

# A Critical Evaluation of the Use of Social Media by Maltese Premier League Football Clubs

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**Abstract:** Social media (SM) has become an integral part of everyday life. Its ease of use and accessibility have given sports organisations the opportunity to use this space as an effective communication and marketing tool. This study, through a qualitative content analysis of all Facebook posts uploaded by all Maltese Premier League (MPL) football clubs in February and April 2020, investigated the use of SM by MPL football clubs. These findings were then supported by semi-structured interviews with seven club representatives to provide a better understanding of the clubs' perceptions in relation to the use of SM. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, which allowed new themes and patterns to emerge. Findings show that MPL clubs mainly use SM as a one-way communication tool. In fact, despite recognising the importance of SM as a tool to create an ongoing two-way dialogue with fans, results show that clubs are missing out on this opportunity by exclusively using Facebook as an informational and marketing tool. The clubs, however, seem to be adopting some effective fan engagement tactics, such as the use of vivid content, maintaining an active page, and the effective timing of posts. This study also identified some of the main challenges faced by the clubs, with lack of human and financial resources being the major challenges. Moreover, maintaining control over what fans post on the clubs' SM profiles was also defined as another gruelling and time-consuming task.

**Keywords:** Social media; fan engagement; communication; fan interaction

## Introduction

During the past twenty years, the world has experienced the widespread growth of SM as a communication tool through which people meet, communicate, and share information (Kuzma et al. 2014; Newman et al. 2013; Pegoraro et al. 2017; Shareef et al. 2019). With an estimated 2.95 billion users worldwide (Statista 2020), SM is defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User-Generated Content" (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010: 61).

This impressive proliferation of SM has allowed organisations to use this space as an invaluable communication and marketing tool (Parganas and Anagnostopoulos 2015; Wallace et al. 2011). SM platforms, like Facebook and Twitter—with 1.73 billion (Facebook 2020) and 166 million (Twitter 2020) daily active users respectively—have turned the online environment into an ideal space where companies can share information, market their products, and reach thousands of people worldwide (Keller 2009). Moreover, SM provides marketers with the opportunity to create a more interactive and empowering two-way communication with their customers (Billings and Hardin 2014; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010).

Sports organisations, leveraging on their fans' high levels of loyalty and emotional attachment, have also recognized the value of SM as a tool to increase brand awareness and fan engagement (Abosag et al. 2012; Aichner 2019). Many sports organisations have also incorporated the use of SM in their strategies to meet relationship marketing goals and build long-term relationships with their fans (Abeza et al. 2017; Wallace et al. 2011; Williams and Chinn 2010).

In 2019, Malta had the second-highest active SM penetration rate in Europe with 79% of the population using SM, mainly Facebook (Statcounter 2020; Statista 2019). This puts Maltese sports clubs in an ideal position to use SM as a platform to increase fan engagement and interaction (Williams and Chinn 2010). This, however, does not seem to be happening in Maltese football where fans seem to prefer more traditional media like TV and newspapers (MFA 2019) and where clubs are experiencing a lack of fan engagement and very poor stadium attendances (Said 2018).

This study's aim, therefore, is to contribute to current academic research by critically evaluating how Maltese Premier League (MPL) football clubs are using SM as an effective communication and marketing tool and offer practical recommendations on how they can derive more value through its effective use. This study is believed to have the potential to be highly relevant to the Maltese football industry due to the dire need for fan engagement, highlighted by different authors discussing the main challenges faced by Maltese football clubs, including that of increasing stadium attendances, attracting sponsors, and increasing revenues (Azzopardi 2016; Finch 2017; Polidano and Mamo 2014).

## Literature Review

As the use of SM by sports organisations has become much more frequent, researchers' interest in studying the impact of SM in sports has increased (Williams and Chinn 2010). Many researchers investigating the planned use and brands' objectives for SM have highlighted the role of SM as a very effective communication tool for sports organisations (Belot et al. 2016; Gibbs et al. 2014; Maderer et al. 2018). Research has also shown that many sports organisations view SM as an excellent relationship marketing tool that enables them to build long-term relationships with fans through an effective two-way dialogue which can lead to improved customer experiences (Abeza et al. 2013; Abeza et al. 2017; Hopkins 2013; McCarthy et al. 2014; Parganas and Anagnostopoulos 2015; Pegoraro 2014; Pronschinske et al. 2012; Williams and Chinn 2010).

Researchers have also identified a number of opportunities and concerns associated with the use of SM. Abeza et al. (2017) explain that by creating an ongoing dialogue which can help sports clubs get to know their fans better and create fan hubs, SM gives clubs the chance to increase their fans' allegiance and loyalty, leading to enhanced long-term relationships with the club. O'Shea and Alonso (2011) and Eagleman (2013) define SM as an efficient and cost-effective tool to inform fans and promote sports organisations. O'Shea and Alonso (2011) explain that in times when resources for sports organisations are quite limited, the low costs associated with the use of SM allow sports organisations to promote their brand and maintain regular contact with their fans. Many studies exploring the strategic use of SM have also shown that, through increased marketing and sponsorship opportunities, sports organisations have the opportunity to generate more revenue through SM (Abeza et al. 2017; McCarthy et al. 2014; Parganas and Anagnostopoulos 2015; Parganas et al. 2015;). Parganas and Anagnostopoulos (2015) further explain that SM offers sports organisations the opportunity to generate revenue in several ways, highlighting the opportunity to attract more sponsors and increase merchandise and ticket sales as some of the main opportunities.

The greatest concern, on the other hand, seems to be the lack of control over content posted by fans. This challenge has been mentioned by several authors (Abeza et al. 2013; Abeza et al. 2017; Anagnostopoulos et al. 2016; McCarthy et al. 2014) who claim that the multidirectional flow of information and the great reach that SM platforms provide, allow fans to post what they want, making it very difficult for sports organisations to have full control over their SM profiles. Other challenges mentioned by different authors include the lack of resources (Pronschinske et al. 2012; Abeza et al. 2013), deciding what and when to post (Eagleman 2013), revenue generation (McCarthy et al. 2014), and adaptation to the constantly changing SM platforms (O'Shea and Alonso 2011; Williams and Chinn 2010).

When investigating how sports organisations are actually using SM, some common themes that emerge are the use of SM to inform, communicate, and promote (Belot et al. 2016; Kuzma et al. 2014; Siguencia et al. 2017; Wang and Zhou 2015). Meng et al. (2015) found that NBA teams communicate with fans by informing, marketing, personalizing, and activating. Whilst "informing" and "marketing" posts are considered as one-way communication tools and are described as posts meant to provide information and relevant promotions respectively, "activating" posts, which encourage group discussions, and "personalizing" posts, which involve personal conversations with fans, allow a two-way communication process. The use of SM as a two-way communication tool is supported by Pegoraro (2010), Pegoraro et al. (2017), Maderer et al. (2018) and Aichner (2019) who assert that many sports organisations use SM to engage and interact with fans.

This, however, does not always seem to be the case. Svensson et al. (2015) and Siguencia et al. (2017) found that sports organisations are mainly focusing on one-way communication. Abeza and O'Reilly (2014) and Naraine and Parent (2016) found that similar use is being made by the Canadian National Sports Organisations, whilst Belot et al. (2016) concluded that even FIFA is not using SM to interact and engage with fans. Zammit Montebello (2017), in the only Maltese study on SM in sports, concluded that although aware of the power of SM to interact with fans, Maltese National Sports Governing Bodies (NSGBs) lacked the skills and resources to do so.

Contrary to these findings, Maderer et al. (2018) argue that most European football clubs are making very effective use of their SM profiles, becoming amongst the most followed brands online. Kuzma et al. (2014) and Aichner (2019), however, argue that although almost all European clubs use SM, not all of them are using them to their full potential. These different findings might be due to the sample chosen by the researchers. Whilst Kuzma et al. (2014) and Aichner (2019) analysed the use of SM by all the clubs in four top European Leagues, Maderer et al. (2018) analysed only 10 of Europe's most valuable clubs, making the results' generalizability more problematic.

Research has also shown that sports organisations use SM to increase fan engagement (Allison 2013; Gibbs et al. 2014; Parganas et al. 2015). Yoshida et al. (2014) define fan engagement as the process through which fans engage in behaviour aimed at fulfilling their need for team identification and interaction. Vale and Fernandes (2018) identified information, empowerment, integration, and social interaction as some of the main factors leading to increased fan engagement. When looking at the main factors which increase fan engagement, Stavros et al. (2014) and Witkemper et al. (2012) both identified entertainment and passion to be amongst the main fan motivations.

Gibbs et al. (2014) found that sports organisations, to increase fan engagement, share team-related information, share links to external content and communicate live match updates, including behind-the-scenes features. Fernández Peña and Arauz (2011), Parganas and Anagnostopoulos (2015), Tafesse (2015), and Pegoraro et al. (2017) also

found that sports organisations are using photos and videos as a strategy to increase fan engagement, suggesting that vivid and entertaining posts generate more excitement and interest amongst fans.

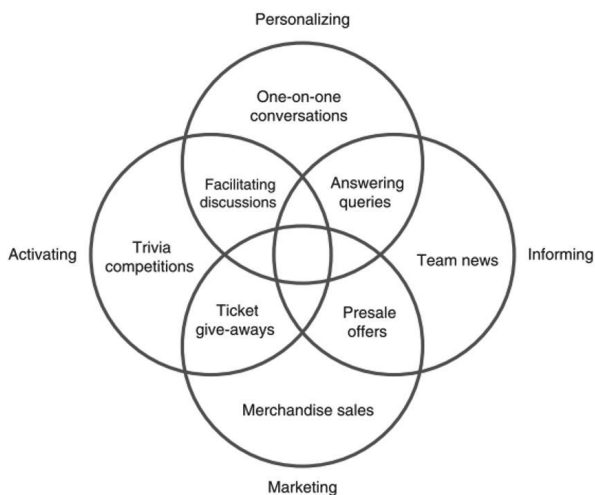
Although a considerable number of researchers have, in recent years, been investigating how sports clubs around the world are using SM, this area is still unexplored in Malta. In fact, no studies looking into the use of SM in Maltese football exist. Therefore, this study aims to critically investigate how MPL clubs are using SM whilst also examining the function of SM from the clubs' perspective and the main opportunities and challenges it presents to MPL clubs.

## Methodology

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Since this study aimed to qualitatively investigate how MPL clubs are using SM, as well as the club representatives' perceptions on the use of SM in football, a two-step sequential method was adopted. The first stage of this research consisted in visiting all MPL clubs' official Facebook pages and collecting all Facebook posts throughout February and April 2020. Facebook was chosen as the main SM platform to be used for this study as research shows that it is the most popular SM platform in Malta (Statcounter 2020). Moreover, the choice of months from which the data was collected was also not random. February was chosen as it was the month with the greatest number of matches played in season 2019/2020, whilst April was the first month in which there were no matches played due to the suspension of the MPL following the Covid-19 outbreak. The choice of these two months allowed the researcher to compare and contrast the use of SM by MPL clubs in two completely different scenarios. A total of 907 posts were collected from all MPL clubs' official Facebook pages. This process was carried out manually in order to ensure maximum researcher interpretation of data (Maderer et al. 2018), 115 Facebook posts and 16,308 tweets from 10 of the most valuable European professional football clubs to identify the range of brand associations communicated and the level of online fan engagement. Statistical analysis captured correlations between and among selected brand attributes, time periods of posts (in and off-season).

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the content collected from the clubs' Facebook pages. This method enables the researcher to analyse and examine written and visual content and identify common themes, core consistencies, and meanings (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The categorization of data collected from MPL clubs' official Facebook pages was carried out deductively by using Meng et al.'s (2015) four types of communication through SM (Figure 1), based on whether the content posted was informing, marketing, activating, or personalizing. Since certain posts comprised more than one type of communication, some posts were classified in more than one category (Meng et al. 2015). Moreover, the posts with the highest number of reactions, comments, and shares were also noted to identify which type of posts encourage most fan engagement and interaction. This process allowed the researcher to better understand which type of posts are most frequently published by the clubs, and which generate the greatest engagement and interaction and why.



**Figure 1:** Meng et al.'s (2015: 209) four types of communication through SM

In the second stage, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were carried out with seven club representatives in charge of their respective club's SM. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed greater flexibility and enabled the researcher to adapt to the conversation's flow and elicit views and thoughts from the club representatives to gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions in relation to the use of SM (Creswell and Creswell 2018; Jones 1997).

The semi-structured interviews with club representatives were transcribed and thematic analysis was then applied on all transcripts. Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach in which data collected is analysed to identify common themes and patterns (Vaismoradi et al. 2013). Since no prior research investigated MPL football clubs' use of SM, an inductive approach—which allowed new themes and concepts to emerge—was employed throughout this process (Saunders et al. 2012).

The choice of two different data collection methods enabled the researcher to better analyse the use of SM by MPL clubs. The choice of carrying out semi-structured, in-depth interviews with club representatives was intended to gain a better understanding of the previously collected data from the clubs' official Facebook pages. Moreover, the choice of analysing the interviews inductively, following the deductive approach adopted in the analysis of the clubs' Facebook posts enabled new and different themes to emerge, providing a better insight into the clubs' use of SM.

By employing an interpretative approach, this research, apart from investigating how MPL clubs are using SM, sought to explore and make sense of the ideas, perceptions, and motivations behind the clubs' use of SM. An interpretative epistemological approach, in fact, allows the researcher to understand people's behaviour, their ideas, and the meanings they confer to their own and other people's actions (Allison 2013; Gratton and Jones 2010).

## Sample

Whereas Facebook posts were collected from all 14 MPL clubs' Facebook pages, interviews were carried out until a point of data saturation was reached. Hence, heterogeneous purposive sampling, which involves using one's own judgement to choose participants with diverse characteristics (Saunders et al. 2012), was used to identify the clubs to be interviewed until the data obtained did not provide any new information. Data saturation was reached after completing seven interviews with MPL clubs' standings and the number of Facebook followers—as at 9<sup>th</sup> July 2020—being the main criteria used to determine the clubs to be chosen for the interviews.

## Research Ethics

Specific ethical considerations were considered throughout the data collection process. Before the interviews, all participants were contacted by phone or e-mail and informed about the method, purpose, and use of the study. The participants were provided with a 'Participant Information Sheet' which included information about the study, explained the voluntary nature of involvement in the study, and informed the participants about the right to withdraw from the study anytime they want without the need to provide an explanation. The interviewees were also informed that the interview would be recorded and were asked to fill in an informed consent form prior to the interview. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout this project with the researcher being the only person having access to the collected data.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Social Media and Malta Premier League clubs: Benefits, Aims, and Strategies*

The rapid growth of SM has, throughout recent years, given sports organisations the opportunity to use the internet as a tool to communicate with fans, promote their brand, and reach thousands of people (Abosag et al. 2012; Aichner 2019; Keller 2009). Several researchers have described SM as a very effective communication tool that offers sports organisations the opportunity to communicate with different people and maintain constant contact with their fans (Abeza et al. 2013; Abeza et al. 2017; McCarthy et al. 2014; Parganas and Anagnostopoulos 2015; Pronschinske et al. 2012; Williams and Chinn 2010). The findings from the interviews with MPL club representatives support these views with all interviewees acknowledging the importance of SM as a very effective communication and marketing tool. The respondents highlighted that, compared to other media, SM enables the club to communicate with a wider variety of people allowing the club to attract more fans, sponsorships, and increase merchandise sales and memberships.

Moreover, Participant 5, the SM manager of a mid-table club, also highlighted that, compared to a website, SM is easier to manage and much cheaper. This, for Maltese sports clubs, can be a major benefit as findings show that one of the main challenges encountered by MPL clubs is the lack of financial resources. O'Shea and Alonso (2011), Eagleman (2013) and Kuzma et al. (2014), in line with this view, had all identified the benefit of SM as a cost-effective communication tool. It is quite surprising, however, that despite the fact that all representatives acknowledged the lack of financial resources as a major challenge, only one representative highlighted the value of SM as a cheap and cost-effective communication tool.

Previous studies have also highlighted that, if used effectively, SM can allow fans to interact directly with the club and other fans (Abeza et al. 2017; Hopkins 2013; McCarthy et al. 2014; Meng et al. 2015; Parganas and Anagnostopoulos 2015; Pegoraro 2014; Pronschinske et al. 2012; Williams and Chinn 2010). MPL club representatives, however, seem to be failing to recognize Facebook's potential as a tool to promote two-way communication and fan interaction. Maltese club representatives, in fact, despite acknowledging the importance of fan interaction and two-way communication, did not identify it as one of their main aims behind the use of SM.

When asked to identify the main aims behind their club's use of SM, the need to inform fans emerged as the clubs' main aim. This was also evident from the posts collected from the clubs' Facebook pages, with 98% of the posts being informational posts. Moreover, the majority of the respondents highlighted that apart from communicating with their fans, through Facebook, they aim to reach people from outside their community as well as people from other countries. Club representatives also pointed out that, through SM, they aim to increase fan engagement and entertain fans by posting relevant, interactive, and appealing content.

Consistent with prior studies (McCarthy et al. 2014; O'Shea and Alonso 2011; Zammit Montebello 2017), this research has also found that MPL club representatives recognize the power of SM as a very effective marketing tool. This view is also supported by Parganas and Anagnostopoulos (2015) and Abeza et al. (2017) who, similarly to MPL club representatives, identified sponsorship and marketing opportunities as two potential benefits of the effective use of SM by sports organisations.

To effectively reap all the benefits that SM can offer to sports organisations, sports marketers must develop effective SM strategies based on their customers' needs and behaviour (Pronschinske et al. 2012; Thompson et al. 2014). Most MPL clubs seem to have a very basic strategy based on simply setting basic aims and objectives at the beginning of the season. None of the respondents argued that their strategy is based on the understanding of fans' behaviour and preferences. Customer knowledge plays a crucial role in developing an effective SM strategy as it would enable MPL football clubs to tailor their messages to their fans' needs and provide a more personalized SM experience (Pronschinske et al. 2012; Thompson et al. 2014).

Several studies have also shown that the integration of SM into the club's overall strategy can be crucial in delivering the right messages and increasing fan engagement and interaction (Abeza and O'Reilly 2014; Chappelet and Aquilina 2017; O'Shea and Alonso 2011; Thompson et al. 2014). However, only one club seems to have a SM strategy that is aligned with the club's overall strategy. All the other respondents claimed that the aims and objectives are set by the SM manager without formal consultation with the rest of the club's committee, demonstrating a lack of communication within the club which might lead to the wrong message being communicated to the fans.

### *Malta Premier League Football Clubs' Use of Social Media*

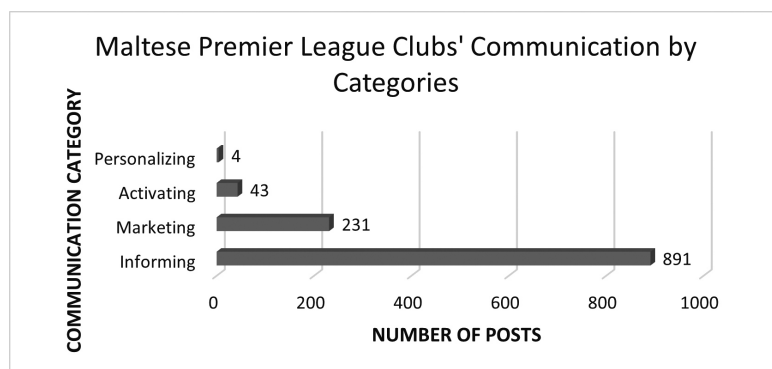
Several studies looking into the use of SM in sports have found that sports organisations use SM to share information, promote the organisation and other products, and communicate with fans (Belot et al. 2016; Hambrick 2012; Kuzma et al. 2014; Meng et al. 2015; Parganas and Anagnostopoulos 2015; Siguencia et al. 2017). Other studies, however, have identified that many sports organisations, despite having recognized the value of SM, are still failing to use it to its full potential (Aichner 2019; Kuzma et al. 2014; Pronschinske et al. 2012). Abeza and O'Reilly (2014), Meng et al. (2015) and Belot et al. (2016), in fact, throughout their studies, found that although SM allows sports organisations to interact with fans and



engage in two-way communication, they are still using SM just to share information focusing on the traditional one-way communication. Consistent with these studies, this research found that MPL football clubs are also using SM as a one-way communication medium, with 98% of the posts collected from the clubs' Facebook pages sharing information with fans (Figure 2).

The current study also found that MPL clubs use SM for marketing purposes. "Marketing" posts were, as a matter of fact, the second most popular type of posts amongst MPL clubs with all respondents recognizing that SM, if used effectively, can serve as an invaluable marketing tool. This finding corroborates those of Maderer et al. (2018), McCarthy et al. (2014), and Meng et al. (2015) who agree that sports clubs are interested in the value of SM as a marketing and revenue-generation tool. This type of communication, although not as popular as "Informing", was quite frequent during both periods from which the data was collected. As a matter of fact, in line with claims made by Allison (2013), Kuzma et al. (2014) and Parganas and Anagnostopoulos (2015), MPL club representatives highlighted that the increased exposure that Facebook offers is a crucial tool in marketing the club and attracting more sponsors looking for increased publicity.

"Activating" posts, which include those posts in which the clubs tried to encourage a two-way communication process through group discussions or feedback from fans, and "Personalizing" posts, which involved direct conversations with individual followers, on the other hand—as shown in Figure 2—were much less frequent. This clearly shows that MPL clubs mainly use Facebook as a one-way communication medium to inform fans and market the club.



**Figure 2:** *MPL football clubs' communication by categories*

The lack of "activating" and "personalizing" posts is quite unexpected, considering that throughout the interviews the respondents agreed that fan interaction is important, mentioning the use of questions and online competitions as some of the tools used to encourage fan interaction. These types of posts, however, despite the respondents' claims, were rarely observed on the clubs' Facebook pages throughout February and April.

This study's findings, therefore, show that MPL football clubs, by primarily using Facebook as a one-way communication medium, are missing out on the opportunity offered by SM to interact and build long-term relationships with fans. Studies have shown that SM can be a very effective relationship marketing tool that allows fans to voice their thoughts and ideas and become active prosumers (Akar and Topçu 2011; Kuzma et al. 2014; Mangold and Faulds 2009; Williams and Chinn 2010). These findings, however, are not really surprising as one can find a great deal of previous work supporting this study's findings. Abeza and O'Reilly (2014), Svensson et al. (2015), Belot et al. (2016), Naraine and Parent (2016), and



Siguencia et al. (2017) have all concluded that the sports organisations analysed, similarly to MPL football clubs, fail to use SM to effectively interact with fans. Zammit Montebello's (2017) findings were also very similar to this study's by concluding that Maltese NSGBs, despite recognizing the importance of fan interaction, lacked the necessary resources to do so.

Previous literature also suggests that sports clubs, through fan interaction, activation, and personal communication can not only build stronger long-term relationships with fans but also increase their team identification and loyalty (Allison 2013; Meng et al. 2015; Price et al. 2013). MPL clubs should, hence, work on creating more activating and personalizing content that can increase fan interaction. Asking direct questions, eliciting feedback, replying to fans' questions, and interactive competitions are some of the strategies suggested by different authors to encourage fan interaction (Hopkins 2013; Meng et al. 2015; Nisar et al. 2018; Tafesse 2015; Thompson et al. 2014). Through the analysis of MPL football clubs' Facebook posts, it is quite evident that Maltese clubs rarely adopt such tactics. However, in support of previous literature, it was noted that the few times that MPL football clubs asked direct questions or integrated interactive competitions on their Facebook pages, these posts led to increased fan interaction when compared to other posts.

### *Social Media Content and Fan Engagement*

One of the main themes which emerged from the interviews was the implementation of several practices aimed at increasing fan engagement. Club representatives highlighted that fan engagement is highly influenced by the type of content posted as well as the timing of such posts. The respondents explained that posts which contain photos and videos are much more effective in increasing fan engagement than any other type of content. These views are supported by previous studies which concluded that photos and videos lead to enhanced shared content, fan interaction, and virtual brand experience (Fernández Peña and Arauz 2011; Parganas and Anagnostopoulos 2015; Pegoraro et al. 2017; Tafesse 2015).

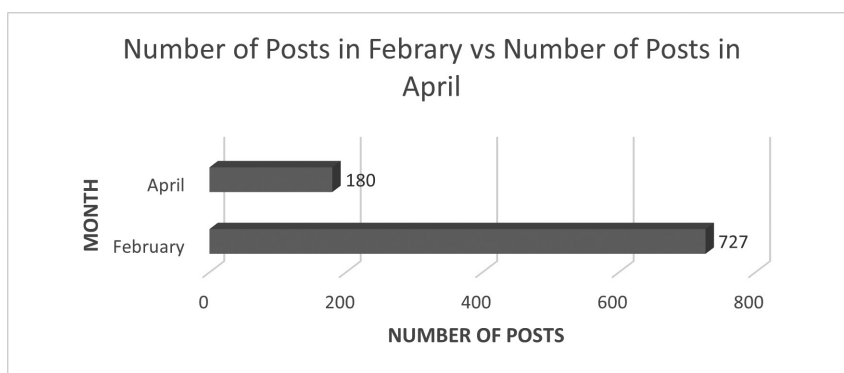
This claim is supported by the data collected from the clubs' Facebook pages, with the vast majority of posts uploaded by the clubs including photos or videos. Furthermore, posts which contained photos and videos were found to generate more reactions than those containing only text. The club representatives believe that the use of vivid content, like photos and videos, is visually more attractive and, as opposed to sharing links or just plain text, gives the page a more professional image.

Club representatives also highlighted the importance of consistency in the frequency and type of posts, arguing that uniformity and standardisation lead to increased brand awareness and association. Strategic consistency in the aesthetic features of a post, by using standard designs, logos, and slogans, has been found to increase brand identification, fan engagement, and interaction (McCarthy et al. 2014; Tafesse 2015). The club representatives' view was, however, not fully supported by the data collected from the clubs' Facebook pages as some clubs lacked consistency in the frequency and type of posts. In these cases, fan engagement, in terms of comments, reactions, and shares, was observed to be lower than that of other MPL clubs, suggesting that, as previous research implies, consistency and fan engagement are positively related (Brasel 2012; Keller 2009; McCarthy et al. 2014; Tafesse 2015).

To increase fan engagement, MPL club representatives, seem to be very careful in choosing the right time when to post. The effective timing of posts was emphasized by the respondents who claimed that the ideal times when to post are after 5 pm, early in the morning, and during break time. Villamediana et al. (2019) and Pletikosa Cvijikj and Michahelles (2013) support this claim, although they do not seem to agree on specific

times when posting would be most effective. Villamediana et al. (2019) explain that the ideal posting times differ and need to be understood in light of cultural and geographical differences.

The importance of keeping the page active with a high frequency of posts, as suggested by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) and Thompson et al. (2014), was also stressed by MPL club representatives. Moreover, their view was confirmed through the analysis of the data collected from the clubs' Facebook pages with MPL football clubs posting an average of 1.8 posts per day in February. This average, however, went down to 0.43 posts per day in April (Figure 3), when due to the Covid-19 pandemic the league was suspended, confirming MPL clubs' tendency to post mainly match-related information. This finding suggests that MPL clubs, although aware of the importance of maintaining a high frequency of posts, might lack creativity when it comes to creating engaging posts which are not strictly match-related.



**Figure 3:** Number of posts in February vs number of posts in April

## Challenges

The findings, in line with previous literature (Abeza et al. 2013; Burk et al. 2016; Pronschinske et al. 2012), have demonstrated that MPL clubs face several challenges when managing their SM profiles. One of the main challenges that emerged from the interviews is a lack of resources. Club representatives claimed that Maltese clubs are lacking financial and human resources with the clubs' SM profiles being managed by volunteers with no real background in digital marketing. The respondents explained that having a full-time SM manager would be an ideal scenario, although, due to financial limitations, they do not see this happening anytime soon. These views support previous findings which describe the management of SM as time-consuming, costly, and labour-intensive, and which show that many sports organisations lack the financial and human resources to maintain an effective SM presence (Abeza et al. 2013; Allison 2013; Anagnostopoulos et al. 2016; Burk et al. 2016; McCarthy et al. 2014; Pronschinske et al. 2012).

The respondents explained that the clubs do not invest any money in SM other than allocating some funds to sponsor posts or pay photographers or videographers for one-off jobs. This lack of financial investment in SM by MPL clubs might suggest that they might not be recognizing the fact that, by investing in SM, the club can gain increased exposure and enhanced fan loyalty which in turn, through more sponsorships, memberships, merchandise sales, and increased attendance, can lead to increased revenues (Allison 2013; Anagnostopoulos et al. 2016). In a previous local study, Zammit Montebello (2017) had

recommended that Maltese NSGBs need to start allocating more funds towards SM to generate a greater reach and a consequent return on investment.

One other recurring challenge, discussed by all respondents, as well as in previous literature (Abeza et al. 2013; Abeza et al. 2017; Kishner and Crescenti 2010; McCarthy et al. 2014; Shareef et al. 2019), is the lack of control over the content shared by fans on the club's Facebook page. Although MPL clubs seem to be managing to keep an adequate control, by checking every comment on their Facebook page, all respondents acknowledged that this practice, considering the previously discussed lack of manpower, is, for them, a very challenging and time-consuming task.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

### *Limitations and Future Research*

Despite every effort being made to minimize the faults, some limitations to the current study, which might affect the accuracy and generalizability of the results, should be noted. One main limitation lies in the fact that this study focused only on one SM platform. Even though Facebook is the most popular SM platform in Malta, and the only one used by all MPL clubs, some clubs also use other SM platforms and, hence, by extending the study to other SM platforms, future studies can obtain a better picture of how Maltese clubs use SM.

Although Facebook posts were specifically collected from two very different months, the collection of Facebook posts over a longer period might have provided further insights. Moreover, whilst this study provides a quite detailed picture of how MPL clubs are using SM, extending this study to investigate the fans' views and perceptions would provide a more holistic analysis.

Finally, since limited academic literature exploring the use of SM in Maltese sports is available, most of the studies referred to in this research were carried out in larger markets which do not necessarily compare to the Maltese sports context. Most academic work, in fact, seems to focus on professional sports organisations without considering the volunteer aspect, which in Malta is very common.

## Key Findings

This study, which appears to be the first to analyse the use of SM in Maltese football, found that MPL football clubs view SM as an important communication and marketing tool. Findings further demonstrate that MPL clubs use SM predominantly as a one-way communication tool by sharing information, mainly football-related, with fans.

The clubs, however, seem to be failing to acknowledge the power of SM as a two-way communication tool, missing out on the opportunity to build long-term relationships with fans through ongoing dialogue and interaction. Findings, in fact, show that posts aimed at gathering feedback, generating fan discussions or targeting individual fans were very rare. Many clubs seem to be also failing in developing effective SM strategies which are based on customer knowledge and integrated into the club's overall strategies. MPL football clubs seem to be developing very basic strategies based on simply setting a number of aims and objectives at the beginning of the year.

On the other hand, the clubs seem to be aware of the importance of posting dynamic, attractive, and exciting content to increase fan engagement. MPL football clubs make

frequent use of photos and videos, which are amongst the main drivers of fan engagement (Parganas et al. 2015; Tafesse 2015; Thompson et al. 2014). This study's findings have also shown that maintaining an active page and consistency in the frequency and type of posts positively influences fan engagement and interaction.

Finally, this study also identified some challenges which MPL clubs encounter when managing their SM platforms. Lack of financial and human resources seem to be the biggest challenges, with the majority of SM managers being volunteers and lacking a digital marketing background. A lack of control over what fans post on the club's SM profiles was also highlighted, with club representatives claiming that maintaining adequate control over their SM profiles is very gruelling and time-consuming.

## Recommendations

Based on the above-mentioned findings, a number of recommendations can be proposed:

- Clubs are encouraged to design an effective SM strategy that is tailored to the fans' needs and preferences and aligned with the club's wider marketing and communications strategies.
- Regular monitoring of performance, by monitoring Facebook analytics and page insights, can help in better understanding how fans are interacting with the page, identify potential shortcomings and ensure continuous improvement.
- Clubs should also encourage more fan interaction by creating a two-way dialogue with fans by ending statuses with a question, creating online competitions, and replying to fans' questions on the club's SM pages.
- Uploading vivid, relevant, and creative content can also help clubs increase brand identification and fan engagement.
- Clubs can team up with external institutions to organise regular courses and seminars for their SM managers.
- Clubs can partner with Maltese educational institutions and create internship opportunities for students studying digital marketing allowing clubs to add knowledgeable human resources who can provide new insights to the club.
- Clubs should also start seriously considering the possibility of allocating more funds towards SM. These could be allocated in several ways, mainly by having a part-time or full-time SM manager. Although this might be seen as a financial burden, clubs should seriously take into consideration the potential return on investment that an increased SM reach can provide in terms of sponsorship opportunities, memberships, as well as merchandise and ticket sales.
- The Malta Football Association (MFA) could also help by organising seminars and workshops for club representatives to help them increase their knowledge in the area and make up for the lack of qualified human resources that MPL football clubs are currently experiencing.

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