



## Social Media Marketing for Professional Soccer Clubs: Focusing on the Quality of the Relationship Between the Club and Fans

### Authors' contribution:

- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
- D) manuscript preparation
- E) obtaining funding

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### Abstract

This study investigates how the social networking service (SNS) activities of professional football clubs have affected the quality of the relationship between clubs and fans during the period in which the COVID-19 pandemic caused limited fan service activities. This study selected a sample population of professional football fans, provided by football clubs, who were experienced in using SNSs. Data collected through convenience sampling using 215 questionnaires completed online by respondents were analyzed using frequency, exploratory factor, reliability, correlation, and multivariate regression analyses with SPSS 23.0 and AMOS 22.0. The study's findings are as follows: among the sub-factors of professional football clubs' SNS characteristics, interactivity and playfulness have a positive (+) effect on trust, a sub-factor of relationship quality, but information and recentness do not have a significant effect; interactivity, information, and playfulness have a positive (+) effect on immersion, a sub-factor of relationship quality, but recentness does not have a significant effect; and interactivity, information, playfulness, and recentness have a positive (+) effect on satisfaction, a sub-factor of relationship quality. This study provides practical and academic data useful for effective marketing activities by investigating how clubs' SNS marketing activities can help fans connect with them despite the limitations owing to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Key words:** Social networking service, relationship quality, sports fan

### Introduction

#### Research purpose and significance

South Korean professional football originated in 1983 under the name "Super League" and has developed over the past 40 years into an established professional sport. The 2002 Korea and Japan World Cup provided an opportunity for the growth of high-quality professional football in South Korea by increasing public interest in the sport, expanding stadium facilities, and producing star players (Sung, 2021). Since then, new teams have emerged and professional football has grown further in Korea, with recent efforts focusing on strengthening league competitiveness by operating first – (12 clubs) and second-division (10 clubs) competitions for the first time in Korea.

However, despite these efforts, professional football is struggling with uncontrollable external factors, such as recent restrictions on entry to stadiums due to COVID-19. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, South Korea has been

restricting the entry of football fans to stadiums. Entry has been prohibited based on the number of confirmed cases or filling seats to 10–50% capacity (Korea Centers Disease Control, 2020). The average number of spectators allowed in Korean professional football stadiums during the height of the COVID-19 period was 383 (as of 2020), representing a sharp drop in the number of spectators allowed before the pandemic (Go, 2021; Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2021).

Revenue generated from professional sports spectators is a key source of funds for club operations. Thus, a decrease in the number of spectators directly affects club operations. Specifically, as South Korean clubs are highly dependent on their parent company's subsidies, ticket sale income is directly related to the club's operations (Kim & Han, 2017). In other words, spectators are the principal factor in club operations, further emphasizing the importance of the relationship between a club and its fans. Thus, clubs actively use social network service (SNS)-based marketing methods to increase their contact points and initiate active communication with fans. Sharing club information through online platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram (Seng & Keat, 2014) has led to increased communication with fans through mobile-based SNS rather than homepages, building fan participation and discourse based on various SNS activities (Wu et al., 2018).

However, not all SNS activities of clubs have a positive effect on their relationships with fans. In a recent news report concerning the Toronto Blue Jays in the Major League, the Jays Journal criticized clubs' SNS marketing activities of posting awkwardly translated SNS messages to overseas players (Lee, 2022). In addition, fans recently criticized the Hanwha Eagles, a Korean professional baseball team, for posting mocking comments about opposing teams (Lee, 2021). In this respect, the relationship between clubs and fans, the ultimate purpose of SNSs, must be clarified.

In other words, the concept of relationship quality (Dwyer et al., 1987), that is, the degree and nature of the relationship between companies and consumers in the field of business administration must be considered. By analyzing the impact of professional football clubs' SNS activities on the quality of the relationship between clubs and fans, clubs can formulate and implement more strategic SNS utilization plans. While studies on relationship quality are insufficient in the field of professional sports, numerous studies have examined this aspect in the general business environment (Lee, 2021; Li et al., 2020).

Relationship quality based on relationship marketing has a positive effect on long-term and future relationships through trust, immersion, and satisfaction (Crosby et al., 1990). Thus, it is assumed that applying this phenomenon to professional football clubs will positively impact the quality of the relationship between clubs and their fans based on trust, immersion, and satisfaction. In addition, several studies have verified the research findings that relationship quality has a positive (+) effect on long-term relationship orientation, obtaining results that are relatively consistent with the literature (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Jang, 2019; Kwon, 2018).

The suspension of the professional sports league due to COVID-19 is not limited to the Korean football league. As a global issue, the suspension was one of the important challenges facing the professional sports industry. Accordingly, many scholars have conducted research on the importance and necessity of using social media as a way to overcome this. Su et al. (2020) argued that social media marketing activities through the short form of video platform, TikTok, could develop relationship with fans during COVID-19 lockdown period. Szczepkowski (2021) also found that sports clubs need to make efforts to strengthen relationships with fans through social media during COVID-19 pandemic.

In this respect, studies confirming the factors that improve the quality of relationships can strengthen the relationship between a club and its fans and provide effective implications for establishing long-term marketing strategies for professional football clubs. Therefore, this study investigates how the SNS activities of clubs can facilitate contact points with fans, even amid the challenging COVID-19 situation, and affect the quality of the relationship between clubs and their fans. The purpose of this study was to provide basic practical and academic data useful in related fields and for future research.

### Research hypotheses

SNS marketing activities primarily contribute to building communication and a good relationship between corporations and customers as well as increase interest in the company's offerings. Social media is a marketing tool used to enhance customer engagement (Dwivedi et al., 2020) and SNSs have been widely used as a marketing strategy. As a part of social media, they allow users to connect with one another and build a reciprocal communication between enterprises and customers (Ajina, 2019). Therefore, more attention should be paid to the characteristics of SNS., which comprise multidimensional variables and consist of various concepts, with slight differences depending on the subject and the researcher. This can reflect various factors because the SNS environment is diverse and rapidly changing (Kang et al., 2019).

In a study of professional football clubs, Lee (2016) examined clubs' SNS characteristics using four constituent concepts: interaction, convenience, playfulness, and information. In addition, Gim, Kim, and Zhuo (2017) examined professional baseball teams' SNS characteristics based on six constituent concepts: interactivity, accessibility, information, reliability, playfulness, and recentness. Studies on clubs' SNS characteristics have generally focused on interactivity, information, recentness, and playfulness, with various other constituent concepts expanded and applied, depending on the research field. Therefore, this study considers certain recent SNS marketing activities of professional football teams in terms of the four constituent concepts of interactivity, information, playfulness, and recentness.

According to the Use and Gratifications theory, one of the media communication theories, all media users are 'active audiences' with specific and solid motivations (Katz, et al., 1973). In this respect, since modern social media enable media audiences to seek and share information, it can be assumed that satisfaction will occur through social media. In particular, richness of digital information of social media could be expected to have a great influence on satisfying user's needs, as it can express information such as text, picture, and videos more diversely than traditional media. In addition, a close relationship can be formed between the information provider and the information consumer in this process.

Meanwhile, relationship quality in this study refers to the quality of mutual relationships and includes trust, immersion, and satisfaction (Crosby et al., 1990). Trust has the advantage of guaranteeing services and reducing uncertainty about the future (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991). Immersion refers to an implicit or explicit pledge to maintain the current relationship with the other party, a crucial factor in successful relationships (Dwyer et al., 1987). Finally, satisfaction is an emotional comparison between expectations before purchase and the experience after purchase (Tse & Wilson, 1988). From the company's perspective, this has the advantage of reducing transaction costs.

Studies in various fields have investigated the relationship between SNS characteristics and relationship quality. Yoo (2019) conducted research on Taekwondo users, Kim (2021), on tourists, and Wibowo et al. (2021) on consumer behavior. Although previous studies have shown differences in influence between constituent concepts, they have generally suggested that SNS characteristics have a positive (+) effect on the quality of relationships. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses based on previous studies and a conceptual understanding of the variables:

H 1-1, 2, 3, 4. The SNS characteristics of professional football clubs (interactivity, information, playfulness, and recentness) have a positive (+) effect on trust in relationship quality.

H 2-1, 2, 3, 4. The SNS characteristics of professional football clubs (interactivity, information, playfulness, and recentness) have a positive (+) effect on immersion in relationship quality.

H 3-1, 2, 3, 4. The SNS characteristics of professional football clubs (interactivity, information, playfulness, and recentness) have a positive (+) effect on satisfaction in relationship quality.

## Materials and methods

### Participants

This study investigated the effect of professional football clubs' SNS marketing activity characteristics on the quality of the mutual relations between clubs and fans. We selected a sample population of football fans, provided by clubs, with experience in SNS use. Given that professional football clubs' SNS marketing targets unspecified fans, convenience sampling can be expected to represent the population. The survey was conducted for approximately three months from August 2021 to October 2021. Using the non-probability sampling method, questionnaires were distributed to 230 respondents through convenience sampling; 215 were used for analysis, excluding 15 questionnaires that were not answered faithfully. Specifically, the online fan page (Instagram and YouTube) of professional football in Republic of Korea was accessed to guide the purpose of this study and how to participate. A message containing a link to participate in the survey was sent only to those who participated in the survey. As it was difficult to conduct face-to-face surveys due to the COVID-19 pandemic, questionnaires were accessed online. The general characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1.

### Measurement

The measurement tool used was a self-report questionnaire on clubs' SNS characteristics measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) separately for four constituent concepts (interactivity, information, playfulness, and recentness) and three constituent concepts (trust, immersion, and satisfaction).

**Table 1.** General characteristics of the study participants

Variable	Category	N	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	151	70.2
	Female	64	29.7
Age	Under 20s	66	30.7
	30s	108	50.2
	Over 40s	41	19.1
Fan page access frequency (weekly)	Less than 3 times	51	23.7
	More than 3 times – Less than 7 times	28	13.0
	More than 7 times – Less than 14 times	96	44.7
	More than 14 times	40	18.6
Total		215	100

The survey questionnaire used for data collection included 24 questions (three of which were related to demographic factors: gender, age, and frequency of SNS use). The questionnaires used in Gim, Kim, and Zhuo (2017) and Kim and Ha (2019) were modified to include the SNS characteristics and included a total of 12 and 3 questions, respectively. Furthermore, the questionnaires used by Kim (2020) and Hong and Park (2019) were modified to include the quality of relationships and included nine and three questions, respectively (on trust, immersion, and satisfaction). All questions were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

### Data analysis

The data were analyzed using frequency, exploratory factor, reliability, correlation, and multivariate regression analyses with SPSS 23.0 & AMOS 22.0. All statistical significance levels were set at .05.

## Results

### Scale validity and reliability

A group of experts verified the questionnaire used for content validity, while exploratory factor analysis was used for composition validity verification. For exploratory factor analysis, factor extraction was conducted through maximum likelihood estimation and square rotation was conducted through direct oblimin estimation.

All the extracted variables showed an eigenvalue of 1.0 or higher and a factor loading value of 5 or higher, meeting the Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black (1998) criteria and securing the validity of the measurement tool. In addition, the reliability analysis demonstrated that the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of all variables used in the study exceeded the Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) criteria, confirming reliability.

### Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

Data normality was verified using the descriptive statistics of the variables (see results in Table 2). The criterion for normality to verify univariate normal distribution is that the data are normalized when displaying values within the range of  $\pm 2$  for skewness and  $\pm 7$  for kurtosis (West et al., 1995). The correlation analysis results presented no multicollinearity problems, as the correlation between variables was less than .85 in all cases (Kline, 1998).

### Hypothesis verification

An examination of how professional football clubs' SNS characteristics affect the quality of their relationships with fans gives the following results. For details on the research results, see Table 3.

### Effects of SNS characteristics on trust

The professional football clubs' SNS characteristics affect trust, a sub-factor of the quality of the relationship between the club and fans, as follows: It was found that regarding trust, interactivity had a positive (+) effect ( $B = .133$ ,

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Interactivity	1						
Information	.444**	1					
Playfulness	.319**	.325**	1				
Recentness	.375**	.326**	.509**	1			
Trust	.307**	.342**	.396**	.705**	1		
Immersion	.220**	.380**	.428**	.647**	.753**	1	
Satisfaction	.196**	.402**	.409**	.576**	.720**	.705**	1
M	3.23	3.09	3.47	3.39	3.09	3.22	2.85
SD	.92	.68	.67	.76	.75	.76	.80
Skewness	-.61	.15	.04	-.10	-.57	-.38	-.10
Kurtosis	.03	.19	-.50	-.21	.49	-.03	.17

\*\* $p < .01$ .

$p = .031$ , POWER = .579); information had no significant effect ( $B = .001$ ,  $p = .981$ , POWER = .050); playfulness had a positive (+) effect ( $B = .650$ ,  $p < .001$ , POWER = 1.000); and recentness had no significant effect ( $B = .027$ ,  $p = .672$ , POWER = .071). Hypothesis 1-1 and 1-3 were supported. But 1-2 and 1-4 were not supported.

### Effects of SNS characteristics on immersion

The professional football clubs' SNS characteristics affect immersion, a sub-factor of the quality of the relationship between the club and fans, as follows: It was found that regarding immersion, interactivity had a positive (+) effect ( $B = .102$ ,  $p = .038$ , POWER = .548); information had a positive (+) effect ( $B = .239$ ,  $p < .001$ , POWER = .957); playfulness had a positive (+) effect ( $B = .572$ ,  $p < .001$ , POWER = 1.000); and recentness had no significant effect ( $B = .123$ ,  $p = .071$ , POWER = .438). Hypothesis 2-1, 2-2 and 2-3 were supported. But 2-4 were not supported.

**Table 3.** Results of Regression analysis

	Factor	B	t	p	np <sup>2</sup>	power
Trust	Constant	.377	1.645	.101	.013	.374
	Interactivity	.133	2.170	.031	.022	.579
	Information	.001	.024	.981	.000	.050
	Playfulness	.650	11.159	.000	.372	1.000
	Recentness	.027	.424	.672	.001	.071
Immersion	Constant	.45	1.839	.067	.016	.449
	Interactivity	.102	2.090	.038	.020	.548
	Information	.239	3.691	.000	.061	.957
	Playfulness	.572	9.311	.000	.292	1.000
	Recentness	.123	1.812	.071	.015	.438
Satisfaction	Constant	.068	.257	.798	.000	.058
	Interactivity	.123	2.303	.022	.025	.630
	Information	.315	4.405	.000	.085	.992
	Playfulness	.504	7.441	.000	.209	1.000
	Recentness	.116	1.989	.048	.018	.592

### Effects of characteristics on satisfaction

The professional football clubs' SNS characteristics affect satisfaction, a sub-factor of the quality of the relationship between the club and fans, as follows: It was found that regarding satisfaction, interactivity had a positive (+) effect ( $B = .123, p = .022, \text{POWER} = .630$ ); information had a positive (+) effect ( $B = .315, p < .001, \text{POWER} = .992$ ); playfulness had a positive (+) effect ( $B = .116, p = .048, \text{POWER} = .592$ ); and recentness had a positive (+) effect ( $B = .504, p < .001, \text{POWER} = 1.000$ ). All sub hypothesis of H3 (3-1, 2, 3, 4) were supported.

## Discussion

This study verified the effect of SNS characteristics of professional football clubs on the quality of the relationship between clubs and fans. The research hypothesis results for this study are as follows.

First, concerning the effect of SNS characteristics on trust the study found that interactivity and playfulness had a significant effect on trust, whereas information and recentness had no significant effect. Kwak (2013), who considered the effect on restaurant consumers, found that interactivity, accessibility, and information reliability have a positive (+) effect on restaurant trust, but information does not. In addition, Ryu (2021), who considered the SNS characteristics of professional sports clubs in a single dimension, found that they have a significant effect on team trust, partially supporting the results of this study.

This study showed a positive (+) SNS effect on trust through playfulness and interactivity, indicating that communication through SNS has a positive effect on trust in the club when users are more familiar and likable. From the perspective of fans, sports can be consumed in four ways: 1) watching the game via media, 2) visiting the stadium, 3) purchasing sports-related products, and 4) accessing sports information via the Internet. In the COVID-19 era, the overall concept of sports consumption has diminished due to restrictions such as game suspension and stadium closures. Therefore, the most effective policy to enable clubs to resolve this issue and comply with quarantine policies is to strengthen or maintain relationships with fans through SNS.

For fans who are restricted from visiting stadiums due to COVID-19, SNSs are the only communication channels available to connect with clubs or players. Thus, repeated interactions focused on interest will have a positive effect on mutual trust. In fact, Ko and Kim (2021), who studied influencers, suggested that the familiarity and likability of SNS influencers have a positive effect on brand image and purchase intention, supporting this study's estimation. In other words, the playful elements and repeated interactions of clubs in their communication using SNSs, such as through influencers' familiarity and likability, improve the quality of the relationship between clubs and fans. Therefore, professional football clubs must actively use playful elements and repetitive interactions in their SNS activities. For example, online events can be facilitated on themes that interest fans to increase the club's interaction with playfulness.

Second, regarding the effect of SNS characteristics on immersion, a sub-factor of the relationship between clubs and fans, interactivity, information, and playfulness, sub-factors of SNS characteristics, had a positive (+) effect on immersion, but recentness did not.

Several studies investigated the relationship between SNS characteristics and immersion. Yim's (2013) research on Twitter users suggested that the interaction between SNS characteristics and information provision has a positive (+) effect on relationship immersion (emotional and computational). Jeong et al.'s (2020) research on beauty consumers determined that information provision, playfulness, and usefulness have a positive effect on immersion. Thus, the findings of this study are similar to those of previous works.

This study demonstrates that from the characteristics of SNS, information, playfulness, and interactivity, in that order, have a positive (+) effect on immersion. Thus, with a focus on the MZ generation, we can conclude that an increasing number of people use SNSs, and not portal sites, in their information searches. The 2020 Inside Report published by the "University Tomorrow's 20th Laboratory" indicates that information search is the highest for the MZ generation when using SNS. This estimation is supported because 80% of the individuals who participated in this study corresponded to the MZ generation. Therefore, professional football clubs must adopt strategies based on information, playfulness, and interactivity when using SNS characteristics. Specifically, it is necessary to understand the uncontrollable COVID-19 environment and establish strategies to actively utilize SNSs. For example, one option might be to facilitate an online football game competition to provide an event for a team (players) and fans. Because most professional football club fans are from the MZ generation (in their 20s and 30s), the quality of the relationship between clubs and fans can be improved through the above-mentioned SNS characteristics.

Third, regarding the effect of SNS characteristics on satisfaction, a sub-factor of the relationship between clubs and fans, interactivity, information, playfulness, and recentness have a positive (+) effect on satisfaction.

Roh et al. (2015) investigated the relationship between SNS characteristics and satisfaction in martial arts. They partially supported this study's findings in that they found that interactivity, information, and ease of use had a positive effect on satisfaction. In addition, Choi and Park's (2019) study on SNS fan page characteristics of Korean professional baseball teams partially supported the findings of this study.

This study demonstrates that playfulness, information, interactivity, and recentness, the four constituent concepts of SNS characteristics, have a significant effect on satisfaction, in that order. Results of the mentioned studies indicate that the greatest influence on satisfaction comes from the SNS characteristic of killing time. Information provision is estimated to have a significant influence on satisfaction because of the MZ generation's SNS utilization method described above. Furthermore, because the SNS use range varies depending on the club, the influence on satisfaction can be relatively small, as some clubs do not use SNS frequently.

Therefore, professional football clubs must adopt various SNS use methods to increase fans' satisfaction, such as expanding the scope and frequency of SNS use and developing content that provides playful elements and information. SNS use is expected to become more important because the COVID-19 pandemic has limited clubs' contact points with fans, calling for a more strategic approach through the use of human resources. In addition, as SNS users' number is continuously increasing, unlike in the past, efforts should be made to enhance the quality of content. This could have a positive (+) effect on improving the satisfaction level of fans, positively affecting the quality of the relationship between clubs and fans.

This study conducted a limited investigation of the quality of the relationship between professional football clubs and fans, focusing on SNS marketing during COVID-19. However, as COVID-19 has accelerated digitalization in our society and as advanced technologies, such as Metaverse, are being utilized, the results of this study are expected to provide a solid foundation for clubs' SNS marketing strategies even after the COVID-19 era.

## Conclusions and limitations

This study investigated how professional football clubs' SNS marketing activities affect the quality of their relationship with fans. To achieve this, the study examined how SNS characteristics sub-factors affect the sub-factors of relationship quality. Further, we provide certain basic theoretical and practical data on the effectiveness of professional football clubs' SNS marketing strategies. However, to generalize the study results, future studies must address some limitations of the study process as follows.

First, as this study considered fans of professional football clubs, to extend and interpret the research results to all professional sports, future research must generalize the results through related follow-up research.

Second, this study considered the effect of only four sub-factors of SNS characteristics; however, as the SNS environment could change, future studies should consider various other additional variables and derive more generalized research results.

Third, this study considered the data of SNS users obtained through YouTube and Instagram; however, as these two platforms have differing characteristics, future studies should subdivide the research results based on platform characteristics.

Fourth, convenience sampling was used during the sampling process. However, given that professional football clubs use different SNS strategies, efforts to generalize the research results through quota sampling for each team are needed in the future.

Fifth, as data were collected during the professional football season, exogenous variables other than SNS characteristics, such as team ranking and performance, may have affected the responses of the study participants. Further efforts are required to generalize the research results by blocking the exogenous variables.

## Ethics approval and informed consent

Prior to data collection, verbal permission regarding voluntary participation were obtained from all survey respondents.

## Conflicts of interest

No potential conflict of interest exists among the authors.

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