Social Media in Relationship Marketing: The Perspective of Professional Sport Managers in the MLB, NBA, NFL, and NHL

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Abstract

This study aims to obtain an in-depth understanding of the use, opportunities, and challenges related to social media (SM) in achieving relationship marketing (RM) goals in professional sport. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 26 managers of professional sport teams from the four major leagues in North America. Results outline the platforms adopted, the six intended objectives of SM use, the seven opportunities SM provides, and the seven challenges of SM as a RM medium. Theoretical and practical implications as well as suggestions for future research are provided.

Keywords

social media use, professional sport, major league, challenges, opportunities

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The emergence of social media (SM) over the past decade has changed the speed and scope of communication and interaction among and between individuals and organizations across the globe (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015; Hambrick & Svensson, 2015). Today, the use of SM goes beyond simple social communication (Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015), and in the sport industry, marketers are using SM platforms to implement a variety of marketing communication elements such as athlete endorsements (Brison, Baker, & Byon, 2013), promotions (Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011), public relations (Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2011), news updates (Reed & Hansen, 2013), and relationship marketing (RM; Williams & Chinn, 2010). While SM is a valuable resource to realize these marketing communication elements (Schultz & Peltier, 2013), it appears to be an ideal tool to achieve RM goals (Hambrick & Svensson, 2015; Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp, & Agnihotri, 2014).

RM is about building a collaborative relationship via communication and interaction between organizations and their stakeholders (Grönroos, 2004, 2011). The central purpose of RM is retaining customers through long-term mutual satisfaction between businesses and customers (Grönroos, 2004). In order to secure long-term mutual satisfaction, businesses need to communicate, interact, and engage in two-way dialogue with customers on an ongoing basis (Grönroos, 2004; Williams & Chinn, 2010). It is through a two-way continuous dialogue that businesses are able to listen to and understand customers' needs, deliver a cocreated product, build long-term relationships, and, eventually, secure a long-term profit (Grönroos, 2000; Gummesson, 1998; Peppers & Rogers, 2011). By extension, this dialogue enables businesses to achieve goals such as increased loyalty, reduced marketing costs, increased profitability, and increased stability and security (Christopher, Payne, & Ballantyne, 2002; Peppers & Rogers, 2011). In this regard, SM has been suggested to be an ideal medium to achieve RM goals (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Reid, 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010).

While SM has become an important RM tool (Schultz & Peltier, 2013; Trainor et al., 2014), most studies' appraisals of SM as an RM tool are confined to its theoretical and/or conceptual benefits (Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012). Within the literature that addresses SM's role in sport marketing, the medium has been discussed as a valuable conduit capable of building meaningful relationships between two parties (e.g., Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Williams & Chinn, 2010). However, an understanding of its use in addressing RM goals in the context of professional sport is emerging but is not yet fully understood. Empirical evidence demonstrating SM's practical role as an RM tool in professional sport is limited, particularly from the practitioners' perspective. Along with this, it has been reported in recent years that implementing effective SM activities has been challenging (Boehmer & Lacy, 2014; Schultz & Peltier, 2013). As some scholars (e.g., Pronschinske et al., 2012; Schultz & Peltier, 2013) stated, having a presence and developing and launching SM initiatives have not been difficult for most companies. Rather, the authors point out that the challenge is in making the platforms truly engaging and valuable to consumers. Therefore, it is argued that an increased

understanding of the challenges involved with using SM as an RM tool will help develop adaptive strategies.

The purpose of this study is, therefore, to develop an empirically supported understanding of the use, opportunities, and challenges of SM in meeting RM goals from the perspective of professional sport managers in the four North American major leagues. Three research questions guided the study: (i) How do professional sport teams use SM in terms of meeting RM goals? (ii) How do managers of professional sport teams see the opportunities of SM in meeting RM goals? and (iii) How do managers of professional sport teams see the challenges of SM in meeting RM goals? In addressing each of the three research questions, this work produces empirical evidence that seeks to demonstrate the use of SM as an RM tool and to articulate the opportunities and challenges that it presents in terms of meeting RM goals in the context of professional sport teams in the four North American major leagues. In doing so, we plan to make a contribution to the existing literature by augmenting previous SM studies in the context of professional sport and to inform practitioners about the effective use of SM as an RM tool.

Literature Review

RM as a Managerial Approach

RM is the management of a collaborative relationship between a company and its stakeholders (Grönroos, 2000; Gummesson, 1998). The collaborative relationship is carried, maintained, and enhanced through communication and interaction, with the intent of producing added or superior value to the core product (Grönroos, 2000; Ravald & Gronroos, 1996). In maintaining and enhancing the communication and interaction process on a continuous basis and by fulfilling the promises that businesses make in their communications and interactions, companies be able to deliver a cocreated and customer valued product (Grönroos, 2000; Gummesson, 1997). Tactically, the RM approach is designed to allow the company to be in close touch with its customers and to obtain more information about them, leading to a mutual understanding where companies become valuable to customers (Peppers & Rogers, 2011). The approach facilitates business efforts to enhance intimacy, provide greater customer satisfaction, achieve improved customer retention, increase consumer loyalty, build long-term relationships, reduce marketing costs, and secure a long-term profit (Christopher et al., 2002; Peppers & Rogers, 2011). As Kim and Trail (2011) report, attracting new customers can be up to 5 times more expensive than maintaining existing customer relations (loyalty). Similarly, Feinberg and Kadam (2002) state that increasing customer retention rates by 5% leads to profit enhancement of anywhere from 25% to 80%.

Customers can achieve a number of benefits from an RM approach (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Stavros & Westberg, 2009), including choice reduction, which provides efficiency in their purchase decision, reduced search costs, and increased

cognitive consistency in decisions (Bee & Kahle, 2006). Notably, Bee and Kahle (2006) note that RM reduces (i) the complexity of the buying situation, (ii) the amount of resources required for information processing, and (iii) the need to be familiar with the offering. Grönroos (2004) added that RM provides enhanced security to customers, a sense of trust and a feeling of control, minimises purchasing risks, and reduced their costs. Notably, an RM approach varies across different industries (e.g., sport, tourism, and goods manufacturing companies) and consumer segments (e.g., sport consumers/fans, tourists, and manufacturing goods consumers; Stavros & Westberg, 2009).

The sport industry is known to be fertile ground for an RM approach (Kim & Trail, 2011). A number of sport consumption and fan behavior studies have reported that both the attitudes and behavior of sport consumers towards their clubs exhibit relational characteristics (Farrelly & Quester, 2003; Harris & Ogbonna, 2008). A sport fan is an enthusiastic consumer who is motivated to engage in behavior related to sport (Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999). Fans are often highly connected and involved personally with their favorite team (Harris & Ogbonna, 2008). As Whannel (1992) stated,

> "While there are clearly aesthetic pleasures in merely watching a sport performance, the real intensity comes from identifying with an individual or team as they strive to win." It is this phenomenon that has helped make sport a vehicle for the promotion of corporate interests. (p. 200)

Sport fans display their commitment through repeat ticket purchases, continued game attendance, viewership, and the purchase of merchandise (Bee & Kahle, 2006). The emotions, experiences, and feelings associated with sport consumption reflect fans' desire to become involved in, engaged in, and maintain a strong relationship with the sporting entities that they support (Kim, Trail, Woo, & Zhang, 2011). Harris and Ogbonna (2008), citing a number of studies that discussed the conducive relational character that sport fans exhibit towards a sporting team (e.g., Farrelly & Quester, 2003), argued that a relationship perspective provides the best scenario for understanding the true dynamics of sport consumption. Consequently, it can be said that RM represents a compelling marketing approach in the sport industry as opposed to the widely practiced short-term transactions seeking immediate profits (for more, see Harris & Ogbonna, 2008; Kim & Trail, 2011).

SM and RM in Sport

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 & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61), SM is evolving rapidly and constantly in its scope and extent of use across the globe (Ngai et al., 2015). In the sport industry, the penetration and magnitude of SM use have been driven by the

industry's various stakeholders, such as professional sport teams, leagues, professional athletes, professional sporting events, and sport fans (Abeza, O'Reilly, Seguin, & Nzindukiyimana, 2017). In scholarly research, SM and its role in RM in sport have been studied for the past half decade and the scholarship is evolving (Filo et al., 2015). Presently, a dozen sport-related SM studies have grounded their research in RM. Table 1 presents the roster of these articles, listing each study's purpose, focus, source of evidence, perspective, context of sport, and findings.

The studies that took an organizational perspective in the professional sport context (e.g., Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Pronschinske et al., 2012; Waters et al., 2011; Williams & Chinn, 2010; Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012) highlighted the role of SM in building a two-way collaborative relationship through a dialogue between teams and their stakeholders. These studies demonstrated how SM can aid RM efforts by creating an environment of two-way ongoing interaction between organizations and consumers. Particularly, as Dixon, Martinez, and Martin (2015) and Williams, Chinn, and Suleiman (2014) stated, the features of SM make it a valuable platform in realizing RM goals that have been long dominated by off-line activities. These features include instantaneity, ubiquity, time unrestrained access (Williams & Chinn, 2010), and simplicity and ease of access, networking, participation, and collaboration (Ngai et al., 2015). As Hambrick and Kang (2014) added, SM provides an opportunity for a direct and real-time conversation, talking and listening to each other, and then learning from each other and knowing each other closely. Essentially, SM presents an opportunity for sport marketers to reach almost every customer anywhere and anytime (both in real time and in long afterwards; Stavros et al., 2013), to engage in dialogue with them, and to create, in due course, a mutually valued product (Abeza & O'Reilly, 2014). While these studies reported the values of SM as a powerful RM tool, the specific opportunities and challenges of SM in terms of addressing RM goals in the context of professional sport are not yet fully understood and empirically supported.

In addition, an examination of the studies that adopted an organizational perspective (see Table 1) reveals two research dimensions (and research gaps) that, in part, inspired the study at hand. The dimensions are (i) the majority of the studies focused on the industry practice and assessed the use of SM as an RM tool but all these studies used SM content as their sources of evidence and the perspective of practitioners is missing (e.g., interviews; i.e., Abeza & O'Reilly, 2014; Boehmer & Lacy, 2014; Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Pronschinske et al., 2012; Wang & Zhou, 2015) and (ii) three studies can be identified that adopted an organizational perspective (i.e., Abeza et al., 2013; Dixon, Martinez, & Martin, 2015; Hambrick & Svensson, 2015), focused on practitioners (i.e., managers and employees), and employed an interview method. However, these three studies have been conducted in the context of college sport (Dixon et al., 2015) and niche sports (i.e., running events, Abeza et al., 2013; sport for development, Hambrick & Svensson, 2015). Hence, considering professional sport teams' sizeable presence on SM (Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Meng, Stavros, & Westberg, 2015), investigating the challenges and opportunities of SM

Table 1. Sport-Related Social Media Studies That Grounded Their Research in Relationship Marketing.

Authors	Research Purpose	Focus/Source of Evidence	Perspective/Sport Context	Finding
Abeza and O'Reilly (2014)	Investigated how national sport organizations (NSOs) used Facebook and Twitter to create relationship dialogue with their stakeholders	Industry practice/SM content	Organizational/ Canadian NSOs	Canadian NSOs' Facebook and Twitter use did little to create a relationship dialogue
Abeza, O'Reilly, and Reid (2013)	Explored the opportunities and challenges of using SM in an RM strategy	Industry practice/ managers interview	Organizational/ Canadian running events	Found opportunities and challenges of using SM as an RM tool
Boehmer and Lacy (2014)	Examined how interactivity on Facebook relates to readers' browsing behaviors	Industry practice/SM content— Facebook posts	Organizational/a German sport–news company	Clicking on a web link is not related to higher levels of interactivity, but an increase in interactivity did affect overall visits
Dixon, Martinez, and Martin (2015)[a]	Explored the usage and perceived effectiveness of SM in accomplishing various organizational objectives	Industry practice/ marketing staff members— Online survey	Organizational/college sport	Found most employing SM to raise awareness and support marketing objectives, but few use it for fund-raising and volunteer recruitment
Hambrick and Kang (2014)	Explored how the four North American professional sport leagues use Pinterest as a relationship marketing tool	Industry practice/SM content—Pins	Organizational/teams from the four major leagues	Found that Pinterest is used to promote the fan group experience, provide team and game information, and sell team-related merchandise
Hambrick and Svensson (2015)	Explored staff members' selection and use of SM and the benefits and challenges they faced in their use	Industry practice/ staff members interview	Organizational/sport for development and peace	SPDO uses SM to disseminate news, educate stakeholders, and promote events. Faces challenges in engaging users in conversations and conveying organizational goals

Table 1. (continued)

Authors	Research Purpose	Focus/Source of Evidence	Perspective/Sport Context	Finding
Pronschinske, Groza, and Walker (2012)[a]	Studied relationship marketing efforts conducted by teams in the four major leagues through Facebook and how teams built relationships with fans	Industry practice/SM content—Facebook	Organizational/teams from the four major leagues	Identified four primary Facebook elements used to accomplish their objectives. Concluded that teams benefit from RM by developing ongoing interactions through SM
Stavros, Meng, Westberg, and Farrelly (2014)	Explored the motivations underpinning the desire of fans to communicate on the Facebook sites of sport teams	Consumers motives/SM content	Consumers/National Basketball Association (NBA) fans	Found that fans exercise four key motives as they draw value from the SM-enabled connection to the team: passion, hope, esteem, and camaraderie
Wang and Zhou (2015)	Explored NBA teams use of Twitter to build relationship with the public	Industry practice/SM content—Twitter	Organizational/NBA	Found NBA teams using SM to develop professional relationships with their publics via sharing information and promoting products
Williams and Chinn (2010)	Discussed SM and RM in sport and extended Gronroos (2004) RM model within context of SM	Conceptual	Organizational and consumers	Articulated that Gronroos's (2004) framework could be extended and applied in context of SM in sport
Williams, Chinn, and Suleiman (2014)[a]	Investigated the value of tweets for the fans and whether there is a relationship between value and team identification	Consumers/SM content and survey	Consumers/NBA fans	Found team identification influencing how much people value specific categories of sports tweets (news, opinion, and promotion)
Witkemper, Lim, and Waldburger (2012)[a]	Investigated sport Twitter consumption (STC) motivations and constraints in following athletes	Consumers/survey	Consumers/Twitter users	Motivations (information, pass time, entertainment, and fanship) positively and constraints (accessibility, economic, skills, and social) negatively relate to STC

Note. SM = social media; RM = relationship marketing; SPDO = sport for development and peace organizations.
[a]These studies adopted additional theoretical perspective in their study.

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in RM from the perspective of professional sport managers extends and augments the literature on the topic area as well as fills the information gap.

Abeza, O'Reilly, and Reid (2013) explored the opportunities and challenges facing managers of eight Canadian mass-participation road races in using SM in an RM strategy. According to the authors, SM efficiently enabled the race directors to gain deeper and timely knowledge about their consumers and to maintain an ongoing dialogue with them and garner their feedback. The race directors also described four hurdles: (i) setbacks in the allocation of proper resources (e.g., time, man power) to manage SM platforms, (ii) lack of control over messages, (iii) concerns with the credibility and reliability of users' messages, and (iv) difficulties in identifying the "true online identity/customers" of a company among users of a company's SM platform (Abeza et al., 2013). This led to the recommendation of future research on these findings in areas of sport outside of participation sport, which has been echoed by others (Meng, Stavros & Westberg, 2015; O'Shea & Alonso, 2011).

Hambrick and Svensson (2015) found that sport for development and peace (SDP) organizations use SM to disseminate news, educate stakeholders, and promote events due to the ubiquity, reach, and low-cost nature of SM. Hambrick and Svensson (2015) further identified two challenges that (i) often messages from SM users do not reach the appropriate SDP staff member and (ii) messages amongst users are inconsistent making response difficult. Further research on a larger sample of organizations was recommended.

Dixon et al. (2015) explored the use and value of SM in addressing different organizational objectives within intercollegiate athletics departments, including awareness, fund-raising, volunteer recruitment, and promotions. They gathered responses from 158 National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I marketing professionals, finding that SM was most frequently used to raise awareness and support marketing objectives, but few use it for efforts related to fund-raising and volunteer recruitment. The lack of sufficient human resources to manage SM platforms is the prime concern identified. Dixon et al. (2015) also recommended future research to include SM platforms beyond Facebook and Twitter.

This work builds on the recommendations, and thereby attempts to extend the findings, of the aforementioned studies and examines the opportunities and challenges of SM in RM in the context of professional sport teams in the four North American major leagues. The reviewed works also serve as an input in the development of the interview questions and informed a further exploration of their findings.

Method

This study sought to obtain an in-depth understanding of the use, opportunities, and challenges of SM in meeting RM goals from the perspective of managers of professional sport teams in four North American major leagues. The study adopted a

semistructured interview method, which helped, as Bryman, Bell, and Teevan (2012) and Jones (2015) pointed out, to define the areas to be explored and, at the same time, allowed flexibility in discussing issues in more detail. The questions were derived from previous studies (Table 1) that grounded their research in RM. The interview guide comprised questions that were used to elicit information on four specific areas: (i) the adoption of RM and the use of SM, (ii) the opportunities resulting from the use of SM in RM, (iii) the challenges learned from the use of SM in RM, (iv) additional points, and (v) concluding questions. All of these aspects were felt to cover the scope of the research question.

Pilot interviews were conducted with three SM managers from three second-tier professional sport clubs, one in the United States and two in Canada. After each pilot interview, a debriefing session was conducted. The sessions assessed the interview guide and informed the conduct of the interviews. Examples of changes resulting include avoiding jargon (e.g., the need to describe RM) as well as adding probing and interpreting questions (e.g., From what you just said, . . .).

Following the pilot study, interviews were conducted with 26 managers of professional sport teams from the four North American major leagues—the National Football League (NFL), National Basketball Association (NBA), Major League Baseball (MLB), and National Hockey League (NHL). In locating informants (Andrew, Pedersen, & McEvoy, 2011; Neuman & Robson, 2012), the identification of a participant who has knowledge of a particular phenomenon being investigated and is willing to discuss the phenomenon in detail was required. Accordingly, managers who are responsible for the management of SM platforms were approached. These included SM managers, directors of communication, and directors of digital media. Recruitment involved an initial contact through e-mail, followed up by a phone call request to participate in the study. In some cases, the initial contact directed the researchers to managers who oversee the management of their teams' SM strategy and who, in view of the contacted informant, could best contribute to the research at hand. The interviewees include managers from eight teams in the NBA, four teams in the MLB, five teams in the NFL, and nine teams in the NHL. The number of interviews completed was determined based on data saturation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013; Neuman & Robson, 2012). About midway through the interviews, the surfacing of new insight started to diminish, particularly after the 20th interview. Yet, to ensure full saturation, the interviews were continued until 26 managers were completed. At that stage, it was decided that saturation was achieved. A brief description of the participants and their teams is presented in Table 2.

The interviews were conducted between January and April 2016. Each interview took place over the phone and lasted between 45 and 65 min. The interviews were recorded on digital devices, and notes were taken during the interviews for further clarification. Data were transcribed verbatim from the audiotapes into 387 pages of text. The text was then processed into a manageable form (i.e., data reduced through

Table 2. Research Participants Description.

Interviewee Code	Pointers—Participants and Their Team
MLB1	Executive director, communications at an MLB team, National League, East Division
MLB2	Manager, social media at an MLB team, American League, East Division
MLB3	Director, interactive and social media at an MLB team, American League, West Division
MLB4	Director, digital media at a MLB team, American League, East Division
NBA1	Director, social media at an NBA team, Eastern Conference, Central Division
NBA2	Director, social media at an NBA team, Western Conference, South Division
NBA3	Vice president, public relations at an NBA team, Eastern Conference, Atlantic Division
NBA4	Director, digital marketing at an NBA team, Eastern Conference, Central Division
NBA5	Manager, digital at an NBA team, Eastern Conference, Atlantic Division
NBA6	Manager, social media at an NBA team, Eastern Conference, Atlantic Division
NBA7	Vice president, sales at an NBA team, Eastern Conference, Central Division
NBA8	Manager, social media at an NBA team, Eastern Conference, Central Division
NFL1	Manager, social media at an NFL team, NFC East Conference
NFL2	Director, communication at an NFL team, AFC North Conference
NFL3	Manager, social media at an NFL team, NFC East Conference
NFL4	Corporate sponsorship and business development at an NFL team, AFC East Conference
NFL5	Director, partnership sales and activation at an NFL team, AFC North Conference
NHL1	Director, digital marketing and analytics at an NHL team, Eastern Conference, Atlantic Division
NHL2	Director, game entertainment and content at an NHL team, Western Conference, Pacific Division
NHL3	Manager, digital media sales at an NHL team, Eastern Conference, Atlantic Division
NHL4	Director, digital media at an NHL team, Eastern Conference, Atlantic Division
NHL5	Chief marketing officer at an NHL team, Eastern Conference, Atlantic Division
NHL6	Senior director, communications at an NHL team, Eastern Conference, Metropolitan Division
NHL7	Manager, social media at an NHL team, Western Conference, Central Division
NHL8	Manager, events at an NHL team, Western Conference, Pacific Division
NHL9	Director, digital and marketing services at an NHL team, Western Conference, Central Division

Note. NFC = National Football Conference; AFC = American Football Conference; NBA = National Basketball Association.

editing and deleting redundancies), the data were condensed topically (i.e., data displayed and quotes extracted), a verification process was undertaken, and conclusions were drawn (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Miles et al., 2013).

Both deductive and inductive approaches were adopted to analyze the transcribed data. Deductively, the technique of a pattern match was used, where the managers' replies to each interview question were compared and contrasted against the findings of previous research related to the use of SM in RM. For this purpose, the details of each respondent's data (for each question) treated individually, followed by the matching and comparing of the replies of each interviewee on each question with one another (Miles et al., 2013). Upon completion of the cross comparison, conclusions were drawn on each question. Inductively, emergent themes were identified from data that surfaced during follow-up questions, open-ended questions, switching/transitioning from topic to topic, and elaborations of previous answers. These data were compiled during the data reduction stage and then analyzed and reanalyzed inductively (Creswell, 2014) by clustering similar topics and organizing the topics into three parts: as major topic, unique topic, and leftovers.

To maintain data quality, (i) member checking was conducted by sending the transcribed interviews (Amis, 2005) and the preliminary findings back to the respondents (Creswell, 2014). Next, (ii) a peer debriefer played the devil's advocate role (Creswell & Miller, 2000) by scrutinizing the research design and specifically the data collection and analysis processes. Finally, (iii) to enhance the reliability of the data analysis process, a reliability check was conducted. For this purpose, the data from the first two interviews were analyzed by a researcher (who published on the topic area of SM in sport studies). This collaborator was provided with sufficient background information on the study, including the front end of the paper (up to the Method section). The collaborator's data analysis was later compared to the analysis conducted by the authors. Initially, a few differences in the analyses were observed, which were discussed until a 100% agreement was reached (Fawcett & Garity, 2008; Krippendorff, 2011), and the data analysis on the remaining 24 interviews was performed accordingly.

Findings

Professional Sport Team Use of SM

All 26 teams are on at least five SM platforms, and some are using more than nine SM platforms. The SM platforms adopted are Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, Periscope, Tumblr, YouTube, Vine, Google+, LinkedIn, and Weibo. For all teams, Twitter is the primary platform, in terms of frequency of use, followed by Facebook and then Instagram and Snapchat. Some of the managers indicated that although they own accounts on almost all mainstream platforms, a few of them are inactive due to resource constraints or on hold in wait for a concrete plan. For some of the teams, this was especially true for nascent platforms such as Snapchat. The

Table 3. Professional Sport Teams' Objectives in Using Social Media.

Objectives	Specific Objectives
Interaction	To communicate, interact, and engage in dialogue with fan; and thereby, to know and understand fans; and to build, maintain, and enhance relationships. To attract new customers and to humanize the brand.
Update	To provide news updates (e.g., breaking news on player signings or trades), to communicate a variety of information quickly and efficiently (e.g., live game highlights, invite fans to community event), and to provide a behind-the-scenes look (e.g., teams and facilities, team at a training, player in airplane/bus, players' injury and rehabilitation).
Public relations	To publicize community involvement and team and members' visit to hospital, schools.
Sales	Ticket sales, merchandise sale, and sales promotions such as fan reward campaigns, including contests and giveaways.
Sponsorship	To monetize social media through sponsorship/partnership.
Customer service	To serve as direct line of communication to listen to questions, comments, and concerns and address them. To gauge the overall customer satisfaction.

managers reported that they are capitalizing on each platform's unique features, such as live transmission on Periscope and Facebook live, quick updates on Twitter, visual content on Instagram, short and transportable/"looping" videos on Vine, merchandise sales on Pinterest, and LinkedIn for business to business relations.

The teams' objectives for SM use can be categorized as one of the six types: interaction, update, ticket sales, sponsorship, public relations, and customer service (see Table 3). All teams reported using the platforms to achieve each of these objectives, but with varying levels of emphasis on each as dictated by their market and their organizational goals. All emphasized that interaction is the prime objective in their use of SM followed by customer service. The managers stated that they strive to maintain content topic balance, particularly between ticket sales, sponsorship, sales promotion, and news updates.

To achieve the six objectives noted in Table 3 and to keep their SM channels robust, the managers reported that they strive to build a team of dedicated and creative professionals and company insiders who are versed in all SM platforms. All the interviewees reported working with a full-time SM team, with an average of two full-time staff and three part-time staff/interns. Of note, a few teams have only a single full-time employee. Most SM teams receive support from other departments within their organization for digital media content production. For some of the teams in large markets, the SM team is a part of a larger digital department, with staff who produce rich "microcontent" tailored to SM, such as Graphic Interchange Formats, video clips, pictures, and audio files. An important point here reported by many of the managers is that an SM team needs to be trusted to be the voice of an

organization. One manager (NHL9) observed that teams need to have confidence in "the persons they are trusting with the voice of their brand." Another (NBA5) added that

> managing social is, first and foremost, an art, supported by scientific data. It is a human doing it, it cannot be an algorithm or an agency. You have to trust the people who you put as the front face of the teams.

Reflecting the same sentiment, another manager (NFL1) stated that "[the organization must] trust our social media manager to use discretion when coming up with new concepts and things to send out to the fan base."

Opportunities of SM to Meet RM Goals

The respondents outlined seven opportunities that SM platforms provide in realizing RM goals. As presented below, the first three opportunities are the values that SM presented to sport teams in their effort to build, maintain, and enhance their relationship with fans. The fourth identified opportunity, ongoing dialogue, is the prime benefit that SM presented to both sport teams and sport fans as an RM tool. The last three of the seven opportunities are the merits of SM that the managers underscored to help heighten fans' sport consumption experience and play a role in enriching fans' intimacy, strengthening their allegiance, and enhancing long-term relationship with their sport team. The identified opportunities are discussed below.

Knowledge of fans. All of the managers agreed that fan knowledge, particularly the opportunity to learn, know, and understand fans' constantly evolving interests, needs, and wants, is one of the primary benefits that SM offers towards realizing RM goals. According to the managers, SM presents access to a large number of customers and a vast pool of data that can be quickly and economically accessed and gathered on a number of marketing factors, such as demographic (e.g., who they are, where they live), psychographic (e.g., what fans want, their sentiments), and behavioral (e.g., what they buy). These inputs inform managers in developing marketing strategy that responds to fans interest in a timely manner. One respondent (MLB3) stated that SM facilitates "not only knowing fans but also knowing what they are asking for," allowing for the delivery of tailored offerings. It was also noted that SM does not only help know a fan base locally, but that it enables an organization to reach out, know, expand, and grow its fan base worldwide. One respondent (NHL3) clarified that, through SM, "we are not just talking to our fans in the country but worldwide and in an area that is not in our traditional market."

The managers also discussed SM's role as a means to solicit fan opinion and obtain their input quickly. As some managers described, SM can initiate a larger

study or give insight into a particular problem that organizations may need to address. One manager (NHL1) explained that

> as a team, we may want to send a survey out to get more specific information. Social media can be the starting point of where a potential issue might arise or it helps detect the symptom. Then, that is when we will go take the next step and do some sort of survey to confirm.

"Feeling the pulse". Most interviewees indicated that one of the merits of SM is that it enables teams to feel the "pulse" of their fan base (i.e., gauge fan sentiment immediately). SM is reported to provide insight into fan reaction to issues ranging from a team's performance to management-related decisions. One (NFL1) noted that "good or bad, you'll know it right away." Another (MLB4) stated that

> you would know exactly how your fans are feeling at any given point and [. . .] you can create a tailored content to those feelings and capitalize on the highs and try to work through the lows, whenever those happen.

Another respondent (NHL8) added that "you can hear fans screaming in the stadium, but the best way to monitor fans sentiment is through social media."

Brand humanization. The interviewees stated that SM provided them the ability to present themselves as an accessible (open and available) entity. The opportunity to exhibit humor, cheer along with fans, offer rewards, and announce contests is an often-mentioned value that SM provides to teams, enabling the humanization of the team brand. For instance, some managers made reference to the entertainment value of friendly banters with rival teams on SM. Others reported that they actively interact on SM to humanize the team with humor, wittiness, and clever topical comments both when interacting with fans and updating them. The managers recognized that SM presents professional sport organizations with an opportunity to build a personality of their own by exchanging jokes and funny pictures, communicating with a consistent and friendly tone, and personalizing their replies (e.g., a fan's personalized birthday wishes). A humanization of the brand, as one respondent (NHL5) stated, "gives fans another reason to support the organization . . . [and] feel justified in their investment in the organization." Some of the managers also mentioned that SM helps the team make itself accessible to the young generation, enabling the team to reach out to them in a specific medium that appeals to that demography.

Ongoing dialogue. All interviewees identified the opportunity that SM offers to professional teams to engage in a real-time and dynamic one-on-one dialogue with fans, without time barriers or border restrictions. The managers underscored the role that SM plays in offering teams and fans the opportunity to directly talk to and listen to each other and then learn about each other on an ongoing basis. Through continuous

dialogue, managers reported that they are able to know and understand the constantly changing needs of their fans. One interviewee (NHL3) explained:

> Team [xyz] a couple of years ago, they didn't talk to their fans and I find that very very . . . almost disturbing. I get it, you can't talk to a million fans and answer every single thing. We get thousands upon thousands of messages and we might not get back to everyone. But, we try to do as much as we can. Why are you on SM if you're not going to interact back and forth? [. . .] Today, the currency is about engagement and interactions, and less about followers and likes and retweets.

Another manager (NFL5) added that SM is

> a new avenue for us to be able to get feedback, take a real look at it and see if it is something we need to adjust on our end, and then explain our position. This helps create a stronger fan affinity and stronger fan experience.

Interviewee (NBA5) concurred that it is not necessarily us conducting the conversation or pushing it in any direction, fans also engage in dialogue among themselves." In connection with this, most managers insisted on the importance of SM in enabling fans to feel that they have a venue to express themselves and their feelings towards their team. As NFL4 stated, "fans definitely feel empowered to have a voice, especially if they are spending money on the team whether on or through merchandise or tickets or something else." As NFL3 specified,

> There's so much noise out there, especially on a game day. You can't even keep up with the Tweets. It's just like a New York stock exchange ticker. It just never stops moving. Even if we wanted to reply to it, it would be hard to keep up with all the conversations and see what's going on. But, I think it does make the fans feel like they have a voice and gratified.

As another manager (NFL4) stated, "fans definitely feel empowered to have a voice, especially if they are spending money on the team whether on or through merchandise or tickets or something else."

"Fan nations". Respondents emphasized the opportunity that SM provides around the creation of a fan hub. As a hub, an SM platform serves as a venue where conversations are carried out among fans, creating a "fan nation," according to the interviewees. Fans interact, express their fanship, and engage in dialogue with other like-minded individuals. In the fan nation, fans, for example, can reunite outside of the stadium and access content to which they react and bond over. Fans can also extend their fresh game experience outside the sport arena through ongoing discussions and interactions with other fans. This, according to some managers, prolongs and enhances the fan game experience.

Teams, using Twitter, for example, can create an environment that facilitates conversation between fans and that brings them together. Using slogans, interviewees reported that a number of teams (e.g., #BroncosCountry–Denver, #JazzNation–Utah, and #GoHabsGo–Montreal) create hubs, or fan nations, where passionate fans come together as a community, enriching fan identity. One respondent (NBA4) stated that teams are "creating environments so that conversations take place that make fans feel that they're bonded together." In connection with this, one interviewee (NFL1) pointed out that "fans capturing our content pushing it on to their network is much more powerful and impactful than us pushing it out."

Content delivery. All respondents put an emphasis on the value that SM provides in bringing fans closer to their organization. The managers stated that SM removes third-party "middle persons," thereby providing them with the ability to directly offer behind-the-scenes stories and exclusive content to fans, enhancing the fan experience and bringing them much closer to the team. As one interviewee (NFL4) described:

> Fans got a thirst for content. They can't get enough of it, and sometimes, it's things that we view as small, unimportant because we're so close to the organization. So, we take advantage of our access to the players and the stadium and all these things that no one else has access to—really give fans extra coverage.

Through the live streaming capabilities of the different SM platforms (e.g., Periscope, Facebook live), a number of teams are broadcasting behind-the-scenes activities such as player training, team travel, and team dinners. Teams are using Twitter for question and answer purposes. One respondent (NFL2) reflected, "people expect instant gratification and real-time information, and if you're not good at providing your fans with that, they're going to go somewhere where they can get it."

To update their fans, one of the six objectives reported earlier, teams use SM to share exclusive content, such as live play-by-play updates, scores, training, warm-up, injury updates, and game highlights. The interviewees claim that the delivery of such exclusive team-related content, directly by the team to fans, extends the game experience, adds value to fan enjoyment, informs fans as consumers, and that these have the ability to enhance fan identification with the team.

Customer service. The managers referred to customer service as a value that SM offers in maintaining their organization's relationship with fans. One manager (NBA3) described, "today, when there is any concern, the first-place fans come to is the social media." In agreement to this statement, a number of managers underscored the fact that, through SM (mostly Twitter), fans are directly informing teams of any customer experience-related issues, such as in-stadium services (e.g., parking, traffic, and concessions) and technology (e.g., broken web links, wireless connections).

SM was described as the most immediate means for teams to provide answers to fans and address their concerns. One interviewee (NFL3) shared some examples:

> "Hey, can you tell me when xyz is going to be available?" "Hey, the podcast isn't on the website. When [are they] going to be up?" "Oh, there's an issue with the live stream." "The lines are really long for these bathrooms, why are the other bathrooms not open?"

The managers frequently mentioned that fans today want their issues to be resolved quickly with easy-to-find solutions. One manager (MLB4) noted that SM has increased a team's ability to be aware of fan issues. Another (NBA4) stressed that "probably the biggest value for me is that it's the best customer [service] tool that we have." NFL3 also adds that

> Before social media, you have no idea [that issues raised by fans] are going on or anything like that. So, I think, it really helps us out, just as much as it does the fans. When we respond back to the fans, they feel like they have an impact on not only their experience but somebody else's experience.

Most interviewees claim that SM is a public reflection of how teams treat their customers, and they pointed to the fact that when a team responds publicly to a fan's inquiry on SM, the response is seen by others. Thus, SM does not only help teams to address the concern of a particular fan, but it also allows teams to respond to others with a similar issue and shares publicly that fans have input and an impact on not only their experience but that of others as well.

Challenges of SM in Meeting RM Goals

Seven challenges that teams face in using SM as an RM tool were identified by the managers. As can be found below, the findings are organized based the nature of the challenges that are presented under three dimensions: issues around platforms management (i.e., the first two identified challenges), limitations related to the volume and frequency of data exchanged (i.e., the third and fourth identified challenges), and hurdles associated with the involvement of different stakeholders (i.e., the last three identified challenges). The identified challenges are discussed below.

Change management. Coping with the constantly evolving SM technology as well as repurposing emerging platforms are noted as challenges by the respondents. It was emphasized by the managers that the SM platforms evolve so fast that they demand constant adaptation. The managers noted, however, that effort is always expended to manage these changes. One (NBA2) stated that SM "is changing a lot and there is a new platform popping up every now and then, so, usually, we need to readjust ourselves." The need to have a good plan, the necessary resources, and a good

understanding of a platform before they adopt it was widely noted. One interviewee (NHL3) recommended to:

> make sure we're on the right platforms and when new platforms do come up—because they are coming up in this digital world every day—that we're on the right ones. Not all are relevant to us, [it's about] making sure that we're speaking to our fans where our fans are.

In connection to this, MLB3 stated that "it's hard to develop a scripted plan for something that it is ever evolving. You are in constant change. It's like saying, 'what's the next platform going to be?' [. . .] You just don't really know." Another added (NFL3), "we may do something to realize, 'Oh, wow. We've been doing this wrong,' or 'We didn't realize that this would drive this kind of traffic.' We experiment things." Most interviewees underscored that, with the constantly evolving nature of SM, they are learning and teaching themselves through the process.

Operational management. The day-to-day operations or real-time content management of SM is reported to be a challenge. Although the managers agree that it is part of their job, they find balancing speed, creativity, and accuracy to be a challenge. One respondent (NBA5) explained that SM is

> moving fast and always changing. There's always new platform to feed and doing it right with the right tone is a challenge, and being accurate, especially on game day . . . . Being good, fast, and perfect is really hard.

As NHL3 noted, "I say to my team all the time: 'It's important to be first but we'd rather be right.'" Although they have high awareness levels of SM platforms, they note a challenge in determining the best ways of managing them due, at least in part, to a lack of best practices they can follow. Many reported that they experiment to figure out the best approach for the day-to-day operation of their SM, with one respondent (NBA1) calling it "a trial and error process" due to the constantly changing nature of SM on both existing and emerging platforms. The constant challenge of producing fresh, diverse, appealing, and different content was commonly reported by the managers.

Actionable data. The issue of filtering "big data" into actionable data that responds to the voices of all fans is one of the major challenges identified by managers. This challenge is complicated by size (large) and impulsiveness (not genuine) of content on SM. One (MLB3) interviewee reported, "teams are so strapped for man power in the social field that a lot of those messages [fans' inquiries] that go to the team may get overlooked." Similarly, another manager (NFL5) recalled that

That's the inherent nature of social media, [. . .] you're going to get people saying absolutely anything and everything. After all, it is a personal opinion, and what they think, so it's just the way you handle it. At times, people speak at their peak emotions and you have to take it with a grain of salt.

Managers also stressed how mining data, sorting it, filtering out "genuine" comments and complaints from the "noise," and transforming it into actionable data are made difficult by the volume of the data. In this regard, as most managers specified, their teams are constrained by the know-how, the human resources, and the technological aids. Some of the teams pointed out that they have a young in-house marketing intelligence team that is endeavoring to address the challenge. However, managers have consistently mentioned this as one of the major challenges.

Lack of control. Respondents informed that lack of control over content posted by users on teams' SM platforms is a concern, but it is not out of control. The managers' report that fans are entitled to their views and that they do not stifle outside views, unless comments step over the established boundaries on topic, language, or ethics. Thus, when the (negative) opinions are performance related (e.g., "get rid of this player" or "fire this coach"), managers tend to "let it go" and to "let that happen." As NHL3 noted, "that is the nature of sport." However, when posted content is vulgar, obscene, offensive (e.g., curse words, racial slurs, threats, and sexist), or otherwise lack civility, teams remove it or block the user when found necessary. For service-related comments, statements that lack factuality (e.g., "game schedule is fixed"), or those that are brand/organization/management related, the team endeavors to respond. In the latter two cases, teams may also let their fans self-police content (i.e., post to correct a factual error or contest a viewpoint). Fans' self-policing is an SM-born solution that managers rely on. In this regard, a manager (NBA5) mentioned that, on SM, teams have "hundreds of thousands—a million advocates who defend you in this space because the team is a part of their own personal identity, as their own personal brand." This is an experience that has been raised by a number of managers. For instance, as described by one interviewee (MLB1),

We see debates going on our social media pages where somebody can say something negative and somebody [else] takes different stances, very positive, and tells the person who's negative that, if they don't agree with what the team's doing, then maybe they shouldn't be on the page or maybe they shouldn't comment.

Influential opinion leaders. Interestingly, most of the managers stated that they personally know many of their influential SM users. One (MLB2) reported that

we have millions of followers and it is hard to know each one. But, there are people that we talk to and that talk about us on SM on a regular basis. Of course, there's a lot of

people that I do not recognize but there are [. . .] a good number of people that I "see" [on Twitter] every night [at the baseball game].

Influential SM users (i.e., fans who have a significant following and who frequently post about the team) have significant "authority," and their opinion as a third party is often considered to be more "real," according to the managers, because they are external to the team and are not bound by a "marketing" label. The managers agree that fans are more likely to listen to another fan and particularly to key influential opinion leaders, who can sway opinions in a positive or a negative way. As one manager (NBA3) stated, "when these users post unfounded criticisms and negative messages, and we have to make a decision whether we want to react to it or not [. . .] that's a process." On the risk of negativity, one interviewee (NHL6) stated that "naysayers who are social influencers, are the difficult customers [we have] to deal with."

Some managers suggested that empowering these opinion leaders would be a beneficial tactic to improve SM use towards RM objectives. In fact, some teams reported organizing a hospitality service for digital influencers, while some others suggested providing them with exclusive content. One manager (NHL2) talked about their "social street nights" organized for top influencers, where they are treated to food and drinks. Another (MLB1) stated that their organization provides opinion leaders with insider information to insure accurate information is shared with their fans. It is also noted that some may see these offers as attempts to buy the opinions of opinion leaders.

Internal conflict of interest. A number of managers revealed that balancing the different objectives and interests of SM use within their organizations' different departments as a challenge. According to the managers, different departments have different interest towards SM use, such as ticket sales, sponsorship, and merchandise sales. In this regard, SM is reported to be primarily perceived as a channel where informative, entertaining, and interactive content are exchanged, and caution is advised to avoid the excessive and overt use of SM for monetization purposes. The lack of control that managers have over their internal stakeholders (e.g., players, coaches, staff, and cheerleaders) is a related challenge as described by one respondent (NHL1):

We don't necessarily have control over our players' social media platforms. For instance, a player may have his own personal sponsorship with [beer company X], and the team may have a different beer company as a partner. So, when a player associates himself with the team and promotes the beer company that he partnered with, we will have a conflict of interest. That always has been an issue.

Conflict of interest with an SM team member was also mentioned as a challenge by a small number of managers. Their sentiment is illustrated by this comment (NHL8):

"An employee can't be layering in his own personality on social media handles but the team's. Recently, we lost a key social employee and we realized later that our fans were following him and not the team content."

Anonymity. Anonymity was identified as a rare yet potential challenge. The managers reported that, on occasion, they learned that if users impersonate the organization to make certain comments or to disseminate false information, they are easily identified and dealt with. Managers indicated that fans tend to also be knowledgeable and savvy, and that they report such anonymous actor to the organization through its official channels. One manager (NFL1) noted that "people can kind of hide behind social media." This, however, did not represent a significant challenge as another's (NHL6's) explanation demonstrates:

> We have had it happen that is a possibility, definitely happens all the time we don't know it but they are weeded out quite quickly by our own followers. We have a very large following and as soon as they smell [someone] to be an impersonator posing as a fan because of their comments, they are usually challenged or called out pretty quick.

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to develop empirically supported understanding of the use, opportunities, and challenges of SM in meeting RM goals in the context of professional sport teams in the four North American major leagues. The study, based on the perspective of managers of the professional sport teams, produced data that allowed the work to accomplish the intended purpose. Table 4 summarizes the identified opportunities and challenges of SM as a RM tool.

The study informed us that the seven identified opportunities that SM presented in meeting RM goals facilitate the building, maintenance, and enhancement of relationships between sport teams and fans. As discussed above, the value of SM is the opportunity it provides to communicate, interact, and engage in two-way dialogue with fans on an ongoing basis. Through a two-way continuous dialogue, sport teams can listen to and understand fans' needs, respond accordingly, and are able to create additional value for consumers. Similarly, a variety of fan needs (ranging from customer service issues to engaging in a direct conversation with players) through a continuing dialogue can be met and potentially translate into the building, maintenance, and enhancement of relationships. These are the core intent of RM, both as a management approach and as a theoretical framework (Gronroos, 2004; Williams & Chinn, 2010). In this regard, the findings support previous studies (e.g., Hambrick & Svensson, 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010) that conceptually claimed the conduciveness of SM as a tool in meeting RM goals and those that argued for SM's role in making the RM approach practical (e.g., Abeza et al., 2013; Dixon et al., 2015; Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Meng et al., 2015; Wang & Zhou, 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010) that has been a difficult marketing

Table 4. Opportunities and Challenges of Social Media as a Relationship Marketing Tool.

Opportunities	Challenges
Team centered	Management related
Knowledge of fans: Social media (SM) presents access to a large number of customers and a vast pool of data that can be quickly and economically accessed and gathered on a number of marketing factors	*Change management*: Coping with the constantly evolving SM technology as well as repurposing the new emerging platforms are noted as challenges
Feeling the pulse: SM enables teams to feel the "pulse" of their fan base at a specific point of time (i.e., gauge fan sentiment immediately)	*Operational management*: Challenge of day-to-day operations or real-time content management such as finding balance between speed, creativity, and accuracy
Brand humanization: SM allows teams to humanize their brand through humor and clever topical comments, friendly banters with rival teams, cheering along with fans, and so on	Data related
Ongoing dialogue: SM offers an opportunity to engage in a real-time, dynamic, and ongoing one-on-one dialogue with fans, without time barriers or border restrictions	*Actionable data*: Challenges with mining data, sorting it, filtering out "genuine" comments and complaints from the "noise," and transforming it into actionable data, which is made difficult by the volume of the data
Fan centered	*Lack of control over messages*: Lack of control over content posted by users on teams' SM platforms is a concern, but it is not a challenge that is out of control
Fan nations: SM serves as a venue where fans reunite outside of the stadium and access content to which they react and bond over with other like-minded individuals	Actors related
Content delivery: SM removes third parties (e.g., mass media) and provides the ability to directly offer behind-the scenes stories and exclusive content to sport fans	*Influential opinion leaders*: Fans with significant following, who frequently post about the team have significant "authority," and their view as a third party can sway opinions in a positive or a negative way
Customer service: SM serves as the most immediate means to provide answers to fans' inquiry publicly and address the concern of others with a similar issue	*Internal conflict of interest*: Balancing the different objectives and interests of SM use within an organization's different departments is noted as a challenge
	Anonymity/true online customer: The difficulty of identifying a "true online customer" and the potential impact that messages from anonymous users can negatively affect a team's brand noted as a threat

resource in the past unless frequent phone calls or letters are exchanged or radio talk shows are used.

As outlined, while ongoing dialogue is the prime benefit of SM as an RM tool identified by the managers across the board, SM (as indicated in Table 4) provided three team-centered opportunities (knowledge of fans, feeling the pulse, and brand

humanization) and three fan-oriented benefits (content delivery, customer service, and fan nations). Particularly, the speed, easy access, and public forum features of SM make it a medium conducive to fans' expression. A decade ago, for example, before the emergence of Facebook, these uses and benefits of SM were almost impossible unless fans, for instance, got a chance to engage in discussions using other traditional communication mediums (e.g., radio talk shows, focus group, and survey). In this regard, the managers emphasized the fact that, through ongoing dialogue, teams are able to understand their fans' constantly changing needs and to deliver a cocreate value that facilitates the building, maintenance, and enhancement of long-term relationships.

In terms of team-centered opportunities, the identified benefits such as "knowledge of fans" and feeling the pulse are enabling teams to design an informed strategy and to develop a customized approach in their marketing endeavors. Similarly, SM platforms are providing professional sport teams with the stage to humanize their brand. Through SM, teams are building a personality and are presenting themselves as open and accessible entities. By communicating SM content with humor, by using a friendly tone, and by participating in real-time personalized conversation with their fans, teams are enhancing relationships with them. Such an approach, as Harris and Ogbonna (2008) and Kim and Trail (2011) pointed out, helps redress the perception of some sport fans that teams are profit-oriented businesses with little care for their fans.

In terms of fan-oriented opportunities, SM extended the boundary through which teams are able to create added values for their fans. Today, through SM, fans are able to get real-time customer service, to receive exclusive team-related content, and to enrich their identity by participating in fan nations. As a customer service platform, SM is a go-to medium to seek help on a number of customer-related issues from in-stadium services to technological troubles. Most importantly, it allows teams to have satisfied customers, which enhances fans' sport consumption experience and, by extension, enhances fan identification. Similarly, teams using SM are able to provide their "content-thirsty fans" with a variety of exclusive information, ranging from play-by-play updates (on game day) to highlights (from previous games) and live transmissions (e.g., from training fields). Fans' access to real-time updates, behind-the-scene information, and other similar team-related content provides them instant gratification, extends fans' games experience, and adds value to their enjoyment of consuming games (as informed consumers) and these, among other factors, enhance fans' identification. In a like manner, fans reunite in fan nations outside of the sport arena and engage in conversation to discuss game experiences, voice their allegiance to a team, react to team-related content, and reunite with other like-minded fans. Through fan nations, SM does not only provide fans the opportunity to extend their game experience outside the sport fields but also enriches their identity as fans of that team. In this regard, as Pronschinske, Groza, and Walker (2012) and Stavros et al. (2013) stated, one of the prime values of SM is its ability to serve as a venue for

conversations and engagement and helping fans to connect with each other as well as carry, extend, and amplify game experience outside the sport arena.

Despite the extent to which SM is an ideal and valuable conduit for a relationship-building approach, an effective realization of SM efforts has been challenging (Schultz & Peltier, 2013). The challenge is in making the platforms truly engaging and valuable to consumers. This study identified seven challenges in meeting RM goals which can be seen from three dimensions: management related, actors (stakeholders) related, and data related. The management-related dimension includes issues pertaining to change management and operational management; actors-related dimension includes concerns in connection with influential opinion leaders, internal conflict of interest, and anonymity; and data-related dimension encompasses limitations in terms of actionable data and concerns related to lack of control over messages.

The two identified management-related challenges (i.e., issues pertaining to change management and operational management) are hurdles that can be resolved over the course of time. Indeed, with the evolution of the use of SM and advancements in technology, it would become relatively manageable to cope with the constantly changing platforms' technology and the lack of exemplary or practice model. On the other hand, actors-related challenges are perceived by managers as either potential (and occasional) challenges or concerns that are controllable. Similarly, data-related challenges are concerns that can be addressed with the advancement of technology (e.g., filtering actionable data). While lack of control over SM messages is a concern, it can be controlled by applying any one of the three basic approaches laid out by managers: "let it go," delete it, or reply to it.

Hence, it can be argued that the opportunities of SM in meeting RM goals significantly outweigh the challenges. As the findings showed, over the past few years, managers have progressively familiarized themselves with the evolving nature of SM, including adaptation to new and emerging SM platforms, changes within existing platforms, day-to-day content management of the platforms, and fans' SM consumption patterns. As SM develops, professional sport teams are learning and teaching themselves through the process, experimenting with content management, and readjusting themselves accordingly. These experiences, among others, are shaping the managers' practices and perceptions. Hence, some challenges are evolving over time and are being perceived simply as drawbacks, while others are controllable within the resource limit of the teams, although the managers admitted that some (notably, data and change management) require extra resources.

The results of this research contribute to the literature by supporting and augmenting previous sport-related SM studies in the area of SM and RM. First, we responded to calls made by sport-related SM studies. Such calls include the need to investigate the use of SM from the perspective of professional sport teams from different leagues (e.g., Meng et al., 2015; Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly, 2014), the use of SM in RM from the management perspective (e.g., Williams &

Chinn, 2010), the use of SM as an RM tool in a professional sport setting (e.g., Abeza et al., 2013), the need to reinvestigate the challenges and opportunities of SM after a suitable period to see the changes over time and in a wider range of sport contexts (Abeza et al., 2013), and with a larger number of research participants (Hambrick & Svensson, 2015). Overall, while most studies' discussion of SM as an ideal RM tool has been confined to a conceptual appraisal (Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Pronschinske et al., 2012), this study produced empirical evidence that substantiates the claim.

In terms of the findings' practical implications, all the respondents put an emphasis on the ability that SM provides to listen to and understand customers' needs on an ongoing basis, respond accordingly, and to be able to create and cocreate additional value for fans. This value of SM helps curb the challenges professional sport teams face today, such as retaining an enthusiastic fan base, intensifying fan loyalty and involvement (Mullin et al., 2014), increasing fan discontent and disconnection (Magnusen et al., 2012), and competition from multiple entertainment services (Kim & Trail, 2011). Managers are, therefore, recommended to capitalize on the identified opportunities.

It is clearly observed in this study that SM is a platform for public dialogue where the practice of censoring or policing content has its own repercussions. Hence, with an understanding that fans are entitled to express their opinions, to handle negative content managers are recommended to apply the basic approaches identified: let it go, delete it, or reply to it. As stated above, when (negative) opinions are performance related, teams "let it happen." When posted content is found to be inappropriate (e.g., derogatory, vulgar, and racist), teams remove it. And, when content is service related, lack factuality, or brand related, teams respond. On a related issue, as a few of the managers stated, a great deal of messages might be overlooked as a result of such factors as a shortage of man power to manage their platforms. To partly address this constraint, managers will be recommended to internally redirect messages from central account to personnel directly responsible for addressing specific inquiry within an organization. This involves, for example, setting up SM accounts for the different departments.

As some of the respondents underscored, with the evolution of SM, there needs to be a shift from merely posting messages on a platform to creating creative and rich data that resonate even more with the SM world, such as player-centered interactive content (e.g., similar idea as players reading mean Tweets as used by one of the teams). The nature of such content is not only creative, fresh, different, and interesting, it adds to fans' experience and draws visitors/traffic. Another lesson to managers will be the management of influential opinion leaders. A number of managers are in agreement that fans are more likely to listen to another fan and particularly key influencers. Empowering opinion leaders would be beneficial. Some teams organize a hospitality service for these digital influencers, and a few suggested that they empower them by providing them with exclusive access to certain content.

In light of the findings, practical recommendations can also be identified. As some of the teams have stated, in order to reach out to a target audience of a particular fan base (rather than sending out a message to the mass), organizations can use new SM features such as Facebook's new targeting capability in which you can target individuals through their interests. This feature enables organizations to narrow their audience reach (i.e., their sending list) down to those users whose interests are associated with a brand or an event a team wants to promote. Also, for some managers, an in-depth understanding of a team's fan base (e.g., demographic breakdown, purchasing power parity, and culture and/or cultural diversity) is an integral part of their day-to-day practice. However, it should be emphasized that an in-depth understanding of a teams' audience is imperative in the management of SM. Such an understanding allows SM teams to customize and frame content delivery in the way that appeals to a target fan base on a particular type of SM platform. Along with these, managers need to understand the unique features of different platforms (from Twitter to Facebook, Pinterest, Snapchat, Instagram, etc.) and mold their SM objectives to fit the features of particular platforms as well as their users' demography and psychography. In this regard, while all platforms can be used for marketing communication purposes such as update, RM, sales, and so on, it is recommended that managers capitalize on the uniqueness of individual platforms. For example, some teams focus on Facebook for pushing out information on events and games and to talk to fans, Twitter for updates and real-time content, Periscope for live events such as training and press conferences, and Pinterest for merchandise sales or recipes from arenas.

Lastly, using SM, teams are encouraged to personalize their brand through humor, wittiness, and topical comments in their interaction with fans, as brand humanization was an aspect of SM that was strongly emphasized by the managers in this research. The findings also show that today, teams are not only expected to provide news updates and highlights and to communicate game-related contents but also to provide a behind-the-scenes look at teams and facilities, such as live streams of teams at a training field, players' off-the-field activities.

Future Research Directions and Limitations

This study informed a number of avenues where future research can be conducted. Some areas are outlined here. First, a study will be needed that investigates how organizations sort out, filter out and distil usable data from the voluminous data available through their SM platforms into actionable data (i.e., a form of data ready to inform strategy development). Second, a study that investigates the best practice in using SM for RM will make both scholarly and applied contribution. A best practice study could be either case based (e.g., focusing on a team that distinguishes itself in revenue generation through SM) or topic based (e.g., a small number of teams [one or two] that could be exemplary in their use of SM in terms of revenue generation, big data warehouses, and/or data analytics). Third, future study will be

also recommended on the relationship between a team and SM opinion leaders (or, as some call them, social influencers or digital influencers). Such a study can also assess the power of these leaders, their characteristics, their role, and the impact they have on teams' brand.

Fourth, studies are recommended on the use and impact of SM in expanding and growing the fan base (or introducing a particular sport) to nontraditional market. Examples include hockey in China and basketball in different parts of Canada. Fifth, a study is recommended that explores the different aspects of conversations that revolve around a team slogan, such as the #BroncosCountry (Denver Broncos), #JazzNation (Utah Jazz), #GoHabsGo (Montreal Canadiens), #LetsGoFish (Miami Marlins), #GoCats (Carolina Panthers), and #TakeFlight (New Orleans Pelicans). Studies can investigate the characterisation of the community, the value of it as an imagined community, how the cutting off reflected failure and basking in reflected glory surface online, and so on. Finally, additional studies will be recommended to study the same topic within the context of tier II and III professional sport leagues. Indeed, it was observed in the pilot studies with Canadian Football League (CFL) and Major League Soccer (MLS) teams, which the focus of SM use differs from that of the teams participated in the study. Also, as it is clearly observed in this study that in the SM world, and that usage patterns evolve constantly and managers' usage is maturing with time, therefore, a similar study over specific period of time is recommended.

While the study makes theoretical and practical contributions, limitations must be recognized. The findings cannot be generalized to all sport and are limited to professional teams in the "Big 4" in North America. As the study emphasizes business-to-customer (B-2-C), the findings may not translate to sport teams' relationship-building effort with other stakeholders such as sponsors. Finally, professional teams have gradually accustomed themselves to the changing nature of SM and have adapted to new and emerging SM platforms and to changes within existing platforms. As SM evolves, teams and fans are teaching themselves and readjusting accordingly. This constant evolution may risk the applicability of some of the findings of this work in the coming years. Yet again, it is believed that laying a strong foundation today will critically formulate and shape future inquiries.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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