because, ultimately, that is what social media is for. It's a tool where the club can communicate with its fans.
(Participant 1)

4.2.7 Theme 7: Recommendation for improving social media

From the thematic analysis covered so far, it is apparent that there is room for improvement in the clubs' use of social media. This theme, therefore, explores the recommendation from the informants on how to improve social media usage by football clubs in South Africa.

- **Subtheme 1: Budget and resources provision**

Budget and resources constraint was considered a barrier to the effective use of social media. Not surprisingly, Participant 1 recommends budget and resource allocation.

To give them the budget and the resources to get it done and measure the progress from month to month, so you know that Uhm, you're improving and you're learning from your experiences. (Participant 1)

- **Subtheme 2: Creative content**

Social media content is the pinnacle for engagement and conversations. Hence, creative content was proposed as a way of improving social media usage by football clubs.

Yeah, yeah no. Yeah, definitely obviously creativity. I think Cape Town City F.C., Uhm, everyone was talking about the way they were doing things on social media there's sort of when they are coming out when, when the recent leaders launched their team. They had fun with the content, so you need to always be creative. (Participant 2)

One way of improving the content is through photographic content. This may be attributable to the fact that images or pictures are more engaging than words.

Participant 3 recommends the improvement of the photographic content.

I think that we need a lot more photographic content. Uh, we need to create a crew of photographers that we can access and rely on all the time. We could maybe spend a little bit more budgets on a couple more people like you know, maybe one more person to bring into the media side of things so that it's not so thin with the resource you know someone that could follow the team with a camera, that kind of thing. You know, just maybe a little bit more budget allocated to the media side of things for different aspects of it. That's the only thing I would think is something we could do. (Participant 3)

- **Subtheme 3: Hiring experienced social media team**

Poor creativity in copywriting may undermine the message the clubs are trying to communicate. Hiring experts in that department may help boost the clubs' social media engagement support. This will be beneficial to their brands and revenue generation. Participant 1 recommends the hiring of an experienced social media team with experience in the sports industry.

I would say hire an experienced team that has a history of working with social media in the sports industry. (Participant 1)

The reason provided for the above view is that social media has become science and thus employing the right people is critical and essential.

To deal with it, when social media and content creation for social media has become a very specific science, and its art trained people in the art of storytelling, and we can build specific blocks. Social media specialists need to be employed and these clubs haven't employed these people. (Participant 1)

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS: NETNOGRAPHY

The way sports stars, clubs and fans interact with each other has changed because of social media. Fans often access news, insights and commentary from the source through game live updates, creating snarky memes, and cheerleading from WebSphere (Nairaine 2019: 223).

Social media has changed the way sports teams, athletes and fans interact with each other. According to Fenton, Keegan and Parry (2023:313) social media has completely changed the 'game' of communication from live tweeting games, creating funny memes, and fans cheering from the stands. Fans are no longer just sitting at home simply watching the games, they now engage with the clubs wherever they are in the world. Even when the fans are not watching the game either on television or at the stadium, they often get news, commentary, and insights straight from social media (Kim, Morgan and Assaker 2020:5).

Currently social media and sports are like a 'match made in heaven' as now sports teams can tell their stories directly to their fans through their own social media platforms and other digital platforms eliminating the process of going through traditional personnel such as journalists. The focus of this study is a netnography research thesis of social media as a communication tool in KZN football industry of the three PSL/DSTV premiership league.

For netnography, the researcher looked at the social media platforms of AmaZulu FC, LGA FC, and Maritzburg United FC, looking at the different aspects of social media communication between sports teams and fans, focusing on the content and level of engagement taking place on the team's social media platforms. The researcher drew conclusions from non-participant observation on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and from interviews with selected staff members of the teams. This features screenshots, archival data and field notes. This chapter addresses each of my research objectives:

- Objective 1: To identify the most used social media platform in the football industry.
- Objective 2: To assess the role of the current social media platforms used in the KZN football clubs; and
- Objective 3: To identify the communication barriers in the KZN football clubs when using social media.

The influence social media has in sports, especially the football industry, is huge. During this time of digital media, it may be hard to find an athlete that is not on social media engaging with fans in some form or another (Figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1: Athlete profile
Source: Instagram (2021)

Real-time updates and live content have dominated social media platforms of sports clubs and has become one of the most important forms of social engagement, from team news and trash talk and beyond as sport related topics are always almost trending on X week in and week out (Manning 2018: 110). The use of social media is forever changing and evolving; therefore, sports clubs do not just trend or have massive engagement on social media by luck or accident, the teams are always adapting and learning through the changing times of digital media (Nations 2017: 2).

4.3.1 The current state of social media in the KZN football sports industry

With the world being hit by the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown in March 2020, the world of sport came to a standstill with an uncertain future for players and no matches for fans to attend or watch as almost all countries restricted public gatherings and closed all non-essential industries indefinitely to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus.

Regardless of all of that, the buzz behind the sports did not go away as teams found creative ways to stay in contact and engage with the fans, athletes, and support staff. Sport teams still had engagement with their fans when posting quizzes, games, or any other content they created during the lockdown. The enthusiasm behind the return of live matches following the ban of matches due to the Covid-19 pandemic was reflected in continued engagement on social media.

The takeaway for the researcher from it all was the ability of social media to keep everyone connected and engaged. Before the league resumed, the fans were very eager for the sports matches to return as they also wanted to return to the stadiums cheering for their teams, but when the league returned fans were not allowed to attend the live matches but fans were eager and willing to engage with the teams and athletes on social media even though they were watching the matches from home.

For the sports broadcaster it was difficult to capture the emotional resonance of sports with fans not allowed into the stadiums, because fans make the stadium come alive with their antics and emotions. Fans are always devoted to the teams, athletes, and stadiums in a way that gives them a social identity and their participation makes sports events more intense and enjoyable both live and on social media. COVID-19 provided teams with an opportunity to change their “formulaic approach” to how and what they communicate with fans (Figure 4.2). Moreover, the social media buzz generated around players and teams serves as a powerful marketing asset, positively impacting ticket sales, merchandise, and overall brand engagement (Wang, Cheng, and Sun 2021).



Figure 4.2: Spot the difference puzzle
Source: Facebook (2021)

During this time when fans were not allowed in the stadiums social media played a role in keeping fans up to date on club news such as player contracts, signings, league announcements etc., providing fans opportunities to engage and interact with the content the teams shared on social media such as quizzes, Q&As, competitions etc., and providing highlights on any team related community news and events. Throughout this study the researcher identified some common trends that the DSTV Premiership football clubs in KZN share or have in common with their social media pages and the content they share on their pages:

4.3.2 Real time updates and live content

Professional sport organisations are heavily dependent on social media to be able to interact with their fans, with most of their interaction taking place in real time through live updates such as tweets, Instagram stories, Facebook stories etc. The live updates often include content message strategies such as hashtags, GIFs, memes, and teams adopt these strategies as they make it easier to communicate with fans. the fact that social media can function in real time, while games are taking place, is a great advantage because it gives eager fans an opportunity to express their views and speak their minds (Vale and Fernandes 2017: 44). For the clubs anything that can help to

encourage and capture engagements is always a plus and a gain for the team. Real time updates and live content identified from the team's social media pages are:

- **Live posting**

Many of X's most active moments in history have been sport related and X is considered an ideal platform for real-time updates to an event, and it is also offering accessibility, combability and interactive structure which blends well in sports. Live posting has gained popularity with professional sport organisations. Unlike regular posting, live posting during big events such as matches and pre- and post-match conferences facilitates the dialogue of the event as it unfolds as users are most likely to engage with live posts while watching the match (Corney, Martin and Göker 2014: 450).

These types of posts are more time sensitive than regular tweets and updates so it is not easy for sport teams to identify its effectiveness when it comes to engagement with fans. According to Rowles (2017: 102) despite its popularity, sport clubs hope that the live updates are effective in encouraging user involvement. Live posting also adds value to the sports club content creators because it is able to attract ordinary users who engage with the clubs social media content.

Live posting contributes to the fans participation and helps to foster online engagements between sport teams and fans. Fans are able to connect with sport clubs as they read posts from their favourites clubs and players and live posting provides focused content for conversation that helps to strengthen the social bonds of the fans (Rowles 2017: 102). The clubs have used different kinds of tactics such as giveaways, games, and quizzes, to start conversations and gain engagement on social media. All these content features are classical and typical techniques that have been widely used by other organisations from different industries including marketing, sales and advertising. Woodcook and Jonson (2019: 321) stated that live posting often involves highly engaged users with advanced knowledge of the space and major loyalty to what they interacting with and observing. From my observation with this research study, the majority of the content that is shared by the clubs on social media is live updates and

play-by-play sports action. Even when the fans are watching the matches either on television or live at the stadium, they do turn on web based technologies including social media platforms such as X to get live updates and to interact and engage with other fans online (Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3: Play-by-play match updates
Source: Twitter (2020)

As more people are now technologically inclined, sport fans are not just watching the matches on television or listening on the radio, they are also interacting with the matches by tweeting before, during and after the matches and following the commentary of the match (Zhang and Sun 2019: 395). X as a mobile app also allows fans to access posts whether they are at the stadium, sports bar or watching from home with family or friends. For many years now X has been operating as a crucial backchannel for a lot of fans by allowing a sense of community, belonging and a feeling of shared passion and engagement. Forming imagined communities that are not restricted by geographical or local borders provides an evident bond of an invisible

audience that is only separated by their own viewing space. Social media platforms such as X bring together fans of different social and cultural background whose only point of connection is engaging in football. While X is not an easy space for sports organisations to control, it does at times become a fun space for engagement, interaction and providing the audience with a sense of community as well as providing them with informal reactions to the content they are providing (Sanders and Freberg 2020: 157).

- **Hashtags**

A hashtag is another feature that influences the visibility of tweets. The function of a hashtag is similar to a hyperlink because when a social media user can search for a specific hashtag and they will discover and see tweets from other users accounts that they do not follow or never followed before. In X, Facebook and Instagram the use of social media hashtag is a popular technique to encourage and increase engagement. By adding the hashtag symbol (#) before a keyword or a phrase, the users group the tweets into categories, which allows the tweets to be discovered more easily via the X search function (Figure 4.4). Therefore, hashtags can increase the visibility of tweets by enabling them to reach beyond the existing followers and rapidly assemble an ad hoc public. Existing literature on X has established a positive relationship between the use of hashtags and user engagement. As Klapper (1960) mentioned in selective exposure that stakeholders chooses to consume specific media dependent on their interests, hashtags offers fans that opportunity to follow topics that they are interested in.



Figure 4.4: Hashtags
Source: LGA FC Twitter (2020)

Even though hashtags have been commonly used to identify trending topics or to alert the public of breaking news, they are also being used by sport clubs, leagues, athletes and broadcasters to generate and increase viewership or to attract sponsors to align with the brand (Chaffey and Smith 2022: 65). The hashtag in sport was initially dominated by fans who were causally seeking to generate conversation around a certain sporting event, then sport organisations slowly began to recognise the power of a hashtag to distribute information and start conversations just by using an event created specific hashtag (Lawrence and Crawford 2018: 118). With the rapid increase and influence of social media within the sport industry hashtags are also used to promote sponsorships that a sports club has. For example, Umgeni Water is one of the Maritzburg United sponsors and they have an on-going “save water” campaign targeted at the public which Maritzburg United has been pushing on their social media pages with hashtags such as #WaterIsLife #WeAreUnited #SaveWater included in their captions. Sponsors are now more aware that a hashtag is an identifier for a discussion that focuses on the same topic therefore by including a hashtag in all their posts, the fans that follow and engage with the content of that team can view the conversation with which the message in the post is associated.

When a hashtag is not properly used, it can cause problems because messages that belong to the same conversations may get lost even if they contain the same keywords. Twitter has no special way or support to add a hash sign (#) in the front of the word therefore once a person forgets the hash or incorrectly spells the words their message can be lost. Social media users often use hashtags for personal categorisation and on many occasions the intention is to introduce new hashtags to turn them into symbols used by the users community in discussing a particular topic. The aim of such hashtags is to find and summarise messages related to that particular topic or event (Chadwick, Widdop, Anagnostopoulos and Parnell 2022: 88).

4.3.3 Sponsorships

According to Weimar, Holthoff, and Biscacia (2020:335) in the area of market communication, corporate sponsorship of sports and other events has grown fast. What makes sport sponsorship's rapid growth is because a lot of people around the world are involved in sport and exercise and because sport is considered to be a "grand stage" which involves humour, drama, laughter, and tears as well as draw superior media coverage (Weimar, Holthoff, and Biscacia 2020:335). Sport sponsorship is often being pursued because of the image rub-off effect due to sport being viewed as a healthy character building activity and important in the development of an individual in a competitive society. Well directed sponsorships have a great impact and enhance the perception of the sport club and their products. See Figure 4.5.



Figure 4.5: Sponsorship
Source: Twitter (2021)

Sponsorship is a flexible promotional tool which can be used in several forms and organisations such as sports, education, and arts etc. must consider the potential benefit for both parties and choose the most appropriate involvement. The type of sponsorships that the researcher found to be common among the three KZN professional clubs included:

While sports continue to attract many people to stadiums, digital advancements and social media have brought new possibilities for brands to increase their visibility and improve their sponsorship message (Weimar, Holthoff, and Biscaccia 2020:336). Sport sponsorship dates all the way back to the 1940s and 1950s when sport TV coverage began. Over the years sport sponsorship have become international with teams being sponsored by different global brands. In the DSTV premiership league, the three teams based in KZN have been or are still sponsored by one or more companies. The two clubs based in Durban namely, LGA FC and AmaZulu FC are both sponsored by eThekweni Municipality and Umngeni Water. AmaZulu FC are also sponsored by Spar and their club regalia is sponsored by Umbro. LGA FC have no other sponsors as the

owners feel that a sponsorship deal will not bring anything onto the table for them. The one club that is based in Pietermaritzburg namely, Maritzburg United FC is also sponsored by Umgeni Water, and they are also sponsored by Gift of the Givers. See Figure 4.6.



Figure 4.6: Seasonality Sponsorship
Source: Facebook (2020)

The rapid growth of social media and digitisation and streaming sports events, for example increases the potential for visibility for both the team and the brand. Social media has provided brands with new platforms to build brand presence and investments and while previously brand logos were only visible during the event or match at the venue, it is now also possible to generate visibility outside the stadium and away from the game as well. Social media offers new ways of interacting with fans and customers. A large part of the content is now generated directly by fans with an increase in content showcasing the brand logo.

Freeman (1984:75) and Clarkson (1995: 92) categorized stakeholders as primary or secondary based on their relationship with the organization. Primary stakeholders are those whose ongoing involvement is essential for the corporation's survival (Clarkson 1995: 106). Sponsors are essential for the survival of the club operation and generating

additional revenue for the club as sponsorship has a common goal regardless of the industry being sponsored; it has been proven that sport has almost the same influence and power that some other industries have such as product placements on TV shows. Sport sponsorship has an influence and power that can give brands access to a huge audience that is global and loyal as well. With social media and streaming coverage, sport sponsorship offers a high visibility for the brand because sport fans watch matches as well as previews and post-game analyses and social media gives brands an additional opportunity to broadcast themselves as every post that the teams posts on social media includes the logo of the brand. Clubs sometimes also post products, specials, giveaways, and competitions related to the brand they have partnered with. See Figure 4.7.

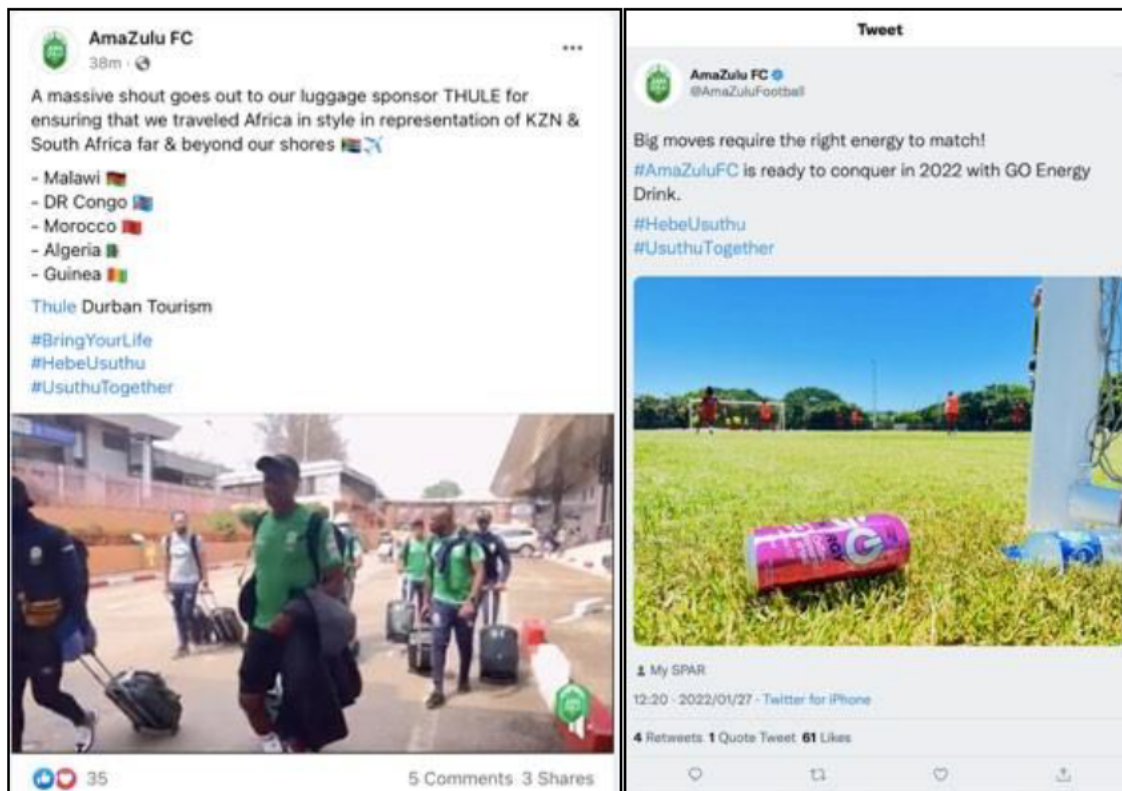


Figure 4.7: Sponsored product placement
Source: Twitter

Sport normally attract a much less targeted audiences compared to other industries which provides a better visibility for the brand and sports fans tends to be loyal and will then be more likely to notice the brands advertising. News, products, campaigns and

brand values and gets the best conversion rates through the quick transmission of information of intelligent support provided by social media.

4.3.4 Memes and GIFs

The position of popular sports like football has become very important in society and with the use of social media has become very influential. In recent years sport entertainment has shifted with the incorporation of second screen devices such as phones, tablets and computers in the sport experience. The internet is now a place where fans can consume sport through different types of channels, for example watching a match on live TV and tweeting at the same time.



Figure 4.8: GIFs and memes

Source: Twitter (2022)

- **Memes**

Brubaker, Church, Hansen, Pelham, and Ostler (2018: 742) described memes as incomplete and flawed in a way because every individual is not guaranteed to understand the meme the same way and therefore the response to the meme can either challenge or reinforce the message being communicated in the original post. Once a meme has been created, it also spreads through the various social media platforms such as Facebook, X and Instagram and so on and a meme's popularity is solely dependent on how well users use it and how the audiences respond to it. Memes are always created with a comic element in them, and they have evolved to be used as a swift response to significant moments on social media and this demonstrates the potential that memes can be used where messages are being communicated in a playful tone to convey and influence certain new ideas.

Nowadays sport fans are no longer just communicating via text, they are communicating in real time through sharing of media such as memes, gifs, video clips and so on (Woodcock and Jonson 2019: 326). These engagements are now more consistent among the online football fan base where fans are not just using memes to talk about football, they are also using these memes as a communication tool to participate in the discussion of social topics that are beyond football (Kelso and Gracyalny 202: 15). Athletes are well-known in their respective sport, but they are also known for their roles as humanitarian ambassadors and their images are used to mobilise awareness towards the real issues of the world, while at the same time their pictures can be used as funny images on social media platforms. The thing that memes have most in common is being shared in the form of images that are designed to be funny and entertaining (Figure 4.9).



Figure 4.9: Crying Jordan meme
Source: Twitter (2018)

Memes are deeply connected to the social life and internet life. One of the most famous athletes of our time, Michael Jordan has found himself being called the “Crying Jordan meme” and this meme is arguably one of the most popular and more visible memes among the millions of memes that are shared and transmitted through all social media platforms (Figure 4.10). During the memorial service of Kobe Bryant, Michael Jordan, who was paying respect and tribute to his friend Kobe shared a joke with the audience in attendance that his emotional and crying face will most probably trend and become yet another “Crying Jordan meme”. Memes such as Jordan's face continue to be used to communicate life issues such ideas, outlooks and, of course, humour.



Figure 4.10: MJ meme
Source: Twitter (2018)

- **GIFs**

Pronounced as jiff and short for Graphics Interchange Format, a GIF is defined as a file extension and a bitmap graphics file that was introduced by Steve Wilhite in 1987 by CompuServe and today it is one of the most used images on social media. GIFs are known to bridge the gap between images and videos which have become very useful in sports, when a user does not have to sit through and listen to a whole video of highlights but at the same time the action and experience of what makes sports interesting. GIFs have also added a fun element to social media content. By sharing sport GIFs on social media, fans provoke commentary and opinions on the origin post and sometimes GIFs are not only used for entertainment but also to gain a better understanding of sports which then ultimately plays a huge role in shaping the conversation and understanding of the entire context. See Figure 4.11.



Figure 4.11: GIFs
Source: Twitter (2020)

Enke and Borchers (2019: 261) state that over the years there has been a shift on how people use social media; nowadays social media is used by individuals and companies to communicate and seek information for both professional and private use. Visual social media has presented a new way for social media users to express their views and commentary through GIFs and memes. Visual social media is a vital part of the everyday activities on social media platforms such as X, Facebook, etc. Social media users can use profile pictures, memes, GIFs, infographics, and affective imagery to engage with several topics on social media. It is not easy to determine who created the GIF even though with popular characters such as celebrities, it is easy to identify which movie or music video the gif or meme originates from. GIFs clearly indicate that social media users are no longer just passive viewers of information or content, but

they are also participants, collaborators and creators; in this new age of content creation people can create and share a great amount of content on their own terms. GIFs have gained huge popularity in sports all over the world because GIFs are so easy to create and have the power to efficiently convey a great deal of information and expression, particularly with fans.

In the PSL, LGA is one of the clubs that uses GIFs when interacting with fans on their social media platforms. The teams interact and share GIFs and they use different types of GIFs. The following are different types of GIFs that the researcher identified from the LGA X account.

1. Highlight GIFs

According to Luker (2019: 445), effective and direct communication with sports fans is essential for all sports organisations. It is very important to have a clear understanding of how information and communicating through technology works to manage the communication process. Highlight GIFs are GIFs that capture and showcase the most important moments of the game, with the high probability that such moments will include the most impressive and inspiring moments of the competition and it can include the goals highlights, team line-up, attempted goals, fouls etc. (Figure 4.12).



Figure 4.12: Highlight GIF
 Source: Twitter (2021)

2. Expressive GIFs

Expressive GIFs focus on someone’s expression during the live match and movies. For example, an expressive GIF may capture a player’s unique goal celebration, a coach’s disappointment after an unpleasant play or a fan’s expression when the fan realises he or she is on the stadium big screen (Figure 4.13).

The purpose of the GIFs is not to replace the 'normal' highlights normally provided after the match. Instead they are used to transmit the communication of emotions and expressions in certain situations outside of sports



Figure 4.13: Expressive GIF
Source: Twitter (2021: 1)

3. Commentary GIFs

Commentary GIFs capture the action from sports broadcasts and any relating topics to the teams or the match. Commentary GIFs can also capture comments relating to political and social issues or queries that fans might have about the teams affairs (Figure 4.14).



Figure 4.14: Commentary GIF
Source: Twitter (2022)

4.3.5 Giveaways and competitions

Giveaways are used by teams as means to facilitate engagements on X. Giveaways have shown to be influential in terms of user engagement and boosting sales for the club's merchandise and match tickets. Giveaways in live sporting events are normally in the form of match tickets, club merchandise or any marketing material used for promotions. For instance, the AmaZulu FC team posted on their social media platforms to fans to download their new App and register as an AmaZulu FC official member and take a screenshot as proof and DM (Direct Message) it to the clubs Instagram account

(Figure 4.15). On the different social media platforms the post received a lot of engagement as this was a strategic move from the club to push the sales of tickets considering that it was the first official match where fans were allowed to watch the match live from the stadium after fans were banned due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Three fans received a set of two VIP tickets each and the AmaZulu soccer jersey as a prize. The reason why giveaways work in favour of the clubs lies in the positive effect of emotional response to receiving something without paying for it.



Figure 4.15: Competition posts
Source: Facebook (2020)

Giveaways and competitions are part of marketing in sports where a club seeks to promote the sale of match tickets, merchandise and sponsored products (Luker 2019: 450). Even though giveaways are the most common type of promotion in professional football to increase demand, most teams provide fewer giveaway items or tickets than the tickets up for sale. Clubs use giveaways as a major promotion strategy component and clubs have demonstrated that the attendance tends to increase when fans are expecting to grab some giveaways whether before or during the match. Clubs have

long offered giveaways or introduced competitions to entice the fans to attend the matches throughout the season. See Figure 4.16.



Figure 4.16: ABSA competition
Source: Facebook (2019)

When it comes to competitions each club is consistent with their own strategy and these clubs use these times of giveaways to maximise a short-run attendance by enticing fans to purchase tickets for matches they would likely not attend if there were no giveaways (Crawford 2018:190). Promotions in sports assists the teams to accomplish many of their goals and objectives such as increasing game attendance and generating positive publicity for the team. To attract fans to matches, the teams normally implement new promotional events to encourage attendance by using complimentary tickets (free tickets), match-day premiums and beverage specials such as alcohol.



Figure 4.17: Celebrity ambassadorship
 Source: Facebook (2022)

Pictured above (Figure 4.17) is a well-known radio presenter in the KwaZulu-Natal province who is affiliated with the AmaZulu FC team. He often collaborates with the club to do giveaways with his listeners and also endorses the club and promotes ticket sales and the club merchandise on his social media pages. With the number of followers and access to the radio audience, his involvement increases the number of people the club can reach and influence in their favour.

4.3.6 Social media impact in sport

Social media has increased the knowledge and excitement in sport at all levels of the leagues, especially in professional sport. The relationship between social media and sport are interdependent and intertwined with each other which and have the potential to affect the ideologies of society in the way they interact and present their key values.

Naraine, Wear and Whitburn (2019: 275) stated that social media has a huge influence on sport in terms of creating revenue by supplying free advertising and free publicity for the teams. Social media has opened new ways to communicate sport news updates and has opened up new opportunities for fans. The interactive nature of the social media experience has drawn the average spectators of sports into a closer relationship with the teams. Sports and social media have a similar aim which is to reach a wider audience, which suits all stakeholders including the teams, the fans and the sponsors.

Over the years technology has improved and the internet has won the hearts of consumers including sports fans who now can watch matches, pre-match interviews, post-match interviews, highlights and replays wherever they may be. The interactive nature of these experiences has drawn the fans closer to all the action and fans who use the internet are a lot more involved in team than any average sport fan (Gdovka and Chen 2021: 45). At first the sport industry did not jump on the social media train, but this quickly changed when social media started influencing how people live their lives, the decisions they make and their taste in material things. One the reasons the sport industry did not want to let social media in was to not give fans too much information or entitlement to the teams and protect athletes privacy, but over time teams and athletes created their own social media pages and became popular with a huge number of followers (Pegoraro, Scott and Burch 2017: 69) . Social media has impacted on how fans view athletes now that they have access to and a little window into their private lives. Athletes and clubs have used social media to gain popularity and for athletes to gain celebrity status. With the way social media affects sports, social media can have a positive impact on popularity of sports by providing free publicity for small teams, enhancing the images of sport athletes and building solid fan alliances with the team and with the players individually. Social media brings the sport to people

who usually do not get to experience sport and this can encourage people to get involved and support the clubs just by the experience and interactions they have on social media. Fans now go as far as declaring on their social media profiles which club/s they are supporting and they interact with almost all the content of that team and the teams players (Figure 4.18).

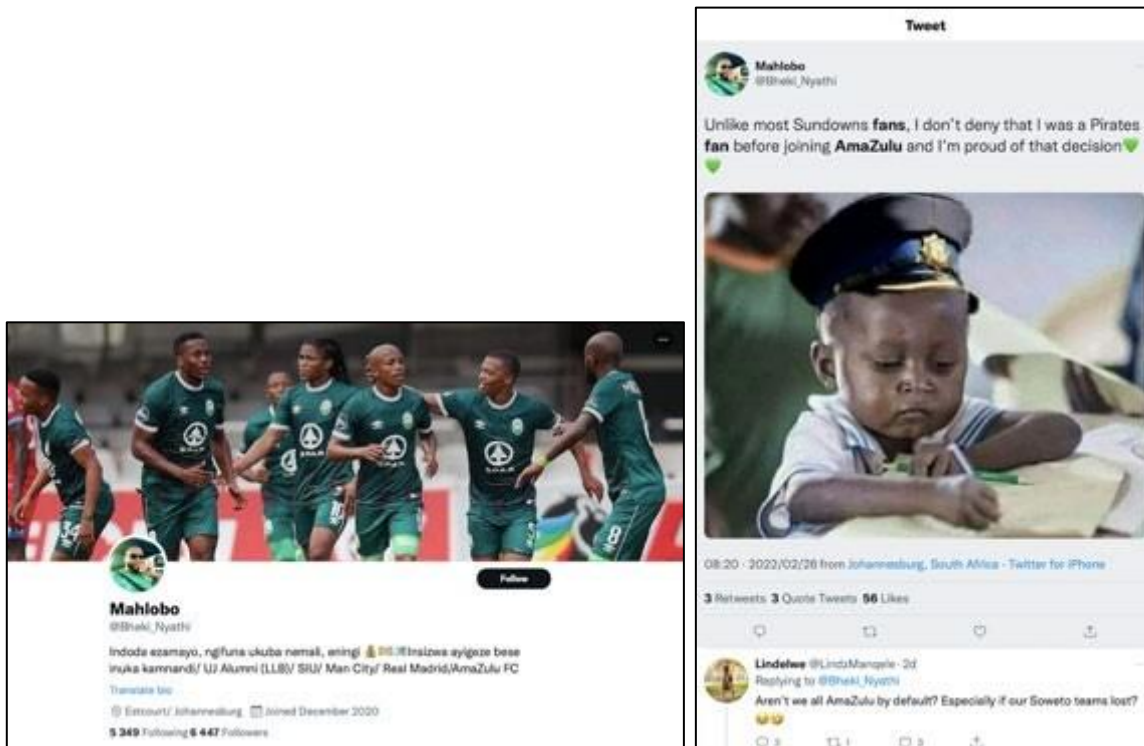


Figure 4.18: Fan profile

Source: Twitter (2021)

The people who engage with the sport content are mostly big fans of the clubs. There are different types of fans and some fans attend live matches at the stadium as well as interact with the team live updates on social media while some fans listen or watch the match by radio or television or on the internet. Social media provides access to everyone whether they are watching live at the stadium or in the comfort of their own home; the impact social media provides can be a positive influence.

4.3.7 The most popular and used social media platform among the three selected KZN football clubs

Social media plays an important role in the sport and this study has offered new insights into the use of social media as a communication tool. One of the findings is that the three football teams have the most followers on X, followed by Facebook then Instagram, and X has the highest number of interactions between fans and sport clubs, athletes, and other stakeholders. See Figure 4.19.

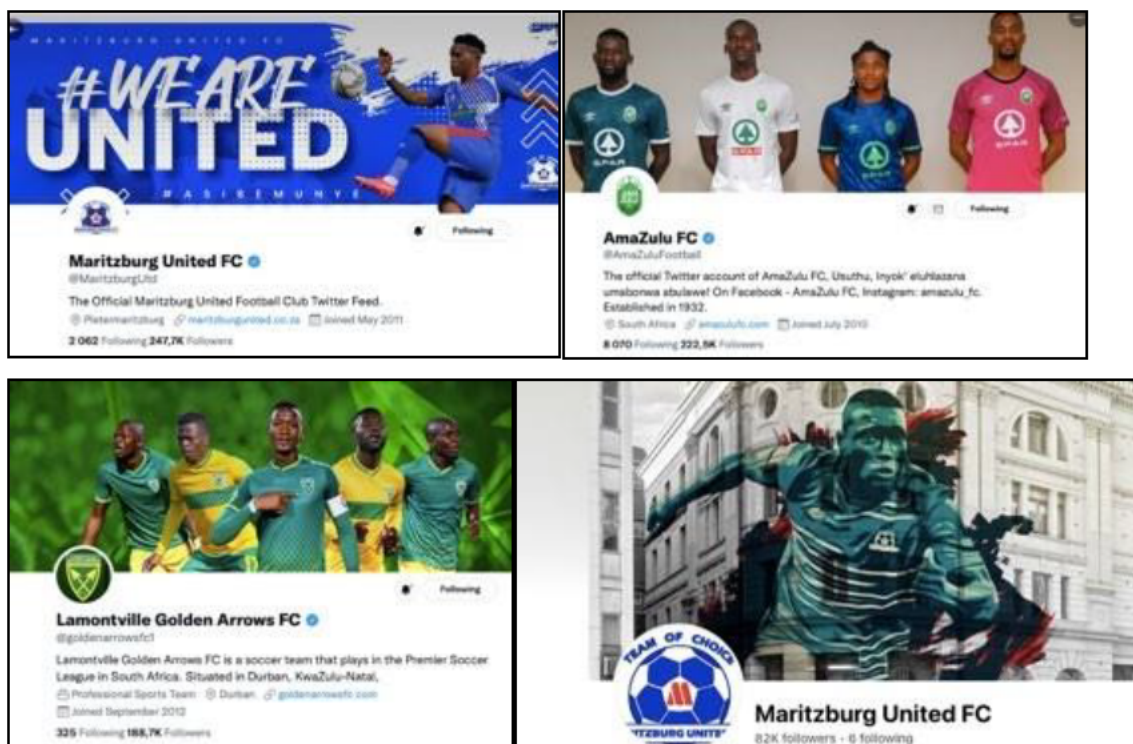


Figure 4.19: Teams X profiles
Source: Facebook (2019)

The researcher analysed most of the posts the teams put on their social media platforms for a certain period of time. The researcher looked at the patterns of interaction, exchange, engagement between the clubs and its fans and other stakeholders. Now that social media is becoming such an important communication tool, clubs are capitalising on the opportunity to build online communities through two-way communication with their stakeholders. Regarding social media the more a brand engages with its stakeholders the more the stakeholders will be satisfied, committed and trust the brand and what it stands for. Therefore, football teams have established

that the more they engage with their fans on social media, the more the fans will be satisfied, committed and faithful to the club and this normally works in the teams favour as the teams are perfectly positioned to use social media, given the fact that they have a huge support foundation and base and the ability to facilitate the interaction of fans with their products and services.

From the data collected, former studies and the researchers knowledge, it can be concluded that the posts are showing that the relationship between clubs and their fans and followers is classified as a general relationship, especially the informational posts such as live updates, match line up and technical club updates. This study shows content from the teams social media pages either from X, Facebook and Instagram, the researcher can suggest that the teams start posting on a more personal or community level type of relationship which will emphasise the engagement and inclusivity of the fans and followers that interact with the teams' content. The followers of a club should be categorised as stakeholders in the team and clubs should be more interactive with the fans and followers which will increase loyalty and help the club to grow beyond the geographical area of KwaZulu-Natal. X is the most cost effective platform for clubs and also has a high engagement between the clubs and fans.

4.3.8 Social media communication barriers

All the three clubs have experienced social media barriers on all their platforms. A communication barrier is anything that precludes effective communication and prevents obtaining and understanding the messages being communicated by other people (Luthans 2019: 65). The noticeable social media barriers are lack of engagement or response to questions and comments from fans. Over the years fans have developed relations with their favourite football clubs both online and offline which require constant engagement to nurture them. The whole purpose of fans following their favourite clubs and players on social media is to get the most updated news instantaneously. Neumann (2008: 2305) stated that when viewed through the two-way, communication is fundamentally interactive. Other advantages of using social media by the clubs is that organisations can use social media as a two way communication channel with the fans to achieve their organisational mission (Wang, Cheng and Sun

2021: 102) Social media platforms have become part of the essential communication tools for connecting teams with their fans. However, research has showcased lack of engagement from the clubs' side. Figure 4.20 is an example of one of the clubs posts about where to buy their regalia and fans had questions in the comment section which the team never replied to.

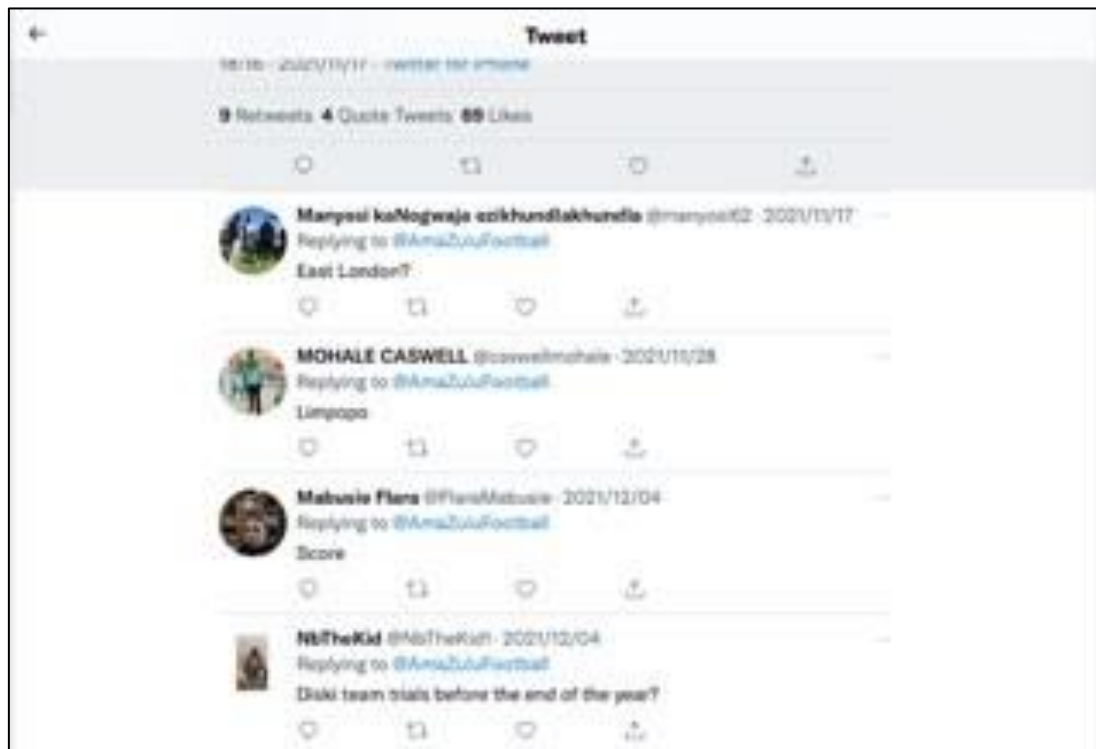
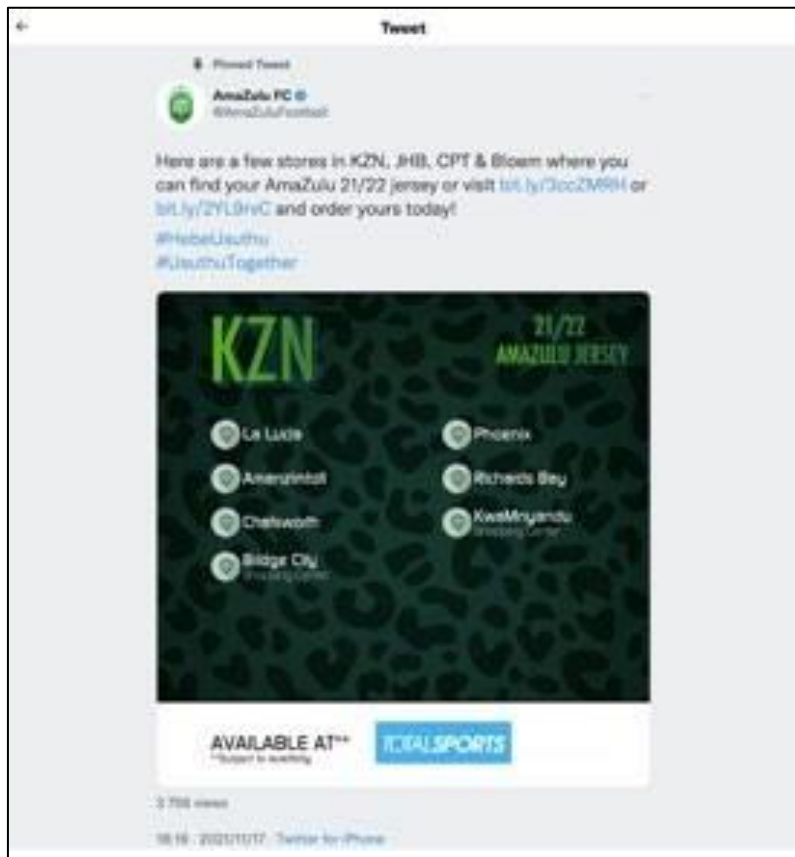


Figure 4.20: Fan comments (communication barriers)
Source: Twitter (2021)

Besides the many positive aspects and benefits that social media platforms have to offer, there are still some negatives aspects of social media in football. For example, fake news can spread more quickly than ever before; some social media administrators of these teams may have no idea of using some of the new trendy social media platforms appropriately; negative comments from fans could affect the performance of the club, etc (Wang, Cheng and Sun 2021: 102). There are lots of cases indicating that the use of social media by the team's social media administrators and the club players need to be trained because one bad post can have a dramatic negative influence on the club and sports organisation as whole (Chanavat, Desbordes and Lorgnier 2017: 45). In essence social media is still evolving and will stay evolving and fans as well as sport organisations, athletes and their clubs are embracing social media platforms as an essential tool to market, communicate, promote and interact with fans. Not responding to fans comments and questions also puts the club in a bad light and it is the organisation's responsibility to train its administrators how to respond to questions on social media even in times of crisis. Figure 4.21 and Figure 22 show an example of one of the KZN teams ignoring comments on a post because fans were commenting about what they had read in a newspaper article about the owner of the club.



Figure 4.21: Team news (1)
Source: Khoza (2022: 1)

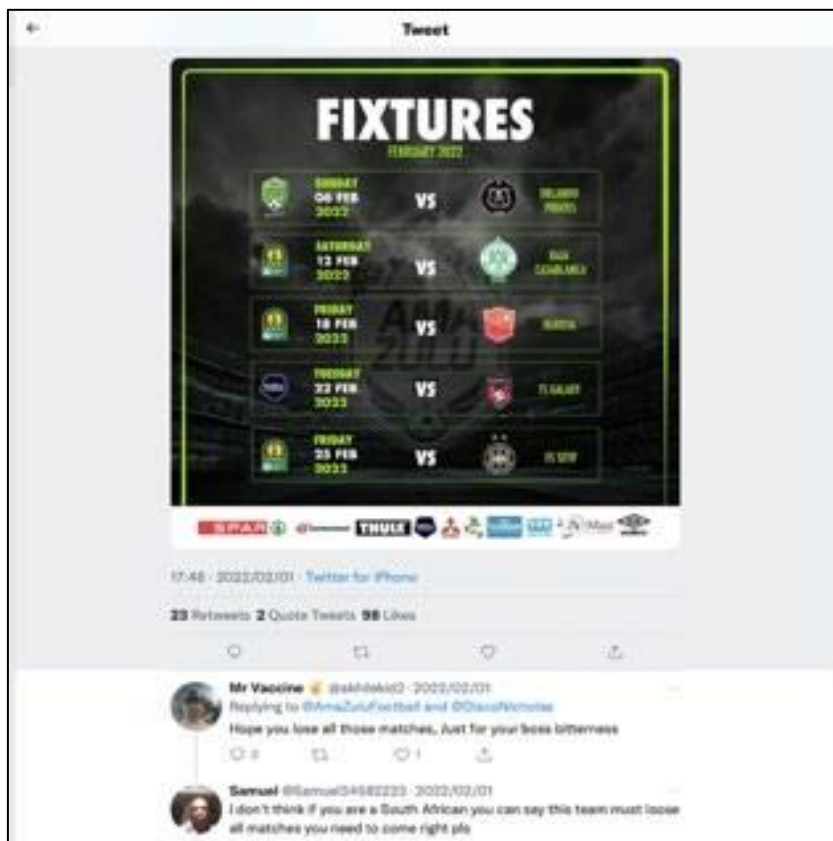


Figure 4.22: Team news (2)

4.3.9 Fans social media content

Fans can be described as individuals who love their clubs and the fandoms they belong to. Therefore, as much as they may post about their own lives and the events that take place in their own lives, they also have a tendency of posting and being very vocal about their clubs and fandoms where they express their thoughts, opinions, praises and criticisms. In terms of what has been observed and analysed in terms of the content the fans share, these are the common features found to be more popular among the different fandoms.

- **Opinions**

Normally fans have opinions whether negative or positive about their clubs which can spark debates from other fans with similar thinking or opinions and most of these opinions always revolve around the clubs results, the players and the coach. See Figure 4.23 and Figure 4.24.



Figure 4.23: Fan opinions (1)
Source: Twitter (2022)



Figure 4.24: Fan opinions (2)
Source: Facebook (2020)

- **Images**

The images that fans share are mostly images from the games, movies and TV shows and sometimes fan art and memes (Figure 4.25). Social media platforms provide the opportunity to enhance communication with the addition of pictures.

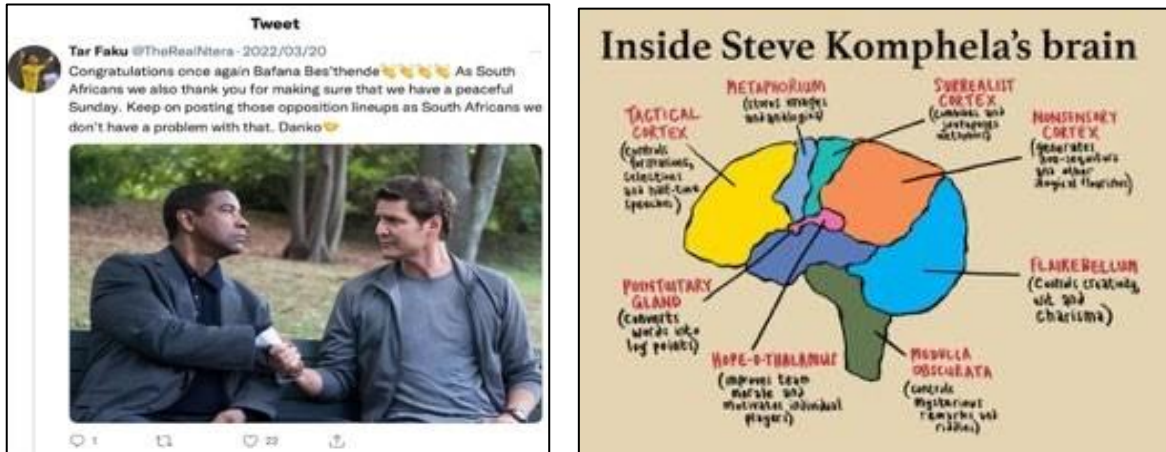


Figure 4.25: Fan comments
Source: Twitter (2022)

- **Quotes**

Fans normally get these quotes from coaches, players or from anywhere the fans consider important and entertaining to be posted on their social media platforms. Fans posts these quotes because they might seem inspiring and motivating, therefore the fans may want to take them into their everyday lives to support whatever opinions they may gave about the games, players and the technical team or the team as a whole.



Figure 4.26: Coaches comments
Source: Twitter (2020)

- **Declaring the fandom and support of the team**

Many fans on different social media platforms show their support and passion for their clubs through their profile pictures, username, header (a background image of a profile picture on Twitter) or by declaring the information on their bio (a profile biography). The fans are able to spot each other on social media by spotting the different codes fans use to identify/declare themselves as the club's fans. Figure 4.27 and Figure 4.28 show how fans declare on their bio on X that they are AmaZulu FC fans. The fans also have pictures of some of the club's players on their header, and on their profile picture they are wearing the clubs 2021 jersey. In this way this fan can be easily spotted by other true fans of the club on social media platforms.



Figure 4.27: Geographical team fans (1)
Source: Facebook (2021)



Figure 4.28: Geographical team fans (2)
Source: Twitter (2022)

Most fans who support the KZN based clubs support clubs do so because the clubs are in their own home town. Most of these fans have other clubs that they support especially the big teams in the PSL/DSTV league then KZN teams would be their secondary clubs because the teams are based or from their home club. This does not mean the fans support or love these clubs any less because they do attend their matches, buy their merchandise, attend their activations and also engage with the clubs on social media.

As shown in Figure 4.29 the fan admits to supporting the other big clubs in the league and then later started supporting AmaZulu FC which is one of the clubs based in KZN and in turn another fans replies to the post by saying “aren’t we all AmaZulu by default” especially “If our Soweto club lost”. The “Soweto” clubs namely Orlando Pirates and Kaizer Chiefs, are the biggest clubs in the PSL/DSTV league that most fans support as their first choice and then support the “small clubs” from their hometown such as AmaZulu FC, Golden Arrows and Maritzburg United.

4.3.10 Clubs social media content

The teams normally focus on posting updates pre- and post-game day. Play-by-play updates and changes made to the club. This study found that the following were the most popular items that clubs share on their social media platforms

- **Birthdays**

Sending birthday wishes to the players, management, technical staff and other staff members that work in the club has now become a popular trend for clubs. This also allows an opportunity for the fans to send well wishes to their favourite club member in the club. See Figure 4.30.



Figure 4.30: Birthday posts
Source: Facebook (2021)

- **Condolences**

Just like birthday wishes, it is now common for the clubs to send and express their condolences through social media platforms. The fans would also normally jump on the post of their clubs to comment and send their own condolences to the deceased's family members. See Figure 4.31.



Figure 4.31: Condolences posts
Source: Facebook (2021)

- **Achievements**

The clubs also use social media to highlight some of the players achievements as well as the achievements of the club. Some of the achievements that they share on their social media platforms are normally not public knowledge such as the number of “appearances” a player has made with the club. Therefore, it is important for the club to share these types of achievements with their social media communities. See Figure 4.32.



Figure 4.32: Achievements posts
Source: Facebook (2020)

- **Player and technical staff signings**

When a club signs new players, coach or technical staff, it is normal for the team to make an announcement of the new signings on their social media platforms. See Figure 4.33.



Figure 4.33: Team news
Source: Facebook (2020)

- **Cup updates**

When there are upcoming cup games, the teams usually update fans via social media on which cup competition they qualified for during the season. They share fixtures of the cup and any other related news about the cup competitions such as which players

will take part in the competition, especially related to games away from home. See figure 4.34.



Figure 4.34: Cup updates
Source: Facebook (2021)

- **Match promotion**

It is common for clubs to use social media to promote games they have with other clubs. It was found that clubs tend to do a lot of marketing when they have a “Derby game” (a game between club from the same town). Promoting games also helps clubs sell more tickets, especially “derby matches” and cup matches which sell out very fast. See Figure 4.35.



Figure 4.35: Promotional posts
Source: Facebook (2021)

- **Public holidays**

Some clubs keep up with the national calendar and take it to their social media platforms to wish well their fans on the different holidays we have in South Africa. See Figure 4.36.

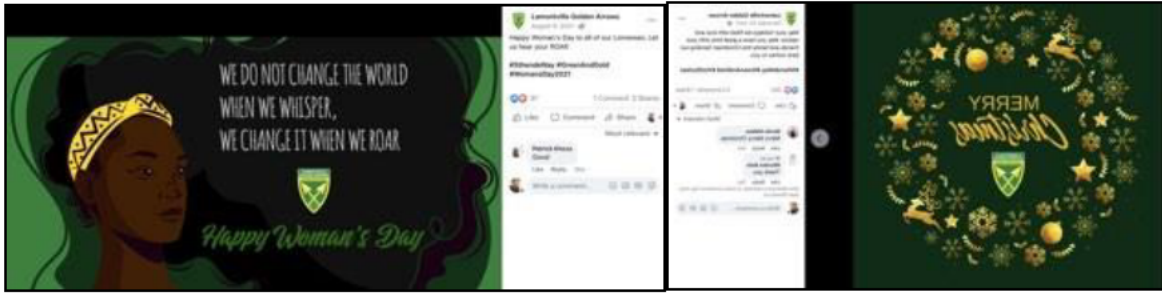


Figure 4.36: Celebratory post
Source: Facebook (2021)

- **Motivational quotes**

Some clubs post motivational quotes or bible verses which is a very different content to what clubs normally post so it is refreshing to see and fans do engage with this type of content. See Figure 4.37 and Figure 4.38.



Figure 4.37: Motivational posts (1)
Source: Facebook (2021)



Figure 4.38: Motivational posts (2)
Source: Twitter (2022)

- **Sponsor campaigns promotion**

Clubs always post or reshare what their sponsors post on their own social media platforms, whether it is a promotional campaign, awareness campaign, adverts, marketing material or content that relates to the club.

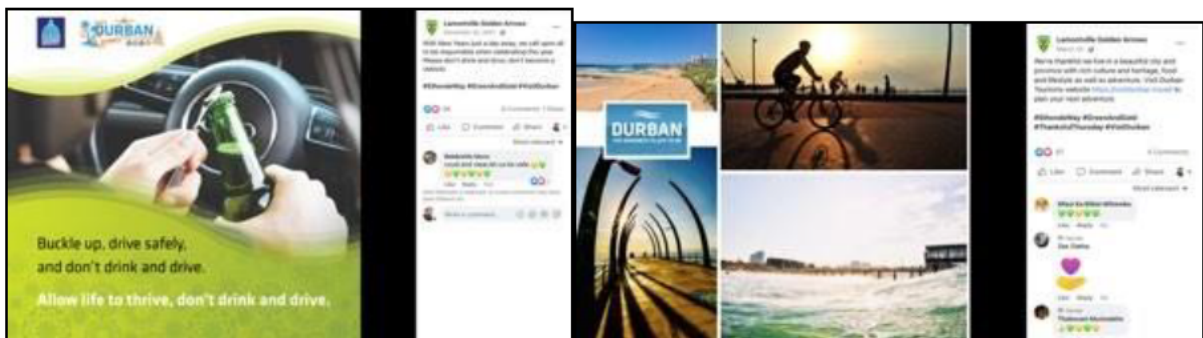


Figure 4.39: Campaign posts
Source: Facebook (2021)

- **Fan Dedications**

Clubs also posts pictures of their fans, which are called fan dedication for example #WCW (which in full stands for #WomenCrushWednesday) where they may picture only women supporters on a Wednesday. See Figure 4.40.



Figure 4.40: Fan dedication posts
Source: Facebook (2021)

4.3.11 The three selected football clubs based in KwaZulu-Natal

4.3.11.1 AmaZulu Football Club

AmaZulu FC club is one of the oldest football clubs in South Africa. The club was formed by Zulu migrant workers in 1932 and originally named Zulu Royal Conquerors. The club was introduced to then Zulu king Solomon, who changed the club's name to Zulu Royals, their colours to royal blue and white, and also introduced the shield to their logo. In 2012, they celebrated their 80th anniversary and on 18 July faced Manchester United in a friendly match. The club's home ground stadium is Princess Magogo stadium in KwaMashu township but between 2020-2022 the team was using the Hollywoodbets Kings Park Stadium as their home ground stadium was being renovated, now the team is using Moses Mabhida Stadium and King Zwelithini Stadium as their home ground. Among the teams successes are the National Premier

Soccer League title in 1972, Coca-Cola Cup in 1992, First Division Coastal Stream wins in 2000/01 and 2002/03 and the winning the Mvela Platinum play-offs in 2007. As of February 2024, the club is sitting at 9th place on the DSTV Premiership 2023/2024 log table. See Figure 4.41.



Figure 4.41: AmaZulu FC Twitter profile Source: Twitter (2020)

4.3.11.2 Lamontville Golden Arrows Football Club

The LGA club was founded in 1943 in the streets of Lamontville, a township in Durban. The club played in the non-operational National Professional Soccer League in the 1970s until they were relegated in 1976. They played in the Second Division afterwards until 1980 when they were involved in a soccer scandal and thrown out of the National Professional Soccer League. Originally named Ntokozo FC, the club came back again in 1996 when the Madlala family bought the Second Division franchise of Ntokozo FC and changed its name to Lamontville Golden Arrows. In 2000 the club won promotion to the PSL by winning the National First Division Coastal Stream. Arrows claimed their first piece of major silverware when they won the 2009 MTN 8, beating Ajax Cape Town 6–0 in the final played at Orlando Stadium. The club is based in Lamontville, KwaZulu-Natal with the Sugar Ray Xulu stadium as their home ground, As of May 2024, the club is sitting at 11th place on the DSTV Premiership 2023/2024 log table. See Figure 4.42.



Figure 4.42: LGA FC Twitter profile
Source: Twitter (2020)

4.3.11.3 Maritzburg United Football Club

Maritzburg United Football Club was established in 1979 and right from the start, the owner and Chairperson Mr Farook Kadodia was passionately involved in the club's progress. When Farook was 19 years old and had just completed his matric, the club was competing in the old Federation Professional League. However due to unforeseen and unexplained issues the club's ownership was overtaken by new management. In 1997 Farook and his brother Imraan Kadodia re-acquired the club with the vision of creating a professional club with a mission to promote itself to the country's number one professional soccer league. The club started competing in the Mvela league in 2004 with Trott Moloto as the head coach. The club was not content with their position in the league therefore in 2005 they acquired the franchise of a club named Tembisa Classic and the team made a great comeback even reaching the ABSA Cup semifinals, however at the end of the season the club was demoted to the second division league, Mvela Golden League. With proper planning, hard work, excellent marketing, new tactical club and effective management, the club was promoted to the first division league in the 2008/2009 season. The club is based in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZuluNatal with Harry Gwala stadium as their home ground. As of May 2024 the club was sitting at 5th place in the National First Division (NFD) 2023/2024 log table. See Figure 4.43.



Figure 4.43: Maritzburg United FC Twitter profile
Source: Twitter (2020)

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented the data analysis results for both the interview questions and netnography social media observation. The next chapter will provide a description of the objectives of the study and will further provide recommendations based on the research findings and present conclusions drawn from the research.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter looked at the data analysis of the use of social media as a communication tool in the KwaZulu-Natal football industry. A mixed research approach was adopted to collect data for this study, which comprised a combination of qualitative and netnography techniques. The mixed research approach was used in the study to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the study. Combining both qualitative methods and netnography, the study could explore the subject from different angles. While qualitative methods allowed for in-depth insights into individual experiences and perceptions, netnography helped analyse social media interactions in their natural online context. The data collected was coded into themes and subthemes to provide an explanation for the data obtained. This chapter will discuss the conclusions by the researcher which are based on the information in the previous chapter. It will also look at recommendations, limitations, direction for future research and provide a summary of the study.

5.2 Summary of the study

The overall aim of this study was to establish how social media is used as a communication tool in the KwaZulu-Natal football industry by three professional selected teams that are in the DSTV Premiership League. The study provided research on communication and social media with a focus on the football industry. The objectives of this study were to identify the most used social media platform in the football industry and assess the role of the current social media platforms used by the KZN football clubs; and lastly to identify the communication barriers in the KZN football clubs when using social media. This was achieved through a literature survey which assessed the use of social media as a communication tool and identified the roles of the different social media platforms used for engagement between the teams and their targeted audiences.

5.3 Conclusions

This study aimed to gain deeper insights into the use of social media as a communication tool in the KZN football industry. The following conclusions were drawn based on the data collected and the objectives of this study:

- **To identify the most used social media platform in the football industry:**
The use of social media platforms as communication tools was reflected by the overall usage of social media by the participating football clubs and their fans. The social media platforms that are the most used by the participating clubs were X, Facebook, and Instagram, with X being the most used and with the most engagement. These results highlighted how these football teams use social media platforms to communicate with fans and the content they share on each platform, with Facebook being highlighted as an older platform used as a community service, X being a microblog platform with rapid engagement and Instagram a method of adding photographs and multimedia content to the team's social media strategies. To initiate communication and engagement, the participants tasks as social media managers include writing posts, making videos, managing various social media platforms, editing videos, and planning social media campaigns. These tasks are a direct response to the most used social media platforms by the football clubs.
- **To assess the role of the current social media platforms used in the KZN football clubs:** LGA, Maritzburg United and AmaZulu FC are all professional football clubs in the PSL based in KZN and while these football clubs have similarities, they have worked hard to establish brand reputations that distinguish them from other football clubs in the same league and same province. The results from the interview and social media observation analysis showed that these clubs use social media to reach, engage and share content with their targeted audiences. Therefore, this study has managed to show the different ways in which clubs engaged with their fans on social media and how

fans use social media to show support and declare themselves as supporters of their favourite club. Fans have continuously maintained their “fan talk” on social media platforms especially when there are new updates about their club and this engagement normally transforms to commercially driven messages through the interest of the fans themselves. Social media has proven to be an easily accessible meeting place for both clubs and fans, this has been evident in the different methods that teams use to promote their social media platforms through other media platforms where they would include links for their Facebook page or handles and hashtags for their X and Instagram accounts. This type of communication tool became particularly important during the Covid-19 Pandemic given the limited options for fans and clubs to interact about match related matters. Hence, clubs like LGA were posting competitions, riddle games and puzzles to keep the momentum going and keep the fans entertained while there were no matches being played. Even when the lockdown regulations were being eased and a small number of fans were allowed to attend matches, clubs like AmaZulu FC took it upon themselves to run ticket competitions to promote the comeback of live matches and encourage fans to attend matches. This one of the ways clubs sought to facilitate connectivity and the flow of information in which fans becomes the club’s unofficial promoters. All three clubs have clearly been using social media to enhance their individual online personalities, with clubs using themes, hashtags and catch phrases that distinguish their posts from other clubs' posts.

- **To identify the communication barriers in the KZN football clubs when using social media:** This study also set out to understand how sports clubs deal with communication barriers regarding social media and what processes they have in place to deal with such issues. Through analysing and contrasting the findings with the literature review, it has been established that there are similarities in the way the football clubs studied handle communication barriers. The interview participants revealed that they have not dealt with any major communication barriers on social media because in their content creation processes, they involve multiple members of the club to ensure that the content that is delivered to the audience is not offensive. This is done to make sure that

the message that the club wants to communicate is well integrated and delivered in a manner that their fans will feel interested in, and it is not discriminatory to anyone.

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5.4 Limitations

This study is not without limitations, the initial stage of this study was undertaken during the Covid-19 Pandemic when sports were cancelled all over the world. While this study examined the three most popular social media platforms, there are new popular and trendy social media platforms that have not been included in this research and have so much to offer in a study. The categories discussed on this study can be examined in other social media platforms and in the context of other sports leagues to determine if the findings can be generalised. A new study could look deeply into the different social media platforms and fan engagement on those platforms. The different kinds of communication tools deserve more detailed attention regarding how they have evolved over the years. Lastly considering the different kinds of social media platforms and communication between the different types of fans and sports organisations, a quantitative study would also have provided an interesting analysis and overview of the methodology of this study.

5.5 Recommendations

In the final analysis, each club's efforts that came up in the analysis process indicates that their social media platforms were designed to be communication tools to assist with brand positioning. Social media has become part and parcel of everyday life. Social media platforms such as Facebook, X, and Instagram have revolutionised communication and made it easier and more efficient for an organisation to engage with their customers and gauge their feelings and perception of the brand. In the football industry, social media has been adopted by clubs as a tool to communicate and disseminate information, particularly to their supporters. While there were potential barriers to club use of social media, the study found that social media helps address social issues, and serving as a vehicle for communicating with the fans.

In this digital era of social media, players and teams engage in new ways that have not been experienced before. Social media has changed the way fans consume sports, and has changed the notion of individualism to community building. X allows easy and immediate access to sports news and streaming platforms. It has become a norm for sports teams to post real-time game updates on social media platforms with the inclusion of Gifs, hashtags, and visual content. The use of social media has allowed the sports industry to be part of people's everyday lives. Social media not only fosters engagement between teams and the fans but it enables fan-fan interactions and has allowed fans to create communities with the establishment of fan bases. It is safe to say that social media has changed the way fans, athletes, and teams are engaging with each other. For fans it is no longer about being spectators of the game and just reading about it in newspapers, but being part of the narrative

This research highlighted the opportunities afforded by social media for the clubs where direct communication with the different fans is now easier than ever. With that being stated, negative comments can have a huge impact on a club and their relationships with important stakeholders. Therefore, it is important for the teams to have a responsive approach to social media crises and know how to best deal with external influences that might negatively affect the club's goals and behaviours of their other audiences as well as the environments the teams operate in. The clubs communications or PR team can help to better equip the social media teams regarding how to deal with negative comments from online users because the "negative side" of social media is how club members, athletes and other stakeholders (especially sponsors of the club) can be at risk of having their image tainted by negative responses and comments from fans especially when it involves political, economic, social and discriminatory issues where a club might be forced by social media users to take a stand or comment on an issue. Some interview participants indicated that their clubs "simple ignore" negative comments on social media – that strategy might not work on issues all the time. Therefore, since the clubs do not have a formal written document with guidelines on dealing with social media crises that might cause a communication barrier between the teams and fans, and because whenever there is a crisis the responsibility for a 'communication strategy' is fragmented between different departments, this study suggests that there is a chance for improvement in the clubs

strategic approach to social media crisis. Overall, recommendations on how to improve social media usage by football clubs were provided by the participants. The following are recommendations made by the researcher:

Future social media trends and innovation

Looking forward, the intersection of football and social media holds the potential for further innovation and thrills. As new platforms and technologies emerge and evolve, fans can anticipate fresh avenues for connection, interaction, and immersion in the sport. This ongoing evolution ensures that football will continue to lead the way in digital engagement for the foreseeable future.

It is imperative for the teams to analyse engagement metrics of their social media pages to determine which types of content the fans resonate with as this helps team social media managers to create more compelling and relatable content that resonates with the fans. Social media plays a huge role in the sports industry and it will keep evolving. Whether the content is for a small team or a professional team, it is important to unlock the power of social media. Social media insights can be used to set the clubs objectives and contribute to the planning and implementation of social media content. Keeping track of the numbers can help the club to shape the process of content creation for each social media platform instead of sharing the same posts on all platforms. Thus, it is important for clubs to understand the level of sophistication required is different across all social media platforms and analytics can further reveal how the clubs can use behavioural insights and engagement with fans to increase their chances of success.

When it comes to trends, TikTok has taken off to a new level of popularity among social media users, which has seen major sports teams around the world get into this platform and create amazing content. With Instagram moving to become more of a video app than imagery app, Instagram reels have become very popular. Fans enjoy the more laid back and unpolished type of content that is shared by teams and players. Big teams such as Manchester United and Tottenham Hotspurs jumped onto TikTok

when it first got popular in 2021 and managed to increase their following by more than 10 million followers for each team. One of the easiest tricks to gain popularity on TikTok and get the most views on Instagram reels is to piggyback onto trending sounds and videos which allow the team and players to show their sense of humour and personality and enables fans to get closer to their favourite players.

Real-time engagement of live content

When it comes to social media and sports nothing is better than real-time engagement with fans while the energy is still high and fans are able to share their commentary with other fans and online users. Live content is one of the greatest ways to generate engagement in sports. Social media users are already using their platforms to stream live content and teams can benefit if they also share live content for fan consumption. As much as there might be restrictions with media partnerships that may prevent the team from streaming live their entire matches for free, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok could be used to stream certain aspects of the game to build momentum and entice fans.

Fan communities and discussions

Social media has enabled the emergence of dynamic fan communities and online forums where enthusiasts unite to express their love for the sport. Through dedicated hashtags and trending challenges, these digital hubs break geographical barriers, nurturing a global sense of togetherness among football supporters. Research has shown that the most crucial aspect for the clubs is the number of fans they reach therefore 'brand' reach is the most important indicator that social media is working as a communication tool because it goes hand in hand with other success measure indicators such as engagement and brand growth therefore these clubs should always strive towards maximising their fan base.

In sports it is important to build loyalty with fans which can yield positive results in revenue and engagement. Fans are important for a team's survival. As much as entertainment is the primary factor when building a loyal fanbase, fans would also love

to be rewarded for their loyalty to the team. Social media is a perfect tool to recognise the team's biggest fans to strengthen their loyalty. One of the reasons for popularity on social media is the ability to recognise the people who are part of your brand. Teams can give a shout-out, send personalised messages, send birthdays wishes and respond to comments of their fans.

Game build-up and teasers

One of the main reasons for game teasers, build-up and campaigns is to drive revenue by selling a lot of tickets and one of the best ways to achieve this goal is building excitement during the build-up to the game. Social media serves as an effective platform that allows teams to share pre-game teasers that can entice fans to have an interest in attending the games. Teams can share videos of their players during training or interactive pictures of the players warming up on Facebook and Instagram stories. In a world where social media visuals are interesting to online users, teams can use reels and TikTok videos to share training sessions as well as pre-game and post-game change room moments to drive thousands of views, likes, and comments among fans. The impact of reels on Instagram speaks volumes considering it can reach users that are not even following the team and that increases engagement for the team and the content reaches a wider audience that can turn into fans.

Community development and community responsibility support

It is crucial for teams to understand which social causes are important to their fans as this will help the team to tailor its message and support to align with the interests and needs of their fans and the broader community. Community development is important to strengthen the teams relationship with the fans because it shows that the team cares about their community, social issues and the well-being of the community that supports them. Social media platforms make it easy for corporates to spread information, show support for social issues that resonate with the team and show support to community development. Whether it is empowering the youth or taking a stand against social

injustice issues, teams should take the opportunity to share their support for relevant social issues through social media. It is important for teams to support social issues that their fans are affected by and social issues that align with the teams values and beliefs.

Player engagement and personal branding

For athletes, social media provides an avenue to directly interact with fans and enhance their personal brands away from the field. Through sharing behind-the-scenes moments and hosting interactive Q&A sessions, players can now engage with their audience in unprecedented ways, fostering stronger connections and building dedicated fan bases.

The players are the ambassadors and face of the brand or the team and they can help to build and maintain strong relationships with fans. Players have the power to bring fans and sponsors closer to the team. Players can build deeper and stronger relationships with the fans through allowing the fans to see behind the scenes, for example, prepping for the game or what they get up to after a big game. Social media platforms such TikTok have allowed people to share candid videos such as “GET READY WITH ME” (GRWM) or “A DAY IN A LIFE OF FOOTBALL PLAYER”. Videos like these give fans an inside look into a players life. When the team posts such content, they can use social media metrics to determine if the fans resonate with this type of content and this will help the team create more effective content in the future.

Tell untold stories of the players

The teams must remember to continue striving for everyday engagement. The aim is to communicate continuously not just on days when the club has a match or “important announcements”. The club’s social media platforms should always be the source of information for fans about what is happening in the clubs and the content on these social media platforms must not only focus on match results, success of the teams. Also focus on the history of the teams, sponsors partnerships, players as individuals, and any interesting facts about the club. As much as fans look at their favourite players

as their idols, they also want to know if they can relate to them. Therefore, another way to build a strong relationship with fans is for the club to tell them stories about their favourite players. Social media has made it easy for people to share their stories, and stories increases a sense of relatability between fans and players. The idea behind sharing their stories is to humanise players by showing that they are people with real lives; sharing stories about challenges that they needed to overcome to get to where they are today is one way to make them more relatable. Also putting a spotlight on different aspects of their lives such as family, charity work, hobbies etc. is an opportunity to show that they are real people with real life issues. Essentially the goal should be to show fans that players are just like everyone and is a different twist to the team's social media.

Sponsorship and revenue opportunities

Social media has introduced fresh avenues for commercial growth, presenting teams, players, and brands with lucrative sponsorship and revenue prospects. By leveraging sponsored content and collaborating with influencers, football entities can capitalise on their digital presence, effectively reaching and monetising engaged audiences with tailored messages.

Fan engagement is important for any marketing plan to be effective. Match tickets sales depend entirely on fans and their willingness to purchase the tickets to have a certain experience. Social media engagement can be utilised as a way for teams to maintain fan support and reward their loyalty for spending their hard earned money on tickets, team merchandise and memorabilia of the team. With the current poor match attendance by fans of these teams, the correlation between the best average match attendance and social media followers implies that the engagement posts are not entirely effective. However, the platforms in which the teams post on as well as how often the team posts play a role in influencing fans to want to attend the matches. Future research can analyse the number of followers, average engagement on a post and average attendance for each team to evaluate the correlation between social media factors and their influence in getting loyal fans out of their homes and into the stadiums.

Social media humour

Humorous posts are powerful and infectious. Social media users tend to engage more with light-hearted content, therefore teams can use humour to increase engagement and provide better visibility for the team. Social media users are also more likely to share funny posts with their followers which enables the team to reach a wider audience.

Fans are drawn mostly to people they find to be trustworthy, relatable and human; therefore, humour is a great addition to any social media strategy. People tend to go online for banter, laughter and to engage in light conversation. Humour is powerful and it could be a great tool to boost social media engagement and drive better visibility. Online users tend to engage and react more to funny content, some fans go as far as sharing the posts with their followers. TikTok is a platform that allows its users to download other TikTok users' video which people then share or post these videos on other social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and X. Sharing relevant memes, funny challenges and posting players just having fun or posting funny Instagram stories can be entertaining enough for fans and drive up engagement for the team. Business that have incorporated this type of content into their social media strategy are seeing a high engagement in their posts in terms of comments, shares and likes.

The findings from this research indicate that having a consistent presence on social media allows the clubs to reach a wider audience of social media users and this increases the social media presence of the club. This is supported by the number of followers each club has on their most popular social media platforms. X stands out from the other platforms because it is more objective and faster. Being consistent and engaging with fans on social media is beneficial in terms of the clubs getting to know how the fans feel and what they think about the team. Furthermore, these social media platforms can be used as marketing and public relations promoting tools without spending too much money, and the clubs have the freedom of creative control over

their content. Consistency is important on social media because it allows brand placement and promotional activities to be more effective.

5.6 Direction for future research

This study showcases the communication relationship between football clubs and fans on social media. The study also presents other ways in which football clubs use social media, showing their creativity in content creation and brand promotion. Future research could focus on fan activities on social media and add new social media platforms such as TikTok which are currently dominating the social media space with fresh and creative content from people in different parts of the world. Therefore, it would be interesting to see future research on how football clubs in South Africa use social media or any other digital platforms to increase match attendance for their clubs.

5.7 Conclusion

The findings indicate that social media is essential to daily communication within the football industry, serving as a critical tool for engaging fans, managing public perception, and shaping overall communication strategies. The study suggests that teams should maintain a consistent social media presence and allocate resources to a specialized communication strategy team to enhance effectiveness in online engagement.

This chapter has provided a summary of this study. It also outlined how the objectives of this study were fulfilled and provided recommendations and direction for future research based on the finding from the data analysis of the study. Limitations were outlined and conclusions stated.

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ANNEXURES

Annexure A: FREC Approval



MANAGEMENT SCIENCES: FACULTY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (FREC)

19 May 2020

Student Name: **Ms A Dzelwa**
Student No: **21314278**

Dear **Ms A Dzelwa**

MASTER OF MANAGEMENT SCIENCES: PUBLIC RELATIONS

TITLE: The use of social media as a communication tool in the KwaZulu Natal football industry

Please be advised that the FREC Committee has reviewed your proposal and the following decision was made: **Approved – Ethics Level 2**

Date of FRC Approval: 3 March 2020

Approval has been granted for a period of **two years** from the above FRC date, after which you are required to apply for safety monitoring and annual recertification. Please use the form located at the Faculty. This form must be submitted to the FREC at least 3 months before the ethics approval for the study expires.

Any adverse events [serious or minor] which occur in connection with this study and/or which may alter its ethical consideration must be reported to the FREC according to the FREC SOP's. Please note that **ANY** amendments in the approved proposal require the approval of the FREC as outlined in the FREC SOP's.

Prof JP Govender
Chairperson: Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Annexure B: Letter of Information



LETTER OF INFORMATION

Title of research study: The use of social media as a communication tool in the KZN football industry.

Principal investigator: Asanda Dzelwa

Co- investigator / Supervisors: Dr P Naidoo (D.PLI) and Dr SB Hussain

Brief introduction and purpose of Study

The football industry has over the years revolutionised into a modernised game through social media platforms (Wang: 2014). Social media platforms such as the Facebook and Twitter have been used globally amongst soccer stars, fans and footballing clubs to communicate (William and Chinn: 2010). Footballing clubs and marketers are exposed to new technology opportunities, innovations and opportunities due to the emergence of social media platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, LinkedIn etc.) (Witkemper, Lim and worldburger: 2010).

Communication plays an integral in the sporting industry. Communication is an important element that needs to be incorporated in an organisations communication plan. Properly planned and managed communication can be seen as an important element in an organisation. Therefore, it is important to evaluate the role of communication tools and its effectiveness in sports (Beech and Chadwick: 2013).

Hence, this study will explore the use of social media as a communication tool in the KZN football industry. To achieve this aim, a mixed research approach will be used wherein questionnaires and structured interviews will used to gather relevant information from stakeholders amongst the KwaZuluNatal (KZN) Football Clubs.

Upon completion of this study, it is anticipated that responses obtained from a wide range of stakeholders in the footballing industry alongside literature will be used to propose - how social media platforms can serve as effective communicative tools for the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Football Clubs to improve communication with stakeholders, branding and marketing.

Aim and objectives

The overall aim of this study is to explore the use of social media as a communication tool in the football industry. To achieve this aim, the following objectives have been set:

To determine the most used social media platform in the football industry

To assess the role of the current social media platforms used in the KZN football clubs; and

To examine the communication barriers in the KZN football clubs when using social media.

Outline and the procedures

As a participant you will be required to answer questions as honestly as you can. The interview will comprise of 20 questions and will take approximately 15-20 minutes. The analysis of the results will enable the researcher to provide appropriate recommendations to the relevant sport organisation with regards to the importance of social media. Prior permission has been obtained from the relevant sport organisation management to proceed with this research.

Risk of Discomforts to the participants:

There is no anticipated or expected or known risk to your organization as a participant of this research

Benefits

This research aims to assist in understanding the importance of social media as an effective communication tool in the football industry. It is also envisaged that this research will contribute in highlighting the importance of strategic communication tools and how they can be addressed if there is communication breakdown between the organisation and its stakeholders. The potential benefit to the researcher will be publications in accredited journals and conference papers and the award of a Master of Management Science: Public Relations Management

Reasons to withdraw

As a participant you may decide to withdraw yourself from this study at any given time without any bad/ negative consequences by telling the researchers that you wish to discontinue participating.

Remuneration

As a participant you will not receive any remuneration or compensation.

Cost of study

As a participant you will not cover any costs for this study.

Confidentiality

As a participant all information provided by you will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear in any thesis or research paper resulting from this study. My supervisor, statisticians and I will be the only individuals with access to the data you provide.

Related Injuries

This research does not pose any danger to the participants. Questionnaires will be asked to all participants and follow up interviews will be conducted with those who wish to fill the participating study.

Persons to contact in the event of any problems or queries.

Persons to Contact in the Event of Any Problems or Queries:

Researcher – Asanda Dzelwa 076 123 5443 or asanda.dzelwa@gmail.com

Supervisor – Dr P Naidoo 031 373 5277 or pauline@dut.ac.za

Co-Supervisor – Dr SB Hussain 031 373 5277 or Sameera@dut.ac.za

Intitutional Research Ethics administrator 031 373 2900

DUT: DVC: TIP, Prof F. Otieno on 031 373 2382 or dvctip@dut.ac.za.

General

Participating in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any given time without experiencing any negative consequence should you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information. Please contact me on the details mentioned above. A copy of this information will be made available to you.

Annexure C: Consent Letter



CONSENT LETTER

Statement of Agreement to Participate in the Research Study:

- I hereby confirm that I have been informed by the researcher, Asanda Dzelwa 21314278 about the nature, conduct, benefits and risks of this study - Research Ethics Clearance Number: _____,
- I have also received, read and understood the above written information (Participant Letter of Information) regarding the study.
- I am aware that the results of the study, including personal details regarding my sex, age, date of birth, initials and diagnosis will be anonymously processed into a study report.
- In view of the requirements of research, I agree that the data collected during this study can be processed in a computerised system by the researcher.
- I may, at any stage, without prejudice, withdraw my consent and participation in the study.
- I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and (of my own free will) declare myself prepared to participate in the study.
- I understand that significant new findings developed during the course of this research which may relate to my participation will be made available to me.

Full Name of Participant _____ **Date** _____ **Time** _____ **Signature** _____

I, _____ (name of researcher) herewith confirm that the above participant has been fully informed about the nature, conduct and risks of the above study.

Full Name of Researcher _____ **Date** _____
Signature _____ **Full**
Name of Witness (If applicable) _____ **Date** _____ **Signature** _____

Full Name of Legal Guardian (If applicable) _____ **Date** _____ **Signature** _____

Annexure D: Gatekeepers Approval Letter



Est.1932Reg:

2008/025694/07

Lyrastar Investments (Pty) Ltd
T/aAmaZulu Football Club
Moses Mabhida Stadium, 44 Isaiah
Ntshangase St,
Durban. 4001P.O.Box 35212,
Northway. 4065
Tel (031) 303 3132
Fax (031) 303 3142

12 September 2018

GATEKEEPERS ACCEPTANCE LETTER

To whom it may concern:

AmaZulu Football Club has gladly welcomed student, Asanda Dzelwa to use the club as a case study for her research topic.

The topic itself, "The use of social media as a communication tool in the KwaZulu-Natal football industry," comes at a very important time for us.

We are a football club that is always looking to come up with innovative ways to improve its offering in the biggest scheme of things.

Since we are the second oldest club in South African football currently having been established in 1932, keeping up with the latest trends in reaching our supporters remains top on our agenda.

Hopefully the dissertation can prove useful to the club. Yours

Sincerely

Brilliant Nhlanhla Mkhathini

PR & Communications Manager



Annexure E: Interview questions

Interview questions

SECTION A: GENERAL INFORMATION

- 1. What is your position in the football club?
- 2. How long have you served in this position?
 1-3 Years 3-5 Years 5-10 Years 10 and above
- 3. Have you performed other duties within this football club? If yes, please mention the duties.
- 4. How does your position allow you to communicate to others within the organization and external to the organization using social media?

SECTION B: OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS

- 1. Why is communication important in organisations?

- 2. Who are the most important stakeholders to your organization?

- 3. What social media platform/s does your organization use most/ often?

4. How is your sports organisation using social media as a communication tool?

5. What type of information does your team share and communicate using social media platforms?

6. How would you describe the social media presence of your organization compared to traditional modes of communication?

7. Are football organizations considered to be more credible if they have verified social media platforms and less credible if they don't?

8. Does the emergence of new social media trends or platforms affect your organization's communication strategy?

9. Which stakeholders/ accounts does your organization follow on social media?

10. Are there certain social media users that your organization had identified to be more important or relevant? How were these identified?

11. How does your sport organisation use social media to build relationships with fans/ supporters?

12. Considering the growing adoption of social media technologies. How do you develop and explore social media and its respective influence on the football industry?

13. How is social media perceived in terms of effectiveness towards achieving organisational objectives?

14. How does your organisation measure effectiveness of social media?

15. How does your sport organisation allocate resources (such as budget, equipment, etc) to social media as a communication tool and its place in the entire organisational strategy?

16. Which social media platform do you feel is most effective for your sport organisation? Please provide a few reasons.

17. What is the greatest strength and challenge to your organization in using social media?

18. Which of these communication barriers affects your team's social media communication:

- Social identity, cultural identity, racial, ethnic, age and sexual orientation.

19. In your opinion, does communication barriers distort the effectiveness of a message? Please provide a reason.

20. How has your team overcome the communication barriers it has faced?

21. Would you agree that it is crucial to maintain relationships using social media as a communication tool with the organisation's stakeholders? Explain your answer.

22. What recommendations can you provide to improve your social media as the current organisation's communication tool?
