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**Case study on use of Social Media
Marketing in four English football
clubs – one from each league**

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Case study on use of Social Media Marketing in four English football clubs – one from each league		
<p data-bbox="312 703 424 730">Abstract</p> <p data-bbox="312 775 1441 842">In the footballing world, digital marketing has evolved a lot and has made football clubs prioritise social media marketing more than ever before.</p> <p data-bbox="312 887 1441 1066">The aim of this thesis was to understand on a deeper level how social media marketing works and can be used effectively in four English football clubs, from the professional football league's top tier to the bottom tier, i.e. Liverpool FC, Sheffield Wednesday, Wigan Athletic and Tranmere Rovers. The thesis provides an in-depth look at how each club uses social media in its marketing.</p> <p data-bbox="312 1111 1441 1402">The first part of the thesis sets out the research background and boundaries. The second part of the thesis covers the theoretical context. The usage of literature included books and internet-based sources. The theory includes aspects such as social media, related to marketing and marketing, related to communication. The empirical part consists of a case study using observations on the clubs' usage of social media marketing during a particular period: 2020 for Facebook and Twitter and January-March 2021 for Instagram. The analysis was carried out by collecting from publicly available secondary sources, including articles, websites and a social media marketing analysis tool called Sotrender.</p> <p data-bbox="312 1447 1441 1626">Results indicated that the four case study clubs in general are using social media marketing actively and efficiently on all social media platforms. As expected, Liverpool FC were the most active on all platforms because they have more resources and a massive following compared to the other clubs. There were some differences between the clubs and the platforms, particularly in the posting frequency on Instagram.</p> <p data-bbox="312 1626 1441 1693">To conclude, the message of the content is coherent across the platforms but there is room for improvement in some aspects related to some of the platforms.</p>		
Keywords: Social media, Marketing, Integrated Marketing Communications, Football, Digital marketing		

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1 INTRODUCTION

Social media has become part of our everyday lives whether it is reading the news from your smartphone or putting a photo of your lunch on Instagram. There are lots of different channels available which are free to use, and this has changed the way we behave, interact and use information. The amount of people using social media and sharing their life on it daily provides opportunities for companies to relate to their customers daily. Social media has influenced marketing and made companies more aware of how important their content will be. Organisations need to design a strategy to target their markets in a beneficial and meaningful manner. The huge growth in digital technology has fundamentally changed the way we live - how we communicate, how we access entertainment, how we share information and how we shop. More than 4.4 billion people are active Internet users (over half of the world's population) which means that we are living in the age of the Internet. (Statista)

In the football world, marketing has evolved a lot and has made football clubs prioritise social media marketing more than ever before. Over recent decades, football has become more and more commercialized and more of a business than it used to be.

2 RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The marketing world has changed dramatically over the last ten years. Marketing has become centred on the Internet, leaving the traditional marketing methods in the background. Conventional marketing such as advertising on radio and TV, although still in use, has been overtaken by online marketing. Online marketing has become more and more important, providing whole new opportunities for marketers and seems

to be the future of marketing. Online advertising includes marketing via email, social media marketing and keyword marketing.

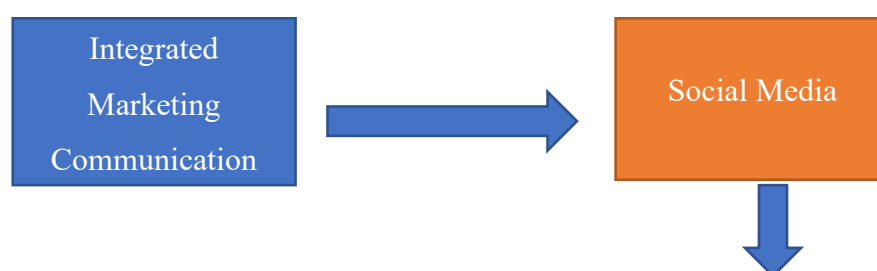
2.1 Thesis objectives

The aim of this thesis is to understand how social media marketing works and can be used effectively in English football clubs. The thesis will provide an in-depth look at how each club uses social media in its marketing. The case study includes analysing and evaluating the usage of all social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) by four football clubs (Liverpool FC, Sheffield Wednesday, Wigan Athletic and Tranmere Rovers), one from each of the four professional divisions. Another objective is to understand the concepts of social media networks and how they have changed the landscape of marketing.

2.2 Research Boundaries

This case study will not discuss marketing plans nor go through social media strategies as the football clubs are reluctant to share any internal information. Firstly, I decided not to go through social media strategies. Secondly, the empirical evidence was only limited to the four football clubs, so it is difficult to generalize for other English professional football clubs.

2.3 Theoretical Framework



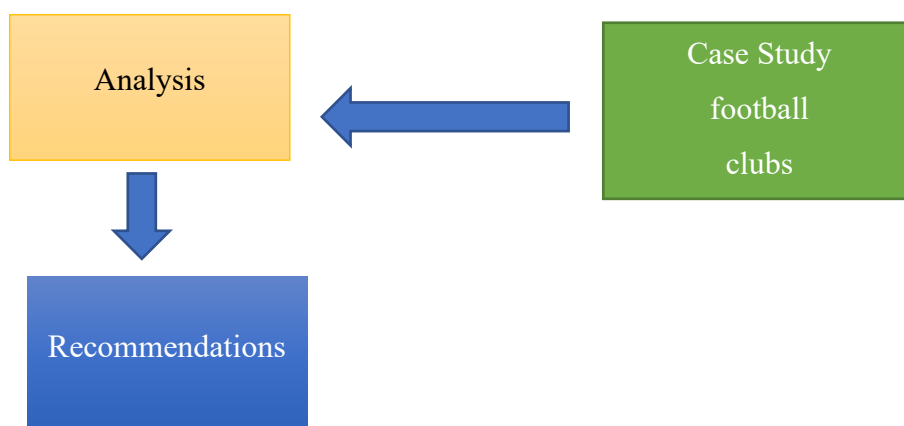


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework which is shown above in Figure 1 offers a visual guide to how this thesis is constructed. Firstly, the thesis will go through the theoretical background of integrated marketing communication which is defined and discussed. Secondly, social media will be defined and the social media channels which are analysed later in the thesis are defined. Furthermore, the social media marketing will be defined. Thirdly, the case study football clubs will be introduced with their history and the organisation is shown on a graph. Fourth, the three chosen social media channels of the football clubs (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) will be analysed by using public information. Lastly, conclusions and recommendations will be given based on the findings of the analysis.

2.4 Thesis Structure

Chapter one introduces the subject of this thesis. Chapter two introduces the theoretical background of concepts of social media and the social media marketing. Furthermore, this chapter has also been divided into sub-sections where the social media channels analysed later in this case study will be defined. There will also be a discussion on the social media channels used by the football clubs in the case study. In the third chapter introduces the theoretical background of the integrated marketing communications (IMC) which will be defined and discussed.

Chapter four will describe the methodology of this case study and steps the author made to carry out the case study for this thesis. Chapter five is all about football: firstly, there will be a brief introduction to the English Football League structure and rules, sponsorship in football followed by a more in-depth introduction to the case study clubs including their organisations. Chapter six will go through the research methods of this case study. Chapter seven will present the most relevant results and findings from the analysis which are discussed in the following chapter. The last chapter will go through the conclusions made from this case study and finally, recommendations will be presented.

3 CONCEPT OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

Nowadays, most companies and brands have their own social media sites that can be easily found with a simple click of a Facebook, Twitter or Instagram icon which directs you from their website. Social media are providing amazing opportunities for customer interaction and to connect people to a brand. (Kotler & Armstrong 2019, p.47) Some of these social media sites have grown tremendously – Facebook has more than 1.5 billion active monthly members which is astonishing. The number of monthly users of Instagram has risen to 400 million and Twitter and Google+ have over 300 million monthly users on their websites. Kotler and Armstrong state: “Online social media provide a digital home where people can connect and share important information and moments in their lives.” Social media platforms are suitable for marketing the brand in relation to whatever is topical or trending as marketers can interact with their customers in real time. This makes it possible for marketers to connect their brands with the most important topics and events in the lives of their consumers. (Kotler & Armstrong 2019, p.47)

Under this heading, the author will go through the concepts of Social media, the social media channels, and the definition of social media marketing.

3.1 Definition of Social Media

Kotler and Armstrong define social media as totally independent networks. They state that social media are online social networks with potential monetary benefits where one can connect with people all over the world via their platforms, sharing pictures, videos, and thoughts on any subject. They point out that wherever large amounts of people meet, marketers are bound to appear. (Kotler & Armstrong 2019, p.521) Tuten and Solomon write about the definition of social media as follows: “Social Media are the online means of communication, conveyance, collaboration and cultivation among interconnected and interdependent networks of people, communities and organizations enhanced by technological capabilities. (Tuten & Solomon, 2015, p.4)

3.2 Social Media Channels

Social media channels are a method of using marketing through certain different channels. As in all different types of marketing, also social media marketing must be targeted to certain groups of people. After the marketer knows one’s own target market, it is then a decision to find and use the most effective social media channels to reach the target customers.

3.2.1 Facebook

Facebook is a popular, online social networking website which was founded by Mark Zuckerberg and co-founders Dustin Moskovitz, Chris Hughes, and Eduardo Saverin in 2004. On December 1st, 2004, Facebook reported that they had one million active users. On Facebook, one can send messages, share photos and videos online. It offers instant messaging and photo sharing and it is very handy and common for students to use as it allows building groups and thus, chats. Often people use it to keep in touch with their friends and family. (Facebook, 2021)

Facebook’s principles are to serve people and guarantee that the website is accessible for everyone and that the ads are free. Secondly, building connections and

communities: Facebook thrives to bring people together by helping people to connect through their services. Thirdly, promotion of economic opportunity so that Facebook's tools create jobs and that businesses can grow through the website.

3.2.2 Instagram

Instagram is a video and photo sharing social networking service owned by Facebook. The initial release of Instagram was in October 2010, but the first Android version came out two years later in April 2012. Instagram allows users to upload media that can be edited with different kinds of filters and which are organized by hashtags and geographical tagging.

Instagram users can hide their profile or keep their profile public and posts are shared publicly. Users can see other users' contents by different tags and locations. Instagram has also featured like Facebook where you can send direct messages to other users or as in Instagram terms "DMs". As of June 2018, Instagram reached the one billion monthly active user landmark which makes Instagram one of the most popular social network applications. As Instagram becomes more and more popular, it was estimated in 2018 that over 70% of US businesses were using Instagram for business and it is shown that seven out of ten (7/10) hashtags on Instagram are from brands. Over 80% of businesses believe Instagram engagement is the most important metric. Instagram is brilliant for social media marketing as the markets are huge and there is a big audience that can be reached without spending large sums of money. (Oberlo, 2020)

From the viewpoint of the case clubs, Instagram provides a free, useful market tool because of its tremendous reach potential. Instagram's advertisement "reach people who matter most to you" is very clear as it has built-in algorithm which makes "the ads reach the exact audience". (Business Instagram, 2020)

3.2.3 Twitter

Twitter is a worldwide known microblogging site where you can set up an account and use it to post anything you want, whether it was sports, politics, fashion or for instance cooking. When one posts a certain message on this format, it is called a tweet. Just like Facebook, a person can follow anyone on the platform, and these people are called followers. The person being followed will be able to see the follower's tweets on their own feed. One can also tweet another person by using the @ symbol before their username. Twitter has been around for fourteen years now (founded in 2006) and in 2019 had over 315 million active users on their website. (Whatistechtarget, 2015)

3.3 Social Media Marketing

Social Media Marketing (SMM) is the use of social media websites and social networks to market a company's services and products. Social Media Marketing provides companies with a way to reach customers that are new to them, promote their own visions and engage with existing customers.

3.4 Benefits of Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing (SMM) has provided companies and organisations with lots of advantages which were not really been available until the rise of digital media and mobile technologies. As Kotler and Armstrong state, social media have allowed marketers to share brand content with customers and their communities which is also specially aimed at them. (Kotler & Armstrong, 2019, p.523) According to a Digital Doughnut article on the subject, audience targeting is one of the best benefits that social media marketing offers as the businesses can easily reach products or services' target markets. Before the social media era, it was hard to tell in marketing how well the advertising was targeted and to which audience. (Digital Doughnut, 2019)

Social media being such an interactive tool, this enables easy communication between brands and customers, making it a helpful and yet fast tool to receive customer feedback. Social media is also immediate, meaning using the social media to reach customers anytime, anywhere with relevant marketing content and activities of the brand. The growth of social media has caused a real rise in real-time marketing, “allowing marketers to create and join consumer conversations around situations and events as they occur. Marketers can now watch what’s trending and create content to match.” (Kotler & Armstrong, 2019, p.523)

“social media is a very cost-effective tool and is much cheaper than traditional marketing” (Digital Doughnut, 2019). Usually the social media platforms are free to use, one can post and reach many people while taking advantage of different social media activities such as location or hashtags. Kotler and Armstrong stated that the biggest advantage of social media marketing is: “their engagement and social sharing capabilities.” They believe that social media’s ability to create consumer engagement is the power that lies in making the brand interaction so personal to the customers. Brands can target customers with powerful, personalised messages or content which attracts them to a greater extent than ever before. (Kotler & Armstrong, 2019, p. 523)

4 INTEGRATED MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

Integrated marketing communications (IMC) means the carefully integrated and coordinated, company’s many communication channels to deliver a clear, consistent, and compelling message about the organization and its products.

There have been many different definitions of IMC over the past years and there does not seem to be any agreed universal definition yet. The earliest definition dates from 1993 by Schultz, Tannenbaum and Lauteborn, who argued that integrated marketing communications is a system which perceives the added value of an overall all-inclusive

plan. They continued by stating that the “communication disciplines” including advertising and sales promotion are included to create a clear and consistent effect.

In 2016, Batra and Keller presented their definition as follows: “The coordinated, consistent means by which firms attempt to inform, incent, persuade and remind consumers- directly or indirectly - about the products and brands they sell.” Finally, in 2017, Melewar et al. defined the IMC as: “The strategic coordination of all the company’s messages as well as the media used by an organization to impact on the company’s perceived value” (Fill & Turnbull, 2019, pp. 381/382).

According to Luxton, Reid and Mavondo, integrated marketing communications and the many research studies done in this field suggest that managers in different organisations still do not understand IMC properly. Because of the changes in the brand-marketing landscape and the increasing level of competition worldwide, managers must keep developing successful brand campaigns. In the long term, it is vital for managers in organisations to understand and realize the fact that their IMC must be effective for keeping the value of its brand. Luxton et al. state that integrated marketing communications “is a core process capability that directly and positively affects influences campaign effectiveness and brand market performance” which also affects brand performances financially. This supports the idea of the IMC productivity chain. (Luxton et al., 2015, pp.44-45)

4.1 Key aspects to integrate

There are many different aspects to integrate when it comes to marketing communication such as technology, messages and communications tools (Fill & Turnbull, 2019, p.382). I will be discussing the following ten areas where the marketing communication can be integrated.

- Messages
- Communications tools
- Touchpoints
- Technology

- Strategy
- Media
- Marketing mix
- Brands
- Employees
- Agencies

First, the core of brand-related messages must be decided upon. All communications regarding the brand must be one cohesive unit, although different elements can be used depending on the situation. Minor differences in content are acceptable to the consumer if the main messages are clear. Communications tools are direct mailing, telemarketing, sales promotions, public relations, and advertising. For instance, social media can be used to advertise and promote different services and products in combination with the more traditional forms of marketing. The integration can use visual themes such as colours and logos or taglines. (Fill & Turnbull, 2019, p.383)

Touchpoints are the interfaces between the consumer and the brand (product or service). This can be a website or any other form of marketing communications. Touchpoints provide increased opportunities for consumer engagement in every step of the potential purchasing transaction. The key to integration is to identify the different steps in the consumer's journey and integrate the messages and touchpoints. Next in line is technology, database technologies allow marketing managers to understand their customers better including how they feel towards the brand. Technology is an enabler which can be integrated in marketing strategies. The recent rise of social media marketing has demonstrated the integration of technology with marketing. (Fill & Turnbull, 2019, pp.384-387)

Next, the strategic aspect of IMC is an important one. The key strategy of the organisation is implemented through a marketing communications plan that clearly defines the message, image and media chosen by the organisation. Cohesive marketing is an effective way to convey the message to the customers. (Fill & Turnbull, 2019, p.386) For media nowadays, the use of digital and interactive media has risen so much

that advertising via the more traditional channels like TV, radio and newspapers has decreased in volume. Nevertheless, Hill and Turnbull state that “the effectiveness of the media increases considerably when media are used in combination”. (Fill & Turnbull, 2019, p. 673)

As for the marketing mix and the elements of the marketing mix, i.e. the 4Ps of marketing: product, price, place, and promotion, need to be integrated together. Customers expect that all these elements will be coordinated and represent the brand image consistently. It could be said that a brand is the epitome of integration. The main idea for a brand is to be well coordinated internally in the organisation so that for the customers it always looks and feels cohesive. Although brands can be adapted in different ways depending on the media and the audience, the core proposition stays the same and can be recognized. (Fill & Turnbull, 2019, p.385)

Frontline employees are expected to understand and act according to the values of an organisation. The messages given to the customers should be consistent. Training may be required to accomplish this. Marketing communications are often provided by outside agencies. In this case, understanding the organisation’s marketing aims and strategies is the key to success. It is essential that the organisation explains their ideas and values clearly to the agency. (Fill & Turnbull, 2019, pp. 385-386)

4.2 The factors driving organisations to IMC

What are the forces moving organisations towards adopting integrated marketing communications? Few organisations have fully managed to implement IMC according to Fill and Turnbull.

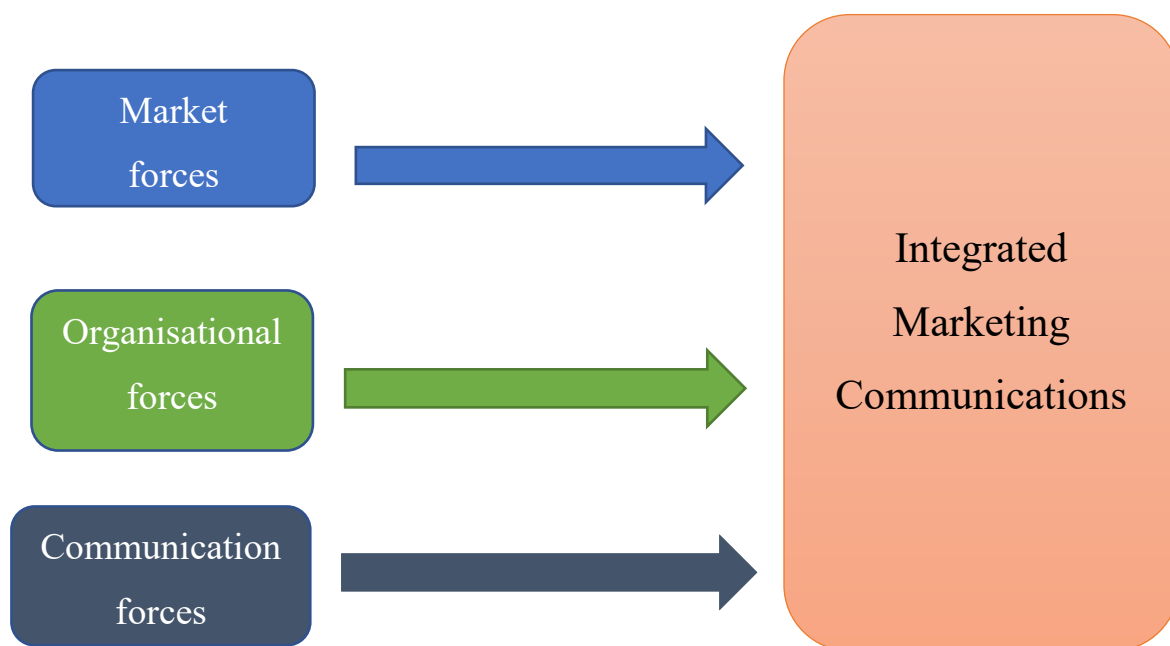


Figure 2. Forces driving organisations towards IMC (Adapted from Fill.C & Turnbull.S, 2019, p.379)

Market Forces

From the market point of view, the most prevailing factor is the redirection from transaction-based marketing where the customer interaction is minimal and short-term to relationship-based marketing which improves customer loyalty and is long-term and high customer interaction (Website of meltwater, 2020). The main principle in the market perspective is to attract people who previously had no interest towards a brand, product or service, turning them into loyal customers who will use them often and spread a positive message by word of mouth and example. (Fill & Turnbull, 2019, p.379)

Organisational forces

From the organisation point of view, the most prevailing factor is the need to become increasingly efficient. With the ability to reduce cost base, it enables improvement levels of productivity and to the profits. By using combinations of other channels in its communications, making the IMC more attractive. Organisations structures are frequently on the change and the necessary integration across all practical areas is a sign of driving for efficiency. (Fill & Turnbull, 2019, p.379)

Communication forces

The key factor here is to provide to the changing ways the customers use communications and meet them whether it was devices in use or behaviours in communication. “The goal is to provide a series of triggers to enable buyers to form brand associations, understand a brand’s values and consider the extent to which a brand might become or continue to be a part of their lives, however peripheral. By differentiating the marketing communications, often by providing clarity and simplicity, advantages can be attained.” (Fill & Turnbull, 2019, p. 379)

“An integrated approach should, at some level, attempt to provide a thematically coherent or consistent set of messages. These should be relatively easy to interpret and to assign meaning” (Fill & Turnbull, 2019, p. 379). A clear, overall message is more convincing for potential customers and permits them to identify the brand easily, with less confusion. This promotes the behaviour which the organisation sets out to achieve. Understanding the fact that customers get messages from a wide range of sources helps organisations improve their marketing communications. (Fill & Turnbull, 2019, p.379)

5 METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH

The author made numerous calls to the commercial departments of the four case study clubs at the end of November and beginning of December 2020. All four clubs declined to answer the survey I had sent them and my enquiries. The clubs explained that disclosing internal club confidential information over the phone or by survey would go against their information policy, so they all declined. I was recommended to use public information by Wigan Athletic.

5.1 Research methods

It is important to define the differences between qualitative and quantitative research because both methods provide different benefits. Qualitative data are “derived from

spoken words (verbal data), written, typed, or printed words (textual data) and still or moving visual images (visual data)". Data collection, analysis and interpretation are linked. Saunders and Lewis state that they are a set of processes which are interactive. In other words, qualitative data collected are not gathered in big numbers like quantitative data but are gathered to give in broader terms. (Saunders & Lewis, 2019, pp. 638-695)

Quantitative research normally uses a questionnaire to gather numerical data (statistics and figures) and is often used to separate the qualitative and quantitative synonym. It is usually used with a deductive approach where theory is tested by analysing and collecting data. (Saunders & Lewis, 2019, p.178)

Having the chance to go through a variety of issues in an interview usually produces "descriptive and explanatory data" which helps not only the interpretation but also facilitates the analysis. Most of this data comes from the interviewee when they speak or write, or from the interviewer's notes, from the recorded interview or by looking at visuals provided by the interviewees. (Saunders & Lewis, 2019, p.639)

5.2 Research process

The approach in this thesis is qualitative research, which includes observation. Using a survey, the author wanted to find out about the club's marketing habits in terms of budgeting, social media and marketing communication, social media channels and contents i.e. posts and written content.

Observation is one part of qualitative research. Saunders and Lewis state that there are three different observation methods which are: structured observation, internet-mediated observation, and participant observation. (Saunders & Lewis, 2019, p.378)

Saunders and Lewis claim that participant observation is qualitative "and derives from the work of social anthropology early in the twentieth century." The attention is placed

on discovering the context where people connect their actions and their social interactions. (Saunders & Lewis, 2019, pp. 378-380)

In contrast, structured observation is quantitative and is more focused on the number of actions, specifically answering “what” rather than the question “why”. Thirdly, Saunders and Lewis state that internet-mediated observation “involves the collection of data from online communities.” This approach is combined with adapted traditional observation by altering the mode of observing oral/visual/digital content, which allows researchers either to entirely observe or participate in an online community to collect the data. (Saunders & Lewis, 2019, pp. 378-380)

My approach in this thesis is internet-mediated observation, as an external observer. When I originally approached the case study clubs where I had little or no relations, I was seeking to act as an external researcher. External observer means that one can appear in a community as a visitor without revealing oneself and not participating in communities except for reading and exploring the material as an outsider. Therefore, my only option was to use publically available sources via the internet. (Saunders & Lewis, 2019, pp. 409-411)

External observer role was suitable for this thesis because of the case study clubs declined giving club internal information so it became the only suitable way to conduct the analysis.

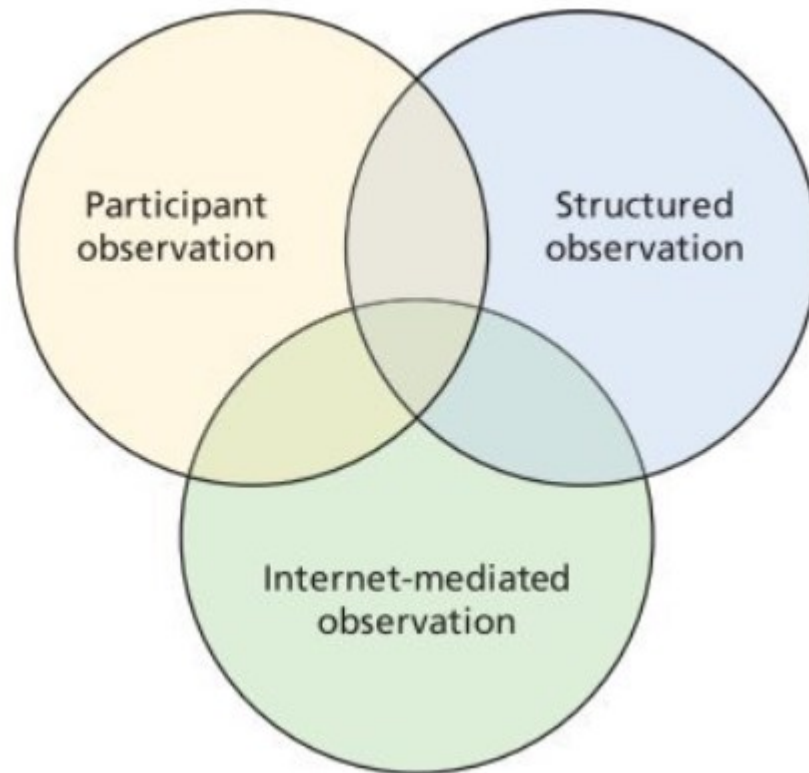


Figure 3. Overlap between types of observation (taken from Saunders & Lewis, 2019, p. 380)

Date	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Website content
15.3	Posting frequency			
17.3	Weekday activities	Weekday activities		
19.3		Administrator's activities		
23.3	Administrator's activities	Types of tweets		
24.3	Administrator's activities	Types of tweets		

4.4			Posting frequency	Websites
7.4			Commercial posts	Categories

Figure 4. Observation process of the analysis

The analysis period for Facebook and Twitter is the whole of the year 2020 and for Instagram, January 2021 until March 2021 is shown in Figure 4. My approach first was to collect data from the social media marketing tool which I found and used, called Sotrender, from a company of the same name based in London. They kindly sent the author the case study clubs' Facebook and Twitter statistics from the year 2020. From the statistics and figures of Facebook, the author found the posting frequency by the four clubs, the activities by weekday and the administrator's activities in the year 2020. For Twitter the collected data was on administrator activities in the year 2020, posting frequency by weekday and the types of tweets the case study clubs used in 2020. For Instagram, the club's posts per month were manually collected and analysed; the clubs' usage of commercialized posts was also analysed thoroughly. Website content was analysed by checking the content and the type of message the clubs used.

6 CASE STUDY CLUBS

The author has chosen four English football clubs from the four highest divisions in the English football league system. The chosen clubs are all located in the north of England as the author's relatives live there. Liverpool FC is marked with the red star, Sheffield Wednesday with the black, Wigan Athletic with the purple and finally, Tranmere Rovers with the blue star.



Figure 4. Map of Northern England (Ontheworldmap)

The football pyramid in England works as follows: The top level is called the English Premier League (EPL), which has twenty (20) teams battling to see who will be crowned champions of England after each season. The Premier League season begins in August and runs through until May, with each team playing each other once at home and once away ($2 \times 19 = 38$ games). League points go as follows: a team who wins a game in the league receives three points (3), if the two teams draw each get a point (1) and the team who loses a league game receives no points. The three (3) teams who are at the bottom of the Premier League table at the end of the season are relegated to the second tier, which is known as the Championship. The top two (2) teams in the Championship at the end of the season are automatically promoted to the English Premier League. A third team is promoted via the end-of-season playoff system where the teams that finished third, fourth, fifth and sixth at the end of the season play a series of knock-out-games to determine the final qualifying spot to the Premier League. It is

a merit-based system where the third play the sixth and fourth versus the fifth and the winners from these go to the Playoff final, which is played at the home of English Football, Wembley. (Premier League, 2020)

Promotion to the highest tier of English football is a big prize as the TV and sponsorship money increases a lot (by millions of pounds) from the Championship to the Premier League so there is not only the competition aim but also the financial rewards which are involved in these different leagues are more lucrative. League One has 24 teams where each season the top three teams get promoted and four get relegated to League Two. Meanwhile, in League Two there are 24 teams, as many as four teams get promoted and two teams unfortunately must get relegated back to Non-League football (tier 5).

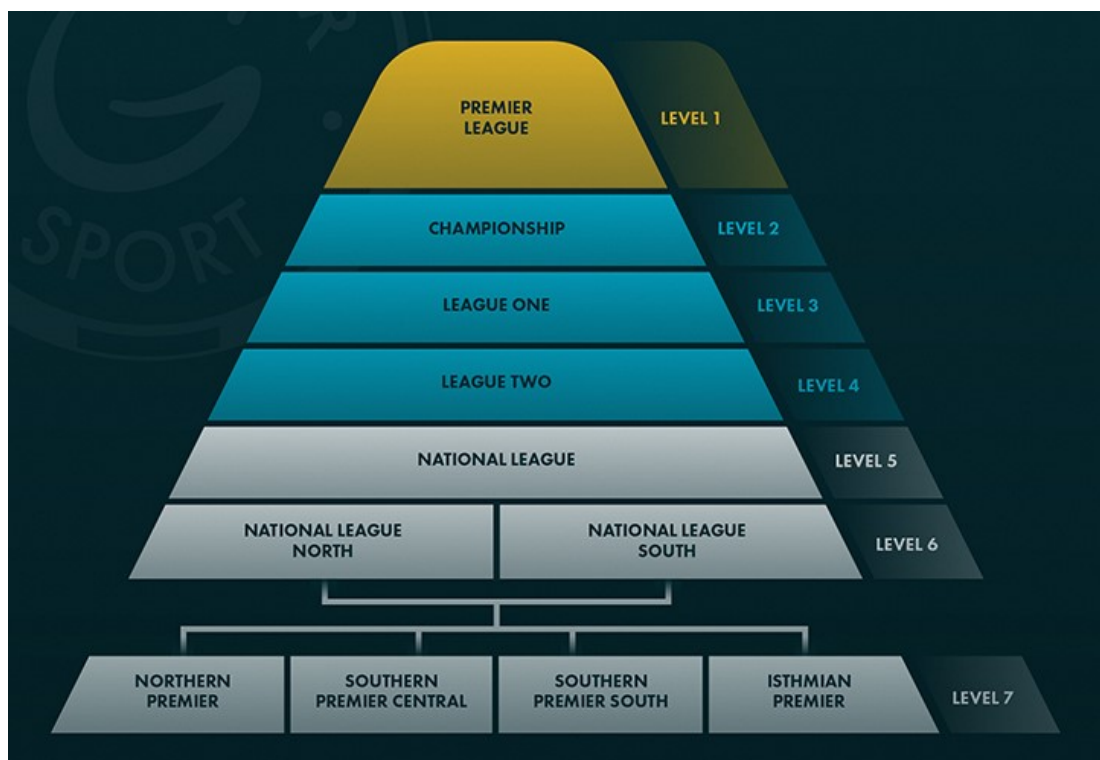


Figure 5. English Football League Pyramid (Grosvenor's Casinos, 2020)

A diagram explaining the English Football League Pyramids from tier 1 down to tier 7. Each league under the EFL organisation has the same sponsor but otherwise there

are different sponsors subject to the dates of the contracts. Tier 5 and lower leagues are called Non-League Football.

6.1 Sponsorship

Sponsorship in football has grown over the past thirty years or so into a massive industry, thanks to the popularity of the game globally. Brand visibility in football has become a major factor which makes positive co-operation with club, player or league and the corporate brand, “providing amplified brand differentiation from their competitors within a cluttered advertising landscape”. (Football Benchmark, 2021)

Top-tier football sponsorship has changed dramatically thanks to the development of media landscape, globalisation, and digitalisation, which has created interesting commercial and strategical opportunities for the football club. Although this is a positive thing, for the football clubs and sponsors to gain competitive advantage, there is a lot to adapt and changes to exploit. (Football Benchmark, 2021)

The Premier League, which is one of the top five leagues in the footballing world, is broadcast to over two hundred (200) countries across the world and nowadays it is not uncommon to have a huge majority of the fan bases living abroad. This shows the overall development not only in professional football but the rise of the digital age. This presents amazing opportunities for football clubs to reach fans all over the world. The rise of new social media channels has opened the doors for football to make it easier to access potential consumers at low cost globally. This has resulted in a change in fans’ consumption habits. Many football clubs have transformed themselves more into “leisure media corporations”. The focus has been on capturing the attention of their fans/consumers globally, which makes the football clubs more open to look for valuable sponsorship deals, mainly towards leading corporate brands. (Website of Football Benchmark). The Premier League allowed shirt sleeve sponsors from the 2017/2018 seasons. (Scoreandchange, 2021)

6.2 Liverpool FC

Liverpool Football Club was formed on the 3rd of June 1892 after John Holding broke up from the Everton Football Club's board and decided on making a new team in the Anfield area of Liverpool. In 1901, Liverpool managed to become champions of England for the first time after just eight years from entering the English Football League and which started the rise of Liverpool FC. On December 1st in 1959, a date that will forever be remembered by the millions of Liverpool fans across the world and by the football club, Liverpool FC acquired a Scottish manager called Bill Shankly. Those times were difficult for the football club as they were struggling in the Second Division. Three years after, in 1962, Liverpool FC were promoted impressively back to the top tier of English Football. In November 1964, Bill Shankly had an idea: to send his team out in all red. In doing the team colours with white socks and trim, Shankly thought his team would be more intimidating and as always, he was right. (Liverpool FC, 2020)



Figure 6. “Sign in the players” tunnel was installed by Shankly in 1964 to instil fear into the opposition. (Liverpool FC, 2020)

6.2.1 Organisation

Before the current owners took control of Liverpool Football Club, there were huge fan protests which started in the summer of 2007. The reason for the protests were clear for the fans, the promises that Hicks and Gillett made after buying the club were starting to become broken as the “rapid development of a new stadium” were stalled and the transfer funds promised to football manager Rafael Benitez were too small for a big club like Liverpool. (Hughson et al., 2017, p.192)

The football club is owned by an American sports company called Fenway Sports Group (FSG) “through certain wholly owned subsidiaries” which is managed by principal owner John W. Henry, who is an investor and a businessman, and by chairman Tom Werner. Altogether there are seven directors in the club including club legend, Sir Kenny Dalglish and recently appointed chief executive officer Billy Hogan. (Liverpool FC, 2020)

The current ownership changed in 2010, after numerous fan protests which started from beginning of 2008 over their disapproval of Hicks and Gillett, when Fenway Sport Group’s John W. Henry bought the club for approximately three hundred million pounds (300) (CNBC, 2019).

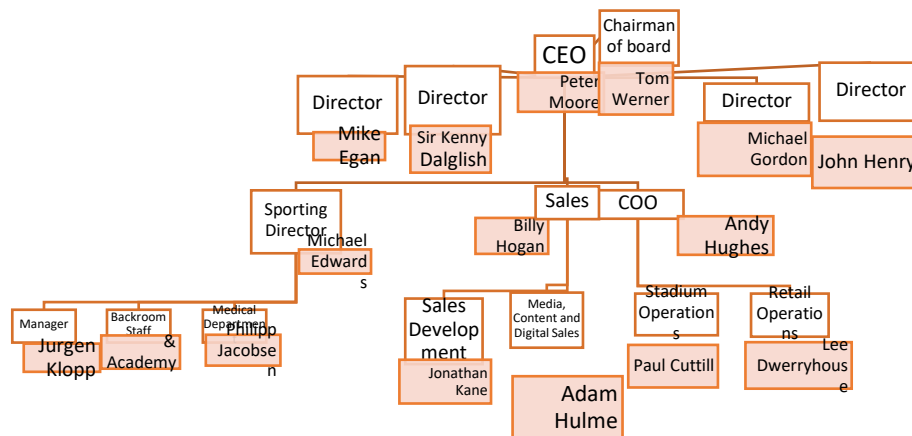


Figure 7. Adapted chart of the current organisation of Liverpool Football Club (Liverpool FC, 2021)

6.2.2 Current Sponsorship

Liverpool FC's current shirt sponsor is Standard Chartered, which is a British multinational financial services and banking company. They took over the shirt sponsorship from Carlsberg initially in 2009 but they waited until the existing deal had expired (at the end of the 10/11 season) as shown below on the graph. The graph perfectly shows the impact of financial growth and the business football has become, and the value of sponsorship deals are growing lucratively.

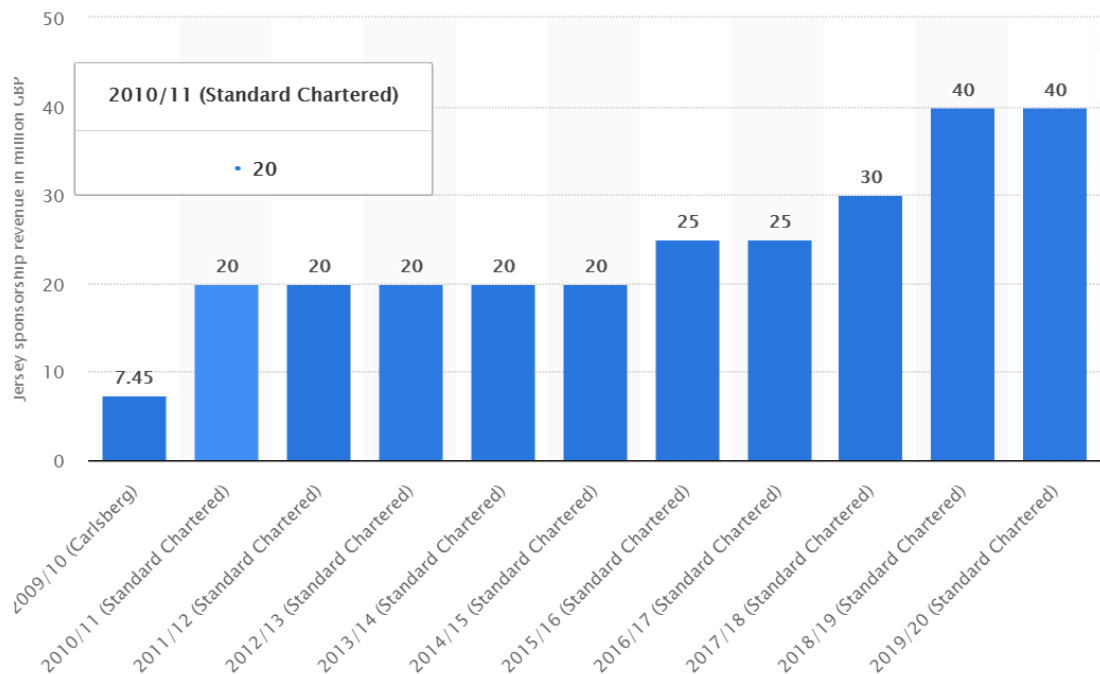


Figure 8. Liverpool FC's shirt sponsorship revenue in millions of pounds (Statista, 2021)

Liverpool FC's current shirt sleeve sponsor is an American online travel shopping company called Expedia who took over in October 2020 from Western Union (an American financial company), who after three years of sponsoring the club cut their sponsorship deal short (five-year deal). (talksport, 2020)

According to the local newspaper, the Liverpool Echo, in November 2020, the deal with Expedia would last until the end of 2022/23 season. They also state that the

current deal with Expedia is an increase in revenues by a few more million pounds: Western Union were paying Liverpool FC firstly 6.75 million pounds per year and in the last year, 8 million pounds per year, whereas the existing deal with Expedia is believed to be in the region of 10 million pounds per year. (Liverpool Echo, 2020)

6.3 Sheffield Wednesday

Sheffield Wednesday was founded a long time ago, in September 4th 1887 by members of a local cricket club. SWFC is in fact the fifth oldest professional football club in England. The name “Wednesday” came from the fact that the local craftsmen who were the founding members of the club, had their only day off in a week on a Wednesday. The name officially changed in the 20s to the current name. The club’s nickname is “The Owls” as it located near to an area called Owlerton, in Sheffield. Sheffield Wednesday have won the most famous cup in the footballing world, The FA Cup, three times in their history; in 1896, in 1907 and in 1935. Sheffield Wednesday have played in their highest tier of English football in 1992/93 season all the way until they got relegated in the season 99/00 to the second tier. (Sheffield Wednesday Football Club, 2020)

6.3.1 Organisation

Why doesn’t SWFC have a senior management team? In fact, the owner of the club, Dejphon Chansiri has not hired a chief executive for the club since Katrien Meire’s departure at the beginning of 2019. Many fans of the football club have wondered why there a CEO has not been hired to help in running the club but Chansiri claims to have a team of CEOs running in the background who have “many years of football experience” (Examiner live, 2020).

6.3.2 Current Sponsorship

Azerbaijan sponsored Sheffield Wednesday's shirts for the 2014/2015 season. According to goal.com the reported deal was around 50 million euros which is about 42.8 million pounds although it was not made public. Sheffield Wednesday said the deal was "financially significant". (Website of Goal magazine, 2014)

Current shirt sponsors Chansiri (the club owner) replaced Azerbaijan in the season 2015/16 and is still to this day the shirt sponsors (Website of Sheffield Wednesday, 2015). The value of the sponsorship deal is undisclosed information, but it is reasonable to speculate that it is lower than the Azerbaijani deal.

6.4 Wigan Athletic

Wigan Athletic are an 88-year-old football club, established in 1932 and located in Greater Manchester. 46 years after being founded, Wigan managed to achieve promotion to the football league. A major contribution to Wigan Athletic's rise to the top tier of English Football League was the arrival of local businessman David Whelan, who bought the club in 1995. Since then, he has invested heavily in his local football club, ensuring the rise of Athletic up through the football pyramid. Shortly after Whelan's arrival he had a future vision that Wigan would be in the highest tier of English football. In 1997, Wigan Athletic became champions of Division Three which was then tier 4.

Finally, in 2005, Wigan Athletic clinched promotion to the top-flight of English Football by finishing in second place. Wigan managed to keep their top-flight place until 2013 when they also had arguably their greatest achievement when they beat Manchester City to win the FA Cup for the first time ever in their history. The team are currently struggling in League One (3rd tier).

Based on The Guardian's article, the club has been struggling financially for the last couple of years and Wigan were put into administration by the corporate restructuring specialist, Begbies Traynor, in the summer of 2020, after the club was sold in late 2018

to a Hong Kong based company called International Entertainment Corporation. In May 2020, it was announced that IEC had sold Wigan onwards and made some profit. At the beginning of June 2020, Wigan announced on their website the official takeover by another Hong Kong based company called Next Leader Fund (NLF). Their new director for the club, Au Yeung, who was a minority shareholder in NLF, promised to make things right for the football club. Au Yeung later in June became the owner with more than 75% of the shares, thus meaning a complete takeover from IEC. His decision to buy Wigan Athletic whilst in the middle of the Coronavirus crisis when football clubs were fearing they would go out of business was a strange one really, especially when considering the fact that Wigan had been losing millions of pounds even before COVID-19. The deal was worth around 40 million pounds and not being able or willing to fund the club and putting it into administration is baffling. (The Guardian, 2020).

6.4.1 Organisation

The chairman of Wigan Athletic is Dave Whelan. They have six personnel in the senior management which includes a head of community trust. The head of HR is Louise Kerrigan, and the head of digital & communications, Ashley Houghton, is the person the author contacted. Andy Birch runs is manager of operations. The other roles are the stadium safety officer and the ticket office manager. (Wigan Athletic, 2021)

6.4.2 Current Sponsorship

Asian betting company KB88 took over the shirt sponsorship from 2019 with a three-year agreement. They also sponsored Wigan Athletic's training wear with this deal (Wigan Athletic, 2019). This deal came to an end when Wigan Athletic were put into administration in June 2020.

6.5 Tranmere Rovers

Tranmere Rovers football club located in the Wirral, was founded in 1884 first under the name of Belmont FC. An interesting fact about Tranmere is that they are the only football club in the whole of the UK which has a Scandinavian name. Tranmere is a name which is from Norse-Viking origin and it is believed that “a group of Vikings of Norwegian descent settled on the Wirral after being forced out of Dublin”. Tranmere have generated for this reason a wide range of fans from the Scandinavian area and there is even a Swedish-based Tranmere Rovers fan group called the “Swedish Vikings”. (Ryan Ferguson, 2016)

At the beginning Tranmere played in local competitive leagues and started their Football League journey in 1921. 1938 saw the club record a promotion to the second highest league (Division Two) for the first time in their club history, after achieving promotion from Division Three. The club struggled during the next ten years and in the 1980s saw its first real financial difficulties. There was even a campaign called “Save the Rovers” which luckily, with the support including sponsorship also from the local council, helped revive the club’s finances and move them into a safer place. (Tranmere Rovers, 2021)

The glory days of Tranmere Rovers were from the late 1980s when legendary manager Johnny King took over and guided the club towards cup finals which were played at the home of football, Wembley stadium. The seasons of 91/92, 92/93 and 93/94 saw the club become close to achieving a promotion to the highest league for the first time but unfortunately, they fell at the last hurdle. (Tranmere Rovers, 2021)

6.5.1 Organisation

The current organisation of Tranmere Rovers consists of a boardroom and a behind the scenes team which will be discussed briefly below. The current chairman and vice-chairman Mark and Nicola Palios bought Tranmere Rovers from Peter Johnson, who was the owner for nearly 30 years, in August 2014. Peter Johnson stayed on as

President. Currently, the club has one director and seven associate directors. They have ten personnel in the senior management, which includes the Managing Director (Dawn Tolcher), Senior HR&Admin (Ellis Parr) and the Communications & Marketing manager Jonathon Swift who I was in contact with. (Tranmere Rovers, 2021)

6.5.2 Current Sponsorship

Tranmere Rovers' shirt sponsor from 2016 to 2019 was Bagnall & Morris Waste Services which is a local, Wirral-based family business. The value of the deal is undisclosed. Current shirt sponsors Essar took over in 2019 for an undisclosed amount and made a further extension in December 2019 until the end of the 2021/22 season. Essar, part of the Essar group, is an Indian multinational, multi-industry company which also has a big connection to the North West of England, being a major supplier for energy companies and supermarkets. (Tranmere Rovers, 2019)

7 ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

In this chapter, I describe and analyse the case study clubs' different social media channels and my observations. I will analyse the three social media platforms for my four case study clubs which are Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The analysis will focus on the current online behaviour, concentrating more on the online activities of the clubs and analysing the usage by the clubs of the three social media channels. The analysis period for Facebook and Twitter was the whole year of 2020 and for Instagram, January 2021 until March 2021.

7.1 Facebook

The Facebook analysis period is the whole year of 2020. Liverpool FC's administrators posted 4675 times in 2020. Out of all the posts, 54.8% were photos, videos accounted for 31.2%, 13% were links and 1% were status posts. Sheffield Wednesday posted 826 times in 2020 and of these posts, 359 posts were links, 43%, 275 were photos which is 32.9% and 190 posts (22.8%) were videos. Wigan Athletic posted a total of 1927 times. The most frequent manner of posting for Wigan in 2020 was photos by 42.9% (505 times). The second most used method was links which was 421 times, making 35.8% of all posts. Status posts, which are text only, was the type least used, only 15 times (1.2%). Lastly, Tranmere Rovers posted 1743 times in 2020. Tranmere made a huge amount of photo posts which accounted for 61.1% of all posts (1073 times). 456 videos were posted in 2020 which represented 26% and Status posts were posted 177 times, which is 10.1%. Interestingly, the least used were links, which were used in 50 posts, accounting for 2.8% of all posts in that year.

Looking first at the similarities between the case study clubs, we can see that Status posts are not very common, all the clubs use photos and videos the most. Between the lowest tier of Tranmere and the highest tier Liverpool there was a fascinating discovery about the posting of photos, as Tranmere posted as many as 61% photos of their total posts, whereas the figure for Liverpool was slightly less with just under 55%.

Secondly, looking at the differences between the clubs we can see that links are used most by Sheffield Wednesday and the least by Tranmere Rovers. There are small differences in the percentage of video posts: Liverpool made around 31%, Sheffield Wednesday and Wigan Athletic made just over 20% videos and Tranmere 26%. The biggest difference besides status posts were photos: where Tranmere and Liverpool had around 55-60%, Sheffield and Wigan made only about 33% and 43%.

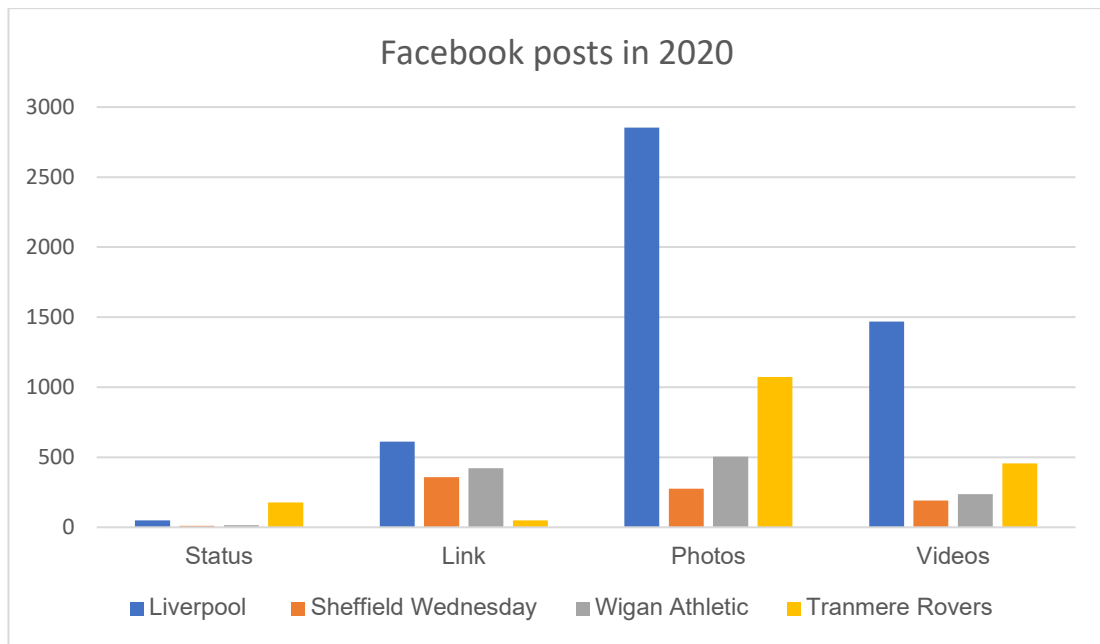


Figure 9. Adapted graph of the case study clubs' Facebook posts in 2020

Administrators performed 4793 activities of which 115 were comments and 4675 were posts.

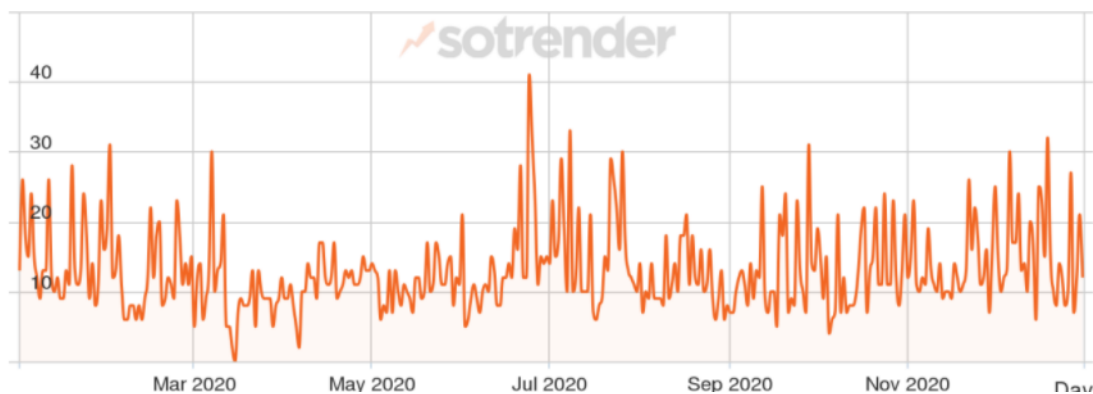


Figure 10. Liverpool FC's administrator's activities in Facebook in 2020

The most active posting day for Liverpool FC was on Saturdays which is the traditional match day in football, with an average of approximately 14.6 posts. The least active day was Friday with 12.29 posts on average. Fridays usually are not very common to have any football games, as the main matchdays are Saturdays and Sundays. Liverpool has a consistent posting every day of the week, unlike the other teams which will be discussed below.

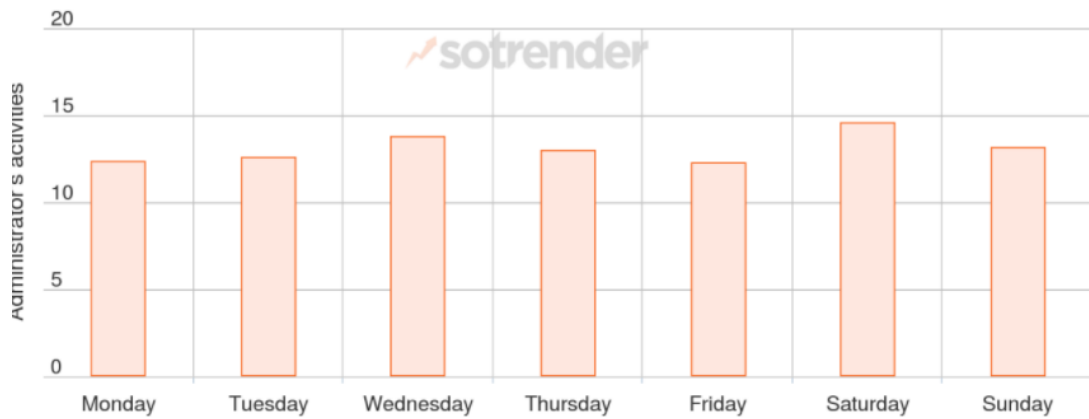


Figure 11. Liverpool FC administrator's activities in Facebook in 2020 by weekday

Sheffield Wednesday administrators performed 826 activities of which all were posts.

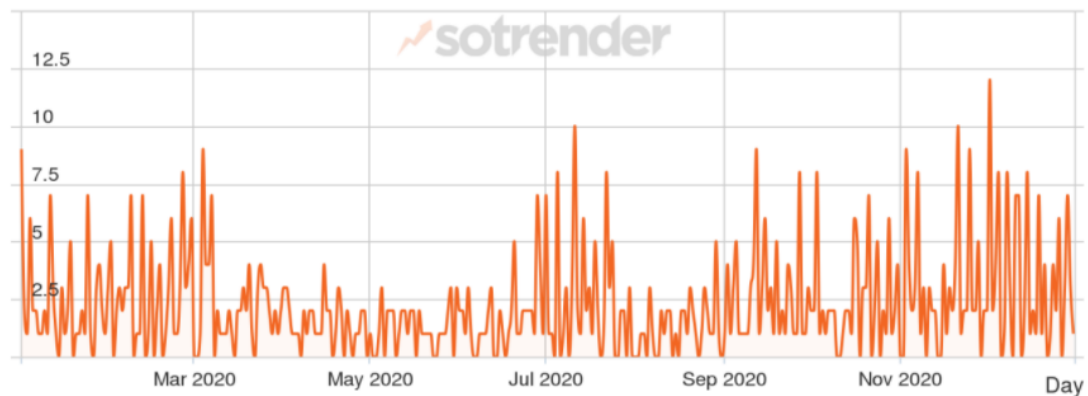


Figure 12. Sheffield Wednesday's administrator's activities in Facebook in 2020

One might have thought that the most active day would be on Wednesday due to the club's name, but it was not the case. Sheffield Wednesday's most active posting day was in fact also on Saturdays with an average of 3.6 posts. Second most active time to post is on Wednesdays with an average of 3.2 posts. Meanwhile, the same trend continues with the least active day, i.e. Sunday, with an average of one post which is about a quarter of the posts of Saturdays.

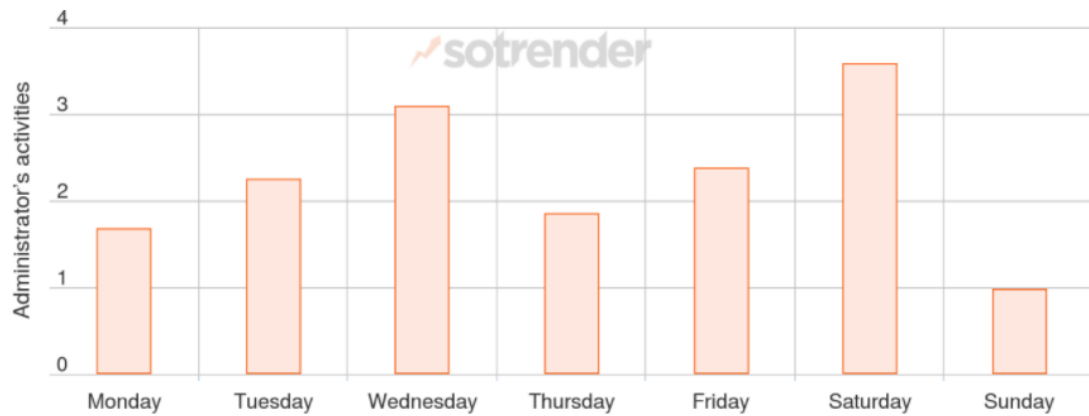


Figure 13. Sheffield Wednesday administrator's activities in Facebook in 2020 by weekday

Wigan Athletic administrators performed 1927 activities of which 1760 were posts and 767 comments. May was especially high due to the end of the 19/20 football season and the club was in a bad situation financially and were also rumoured to go into administration.

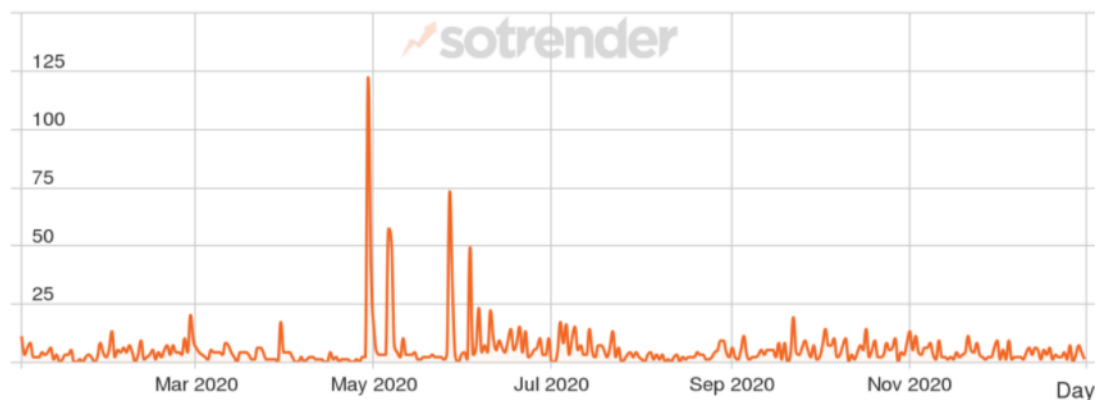


Figure 14. Wigan Athletic's administrator's activities in Facebook in 2020

Meanwhile in 2020, Wigan Athletic were very active on Facebook on Wednesdays, which is an interesting finding with 9.3 posts and second most active on Saturdays. The club posted less actively on Sundays with approximately 2.7 posts. The other clubs do not post as much on Wednesdays and rather focus their posts at the weekend. Comparing the number of posts on Wednesdays to the number of posts on Sundays, there is a huge difference (29% more activity than Sunday).

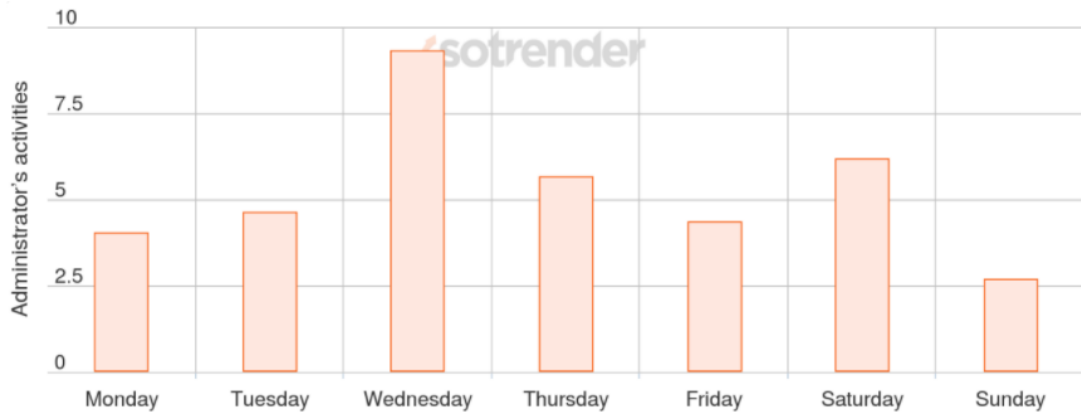


Figure 15. Wigan Athletic administrator's activities in Facebook in 2020

Administrators performed 1761 activities of which 18 of these were comments and the rest were posts (1743).

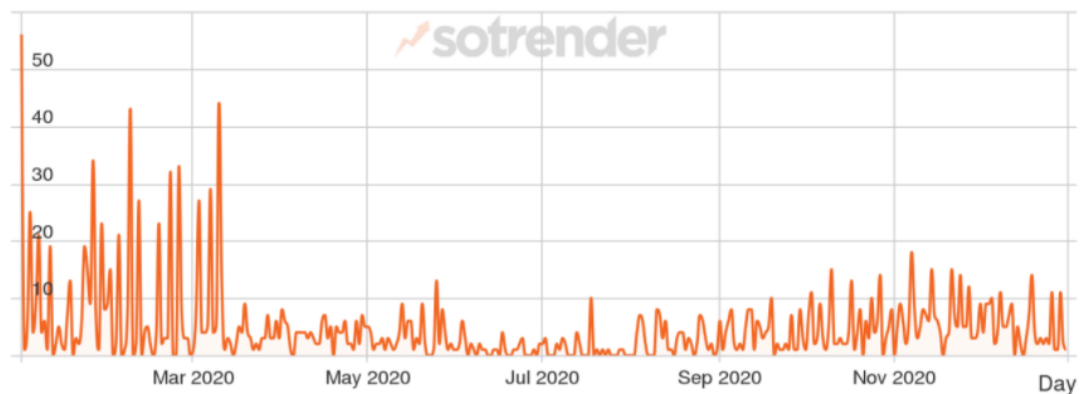


Figure 16. Tranmere Rovers administrator's activities in Facebook in 2020

Tranmere, on the other hand, were also most active on Saturdays with an average of 8.1 posts and least active on Sundays with two posts. Tranmere post rather lot on Tuesdays which is not a traditional matchday in football with approximately 7.2. When comparing the Saturday amount to the Sunday, there is a 24% difference which is quite big.

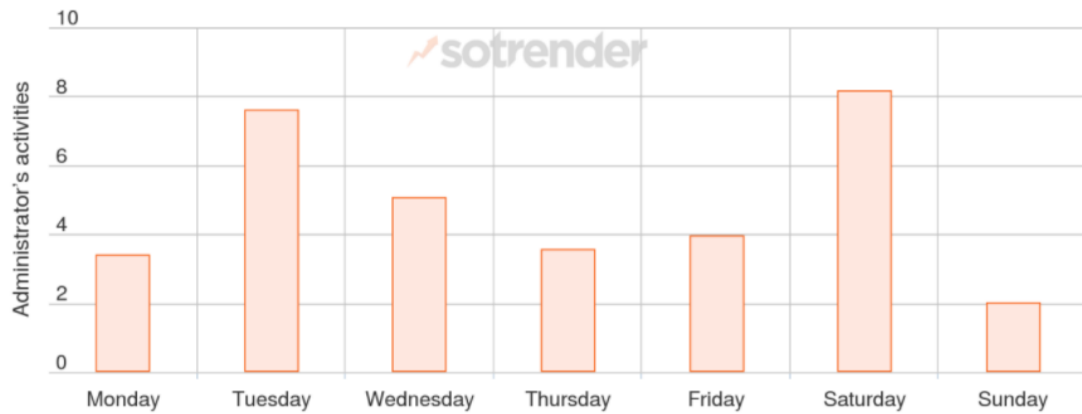


Figure 17. Tranmere Rovers administrator's activities in Facebook in 2020

Overall, the clubs posting days are very similar in that Saturdays are the most popular days to upload new posts. Sundays are the least popular day for Sheffield Wednesday, Wigan Athletic and Tranmere Rovers. Liverpool on the other hand post regularly on every day because they have more marketing resources.

7.2 Twitter

The Twitter analysis period is the whole year of 2020. Below are listed the posting frequency, online activity and the usage of different channels.

7.2.1 Liverpool FC

The brand's tweets are illustrated by type in the charts below. As we can see in the Figure 18 below, Liverpool FC's tweets are mainly organic and promoted tweets which totalled 6638.

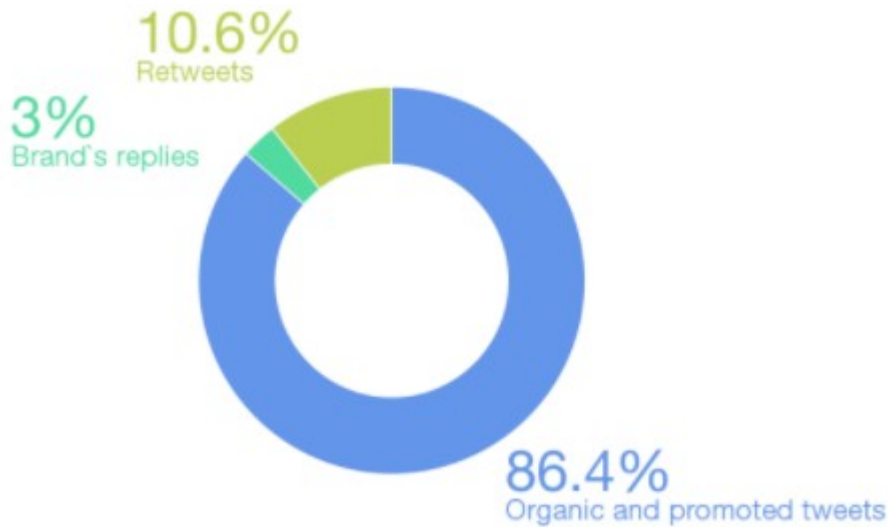


Figure 18. Liverpool FC's types of tweets in their Twitter account in 2020

In all the administrator's activities graphs from Sotrender, the blue colour shows the number of tweets, green shows the replies, yellow represents retweets and the colour orange the number of likes. Liverpool made 6638 tweets, 236 replies, retweeted 812 times and liked 2880 times.

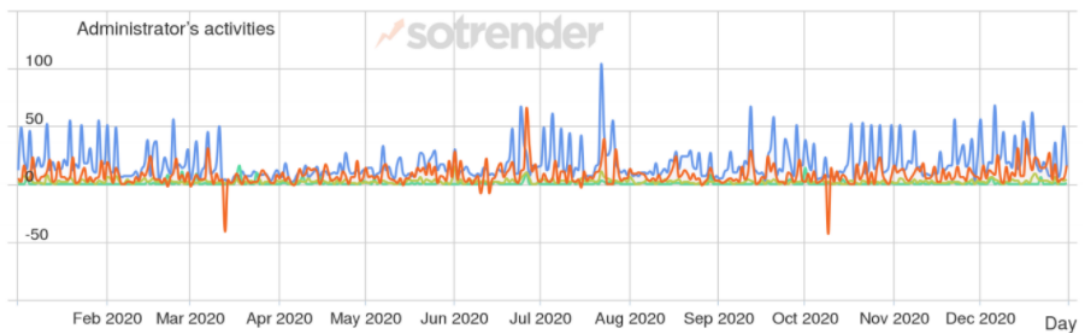


Figure 19. Liverpool FC administrator activities in Twitter during 2020

Days with the most activity again shows on the Saturday's which has on average 34.33 activities. The least activity is on Fridays with an average of 25.79 activities.

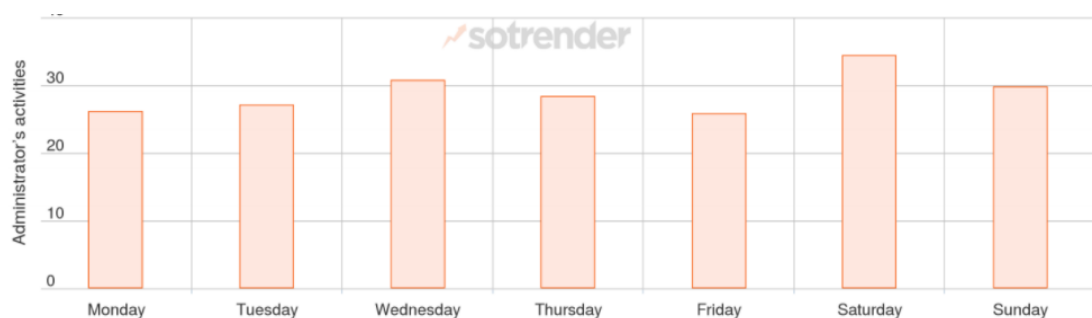


Figure 20. Liverpool FC administrator's activities in Twitter in 2020 by weekday

7.2.2 Sheffield Wednesday

62 were replies, 97 retweets and 2100 were organic and promoted tweets of Sheffield Wednesday.

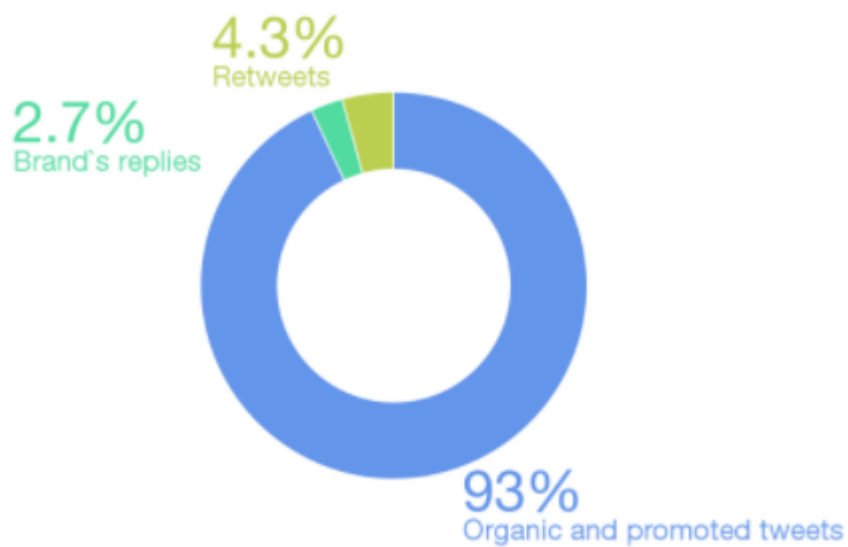


Figure 21. Sheffield Wednesday's types of tweets in their Twitter account in 2020

Wednesday's administrators used tweets as their main action with 2100 of them, replied 62 times and retweeted 97 times. They did not "like" at all in 2020.

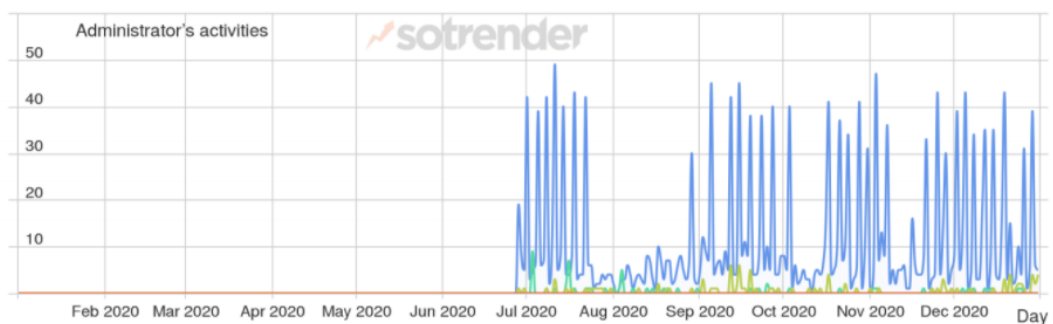


Figure 22. Sheffield Wednesday administrator activities during 2020 in Twitter

Days with the most activity again shows on the Saturday's which has on average 27.12 activities. The least activity is on Sundays with an average of 6.24 activities.

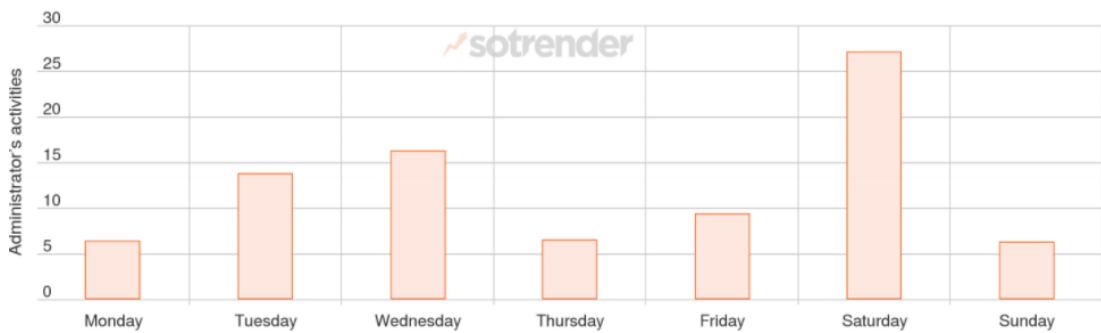


Figure 23. Sheffield Wednesday administrator's activities in Twitter in 2020 by weekday

7.2.3 Wigan Athletic

Wigan Athletic posted 389 replies, retweeted 340 times and used organic and promoted tweets over 1500 times (1534).

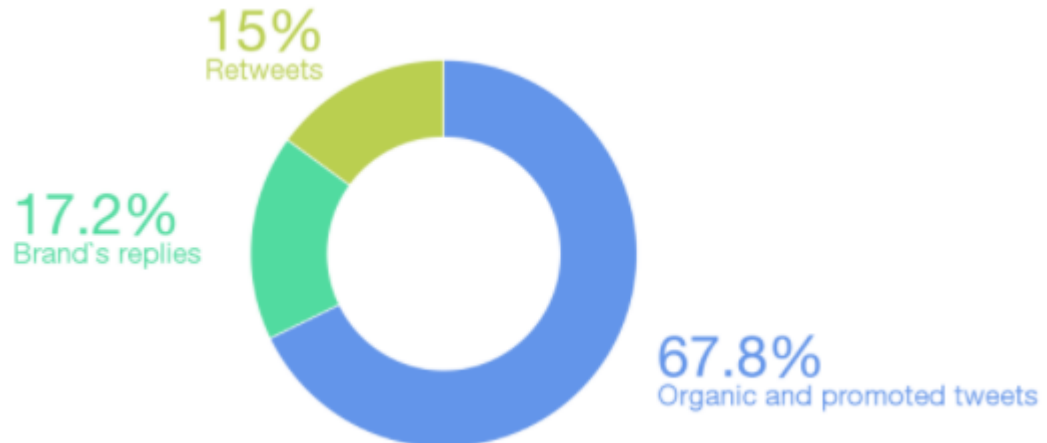


Figure 24. Wigan Athletic's types of tweets in their Twitter account in 2020

Wigan tweeted over 1500 times (1534), replied to 389 tweets, retweeted 340 times and just like Sheffield Wednesday, they did not like a single post.

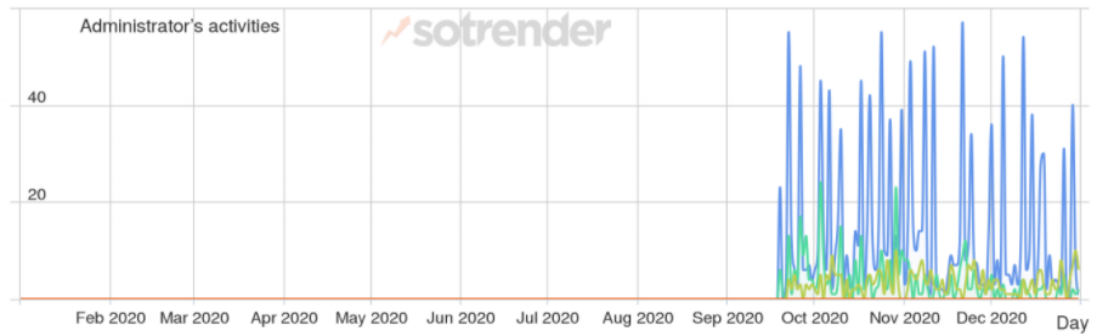


Figure 25. Wigan Athletic administrator activities in Twitter during 2020

Days with the most activity again shows on the Saturday's which has on average 46.93 activities. The least activity is on Sundays with an average of 12.93 activities.

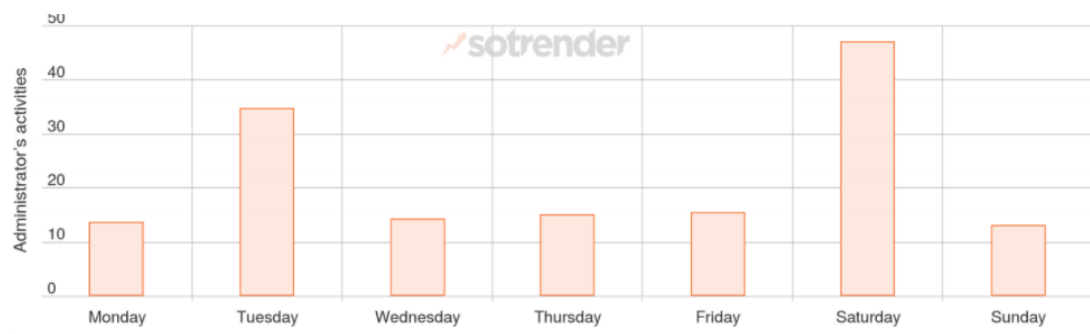


Figure 26. Wigan Athletic administrator's activities in Twitter in 2020 by weekday

7.2.4 Tranmere Rovers

Tranmere Rovers replied a total of 36 times, made 180 retweets and used 1584 tweets for organic and promoted tweets.

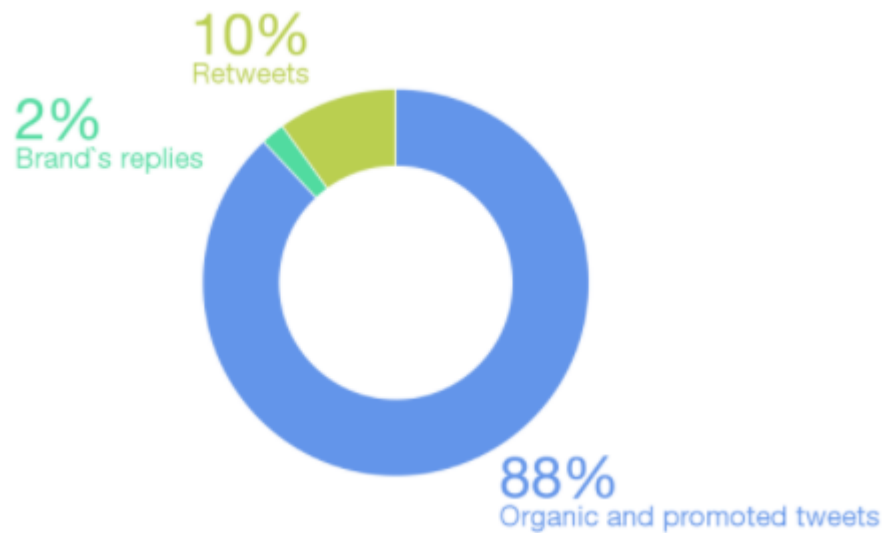


Figure 27. Tranmere Rovers' types of tweets in their Twitter account in 2020

For the administrator's activities, Tranmere data is not available from the beginning of 2020 until October. Below you can find the administrator activities from October 2020 until the end of 2020. Most were tweets (1584), and the least were likes with zero. The club's twitter replied 36 times and retweeted just under 200 times (180)

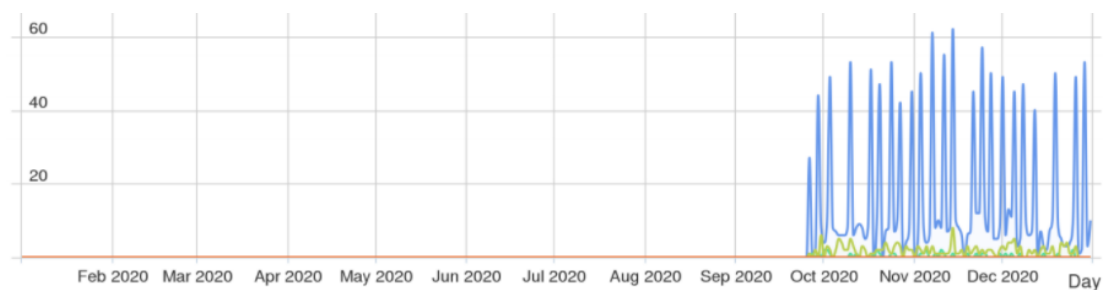


Figure 28. Tranmere Rovers administrator activities in Twitter during 2020

Days with the most activity again shows on the Saturdays which has on average 48.29 activities. The least activity is on Sundays with an average of 7.25 activities.

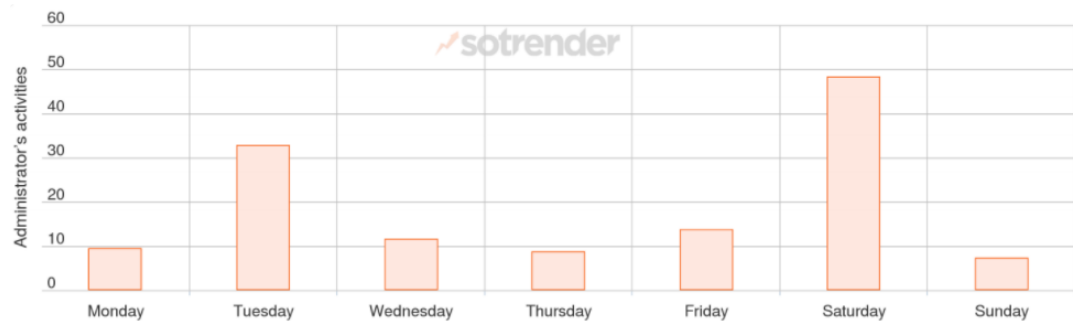


Figure 29. Trammere Rovers administrator's activities in Twitter in 2020 by weekday

On Twitter, the amount of tweets Liverpool receive means that it would be almost impossible to reply to all the tweets they receive. In contrast, Wigan Athletic can successfully answer the tweets from fans at a good percentage precisely because it is a more manageable amount. It can be speculated that Sheffield Wednesday and Trammere Rovers do not reply to fans' tweets due to their lack of resources.

7.3 Instagram

The Instagram analysis period is from January 2021 until the end of March 2021. As shown in the Figure 30 below, Liverpool post about 250 more posts per month than the other clubs. Wigan Athletic post the least content on their Instagram account with around 35-60 posts per month. Trammere Rovers and Sheffield Wednesday have been quite active on Instagram. For a small club, Trammere have used their account regularly, also using posts for commercial purposes. Wigan Athletic's small number of posts suggests that either they do not consider Instagram to be a good social media marketing tool or they do not believe that their follower count is enough. Nevertheless, their 150,000 followers (average number during this analysis period) are high compared to other clubs in their division and thus, the reach is good (Website of Sports lens). It seems that they focus strongly on Facebook and Twitter.

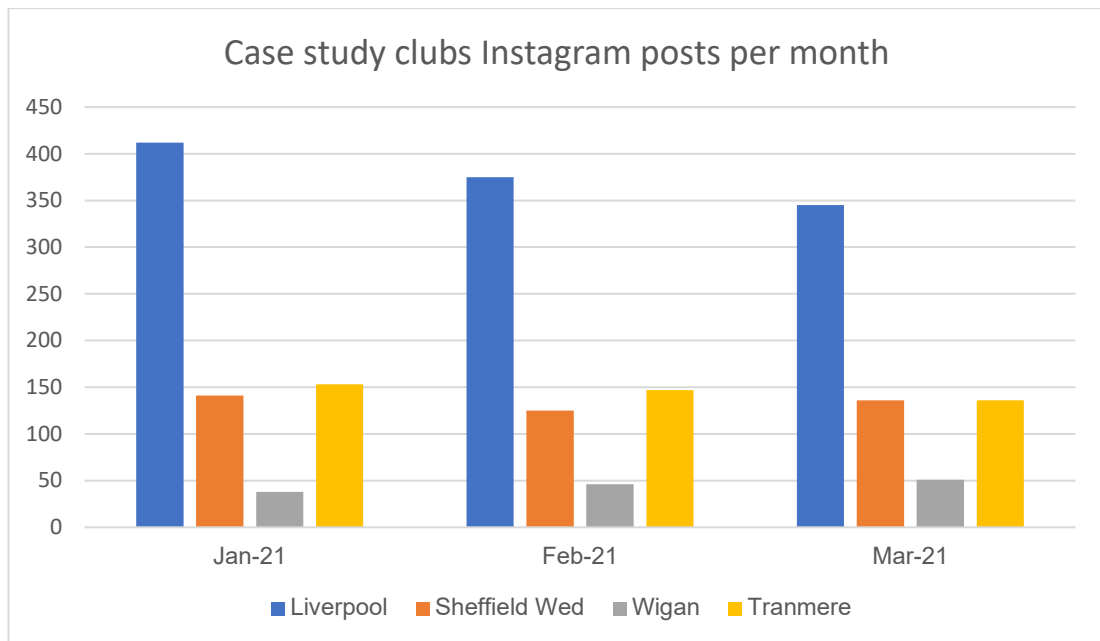


Figure 30. Case study clubs Instagram posts per month

Liverpool FC have a second Instagram account called LFCretail which is very active and solely makes commercial posts. LFCretail posts six to eight times daily and focuses on different products each time. The account also posts regularly on Stories which is another good way of gaining reach. Sheffield Wednesday had zero purely commercial posts during the analysis period of January 2021 until March 2021. In contrast, Wigan Athletic posted about 40 posts during the analysis period: they posted two commercial posts in January and one at the beginning of February. This shows that they have some interest in using the social media platform for marketing purposes. In the analysis period, Tranmere Rovers used purely commercial posts eight times, which showcased the sales offers the club had in the club shop.

7.4 Website content

On their website, Liverpool FC mostly use web banners to promote their sales and offers on their official store. The purpose of this is to attract traffic onto their website and to generate sales. Liverpool has sales that are sometimes even up to 70% off and a very smart “Deals of the week” section which has six items on sale for a reduced price. During the analysis period, they also had three specific promotional posts which

showcased price cuts of up to 50% for certain products for a month-long period. Liverpool uploads mainly team news, match reports and player interviews as their website content. Sheffield Wednesday has their commercial posts under their website archive and they can be found when clicking on the “category - commercial”. They posted twice on their website during the analysis period. They had a 50% sale of replica shirts and another 50% sale on products from their official kit suppliers, ELEV8.

Wigan Athletic publishes mainly team news, match reports and player interviews as their website content. During the three months period of the analysis, they also made a few commercial posts at the beginning of the year on their website with sales on homeware products and a commercial post on away shirts and goalkeeping shirts. Tranmere Rovers uploads the same kind of content as all the other case study clubs.

8 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In the football world, marketing has grown, and football clubs have been able to engage with their fans through social media channels such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. This has enabled football clubs to become more commercialized and reach a greater audience than ever before. Using a qualitative research approach, which included observation, the author analysed the usage of social media in marketing for a whole year for Facebook and Twitter and for a three-month period for Instagram. The author had originally sent a survey to each of the four clubs, but they declined to disclose the information about the marketing habits in terms of budgeting, social media and marketing communication, social media channels and content, i.e. posts and written content.

The results of this case study indicate that the four clubs are using social media marketing actively and efficiently on all social media platforms. The message of the content is coherent across the platforms, in line with the theory on integrated marketing communications. The research found that there are many similarities between the four clubs for instance, in the posting days of the week on Facebook and Twitter. Status

posts are not very common, and all four clubs use photos and videos the most. Website content is similar throughout the four clubs and the message is coherent.

However, there are some differences between the clubs regarding use of Twitter and Instagram. Overall, the case study clubs post organic and promoted tweets as the majority and Liverpool, Sheffield Wednesday and Tranmere rarely reply to the fanbase's tweets. On the other hand, Wigan Athletic have interacted quite well with replies to tweets from the fanbase. With thirty million followers on Instagram, Liverpool FC have wisely concentrated their commercial marketing on a separate account which is called LFCretail. Although Tranmere are in the lowest tier of professional football, they are equally as active as Sheffield Wednesday, a team from the second highest tier, according to my analysis period.

As far as the teams in the lower leagues are concerned, Sheffield Wednesday seems to be making a mistake as the club has no commercial posts on Instagram. They are missing an opportunity to potentially increase sales with these specific marketing posts. It is recommended for them to put at least one or two commercial posts a month on Instagram. Wigan Athletic could also post much more actively on their Instagram account as they only posted around 40 posts a month during the analysis period.

In conclusion, the results of this case study indicated that the four clubs are using social media marketing actively and efficiently on all social media platforms. The message of the content is coherent across the platforms, in line with the theory on integrated marketing communications, although there is still room for improvement, especially on posting frequency on Instagram.

For future research, it would be interesting to compare social media marketing in England with that of clubs in different tiers from another European country, for example a club in Finland, or by extending the period of analysis for each platform. Also, using a participant observation method could be interesting to see what the fans perspective of the clubs' usage and engagement of social media channels are managed, and would they change something if they had the chance to.

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