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# Digital media, football fans and communications : a case study of Salford City FC, a ‘digital football club’

Fenton, A

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<b>Authors</b>	Fenton, A
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**Digital Media, football fans and communications**  
**A case study of Salford City FC, a ‘digital football club’**

*Abstract*

This paper is written in year one of a five year longitudinal ethnography, six months into my PhD studies. Significant progress has been made so far. I am currently part way through my literature review and I am currently refining my research questions. I have recently obtained ethical approval for my study from the University of Salford.

The PhD study focuses on a new era for Salford City Football Club (SCFC). SCFC currently sit in the 8<sup>th</sup> tier of English football but have recently been taken over in a high profile move by ex-Manchester United players the ‘class of ‘92’ and are more recently joined by billionaire Peter Lim. The new era heralds an unusual case of a non-league football team having such high profile owners with reported ambitions to turn SCFC into a ‘digital football club’. The study poses the question of how digital media impacts on this football club and its brand.

This paper evaluates the relevant literature related to digital media and football at this early stage and highlights potential gaps in both academic research and managerial understanding in this area. One particular gap noted at this stage is the role of social media on sales and football club brand. The study reflects on the current gap in understanding with regard to SCFC and provides an appraisal of the current situation and the next steps. The research design so far is discussed and proposes a method of netnography and interview using a grounded theory approach with CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis), qualitative data analysis and coding.

## Introduction

In March 2014, The Class of '92 purchased Salford City Football Club (SCFC) (Guardian, 2014). This group are composed of ex-Manchester United players Paul Scholes, Ryan Giggs, Nicky Butt, Gary Neville and Phil Neville (Figure 1). Billionaire Peter Lim bought a 50% stake in the club in September 2014 (Conn, 2014). In the 2014/15 football season, SCFC play in the Evo-Stik League Division One North in the eighth tier of English football. It has been reported that the ambitions of the new owners are to raise the club up to The Championship, which is the second tier of English football, within 15 years (Bajkowski, 2014). It was also widely reported in the national press that the new era for the club heralded the “world’s first digital, ‘always on’ football club, giving fans unrivalled access to behind-the-scenes activities and up-to-the-minute information about Salford City’s on-going development” (Mirror, 2014). The new owners wish SCFC to succeed on the pitch and to be commercially successful in terms of attracting more fans to attend matches and to purchase club merchandise.



The image is a screenshot of a news article from The Guardian. At the top, the Guardian logo is visible with the tagline "Winner of the Pulitzer prize". Below the logo is a navigation bar with links for "home", "football", "live scores", "tables", "competitions", "results", "fixtures", and "all sections". The article title is "'Class of 1992' agree deal to purchase Salford City" by Ryan Giggs. Below the title are two bullet points: "Giggs, Scholes, Butt and Neville brothers in consortium" and "Agreement subject to FA and league approval". The main image shows five men in suits standing on a red carpet. Below the image is a caption: "Paul Scholes, Phil Neville, Ryan Giggs, Nicky Butt and Gary Neville have agreed a deal to purchase Salford City Photograph: Neil Hall/Reuters".

*Figure 1. Salford City FC are taken over by the Class of '92 (Guardian, 2014)*

This paper is based upon research from the first year of a five year longitudinal case study ethnography. The purpose of this research is to evaluate how digital media impacts on SCFC. This case creates the basis for a unique opportunity for research

with a specific emphasis on digital media and its effects. The takeover of SCFC by the Class of '92 and subsequent partnership agreement with the University of Salford provides an excellent opportunity to provide insight and contribution to knowledge in this field. The takeover also heralds a new, enhanced digital era at the club, providing a unique opportunity for research. This paper evaluates relevant literature, discusses the research design for this study and discusses data collected so far.

### *Literature review*

Microsoft TechNet, (2010) defines digital media as media that has been digitally encoded. This media includes web pages, E-mail, video, audio, images and Social Networks (Borho et al, 2006; Singh, 2013). Social media refers to “web-based and mobile applications that allow individuals and organizations to create, engage, and share new user-generated or existing content” (Davis, et al 2013). Digital media is of key importance to the marketing of corporations in today’s digital world (Stone & Woodcock, 2014). They highlight an excellent opportunity to bring together business information and interactive marketing to further engage fans. Mass use of digital media has become widespread and UK football clubs at all levels have largely embraced these technologies at board and fan level (McCarthy et al, 2014; McLean & Wainwright, 2009). These studies demonstrate and recommend that football clubs can benefit from using digital media for better communications with fans.

Digital media consumption has risen dramatically and ubiquitously in this period with digital media marketing driving a demand for content to power digital channels and make them succeed by increasing fan engagement (McCarthy et al, 2014). McCarthy et al call for “enhanced understanding of the way in which fans, members and customers will evolve their engagement with brands through social media”.

Several other studies (Araújo, de Carlos, & Antonio Fraiz, 2014; Jackson, 2014); Abosag, 2012) note the power of digital media on the brand of a football club. McCarthy et al, 2014 note that UK football clubs are at an early stage with their use of social media and that there is: “considerable scope for enhanced understanding of the way in which fans, members and customers will evolve their engagement with brands through social media over the next few years.”

A gap in the research was identified on the role of social media at football clubs on sales. A key goal of most professional football clubs is to increase brand awareness, communications and also sales of match day tickets and merchandise. This link between these goals and digital media is a key area for further research and theory development. Pasi Lankinen, Barcelona FC’s business intelligence manager speaking at the Sport and New Media Conference said, “New media does not build fans or make more fans, but it does open up a window to them” (Wilson, 2012). Barcelona, like SCFC are using Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to “move fans to buying our products, whether it is tickets or merchandising, buying both online and offline” (ibid). This sentiment was also echoed by the head of social media at LA Galaxy, Lisa Bregman, who commented “Ultimately we haven’t seen great success driving sales directly through social media” (Green, 2013). Football clubs are actively using digital media and social media to engage and communicate with fans in a “social media arms race” (Jackson, 2014), but it is currently unclear if this engagement leads to direct revenue. It is possible however that this situation may change in the future with new

studies such as (Jung, 2014) predicting that direct sales from social media are set to grow dramatically.

### ***Research Design***

The crux of this study is to understand the question of how digital media impacts on the case of SCFC to further academic research and managerial recommendations. This question lends itself best to an interpretive case study approach where netnography and interview are the methods of data collection. A deeper understanding of the effects of digital marketing and people's perceptions using qualitative data analysis will be used to further research in this area. Using an interpretivist approach enables the meaning of complex situations to be better explained and understood, providing new insight (Black, 2006; Oates, 2006).

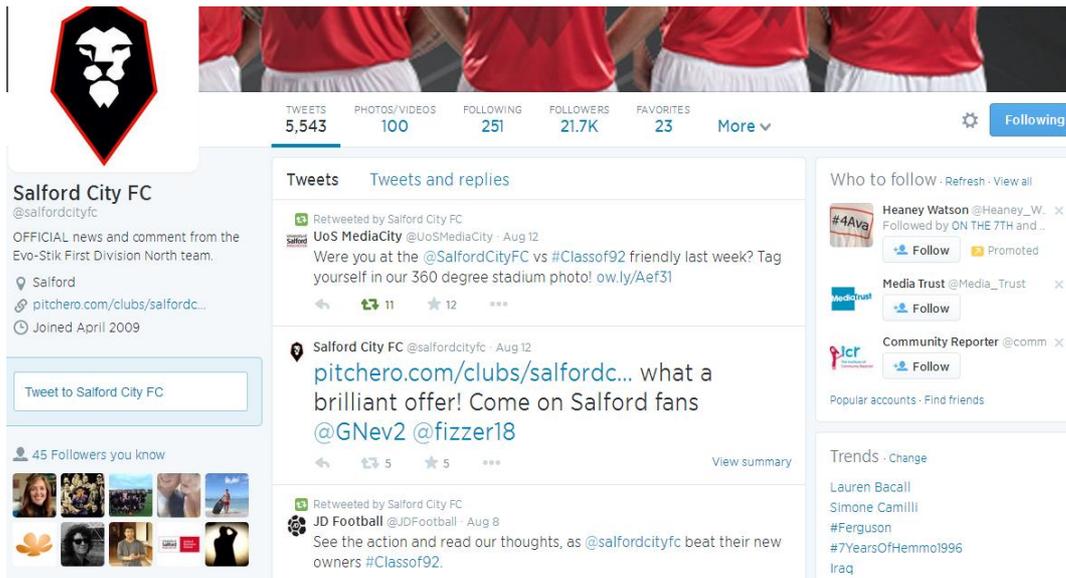
Ethnography is an approach used to study everyday life and complex interactions between people (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012; Kozinets, 2010). It provides a way to better understand culture and the meaning of phenomena. Ethnography and qualitative information can be used to great effect to analyse human behaviour and make meaning of the complexity of these situations (Boellstorff et al, 2012). Geertz (1973) describes the need in ethnography for 'thick description' thinking, capturing and reflecting. For Geertz, the understanding of culture and in particular, the webs that people weave, provides meaning to their actions and better understanding of a situation. Thick description to understand the meaning of actions within the culture will be key to this study.

Holmes et al (2012) highlight the need for Internet ethnography by "analysing data that has been created through social media". This method is known also as digital or virtual ethnography or also netnography (Boellstorff et al, 2012). Effectively, it is an ethnographical approach to gather data from people online (ibid.), it is an adapted form of ethnographic research which has become widely accepted (Kozinets, 2010). Hine (2000) also describes how netnography is much the same as a traditional ethnography, the difference being that we are analysing the patterns and meanings of the people behind the screen.

From an ethnographic perspective, Turkle (1995) describes digital media as an opportunity to create communities whereby people interact globally and "with whom we have fairly intimate relationships but whom we may never physically meet." Going beyond the screen, Greschke (2007), argues that netnography "can't be limited to 'screen research,' but it has to be combined with physical observation in multiple sites, in order to explore how the mediated activities are inserted in the everyday life of participants." For this reason, interviews and netnography were chosen as the methods for this study. At this early stage in the study, a literature review has been conducted and data from netnography and 25 interviews with key personnel will be conducted. CAQDAS software Nvivo will be used to collect, code and analyse the interpretive data to allow analysis, reflection and better understanding.

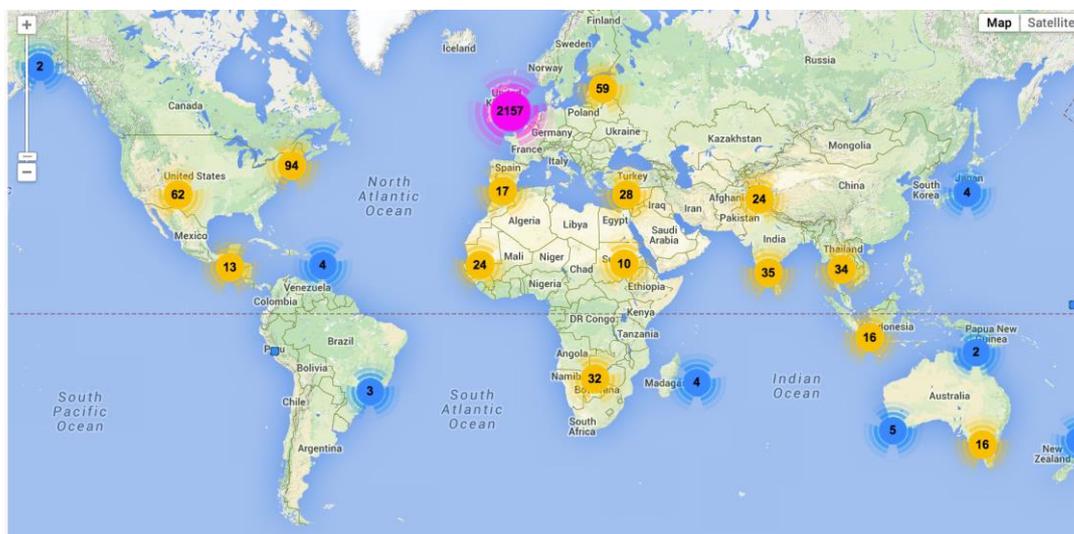
### **Data Analysis so far and future direction**

When Salford FC played the Class of '92 in an exhibition match on 08 Aug 2014, the club increased their Twitter followers from 7000 to 21,700 after the game (Figure 2) and stood at 26,000 followers in December 2014. This put them above many English league football clubs in terms of followers.



**Figure 2. Salford City FC's Twitter followers grow from 7,000 to 21,700 (July – August 2014)**

At this early stage, it has been discovered that there are a significant number of new fans contacting SCFC regularly using Twitter. This phenomenon was highlighted in an interview with SCFC's Social Media Manager and further ratified using an Nvivo analysis of Twitter comments. These comments posed questions such as, how much are tickets? and, where is the ground? Interviews will be conducted with these new or potential fans to better understand how digital media is a key influencing factor in their decision making process.



**Figure 3 – World map generated using Followerwonk to identify the location of a quarter of SCFC's Twitter followers**

A geographical analysis of 25% of SCFC's 21,700 Twitter followers helps to understand where in the world fans or potential fans are based (Figure 3). Interviews with key digital staff at the club combined with the figure above reveals that half of the Twitter followers of the club are from overseas. Clearly, these fans will not be attending games on a regular basis. However, the significant percentage of Twitter

followers lived in the Salford area. Of these new followers, several people were using this medium to contact the club and could be classed as 'new fans'. Attendances for SCFC matches are also up 159.1% in the 2014/15 season on the previous season to an average attendance of 360 people (European Football Statistics, 2014). Early signs indicate that there may be a connection between the use of digital by the club to attract new fans and strengthening communications with others. This is subject to further scrutiny, data collection and analysis.

A goal of this study is to further understanding and theory building in this field. Eisenhardt et al (2007) argue that single cases can provide compelling evidence for theory building and for disproving existing theory. Siggelkow (2007) notes, "if only limited theoretical knowledge exists concerning a particular phenomenon, an inductive research strategy that lets theory emerge from the data can be a valuable starting point". This is a key point underpinning this study and its future direction. It is proposed that a grounded theory approach will be used, which allows for "discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 2). This approach involves coding qualitative data, which can also be done using Nvivo.

### ***Conclusion***

There is more data capture and analysis to be done on this longitudinal, five-year case study of Salford City FC and much action both on and off field and in the digital arena. Some trends and concepts are starting to emerge from the literature review combined with the primary data sources from netnography and interview for this inductive study. As more data is gathered, triangulated and coded, further analysis will be made leading to theory and managerial recommendation and contributing to the field of digital marketing and football.

Digital media is set to evolve and grow to an even greater level over the coming years and this ethnography will follow the progress of SCFC to tell the story of this fascinating case and its place in the rich tapestry of digital media and football at this crucial point in time.

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