Social Media in Relationship Marketing: The Professional Sport Context

Gashaw Abeza

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Faculty of Health Sciences
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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the use of social media (SM) as a relationship marketing tool (RM) in the context of professional sport in North America. The specific objectives are (i) to explore the use of social media in meeting relationship marketing goals within the context of professional sport, (ii) to explore how professional sport teams' managers see the opportunities of social media in meeting relationship marketing goals, (iii) to explore how professional sport teams' managers see the challenges of social media in meeting relationship marketing goals, and (iv) to examine the benefits of social media, if any, in enhancing long-term relationships with their favourite sport team from the perspective of fans of professional sport teams. Guided by a pragmatist philosophical worldview, the project adopted a multi-domain qualitative research approach. The multi-domain approach reflects the three data sources (i.e., the medium-SM platform, organization-professional teams, and consumers-sport fans). Putting an individual emphasis on each of these three data sources, three different but interrelated studies are conducted to accomplish the overall purpose of the dissertation using an article-based format.

The first study, guided by the relationship marketing theoretical framework, adopted a netnographic method to investigate professional sport teams' use of Twitter as an RM tool. Specifically, the study focused on the three core components of RM: communication, interaction, and value. The netnography is based on data gathered from the official Twitter account of 20 professional sport teams from the four major leagues from August 1, 2015 to February 29, 2016. Results outline seven emergent communication types, six interaction practices, and ten values (co)created by the teams or/and fans. Theoretical and practical implications, as well as impetus for future research are identified.

The second study aimed at obtaining a first-hand and an in-depth understanding of the role, opportunities, and challenges of SM in meeting RM goals from the perspective of senior managers of professional sport teams. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 managers from the four major leagues professional sport teams in North America. Results outline the platforms adopted, six intended objectives, seven opportunities and seven challenges of SM as an RM medium. A list of theoretical and practical implications, and impetus for future research is provided.

The purpose of the third study was to first gain an empirically supported understanding of the role and benefits of SM as an RM tool from the perspective of professional sport fans and, following that, to identify, specify, verify, and refine the emergent benefits. The study employed an adaptation of the focus group method, dubbed the 'sequential funnel-based focus group', which is a multiphase, step-wise version of the established method. The sequential funnel-based focus group is conceptualized, developed, described, and used in this work as a research method. The adaptation allowed the identification of benefits of SM as a medium that enhances long-term relationships through a series of funnel-based focus group discussions in three sequential phases. A total of 10 focus groups with 81 participants took part in the study. The work identified seven major benefits (and 15 sub-categories of benefits) that fans see as opportunities presented by SM as a medium to enhance long-term relationship with their team. Theoretical contributions, practical recommendations, and directions for future research are provided.

The findings from the three studies are integrated to construct a multi-dimensionally informed and comprehensive understanding of the use of SM in RM in professional sport. In general, data gathered from the perspective of the three domains (i.e., medium/SM platform, organizational/ professional teams, and consumers/sport fans) informed that SM is providing new directions to RM, making it an effective and affordable channel in realizing RM goals in

professional sport context. The thesis also produced empirical evidence of the opportunities that SM presents and the challenges that it poses in terms of meeting RM goals in the context of professional sport. Informed by the studies data, the dissertation also extended Grönroos's (2004) RM process model through the lens of SM in professional sport context. Contributions to scholarship, practical recommendations, directions for future research, and the limitations of the dissertation are provided.

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List of Abbreviations

AFC	American Football Conference
B-2-B	Business to Business
B-2-C	Business to Consumer
CFL	Canadian Football League
CRM	Customer Relationship Marketing
GIF	Graphic Integrated Format
IMC	Integrated Marketing Communications
IMP	Industrial Marketing and Purchasing School
LTV	Life Time Value
MLB	Major League Baseball
MLS	Major League Soccer
NASCAR	National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing
NBA	National Basketball Association
NCAA	National Collegiate Athletic Association
NFC	National Football Conference
NFL	National Football Association
NHL	National Hockey Association
NLL	National Lacrosse League
NWSL	National Women's Soccer League
OBS	Open Broadcaster Software
PCM	Psychological Continuum Model
Q&A	Question and answer period
RM	Relationship Marketing
ROI	Return on Investment
RQ	Research Question
RSS	Rich Site Summary
RT	Retweet
SCTRQS	Sports Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale
S-D	Service-dominant
SDP	Sport-for-development-and-peace organisation
SFB	Sequential Funnel-Based (focus group)
SM	Social Media
USL	United Soccer League
WWE	World Wrestling Entertainment

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Social media (SM) use is a phenomenon that has grown exponentially in the sport industry over the past decade (Pedersen, 2014; Rowe & Hutchins, 2014; Thompson, Martin, Gee, & Eagleman, 2014). Its popularity and acceptance by athletes, coaches, managers, teams, leagues, fans, events, and sport governing bodies is widespread (Hutchins, 2014; Pedersen), and the expansive reach of SM's use in the sport industry has presented a multitude of marketing opportunities to sport organisations (Hopkins, 2013; Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012). Today, with the ability to reach greater numbers of audiences at a time, place, and frequency that is convenient to consumers (Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly, 2013), marketers are using SM as a medium to implement a variety of marketing communication elements such as news updates, sales, advertising, public relations, internal communication, and relationship marketing (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013; Schultz & Peltier, 2013; Vernuccio, 2014). While SM is a valuable resource to realise these marketing communication elements (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010), it appears to be an ideal tool to achieve relationship marketing (RM) goals (Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp, & Agnihotri, 2014; Williams & Chinn, 2010).

Relationship marketing, both as a theoretical framework and as a management approach, is primarily a management of customer relationships with an interest in the management of stakeholders' relationship (Grönroos, 2000, 2004, 2011). Its central purpose is retaining customers through long-term mutual satisfaction between businesses and customers (Grönroos, 2004; Kotler, 2011). 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, to deliver a co-created product, to build long-term relationships, and, eventually, to secure a long-term profit (Grönroos, 2000;

Gummesson, 1998; Peppers & Rogers, 2011). By extension, the dialogue enables businesses to achieve goals such as increased loyalty, reduced marketing costs, increased profitability, and increased financial stability and security (Grönroos, 2004; Gumsoon, 2002). In this regard, SM has become an ideal channel to achieve RM goals (O'Brien, 2011; Williams & Chinn, 2010).

While SM has clearly become an important RM tool (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013; Schultz & Peltier, 2013; Trainor et al., 2014), most studies' appraisals are confined to the theoretical (and/or conceptual) benefits of SM as an RM tool (Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Pronschinske et al., 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 in the sport industry (e.g., Hambrick & Kang; Williams & Chinn, 2010). However, as ideal as SM is argued to be for a relationship building approach with lists of opportunities (Williams & Chinn), its benefits in terms of addressing RM goals *in professional sport* are not yet fully understood and empirically supported.

Within the literature that addresses SM's role in sport marketing, a dozen studies (see Table 4.2 for a roster of these studies) can be found to have grounded their research in RM. While the majority of the studies are conducted from an organisational perspective, few of the studies are centered on consumers' perspective (e.g., Stavros et al., 2013; Williams, Chinn, & Suleiman, 2014). An examination of the studies that adopted an organisational perspective and that investigated the benefits and concerns associated with the use of SM in RM reveals that the studies have been conducted in sports other than professional sport, namely, in the context of college sport (e.g., Dixon, Martinez, & Martin, 2015) and niche sports (e.g., Abeza, O'Reilly, & Reid, 2013, running events; Hambrick & Svensson, 2015, sport for development). Hence, considering professional sport teams' sizeable presence on SM (Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Meng, Stavros, & Westberg, 2015), it will be imperative to fill the existing information gap, and to

extend and augment the literature on the topic area. Therefore, this study attempts to produce empirical evidence that demonstrates the use of SM as an RM tool and the opportunities that it presents in terms of meeting RM goals in the context of professional sport.

RQ1. How do professional sport organisations use social media in terms of meeting RM goals?

RQ2. How do managers of professional sport teams see the opportunities of SM in meeting RM goals?

It has also been reported in recent years that an effective realisation of many SM efforts has been challenging (Boehmer & Lacy, 2014; Dixon, Martinez, & Martin, 2015; Schultz & Peltier, 2013). As Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker (2012) and Schultz and Peltier (2013) stated, having a presence, and developing and launching SM initiatives has not been difficult for most companies. As these authors pointed out, the challenge is in making the platforms truly engaging and valuable to consumers. Therefore, understanding the challenges of using SM as an RM tool will help managers to develop adaptive strategies.

RQ3. How do managers of professional sport teams see the challenges of SM in meeting RM goals?

There is an equally limited understanding of how sport fans see the benefits of SM in maintaining and enhancing relationships with their favourite professional sport teams. While a number of sport related SM studies centering on sport fans (e.g., Clavio & Walsh, 2013; Gibbs, O'Reilly, & Brunette, 2014; Hull & Lewis, 2014; Mahan et al., 2014; Wang, 2013) have contributed to our understanding of fans' motivation, behaviour, and attitude in using SM, limited research exists that studied sport fans' use of SM as a channel to communicate, interact, and co-create value with their favorite sport teams, which are (per Grönroos, 2004; Williams & Chinn, 2010) the core intent of RM. In fact, four related articles can be identified in the current

sport management literature on the topic of sport fans and RM (i.e., Pronschinske et al., 2012; Stavros et al., 2013; Williams, Chinn, & Suleiman, 2014; and Witkemper et al., 2012). However, these studies have investigated the motivation (behavioural) underpinning fans' use of SM (e.g., Stavros et al., 2013) or concentrated on SM use in relation to fan identification (e.g., Williams et al.). Therefore, given that SM is praised as an ideal RM tool and sport consumers are primary active collaborators in SM (Stavros et al., 2013), a deeper and empirically informed understanding of the benefits that sport fans have gained, if any, in using SM as an RM medium will be essential. Such an understanding will allow sport managers to recognise fans' perspective on the use of SM as an RM tool, and to be more proactive and purposeful in their interactions. Gaining a rich sense of fans' perspective on the benefits of SM as an RM tool will also have significant importance for academics, as it contributes to the advancement of RM theory in the sport context (see "Research Contribution" section below for more detail on theoretical contribution).

RQ4. How do professional sport team fans see the benefits of SM, if any, in enhancing long-term relationships with their sport team?

Research Contribution

In addressing the four research questions developed in this study, the work will address some of the pivotal issues that still confront the development of SM scholarship in the context of sport marketing, particularly professional sport. The study seeks to contribute to the field's literature by identifying the value and significance of SM, if any, as an RM vehicle in the professional sport setting from both a practical and a theoretical point of view. From a practical point of view, the study investigates the use of SM in meeting RM goals from the perspective of three domains – organizations (professional teams), the medium (SM platforms), and consumers

(sport fans). The findings will allow sport managers (as an input) to design an informed (and/or adaptive) strategy that enables the realisation of an effective use of SM as an RM tool.

From a theoretical point of view, the work empirically informs us on the use of SM as an RM vehicle in a professional sport setting, and contributes to the existing literature by filling the information gap on the use of SM as an RM tool, and extending and augmenting previous SM studies in the context of sport. In addition, at present, a dozen sport-related SM studies can be identified to have grounded their research in RM theory (see Table 4-2 for the roster of these articles). These studies have made significant contribution to the advancement of the theory of RM through the lens of SM in sport context. However, the studies did not utilise the theory of RM in its complete form. Specifically, while the theoretical framework of RM includes three sequential core components, namely communication, interaction, and value (Gronroos, 2004; Wilimas & Chinn, 2010; for more see the section on RM Theory), the above-listed studies addressed only the two initial components of the theory and encouraged future research to investigate the last one—value. Therefore, this study will be advancing the theory of RM through the lens of SM in the context of sport, specifically by examining the unexplored component of the theory—the value element—alongside the two preceding stages: communication and interaction. In attaining the two contributions (i.e., theoretical and practical), the study also intends to draw vital linkages between how SM is researched in academia and how it is employed strategically by its users. In this way, the work aims to minimise, if not avoid, the relevance gap (see Bansal et al., 2012; Worrall, Lubbe, & Klopper, 2007) - between academic research and management practice.

Research Philosophy and Methodology

This section outlines the study's underlying philosophical worldview, approach to theory, research design, methods of data collection, and methods of analysis. To help present

these, as a guiding framework, the pictorial depiction of research stages (see Figure 1-1) introduced by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2009) is used.

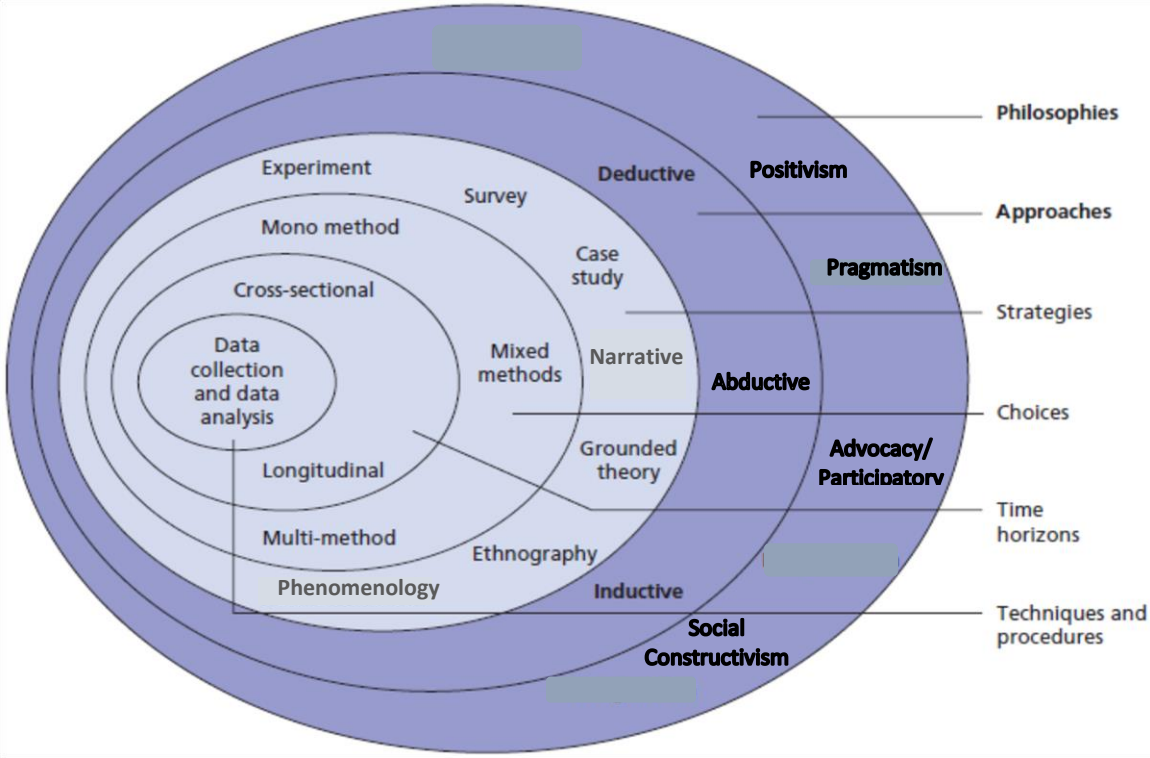

Figure 1-1. The research onion. Adapted from Saunders et al. (2009); with the aid of Creswell (2014)

Research philosophy. Philosophical worldview assumptions in research are "a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied" (Guba, 1990, p. 17). The study at hand is guided by a pragmatist philosophical worldview for two main reasons: (i) the researcher's philosophical stand is that rather than adopting the purist philosophical worldviews that have been fought over as a guiding path to scientific studies (Denscombe, 2008), research should primarily be concerned with applications and solutions to problems (Creswell, 2014). In this regard, practice-based, problem-centered, and consequence-oriented approach to research are core features of the pragmatist worldview (Daymon & Holloway, 2010); (ii) The four research questions identified in this dissertation demand a construction of knowledge or a production of a set of data that allow expansion (i.e., enriching

explanations and attaining a deeper and broader understanding), development (i.e., using results from one type of data to inform the use of a second method), complementarity (i.e., complementing results from one data type with results of another type of data), and triangulation (i.e., enhancing validity and reliability, and gaining a more complete picture). Such construction of knowledge is a typical feature of pragmatism, which is not committed to any one system of reality, and thereby one type of data but rather focuses on research problems and uses pluralistic approaches (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Therefore, guided by the pragmatism worldview, this work aims to produce data that allow to answer the four research questions.

Research Approach to Theory. This work follows an abductive approach to theory, which combines both inductive and deductive approaches that moves back and forth between the two approaches (Clark & Creswell, 2008). According to Saunders et al. (2009), in deductive approach to theory, a study is strictly theory-guided and the data collected are analyzed in respect to a prior established theoretical framework. On the other hand, in inductive approach to theory, a study collects data and develops theory as a result of the data analysis. This study adopts an abductive approach to RM theory. The deductive side consists of using RM theory as the study's guiding framework, and the inductive part advances RM theory by putting an emphasis on the under-researched segment of the theory–value–in SM and sport context.

A Multi-Domain Qualitative Approach. According to Saunders et al. (2009), there are three method choices in research: mono-method, multi-method, and mixed method. In congruence with the pragmatic research philosophy that is adopted and, most importantly, with the purpose of the research questions, this study employs a multi-domain qualitative method approach. The multi-domain study reflects the three data sources (i.e., the medium-SM platform, organization-professional teams, and consumers-sport fans). Three different data collection methods (and corresponding method of analysis) are employed to gather (and analyse) data

sourced from the three different domains. These are briefly described below (see Figure 1-2 for the summary) and the details on each can be found in the method section of study #1 (chapter 3), #2 (chapter 4), and #3 (chapter 5), respectively.

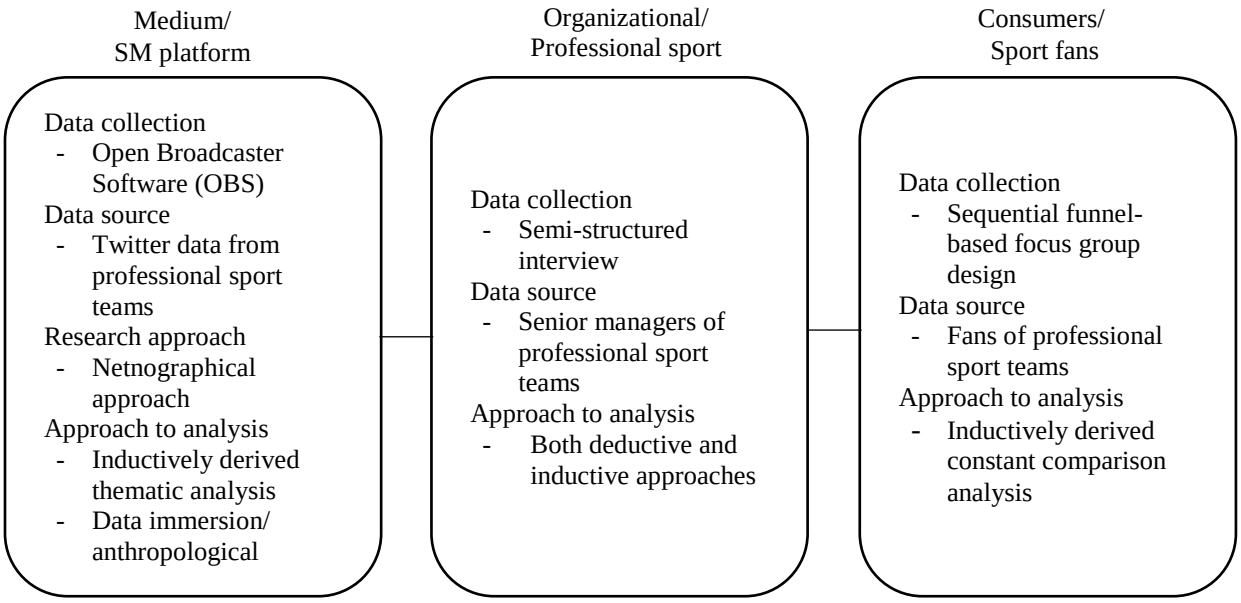

Figure 1-2. Summary of data collection (and analysis) methods

RQ1 (medium focused investigation) was addressed through a netnographic method. The study intended to go beyond treating the SM messages/content as a manifest content; it aimed to adopt an anthropological approach to examine the online latent content as embedded expression of meaning through the researcher's immersion into the 'culture', and extensive and deep exposure to the setting. In this regard, netnography allows the researcher to gain insight into the way professional sport teams' use of Twitter as an RM tool. For this purpose, data was gathered from the official Twitter account of professional sport teams from the four major leagues. This was done using Open Broadcaster Software (OBS), an open source software for live streaming and recording (Zhang & Liu, 2015). In the data analysis, an inductively derived thematic analysis, along with an anthropological approach of data immersion, was used.

RQ2 and RQ3 (organizational focused investigation) were addressed through qualitative data from interviews to obtain a first hand and an in-depth understanding of the role, opportunities, and challenges of SM in meeting RM goals from the perspective of professional sport managers. Data was gathered from senior managers of professional sport teams using semi-structured interview questions. In the data analysis, both deductive and inductive analytical approaches were employed.

RQ4 (consumer focused investigation) was addressed by employing an adaptation of the focus group method, dubbed the sequential funnel-based focus group, which is a multi-phase, stepwise version of the established method. The method allowed an exploration of the use and value of SM as an RM medium from the perspective of professional sport teams' fans. In the data analysis, an inductively driven constant comparison analysis was used.

Dissertation Outline

The dissertation is structured in an article-based format with an intention of addressing the four research questions and with a concentrated effort on three different domains (medium, organizations, and consumers). While chapter 2 presents the foundational literature review surrounding the three major topic areas on which the study's four research questions are grounded (i.e., RM, SM, and professional sport), chapter 3, chapter 4, and chapter 5 present respectively study #1 (RQ1), study#2 (RQ2 and RQ3), and study#3 (RQ4). All three studies each contain the following sections: literature review, theoretical/conceptual framework, method, findings, discussion, implication and direction for future studies, and limitation sections. It is worth mentioning here that each study is based on the overarching literature review provided in chapter 2 although each has its own tailored literature review section. The final chapter (chapter 6) brings the findings from the three studies together. A brief description of the three studies is provided below.

Study 1

The first study is entitled *The Use of Social Media as a Relationship Marketing Tool in Professional Sport: A Netnographical Exploration*. The study explored the use of SM in meeting RM goals within the context of professional sport (RQ1). With an intention of gaining an in-depth understanding through a closer exploration, RQ1 is further broken-down into three sub-RQs: (i) How do professional sport organisations use SM for an RM purpose (*Study 1 RQ1*, referred to as *S_1RQ1*)?; (ii) What are the values, if any, professional sport teams create on SM as a RM tool (*S_1RQ2*)?, and (iii) What discernible differences and shared features exist among the professional sport teams' use of SM as an RM tool (*S1RQ3*)?

Guided by an RM theoretical framework, the work adopted a netnographic method to investigate professional sport teams' use of Twitter as an RM tool. Specifically, the study focused on the three core components of RM: communication, interaction, and value. The netnography is based on data gathered from the official Twitter account of 20 professional sport teams from the four major leagues in North America over a period of seven months, August 1, 2015 to February 29, 2016. Results outline seven emergent communication types, six different interaction practices, and ten different types of values (co)created by the teams or/and fans. Theoretical and practical implications, as well as impetus for future research, are identified.

Study 2

The second study is entitled *The Use of Social Media as a Relationship Marketing Tool in Professional Sport: The Senior Manager Perspective.* This study aimed at obtaining an in-depth understanding of the role, opportunities, and challenges of SM in meeting RM goals from the perspective of senior managers of professional sport teams (RQ2 and RQ3). With an intention of gaining a first-hand information on professional sport teams' use of social media, a third sub-RQ is included in this study; how do professional sport organisations use SM in terms

of meeting RM goals (*Study 2 RQ1*, referred to as S_2RQ1)? For this purpose, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 managers from the four major league professional sport teams in North America. Results outline the platforms adopted, six intended objectives, seven opportunities, and seven challenges of SM as an RM medium. A list of theoretical and practical implications, and impetus for future research are provided.

Study 3

The third study is entitled *The Use of Social Media as a Relationship Marketing Medium in Professional Sport: The Fan Perspective*. The purpose of this study was to first gain an empirically supported understanding of the role and benefits of SM as an RM tool from the perspective of professional sport fans of the four major leagues in North America and, following that, to identify, specify, verify, and refine the emergent benefits (RQ4). With the evolving nature of the findings within the study, RQ4 is further broken-down into two sub-RQs: (i) How do fans of professional sport teams see the benefits of SM, if any, as a medium that enhances long-term relationship with their favourite sport team (*Study 3 RQ1*, referred to as S_3RQ1)?, and (ii) What are the benefits, if any, fans of professional sport teams see in SM as a medium that enhances long-term relationship with their favourite sport team (S_3RQ_2)?

For this purpose, the study employed an adaptation of the focus group method, dubbed the sequential funnel-based focus group, which is a multiphase, step-wise version of the established method. The sequential funnel-based focus group is conceptualized, developed, described, and employed in this work as a research method. The adaptation allowed the identification of benefits of SM as a medium that enhances long-term relationships through a series of funnel-based focus group discussions in three sequential phases. A total of 10 focus groups with 81 participants were undertaken as part of this study. The research identified seven major benefits (and 15 specific benefits) that fans see as opportunities presented by SM as a

medium to enhance long-term relationship with their team. Theoretical contributions, practical recommendations, and directions for future research are provided.

Discussion and Conclusion Chapter

The final discussion and conclusion chapter (chapter 6) combines the findings from the three studies to construct a multi-dimensionally informed understanding of the use of SM as an RM tool in the context of professional sport. The chapter provides a critical analysis of the findings through model development, identification of recommendations with applied values, articulation of areas of theoretical contribution, directions for future studies, and limitations of the dissertation.

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CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

This chapter presents the literature surrounding three major topic areas on which the study's four research questions are grounded (i.e., RM,667y5t SM, and professional sport). These three major topic areas are further organised into seven different sections (see Figure 2-1 below). The first section presents an overview of RM, followed by the literature on RM as a managerial and theoretical framework. Third, RM's contextual application in sport industry is discussed. Fourth, with an intention of specifying topic relevant context, professional team sport is discussed. Fifth, the unique features and typologies of sport fans are provided. Sixth, the literature on the definitions of SM, history, platforms and users is presented. Lastly, the seventh section provides an overview of the SM scholarship in sport management research.

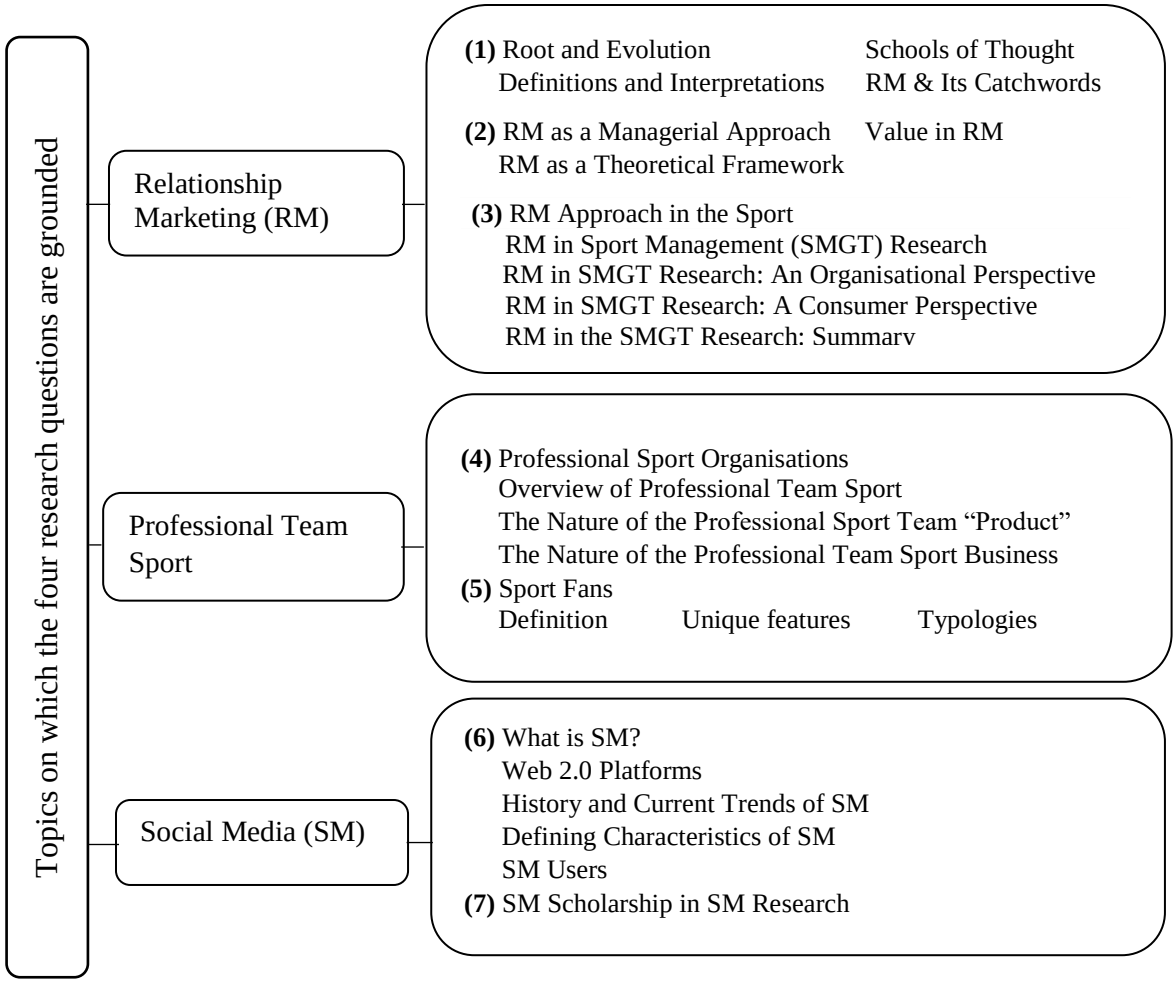

Figure 2-1. Graphical Summary of the topics covered in CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

2.1. Relationship Marketing

This first section of the chapter presents the root and evolution of RM, the different schools of thought of RM, the definitions and interpretations of RM, and RM and its catchwords. Following that, the literature on RM as a managerial and as a theoretical framework is provided. As can be found in this section, RM is a diverse field with different schools of thoughts (more than five), varied definitions (more than 70), with no clearly defined scope and domain, and, most particularly, the literature is a 'melting pot" of various theories. In last three decades, RM has been "probably the major trend in marketing and certainly the major (and arguably the most controversial) talking point in business management" (Egan, 2003, p. 145). Over the three decades, RM, as an academic field and as a marketing approach, has not only attracted the attention of academics but also that of a great number of practitioners. The chapter provides an overview of this diverse topic area of RM by discussing the varied definitions and interpretations while also locating the position of the work at hand on each of the points discussed.

2.1.1. Relationship Marketing Root and Evolution

Although relational approaches in marketing have existed for as long as the history of trade and commerce (Ballantyne, Christopher, & Payne, 2003; Grönroos, 2004; Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009), such an approach was not incorporated into the discipline of marketing as the field grew in the 1950s and 1960s (O'Malley, 2014). As Christopher, Payne, and Ballantyne (2002) and Agariya and Singh (2011) documented, the main focus of marketing in the pre-1900s was product, followed by mass-production and an emphasis on sales in the 1950s. Then, in the 1980s, marketers shifted their focus toward marketing mix with a competitor orientation. By the turn of the century, marketers started emphasising customer satisfaction as a source of competitive advantage, as marketing on the basis of product characterisation alone started to fail.

In the post-2000 era, marketing practice turned its focus toward a service dominance aspect of marketing, emphasising an RM approach. The shift to a service oriented marketing was influenced by a number of factors such as the decline in traditional mass marketing techniques with the emergence of demanding customers, the saturation of markets as they mature, the availability of new customer solutions with the rise in technological innovations, an increase in competition, and the emergence of fragmented and/or global markets (Grönroos, 1994; Hunt & Morgan, 1994; Palmer, Lindgreen, & Vanhamme, 2005; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995).

In the academic literature, RM as a phrase was first alluded to by Thomas (1976), but Berry (1983) formally introduced the term into the literature (Harker & Egan, 2006; Ballantyne et al., 2003; Sheth, Parvatiyar, & Sinha, 2012). Some (e.g., Baker, 2000) credited Webster's (1992) work as the first to introduce the concept of RM to the academic discourse, while others also argued that several ideas about RM emerged much before Berry's work. In the last three decades, RM, as an academic field and as a marketing approach, attracted the attention of a great number of practitioners and academics. Over this period, RM was "probably the major trend in marketing and certainly the major (and arguably the most controversial) talking point in business management" (Egan, 2003, p. 145). Scholars started discussing the concept of RM in the early 1980s (e.g., Berry, 1983), and its rise in the 1990s (as an emerging marketing perspective) was reflected through a number of academic infrastructures (Ballantyne et al., 2003; Möller & Halinen, 2000). This included the publication of a number of special issues in journals (Möller & Halinen, 2000), RM centred books (e.g., Christopher et al., 2002), RM focused conferences and colloquia (e.g., Emory University's biannual international conference, and Monash's University International Colloquia), RM dedicated research centers (e.g., Centres established at Cranfield University (England), Hanken Swedish School of Economics, Tampere University (Finland), and Emory University (United States)).

Relational perspectives have influenced marketing theory and practice over the last 30 years, and have informed revisions to the American Marketing Association's definition of marketing (O'Malley, 2014), where relational thinking started being encapsulated in the 2004, 2007, and 2013 definitions (Anker, Sparks, Moutinho, & Grönroos, 2015). As Harker and Egan (2006) concluded from their review of the literature, RM certainly challenged the dominance of transactional marketing as a theory and practice (Harker & Egan, 2006). Some (e.g., Grönroos) considered that development to be representative of a paradigm shift, while others (e.g., Vargo & Lusch, 2004) referred to it as a "dominant logic", and still some others (Egan, 2003) contended that it is a perspective rather than a paradigm. Sheth, Parvatiyar, and Sinha (2015), for their part, considered RM as a dominant paradigm that is a subset or a specific focus of marketing. Overall, RM has been debated in the last three decades in practice and academia, and its popularity continues to grow (Brito, 2011; Ganguli, Eshghi, & Nasr, 2009; Peppers & Rogers, 2011).

With growing academic interest, the volume of RM research started accumulating over the years. As Egan (2003) stated, while earlier works (e.g., Berry, 1983) focused on the supplier-customer relationship, later contributions widened the scope of RM towards the whole series of relationships, networks, and interactions. During the past three decades, RM has been studied by scholars with a diverse set of interests within the field of marketing including services marketing, business-to-business marketing, business-to-customer marketing, and marketing communication (Brito, 2011; Ganguli et al., 2009). RM studies have also been conducted in varied research contexts (e.g., service marketing, industrial marketing, business to business (B-2-B), business to consumer (B-2-C)) (Das, 2009; Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2001). This has resulted in different RM research streams, and by extension, a varied and fragmented set of RM ideas (Egan, 2003). Importantly, a solid and consistent body of theory is still lacking (Brito, 2011). Even the early works (e.g., Mattsson, 1997) describe the lack of co-ordination among the various research

streams as “scientific myopia” and a “melting pot.” Hence, it is difficult to find one distinctly defined perspective, definition, or term that gives a clear picture of RM.

Following the lack of co-ordination, several review articles have appeared in the literature in which authors attempted to organise the literature by examining the history and evolution of RM (e.g., Harker & Egan, 2006; Möller & Halinen, 2000), the varied definitions (e.g., Harker, 1999; Agariya & Singh, 2011), the different schools of thought (e.g., Ganguli et al., 2009; Palmer et al., 2005), the state of what is known about RM (e.g., O’Malley, 2014; Bonnemaizon, Cova & Louyot, 2007), and the different research streams (e.g., Das, 2009; Yadav & Singh, 2014). Along with this, critical reviews of the literature were published that proposed future directions for RM (e.g., Christopher et al., 2002; Lindgreen, 2001; Palmer et al., 2005; Tadajewski, 2015).

Overall, a review of RM literature informs that the term has been used to reflect a variety of themes and perspectives, that there is a lack of a universally-accepted definition, and ambiguity exists in relational concepts. The whole phenomenon may sometime cause frustration among researchers and possibly lead to confusion. As Egan (2003) and O’Malley and Tynan (2000) stated, the diverse academic approach has exacerbated conceptual problems within the discipline, and most importantly, it has made the delimitation of RM domain challenging with its permeable and elastic boundaries. The authors added that this circumstance has created a difficult situation for researchers attempting to identify an appropriate context for empirical research. With this in mind, different schools of thought of RM are presented below, followed by the different definitions and interpretations of RM, and the varied catchwords used to reflect RM.

2.1.2. Relationship Marketing Schools of Thought

A school of thought represents a collection of academics who, with no formal membership, share a common outlook about an academic field, and are drawn together by

commitment to a discipline through research, publications, and practice (Aijo, 1996; Grönroos, 1994). In RM, different schools of thought emerged in the 1980s and 1990s with the growth of literature in the field (Palmer et al., 2005; Sheth et al., 2015). Hence, the identification of a schools of thought helps to provide a point of reference for research in the field (Sheth and Parvatiyar, 2000) and provides a more consistent basis for comparison (Palmer et al., 2005). In this regard, various authors revealed different schools of thought in an effort to identify the 'big picture' of RM while compartmentalizing its components. The commonly discussed major schools include: The Nordic school of service management, the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing [IMP] school for a network approach to industrial (or business-to-business) marketing, the Anglo-Australian approach to investigation of the nature of relationships in marketing, and the North American school focused on customer relationship management (Egan, 2003; Palmer et al., 2005; Ganguli et al., 2009; Harker & Egan, 2006).

In relation to the identification of the different schools of thought, for instance, Möller and Halinen (2000) identified four root traditions of RM in terms of their characterisation and focus: (i) Practice-Based Tradition of database marketing and direct marketing, which emphasises the managerial practice of enhancing the efficiency of marketing activities through communication channel and messages, with a tradition that focuses on keeping customers loyal and profitable; (ii) the Services Marketing Tradition, which pays attention to the relationship between the individual consumer and service company personnel; (iii) the Marketing Channels Tradition, which covers business relationships, and economic exchange and efficiency; and (iv) the Interaction and Network Tradition, which focuses on relations between companies, individuals and various organisations such as governmental and research agencies.

The Nordic school emerged in response to perceived shortcomings in the transactional approach to marketing (Palmer et al., 2005), and as a "shift in focus" from traditional marketing

concepts (Egan, 2003, p.147). The school puts an emphasis on the belief that for effective marketing and delivery of services, businesses need to adopt internal marketing and engage the entire organisation in the management of relationships with their customers (Egan, 2003; Grönroos, 1994). The Nordic school research community emphasises topics such as the processes of interaction, dialogue, and value (Palmer et al., 2005). According to Sheth et al. (2015), the school's approach to RM ideas are similar to the service marketing ideas proposed by scholars in the United States (e.g., Berry 1983; 1995), except for their contention and consideration of the RM approach as a paradigm shift in marketing. The IMP group school of thought share similarities with the Nordic school, but they place a strong emphasis on organisational relationships in B-2-B markets, network, and the transformation of relationships into competitive advantage (Bush, Underwood, & Sherrell, 2007). According to the IMP group, relationships are constituted from activity links, resource ties, and actor bonds, and multiple relationships between buyers, suppliers, and other firms aggregate into networks. The community's research work focuses on topics such as relational channels within networks, and the impact of information technology on development of relationships in networks (Bush et al., 2007; Harker & Egan, 2006).

The Anglo-Australian school of thought focuses mainly on research within the domain of marketing of services, and focuses on six market types: referral, influence, recruiters, suppliers/alliance, and internal markets (Ganguli et al., 2009). The school is criticised for lack of detail on these market types (Ganguli et al., 2009). Scholars of this school studied topics such as customer lifetime value, internal marketing, service delivery quality, and relationship quality (Christopher et al., 2002). The North American school of thought focuses heavily on customer service as the main component in relationship management, and emphasises on one-to-one buyer-seller relationships, interaction and collaboration, and value addition (Ganguli et al., 2009;

Grönroos, 1997). According to Grönroos (1997), the school introduced technology-based concepts of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and direct marketing. The North American approach to RM has frequently been criticised by scholars for promoting traditionalistic view in RM (Palmer & Bejou, 2005).

Amongst the four schools of thought discussed here, the Nordic School is often presented as the most influential (Egan, 2003) and most strongly associated with RM (Palmer et al., 2005), and offers a structured approach towards RM (Ganguli et al., 2009). After reviewing the different schools of thought of RM, Ganguli et al. (2009) identified certain commonly shared concepts among the schools (even if they have some underlying differences) which included value, long term effects, interaction, cooperation, networking, resource utilisation, trust, and commitment. Based on their assessment, these authors argued that the aim of RM for an organisation is

> "to have long term positive effects on the business with optimum resource utilisation through constant interaction, extensive networking and cooperation among all members (employees, customers, suppliers, business partners, etc.) with proper commitment to create superior value for all stakeholders in a trustworthy environment" (p. 6).

The Nordic school developed and expanded the RM literature over the course the 1990s and 2000s period. The contentious side of the Nordic school is, however, its emphasis on RM as a new paradigm in marketing (e.g., Grönroos, 1994; Gummesson, 2002), while other scholars (e.g., Berry, 1983; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995) consider RM as an alternative strategy in marketing. In their analysis of the literature on the roots of RM, Möller and Halinen (2000) pointed out the lack of interaction between the schools and how critics of one school of thought critiqued another school by discounting each other's concepts, models, and methods. According to the authors, there is a fundamental difference in the underlying bases of the different RM theories of each school of thought and, as a result of the divergence, the authors did not "expect to see any unification into a 'general theory of relationship marketing'" (p. 44).

2.1.3. Relationship Marketing Definitions and Interpretations

Since Berry's (1983) first and formal description of the term RM as a marketing effort aimed at "attracting, maintaining and – in multiservice organisations – enhancing customer relationships" (p. 25), a plethora of definitions of RM have been proposed over the years. Today, it is difficult to identify an all-encompassing universally accepted definition of RM; this is despite the extensive coverage that RM has received from various researchers and practitioners (Bush et al., 2007; Das, 2009; Harker & Egan, 2006). It is, in part, due to the different schools of thought of RM and their varying conception of what constitutes the RM concept, as well as the range and nature of relationships within industrial, services, and consumer markets, and between suppliers, intermediary parties, and specific brands (Szmigin, Canning, & Reppel, 2005). As Harker and Egan (2006) stated, for instance, while some RM scholars take a holistic view of diverse organisational relationships, others place an emphasis on the customer-supplier dyad by de-emphasising all the other relationships (e.g., Parvatiyar & Sheth 2000). These, among other reasons, make identifying a definition that accommodates all forms of relational exchange problematic.

The term RM was also used to reflect a variety of themes and perspectives (Sheth et al., 2012), and it has been viewed both in its narrow form (e.g., database marketing, customers' retention) and broad form (e.g., a shift from manipulating the customer (telling and selling) to genuine customer involvement (communicating and sharing the knowledge)). In its broader definition, Berry (1983), Grönroos (1994), Gummesson (1987), and Morgan and Hunt (1994) interpreted RM as an approach where a marketer develops a closer relationship with customers and other stakeholders, enhancing the relationship, and turning them into loyal partners.

The various definitions of RM proposed over the years have been illustrated in articles that were solely dedicated to a definition of RM (e.g., Haker, 1999; Agariya & Singh, 2011).

Harker (1999), analysing 117 different RM articles published pre-2000, extracted 26 of the most prominent definitions of RM and seven commonly shared conceptual categories of the definitions. The conceptual categories included *creation* (attracting, establish, getting), *development* (enhancing, strengthening, enhance), *maintenance* (sustaining, stable, keeping), *interactive* (exchange, mutually, co-operative), *long term* (lasting, permanent, retaining), *emotional content* (commitment, trust, promises), and *output* (profitable, rewarding, efficiency). Some of the 26 identified definitions were broad and inclusive of the commonly shared conceptual categories, while others were narrow.

Extending the work of Haker (1999), Agariya and Singh (2011) identified 45 additional definitions of RM proposed from 1982 to 2010, and 50 defining constructs. According to Agariya and his colleague, although the definitions differed somewhat because of the various contextual scenarios in which they were proposed, the core of all definitions revolved around acquisition, retention, profitability enhancement, a long-term orientation, and a win–win situation for all stakeholders of the organisation. Agariya and Singh reported that trust, satisfaction/experience, loyalty, commitment, service quality, and communication were the six most often cited from the 50 identified defining constructs (for more see, p. 229 of the authors' work). Some of the prominent scholars in the field (i.e. scholars who wrote extensively on the topic area) introduced successive modified version of their original definitions, and some of these prominent scholars are leaders in their schools of thought (e.g., Gummesson, Gronroos, Morgan & Hunt, Sheth & Parvatiyar). The definitions proposed by these scholars are presented below. For an exhaustive list of RM definitions, see the work of Harker (26 definitions) and Agariya and Singh (45 additional definitions).

Most of the prominent scholars' definitions built on the first formal definition introduced by Berry (1983) that described RM as marketing efforts aimed at attracting, maintaining, and

enhancing customer relationships overtime with a goal of achieving customer loyalty and satisfaction, and staying competitive in the market. Grönroos (1989) modified Berry's (1983) definition by stating that marketing is as an approach "… to establish, develop and commercialise long-term customer relationships so that the objectives of the parties involved are met. This is done by a mutual exchange and fulfillment of promises" (p. 57). Grönroos made slight modifications to his definitions over years (1990, 1994, 1996, 1997), and in 2000 defined RM as process of identifying and establishing, maintaining, enhancing, and, when necessary, terminating relationships with customers and other stakeholders at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties involved are met, where this is done by a mutual giving and fulfillment of promises. Morgan and Hunt (1994) defined RM as "all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges" (p. 22). Gummesson (1996) stated that RM emphasises a long-term interactive relationship between the provider and the customer as well as a long-term profitability. Parvatiyar and Sheth (2000), for their part, define RM as the "ongoing process of engaging in cooperative and collaborative activities and programs with immediate and end-user customers to create or enhance mutual economic value at reduced cost" (p. 9).

Researchers who reviewed a number of RM journal articles published over the period of years (e.g. Das, 2009; Harker, 1999; Yang & Wu, 2007) suggested that Grönroos' (1994) definition is the "best" in terms of the underlying conceptualisations of RM. Harker (1999), for instance, having extracted the commonly shared constructs of RM definitions, identified Grönroos' definition as comprehensive and clear in incorporating the underlying conceptualisation of RM. Harker described the definition as "more elegant and more succinct" (p. 15). Egan (2003), in his work that charted the history of RM theory and the divide in RM research, stated that Grönroos' definition is the most widely quoted in the literature.

In addition to the seven conceptual categories that are commonly shared by the 26 most prominent definitions of RM (per Harker, 1999), the definitions also commonly share three fundamental features (per Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2000 and Kim & Trail, 2011): process, purpose, and parties. First, the definitions highlighted the process aspect of RM where the process is considered as establishment, enhancement, and maintenance of relationships. Second, the definitions revealed that the purpose of RM is to produce mutual benefit for all parties involved in the relationship. Third, RM naturally involves different parties in relational exchanges and the nature of the relationship varies depending on the type of entities involved in the relationship. On this third feature, Morgan and Hunt (1994) identified 10 general types of partners commonly involved in relational exchanges: (1) goods suppliers; (2) service providers; (3) competitors; (4) non-profit organisations; (5) government; (6) ultimate customers; (7) intermediate customers; (8) functional departments; (9) employees; and (10) business units. Based on the discussion provided hitherto under this section, the framework below (Figure 2-2) is constructed to capture and depict what has been reflected in the varied definitions of RM.

Taking a note of the varied perspectives of RM and their resulting effect on the field's published works, a number of scholars conducted a critical review of the RM literature in an attempt to reveal a more unified and commonly shared concept of RM (e.g., Agariya & Singh, 2011; Awasthi & Sangle, 2012; Das, 2009; Gupta & Sahu, 2012; Kevork & Vrechopoulos, 2009; Ngai, 2005; Yadav & Singh, 2014).

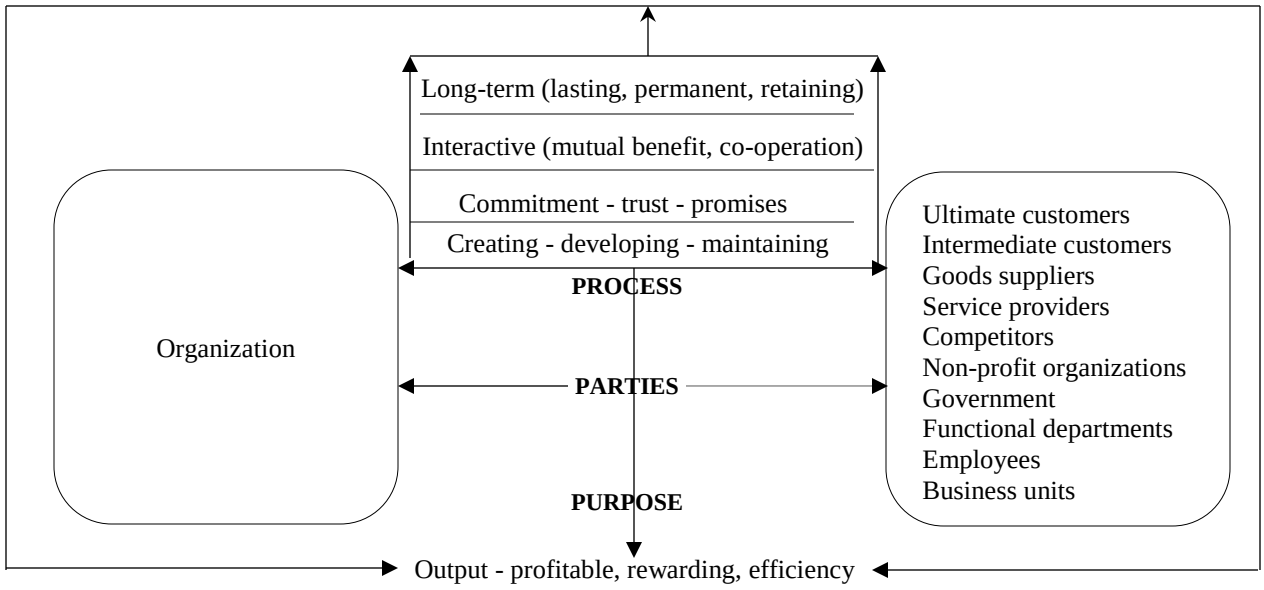

Figure 2-2. Framework capturing relationship marketing definitions

Gupta and Sahu (2012), for instance, reviewed and classified the RM research works, and categorised the literature into five broad categories: understanding RM, industry applications, market development, technological concern, and firm performance. Yadav and Singh (2014), adopting the CRM perspective of RM, reviewed 558 RM articles published from 1983-2012, and classified the literature into five dimensions: vision, strategy, relationship processes, technology, and activities. Das (2009), extending the work of Lindgreen (2001), reviewed 209 RM articles for the period of 1994-2006, and classified the focus of the literature into five categories. According to Das (2009), the five categories covered in the literature are: objectives of RM (e.g., customer satisfaction, customer delight, share of customer, customer retention, loyalty, etc.); defining constructs/underlying constructs of RM (e.g., trust, commitment, cooperation, closeness, relationship quality); instruments/tools of RM (e.g., direct marketing, database marketing, customer partnering, one-to-one marketing, CRM); issues related to RM (e.g., privacy, cultural impact, impact of gender, impact of technology); and industry applications/implementation of RM (e.g., implementation programmes, industry practices). The

study at hand falls under the category of "instrument" (SM as a RM tool) to achieve RM goals (listed under the category of "objectives"). It is should be noted that the current work does not intend to study the "underlying constructs of RM" or "issues related to RM."

2.1.4. Relationship Marketing and Its Catchwords

Along with ambiguity in the field as discussed above, the other issue that needs to be underscored in the discussion of RM is the use of different terms that are assumed to fully or partly reflect what RM is, particularly the interchangeable use of the two widely practiced terms: RM and CRM (Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2001; Sin, Tse, & Yim, 2005). Ryals and Payne (2001) and Sin, Tse, and Yim proposed that while RM is strategic in nature, CRM is tactical (e.g., as a sales promotion tool, such as loyalty schemes (Egan, 2003; Palmer, 1996)). They added that while RM emphasises emotion and behaviour (i.e., centering on constructs such as bonding, empathy, reciprocity, and trust) and puts an emphasis on maintaining relationship not only with customers, but also a range of stakeholders, CRM is managerial and stresses the importance of maintaining relationship with profitable customers. Moreover, it was found that some managers considered CRM to be an information technology (IT), a software solution to implement relational strategies (e.g., to track customer data) (Harker & Egan, 2006; Peppers & Rogers, 2011; Ryals & Payne, 2001), and as database marketing that emphasises the promotional aspects of marketing (Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2001).

In conjunction with the CRM and RM ambiguity, there exists a long list of different terms/names and/or concepts that are used to reflect and describe RM (Brito, 2011; Kotler, 2011; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Peppers & Rogers, 2011). These interchangeable terms and concepts include customer experience management, customer value management, customer focus marketing, customer orientation marketing, customer centricity marketing (Peppers & Rogers, 2011), symbiotic marketing, strategic alliance, co-marketing alliance (Morgan & Hunt, 1994),

one-on-one marketing, individualised marketing, interactive marketing, customer intimacy, dialogue marketing, technology enabled marketing, permission marketing (Kotler, 2011), viral marketing, social networks marketing, tribal marketing, sense marketing, and experiential marketing (Brito, 2011). The list implies that the term RM is "a suitable name for the new marketing concept in a very holistic sense" (Aijo, 1996, p. 166). It also implies that RM is often used to merge together a wide body of thought into a manageable catch-all phrase (Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009). Having an understanding of the root and evolution, the different schools of thought, the definitions and interpretations, and RM and its catchwords, the following section presents the literature on RM as a managerial approach.

2.1.5. Relationship Marketing as a Managerial Approach

In basic terms, RM is the management of a collaborative relationship between a company and its stakeholders (Gronroos, 2000; Gummesson, 1996; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The collaborative relationship is maintained and enhanced through communication and interaction, with the intent of producing added/superior value to the core product (Gronroos; Ravald & Gronroos, 1996). In maintaining and enhancing the communication and interaction process on a continuing basis and by fulfilling the promises that businesses made in their communications, it is suggested that companies will be able to deliver a co-created and customer valued product (Gronroos, 1994, 2000, 2004; Gummesson, 1997, 1998). This process facilitates enhanced intimacy, greater customer satisfaction and retention, increased loyalty, reduced marketing costs, and eventually it enables businesses to secure a long-term profit (Berry, 1995; Christopher et al., 2002; Gronroos, 2000; Gummesson, 1998; Peppers & Rogers, 2011).

Tactically, the RM approach is designed to get in closer touch with customers to gain more information about them that then enables businesses to learn more about those particular customers and deliver greater value to them (Peppers & Rogers, 2011). In maintaining a closer

relationship with customers, learning about them, communicating and interacting with them, and developing a mutual understanding, companies become valuable to customers (Gronroos, 2000; Gummesson, 1998; Peppers & Rogers, 2011).

In their meta-analysis of the RM empirical research that analyzed how the relational constructs of trust, commitment, relationship satisfaction, and/or relationship quality mediate the effect of RM on businesses performance, Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, and Evans (2006) found empirical studies strongly supporting the positive effect that RM has on businesses performance such sales growth and profits. Relatedly, in their Delphi study of 12 European RM scholars/experts on the state of RM, Bonnemaizon, Cova, and Louyot (2007) reported that RM approaches all have, at their core, a desire to improve the customer experience. Studies (e.g., Bauer, Grether, & Leach, 2002; Kim & Trail, 2011) also reported that attracting new customers can be up to five times more expensive than maintaining existing customer relations. Similarly, Feinberg and Kadam (2002) stated that increasing customer retention rates by 5% results in a profit enhancement of 25%–80%. Hence, these studies reported that losing an existing customer results in losing the entire revenue stream that the company can get from the customer over time and is not just a loss of a single encounter or the particular sale that the customer represents.

In a competitive market environment and with ever-changing customer expectations, customer retention and loyalty is a concern for many companies. As Ha and Janda (2011) observed, an RM approach can also play a role in communicating positive word of mouth, building a strong brand, fostering loyalty among customers, and reducing the cost of serving customers over time. In a broader context, RM will result in benefits such as increased profitability, and increased stability and security (Gummesson, 1997; Peppers & Rogers, 2011).

Customers also gain a number of benefits by becoming involved in relational exchanges (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Stavros & Westberg, 2009). In fact, in business transactions, as

Szmigin et al. (2005) stated, each stakeholder acts to satisfy its own interest, but in a relational exchange, partners are given special recognition of their interest, and such previous recognitions inform an exchange that takes place at a particular time and influence future actions. In this regard, Szmigin et al., (2005), echoing Gummesson's (1987) statement, described relational exchange as an affiliation in which "either party has the capacity to affect, and the propensity to be affected by, the actions of the others" (p. 481). In other words, within the context of the relationship, neither party acts entirely independently of the other; customers also benefit from an RM approach (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Stavros & Westberg, 2009).

According to Bee and Kahle (2006) and Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995), the RM approach benefits customers by providing a preference for choice reduction, which provides efficiency in decision, lesser search costs, and increased cognitive consistency in decisions. Bee and Kahle (2006) also noted that RM reduces the complexity of the buying situation and the amount of resources required for information processing. Additionally, if consumers are engaged in a relationship with an organisation, they are likely to be familiar with the services that they are offered, which reduces the perceived risks associated with future purchase choices (Bee & Kahle, 2006; Stavros & Westberg, 2009). Grönroos (2004), for his part, stated that RM provides enhanced security to customers, a sense of trust and a feeling of control, minimises purchasing risks, and reduces the costs of being a customer.

While there are a number of RM benefits discussed in the literature both for companies and their partners, its implementation is not as simple as its interpretation. First and foremost, the effectiveness of the RM approach may vary depending on the specific RM strategy and exchange context (Palmatier et al., 2006). As Peppers and Rogers (2011) stated, some businesses, at times, did not commit the necessary resources for the implementation of RM, and thus failed to produce the desired benefit. The authors also added that some businesses saw RM as a strategic

alternative to be experimented with instead of considering it as a set of long-term philosophies that will affect all aspects of the business. RM is a marketing approach that requires a long-term outlook, an embracing of technology, and a commitment to a customer focus (Stavros, Pope, and Winzar, 2008). However, despite implementation challenges, the importance of RM is well accepted and practiced across different industries (Peppers & Rogers, 2011).

2.2. Relationship Marketing Theory

As discussed, RM is a diverse field with no single best explanation (Palmer et al., 2005), no clear domain and scope (Egan, 2003), or no universally accepted definition (Agariya & Singh, 2011). The literature is a 'melting pot' of various theories and schools of thought (Harker, 1999) that involves a "very fragmented set of ideas and theoretical frameworks" (Möller & Halinen, 2000, p. 30). Möller and Halinen (2000), having conducted a critical review of published works on the possibility of synthesising the theories of RM, argued that the underlying discrepancy in the way the different schools of thought view RM made any theory-level unification effort (into a 'general theory of relationship marketing') difficult and of no use. According to the authors, the discrepancy is due to "the nature of relationships (complex or standardised, individual vs organisational, seller maintained vs mutually dependent) and their context (atomised and competitive markets vs strongly interconnected and often co-operative networks)" (p. 44).

Therefore, an identification of a school of thought that has a relatively advanced theoretical proposition, focal discussion point, and definition is imperative to guide the study at hand. In this regard, the Nordic school best meets these conditions, which is revealed through a number of works that have critically reviewed and examined the RM articles published over a course of years. For example, this has been done for theory, focus, and domain (e.g., Egan, 2003; Palmer et al., 2005; Ganguli et al., 2009) and for definition and defining constructs (e.g., Das, 2009, Harker, 1999; Agariya & Singh, 2011).

Hence, this work adopts the theoretical framework and definitions proposed by the Nordic school, although the work will not take a side on the issue of the school's paradigm shift argument. In addition, the Nordic school of thought fits the study at hand for contextual reasons: (i) the context of this study is sport, which falls under the service marketing emphasis of the school, and (ii) the focus of this research is to study SM as an RM tool, which is an ideal instrument to implement the RM approach/theory that is proposed by the school's leading scholar, Grönroos (communication - interaction - value) (Williams & Chinn, 2010).

According to the Nordic school approach, managing services is the core of relationship building and maintenance, reinforced by other factors such as the building of networks, the adoption of customer databases, the formation of strategic alliances, and the management of relationship orientated marketing communications (Egan, 2003; Grönroos, 2004). The Nordic school, as discussed above, defines RM as

> the process of identifying and establishing, maintaining, enhancing, and when necessary terminating relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties involved are met, where this is done by a mutual giving and fulfillment of promises. (Grönroos, 2004, p. 101)

Grönroos made a substantial contribution to the field through successive works in the 1980s, 1990s, and after the turn of the century. According to Grönroos (2000) and Ravald and Grönroos (1996), the basic perspective of RM is based on the idea that a relationship between two parties creates additional value for the customer and also for the supplier or service provider, on top of the value of products and/or services that are exchanged.

Furthermore, as the principal relationship is the one between provider of goods or services and buyers or users of the goods or services, RM is primarily harnessed towards the management of relationships between providers and users (Grönroos, 2004). However, in order to support the management of the relationship, other stakeholders in a network of relationships

may have to be involved, such as other suppliers, partners, distributors, financing institutions, and sometimes even political decision makers. In an RM perspective, as opposed to the transaction-oriented perspective, products (i.e., physical goods and equipment) are offerings that are bundled with a host of services (intangibles) that enhance the value of the products, such as just-in-time deliveries, prompt service and maintenance, and customer-oriented and timely service recovery. Hence, according to Grönroos (2004), beyond the offering of the core product, what matters is the delivery of the additional elements better than competitors that create an added value for customers. In such perspective/orientation, the product (the tangible goods) will be translated into a process of service (or a total service offering) through a host of services (intangibles) that are added to the product (tangibles).

As Grönroos (2004) stated, RM is, first and foremost, a process. The author elaborated on his definition and articulated how the process of RM moves

> from identifying potential customers to establishing a relationship with them, and then to maintaining the relationship that has been established […] to enhance it so that more business as well as good references and favorable word of mouth are generated. Finally, sometimes relationships are terminated either by the supplier or by the customer (or by any other party in a network of relationships), or they just seem to fade away. Such situations must also be managed carefully by the supplier or service provider (p.102).

He then identified and discussed the three areas of focus that are required in the implementation of a successful RM strategy: (i) a planned communication process supporting the development and enhancement of relationships, (ii) an interaction process as the core of RM, (iii) a value process as the outcome of RM. He adds that "when all three processes are in place and well understood we have a good part of a theory of relationship marketing" (Grönroos, 2004, p. 103).

For a relationship to develop, through the creation and sharing of knowledge between businesses and customers, a value-enhancing interaction needs to take place. In the interaction process, the dialogue facilitates the co-creation of value with customers and ultimately the

transfer of the value to the customers. Businesses (suppliers of goods or providers of services) interact with their customers and stakeholders through different types of contacts such as contacts between people, and on technologically supported platforms. Building on the concept of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC), Grönroos presented communication as a planned undertaking supported by public relations, mass communication (e.g., advertising, brochures), and direct and interactive communication (personally addressed letters including offers, information, recognition of previous interactions, request of customer data). According to Grönroos, it is in the later activities that (supported by the other elements) a customer response will be sought in the form of feedback from previous interactions. Grönroos' model (the interaction, planned communication and value processes) is presented in Figure 2-3.

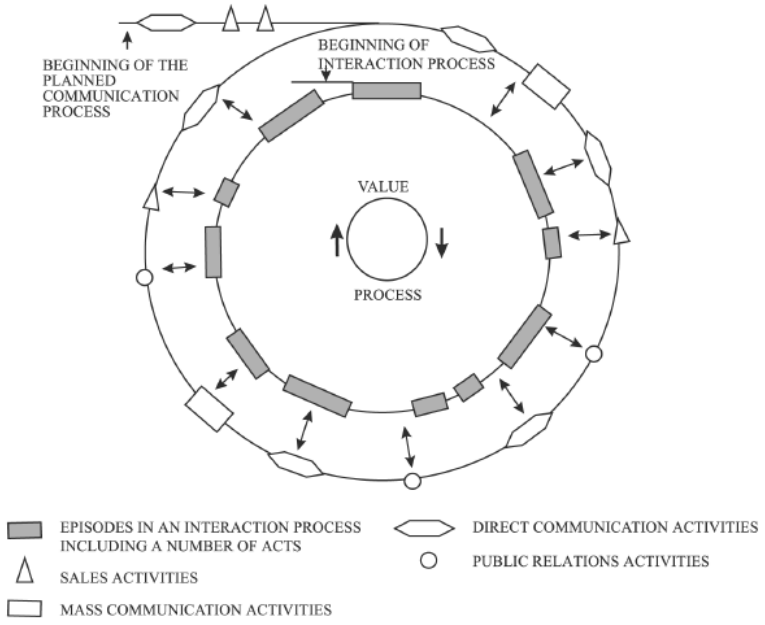

Figure 2-3. Grönroos' model of the process of relationship marketing

Grönroos' model was proposed before the prominence of SM, but SM nonetheless fittingly serves to carry out the communication and interaction process proposed by the author. In his proposed theory of RM, Grönroos assumed that a planned communication process, one of

the three foci of RM, is initiated by a business and the message flows in a linear direction. However, with the emergence of SM, the assumption of planned communication messages might no longer be valid (O'Brien, 2011; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Flow of messages is two- or multi-way, and communications are not all initiated by businesses; customers initiate communication too. In this regard, Williams and Chinn presented an expanded version of Grönroos' model in the context of SM and, in particular, in the sport setting.

In their modified model, Williams and Chinn suggested that interactions between businesses and proactive SM users occur in a more nonlinear fashion as opposed to Grönroos' unidirectional interaction. In fact, Williams and Chinn (2010) stated that businesses can embrace SM platforms as part of planned promotional strategies (e.g., through tweets and Facebook profile updates) – as Grönroos suggested. But businesses can also interact with SM users on a more informal, unplanned basis (e.g., replies to Facebook updates/tweets, user-to-user conversations). Through SM, a much higher level of interaction can occur than what Grönroos anticipated with the limited communication outlets that were available at the time he suggested the three focal areas of RM process. On SM platforms, two parties acquire access to shared or common information through interaction. Through ongoing communication and interaction, businesses will be able to hear from their customers and relevant stakeholders, react aptly, maintain ongoing dialogues, and then know customers closely and, in due course, reach a common understanding and co-create value (Williams & Chinn). The value that emerges through the integrative process of communication and interaction is depicted in the center of Williams and Chinn's (p. 433) modified version of Grönroos' (2004) RM process model. Figure 2-4 depicts the model showing communication, interaction, and value creation between sport organisations and sport consumers.

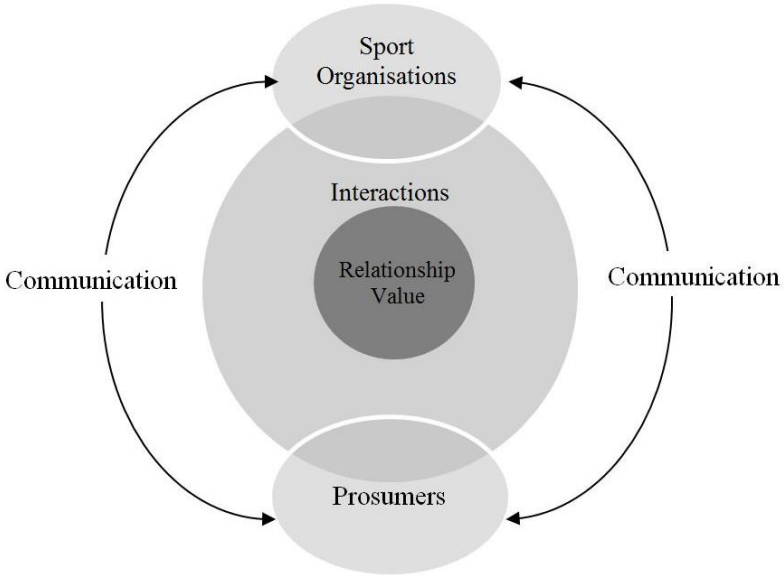

Figure 2-4. Modified relationship marketing process model

As explained, through ongoing communication and interaction, businesses reach an understanding with their customers. By fulfilling promises they made in their communications, they produce and deliver a co-created and customer valued product. A relationship dialogue is, therefore, the process of reasoning together so that organisations and their relevant stakeholders can develop a common knowledge that leads to additional value for the parties involved beyond the value of the products or services exchanged (Grönroos, 2000; 2004). In maintaining and enhancing this process on a continuing basis, organisations understand customers' ongoing needs, build intimacy, develop long-term relationships, and ultimately secure long-term mutual benefits (Grönroos, 2000; Gummesson, 1998; Peppers & Rogers, 2011).

In the discussion thus far, the assumption has been that all parties are interested in staying in a long-term relationship. However, it should be noted that RM is not a solution for all customers as well as organizations in all situations. Not all customers want or require a relationship with their supplier (Jackson, 1985) (e.g., interest in single exchange – shopping at a locally owned convenient store on a cross-country drive). A customer could also be interested in RM in one situation and not in another (Grönroos, 2004). To address this assumption, Grönroos

(1996) suggested a continuum of relationships from transaction-based to relationship-based, where "for some types of products and in some situations or for some types of customers a one-deal-at-a-time approach may be a good strategy" (p. 11). As Palmer et al. (2005) also stated, relationship and transaction marketing can be concurrently practiced, and businesses can adopt mid-range positions appropriate to the context in which they operate. It should also be noted that developing a relationship is not always easy. To engage in a relationship process, the product or service offering has to first be considered valuable in the mind of the consumer. Moreover, as Saren and Tzokas (1998) stated, relationships are not contractual agreements and, as a result, have to be based on trust, commitment, and mutual benefit (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Although theory about RM is typically centered on three elements—communication, interaction, and value—the communication and interaction elements of RM have received a wider discussion in the literature, while the value segment (i.e., the outcome of RM) has not been articulated in manner that is precise and clear. The term is understood and used in a number of different ways in the literature. Hence, clarifying how the term has been conceptualised, understood, and utilised in Grönroos' RM theory will be essential to gaining a better understanding of the concept, in an effort to articulate it in the context of RM. The following section presents a brief discussion of the conceptualization of value.

2.2.1. Value in Relationship Marketing

In the marketing literature, value is understood in a number of different ways (Grönroos, 2008), and it is perhaps the most ill-defined (Grönroos & Voima, 2013) and elusive concept in marketing (Vargo, Maglio, & Akaka, 2008; Woodall, 2003). The complexity of the concept becomes clearer in asking questions such as where, how, by whom, and when value is created (Voima, Heinonen, & Strandvik, 2010). As Grönroos and Voima (2013) discussed, a number of scholars made an attempt to develop a holistic conceptualisations of value (e.g., Khalifa, 2004;

Woodall, 2003). The works, in general, considered value as a trade-off between benefits and sacrifices. The common conceptions of value do not take relational aspects as a constituent of an offering (Ravald & Grönroos, 1996). The term, in marketing literature, has also been commonly used in terms of 'the value of customers for a firm,' and 'value for the customer' has been discussed only to a limited extent (e.g., Zeithaml, 1988). For example, Monroe (1991) defined customer-perceived value as the ratio between perceived benefits (i.e. a combination of physical attributes, service attributes, and technical support available) and perceived sacrifice (i.e. purchasing costs such as purchase price, transportation, installation, repairs and maintenance, and risk of failure). Similarly, Zeithaml (1988) defined customer-perceived value as "the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on a perception of what is received and what is given"(p.2). Zeithaml also pointed out that perceived value is subjective and individual, and therefore varies among consumers. Holbrook (2005) and Ulaga (2003) also stated that value is subjective, relativistic, and multi-dimensional. Recently, a more experiential perspective that acknowledges value in the context of customer experiences emerged (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). Value is realised through possession, usage, or mental states (Grönroos & Ravald 2011; Grönroos & Voima, 2013), and the two most commonly discussed concepts of value are value-in-exchange and value-in-use.

The value-in-exchange meaning of value is based on the traditional goods-dominant logic (see Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo & Morgan, 2005), and contains the idea that the promised product or service attributes are what the provider offers within the value proposition (Payne, Storbacka & Frow, 2008). Thus, value-in-exchange represents a conception that the value is embedded in products or services (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). As a result, in goods dominant (G-D) logic, the marketing research focused mainly on the attributes of products and services and the price put upon the attributes (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). On the other hand, the value-in-use is tied

to the service-dominant (S-D) logic meaning of value (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). According to Vargo, et al. (2008) and Vargo and Lusch (2008), in S-D logic, the roles of producers and consumers are not distinct, meaning that value is always co-created, jointly and reciprocally, in interactions among providers and beneficiaries through the integration of resources and application of competences. Value-in-use expresses the idea that value is created by using a product or service, rather than by producing the product or service (e.g., Lusch, Vargo, & O'Brien, 2007; Vargo and Lusch, 2004), which constitutes one key assumption of the S-D logic (e.g., Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011).

While the concepts of value-in-exchange and value-in-use have received a wide scholarly discussion (e.g., Ballantyne & Varey, 2006; Ravald & Grönroos, 1996; Vargo & Lusch, 2008), there are also other considerations of value that have emerged, namely value-in-context and value-in-life (e.g., Edvardsson et al., 2011; Vargo et al., 2008; Voima et al., 2010). Value-in-context puts an emphasis on the role of "other market-facing, public, and private resources" (Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009, p. 330). However, criticism has already risen as some scholars consider the idea as static (Grönroos & Ravald, 2011). The criticism (together with the consideration of the highly dynamic and multi-contextual reality and life of the customer) has led to the proposition of value-in-life (Voima et al., 2010). However, there seems to be a lack of clarity in the literature as to which one (of the latter two) is the most appropriate notion that captures the phenomenon.

In an article dedicated to articulating value and value co-creation, Vargo et al. (2008) simply defined value as "an improvement in system well-being" (p. 149). Similarly, the thinking behind RM is that businesses are "adding more value" or "extras" to the core product that the customer perceives important, beneficial, and of unique value (Grönroos, 2004; Ravald & Grönroos, 1996), thereby making the customers better off in some respect or increasing the

customer's well-being (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). As Wikström and Normann (1994) indicated, added value can be created by both relieving the customer and by enabling the customer.

While the literature presented thus far provided an overview of the RM literature and, at the same time, helped this work identify its position on the different topics (of RM) discussed, it is worth noting that the significant majority of the discussion was concentrated on the mainstream marketing literature. Relational exchanges, however, differ across various industries (e.g., sport, hotel, car manufacturing), and consumers (e.g., sport fans, tourists, manufacturing good consumers) (Stavros, 2005). Hence, a further examination of the contextual application of RM will be required to understand the operation of an RM approach across specific industries (Stavros & Westberg, 2009) and, in the case of the work at hand, the sport industry. The following section of the chapter discusses RM in sport industry.

2.3. Relationship Marketing Approach in the Sport Industry

Relationship marketing has received a considerable amount of attention from scholars and practitioners outside sport management; and some empirical and industry specific research and/or theoretical development has been conducted in relation to RM in the sport industry (e.g., Bee & Kahle, 2006; Stavros & Westberg, 2009; for further detail on this, see the works discussed below). The existing studies did offer useful information on the practice of RM in the sport industry. It is also important to note that it is well accepted in these studies that sport can benefit from RM (see below). This section of the chapter presents a critical review of that literature conducted after an exhaustive search for RM articles in sport studies.

2.3.1. Relationship Marketing in Sport Management Research

The search for RM articles in sport studies generated 20 academic articles published over the past 20 years (since the late 1990s). Table 2-1 presents the roster and summary of these articles. The earliest studies that were identified were published in *Sport Marketing Quarterly* in

its 1997 special issue (Vol. 6, Issue 2). A critical analysis of the 20 articles offered valuable insights in terms of the scholarship's perspective, body of knowledge, focus, context, research setting, and unit of analysis as presented below:

i. *in terms of its perspective* - while few of the RM-in-sport articles (e.g., Shani, 1997; Stavros, Pope & Winzar, 2008) view RM as a holistic managerial approach/ strategic approach, a few (e.g., Achen, 2014; Jowdy & McDonald, 2003) presented RM as being tactical in its nature;
ii. *in its body of knowledge* - these articles include empirical, conceptual, and case/industry specific studies;
iii. *in its focus* - the literature concentrates on two streams of research (i.e. defining the construct and the industry application of RM (see Das, 2009));
iv. *in its context* - a significant majority of the articles focused on B-2-C relationships, and two studies conducted their research in the context of B-2-B market (i.e. Farrelly & Quester, 2003, and Cousens, Babiak, & Slack, 2000),
v. *in its research setting* - the majority of these studies were conducted in the context of professional sports, while a few others focused on college sports (e.g. Wang, Ho, & Zhang, 2012; Magnusen, Kim, & Kim, 2012) and not-for-profit sport organisations (i.e. Tower, Jago, & Deery, 2006; Girginov et al., 2009), and
vi. *in its unit of analysis* – an equal number of studies conducted their investigations from the perspective of consumer behaviour and organisational perspective.

2.3.2. Relationship Marketing in Sport Management Research: An Organisational Perspective

Shani's (1997) work was the first study on the application of RM in sport that proposed a theoretical model developed from several existing models in the sport marketing literature (Stavros et al. 2008). Shani presented the framework for implementing RM in the sports industry

by focusing on teams' efforts in building strong bonds with their customers so as to foster repeat attendance and encourage additional purchases. In this model, sport organisations first segment customers, then break those segments into smaller niche markets. Next, database marketing techniques are employed to communicate messages to these customers. Through this process, best customers will be identified in the niche market and one-to-one communication will be conducted; the strategy then moves to RM. According to Shani (1997), relationships are built by teams' use of financial, social, and structural bonding strategies. While Shani (1997) offered the first insights into the application of RM in sport almost 20 years ago, the study at hand supports Stavros and Westberg's (2009) claim that subsequent research has been limited and primarily adopted a narrow focus.

Based on Shani's (1997) work, Stavros, Pope, and Winzar (2008) studied the adoption and application of a RM strategy across a diverse range of Australian professional sport organisations. In their study, Stavros and his colleagues found that Australian professional sports organisations adopted a RM approach to try and survive the industry's fierce competition and achieve financial security. As the authors noted, the need for implementation of RM was acknowledged by Australian professional sport organisations, but reluctance was also observed in these organisations in terms of embracing and fully applying a RM approach. Financial and staff shortages were mentioned as the major reasons for failing to appropriately implement RM. Stavros and his colleagues further stated that the traditional media was the only and the main communication channel used by the sport organisations to communicate with their customers. They also found that Australian professional sport was focusing on attracting and (to a certain degree) maintaining their customer relationships. However, active and strategic enhancement of their customer relationships was lacking, and an RM's application remained underdeveloped.

In the same geographic setting, Tower et al. (2006), assuming a partnership or stakeholder relationship management perspective, assessed the successful and unsuccessful partnerships in Australian not-for-profit sports. These authors also determined the application of 28 constructs that they compiled from the RM, education partnerships, and health and community service partnerships literature. According to Tower and colleagues, a key feature of successful relationships was complementary expertise and knowledge. Factors contributing to an unsuccessful relationship, on the other hand, included poor communication, incompatible management styles, lack of commitment (including time), and staff turnover. In a similar research setting, Girginov et al. (2009) assessed the Canadian national sports governing bodies' use of Web sites in an RM approach. The authors found the promotion of sport participation through Web-based interactions to be lacking in these organisations, particularly in terms of information gathering and dissemination activities.

Taking a narrow view of RM as a tactical approach, Jowdy and McDonald (2003) examined RM from the experience-offering point of view, namely, interactive fan festivals (one type of RM approach) which includes music, concessions, kids' zones, autographs, etc.) during the inaugural Women's United Soccer Association's 'Soccer Sensation.' Achen (2014) on her part presented an overview of the sport professional viewpoints on RM. According to Achen (2014), sport professionals viewed RM as essential for the survival of professional sport teams and used numerous tactics to build and maintain customer relationships.

McDonald and Milne (1997) introduced a conceptual framework for evaluating marketing relationships in professional sports franchises. According to the authors, the standard measure of customer relationship value (i.e., Lifetime Value (LTV)) informs on customer financial value but fails to offer insights into improving retention levels and strengthening relationships. Based on this argument, the authors proposed a framework. Applying the work of

McDonald and Milne (1997) on customer LTV, Lachowetz, McDonald, Sutton, and Clark (2001) discussed the need for an emphasis on customer LTV, which is the present value of the expected benefit (e.g., gross margin) minus the burdens from customers (e.g., direct cost of serving and communicating). Lachowetz and his colleagues argued that, rather than measuring success by counting the number of new customers and stimulating a particular transaction, sport organisations needed to focus on the LTV of customers, through retention of existing customers and building a mutually beneficial long-term relationship with them. According to the authors, repeat business stems from the purchasing and usage experience, as well as the communication to which the customer is exposed. The authors used the experience of the NBA to illustrate the importance of RM and customer LTV. The other case study that was identified in RM in sport literature was the work of Lapio and Speter (2000), who studied RM in the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) and praised its successful RM implementation and integration, while at the same time reminding NASCAR not to be complacent about its strong customer base.

Two studies were conducted in a B-2-B context: Cousens et al. (2000) and Farrelly and Quester (2003). Cousens et al. studied the adoption of a RM paradigm by the National Basketball Association (NBA) over the period 1980 to 1997. The authors indicated that the results of their study offered insights into RM and organisational change for sport managers. According to the authors, an RM paradigm in sport is based on the principle of attracting and maintaining long-term relationships with commercial and industrial buyers, corporate sponsors, and fans. The research provided an insightful look into the RM practice in the case of the NBA. In terms of overall perspective, however, the work assumed that the RM paradigm is as an approach that was imposed on the NBA rather than one that has been embraced by that organisation. For example, the authors mentioned that “an abundance of examples of relationship marketing practices in

professional sport organizations" (Cousens et al., 2000, p. 331) did exist and were adopted by professional sports organisations, such as rewarding valued customers, and holding contests for trips to major games or season tickets. However, these activities are transaction marketing-oriented relational exchanges unless they are maintained on an ongoing basis. When they were terminated, it became difficult to maintain the overall relationship. The authors also found that adoption of RM extending beyond simple software management to touch aspects of the organisation's culture, strategy, and structure. The work also emphasised the role of organisational members for effective implementation of RM. In a related work, Farrelly and Quester (2003) examined sponsorship from a RM perspective in Australian Football League (AFL) by focusing on the two commonly discussed relationship constructs of trust and commitment. These authors reported that sponsors' perceptions of their properties market orientation (i.e., responsive marketing activities) did not influence their commitment to the relationship. As Farrelly & Quester (2003) noted, based on previous work, the construct of commitment not only signals enduring stability at the conceptual level, but also serves as a reliable way of measuring long-term relationships at both the operational and the empirical level.

2.3.3. Relationship Marketing in Sport Management Research: The Consumer Perspective

The first available work on RM identified that centered on sport consumer behaviour in sport studies is Bee and Kahle (2006). Arguing that an in-depth understanding of the underlying dimensions of consumer behaviour is the basis for managing relationships, attendance, and retention, Bee and Kahle adopted Kelman's functional approach to attitude change to examine how and why sport consumers develop, enter into, and maintain relationships in a sports marketing context. These authors proposed a three-level social influence framework for understanding relationship formation and its maintenance, namely, compliance, identification, and internalisation. According to the authors, compliance is useful for initially introducing

consumers to the role of the sports consumer, and identification (a stronger level of RM – e.g., winning, fan identification) and internalisation (the strongest level – e.g., sharing information and hospitality) are needed to maintain a long-lasting relationship between the sports organisation and the sports consumer. These authors also listed sports talks, hospitality programs, and sport-related gifts as the three common mechanisms used by sports marketer to strengthen their relationships with sport consumers. In a related work, Harris and Ogbonna (2008) used the English Premier League experience to explore the extent to which various types of customers exhibit relational links with service firms. They then examined the manner in which such identification is manifested. The authors identified three key issues: (i) the vast majority of soccer fans believe they have a relationship with the club or team they support; (ii) in most cases, intimacy, mutuality, trust, or commitment was lacking; and (iii) only a significant minority of fans appeared to develop and sustain meaningful relational ties with their soccer club or team. Harris and Ogbonna (2008) further highlighted the different relationship statuses of fans with their clubs or teams.

In a series of publications, Kim and his colleagues attempted to define the constructs of RM, specifically relationship quality. Kim and his colleagues' consumer behaviour centered RM studies were based on the tenet that nurturing relationships of a high quality between businesses and customers is a key determinant for converting RM efforts into desirable business outcomes. In this regard, Kim, Trail, Woo, and Zhang (2011), in an attempt to conceptualise and measure the relationship quality between a sport team and its consumers, developed the Sports Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale (SCTRQS) in the context of college sports. These researchers undertook a qualitative study followed by a two-phase survey. The authors concluded that their SCTRQS showed a preliminary validity and reliability for assessing the quality of a relationship

between a sport organisation and its consumers. Their constructs included trust, commitment, intimacy, self-connection, reciprocity, and satisfaction.

Kim & Trail (2011) focused on the psychological factors that affect sport consumption behaviour in the RM context and proposed a conceptual framework for sport consumer-organisation relationship quality (i.e., assessment of the strength of a relationship). Their framework provided a theoretical explanation of: (i) relational constructs that represent relationship quality (i.e., trust, commitment, intimacy, self-connection, and reciprocity); (ii) the expected behavioural outcomes of the relationship quality (i.e., word of mouth, media consumption, licensed-product consumption, and attendance behaviours); and (iii) psychographic factors, such as relationship styles, relationship drive, and general interpersonal orientation are moderators, and also demographic factors, such as age, gender, ethnicity, region, and income. According to the authors, an understanding of relationship quality offers insight into the key elements that comprise either a good or a bad relationship, and how any problems can be addressed. It also informs on an evaluation of RM effectiveness and provides further understanding of the influence of RM strategies on sports consumption behaviors (Kim & Trial, 2011; Kim et al., 2011).

Building on their conceptual framework, Kim, Trail, and Ko (2011) conducted an empirical study that examined relationship quality in sport consumer behaviour contexts (i.e., the cognitive structure of relationship quality constructs include trust, commitment, intimacy, identification, and reciprocity). Then, the authors tested the link between relationship quality and three sport consumer behavioural intentions, namely, attendance, media consumption, and licensed merchandise consumption. They found that each construct reflected a unique aspect of the different relationship quality dimensions and its the holistic nature, thus supporting a general-specific model. In a related study, Magnusen et al. (2012), adopted a relationship quality

approach to examine the impact of the relationship quality construct of reciprocity on the outcome of attendance intention through relational mediators of trust and commitment in the context of college sports. The authors reported that their study supported the hypothesis that there were direct and mediated effects of reciprocity on sport consumer attendance intentions.

Similarly, Wang et al. (2012) emphasised the commitment construct (affective vs calculative commitment) due to its relevance in college sports in the United States and examined the effects of relationship quality and calculative commitment on three sport consumer behaviors—game attendance, donation intentions, and customer referral—in the context of intercollegiate athletics. These authors operationalised relationship quality as a construct that contained trust, satisfaction, and affective commitment. Calculative commitment, was conceptualised as a cost-induced commitment between relationship partners or a commitment due to the cost incurred by terminating existing relationships. The authors stated that calculative commitment increases game attendance, but it decreases customer referrals due to a constraint of available sport options in the area and the costs that can be incurred when switching costs to attend other distant sporting events. The authors found that relationship quality and calculative commitment together explained large portions of these three sports consumer behaviors.

Table 2-1

Profiling the Relationship Marketing Research in Sport

Authors	**Research Purpose**	**Perspective**	**Sport Context - Focus**	**Finding**
Achen, 2014	Industry application/ Sport professionals' viewpoints on RM	RM practice - as a tactical approach/ CRM	Professional sport – organisational focused	The study respondents viewed RM as essential for the survival of professional sport teams and used numerous tactics to build and maintain customer relationships
Bee & Kahle 2006	Conceptual/ examines how and why consumers develop, enter into, and maintain relationships in a sports marketing context	Broader view of RM based on Kelman's functional approach to attitude change	Professional sport – consumer focused	Proposed a framework for understanding how and why consumers engage in RM. The framework presented three levels for understanding relationship formation and maintenance: compliance, identification and internalisation

Cousens, Babiak, & Slack (2000)	Industry application/ explores the adoption of a RM paradigm by the NBA	Network approach of RM	Professional sport – organisational focused	Found the adoption of RM extending beyond software management to touch aspects of the firm's culture, strategy and structure. Emphasised on the role of organisational members in effective implementation of RM
Farrelly & Quester (2003)	Defining construct/ Examined sponsorship relationship in a B-2-B context focusing on the 2 commonly discussed trust & commitment	B-2-B	Professional sport - organisation focused	The authors reported that sponsors' perceptions of their properties' market orientation do not influence their commitment to the relationship.
Girginov, Taks, Boucher, Martyn, Holman, & Dixon (2009)	Industry application/ examined use of Website for the purpose of RM in promoting sport participation	Broader view of RM	Canadian NSOs organisation focused	They found that the NSOs' information-gathering and -dissemination activities, which make up the relationship-building process, on website appear sparse and in some cases are lagging behind the voluntary sector's use in Canada
H. Tsiotsou (2013).	Defining constructs/ Examined the formation process of sport team loyalty by integrating RM perspective and a hierarchy of effects model	Theoretical framework	Professional soccer sport teams – consumers focused	Centering on both, cognitive (team involvement, trust, self-expression), an affective (team attachment) aspects of sport team relationships, the authors found all their hypothesised constructs constitute either direct or indirect determinants of sport team loyalty
Harris & Ogbonna (2008)	Defining constructs/ Explored the extent to which various types of customers exhibit relational links with service firms, and to generate insights into the manner in which such identification is manifested	Theoretical framework	the focus groups and in-depth interviews with soccer supporters – consumers focused	Identified three key issues: (i) the vast majority of soccer fans believe that they have a relationship with the club or team they support, (ii) in most cases, however, intimacy, mutuality, trust, or commitment is lacking, and (iii) only a significant minority of fans appear to develop and sustain meaningful relational ties with their soccer club or team
Jowdy & McDonald (2003)	Industry application/ Examined RM and interactive fan festivals (e.g., music, concessions, etc.) during the inaugural Women's United Soccer Association's 'Soccer Sensation'	RM from experience-offering point of view (one type of RM approach – interactive festival	Professional sport – organisation focused	The study attempted to assess the role and value of interactive festivals in marketing efforts. Considering RM as creating & building relationships, showed how various entertainment and fans activities used to create opportunity to participate, interact and experience a sport product first hand
Kim & Trail (2011)	Defining construct/ Discussing psychological factors that affects sport consumption behaviour in RM context, the authors proposed a conceptual framework of consumer-organisation relationship quality	Conceptual – An relationship quality approach	Professional sport consumer behavior context	Proposed a conceptual framework of sport consumer-organisation relationship quality consisting of 3 components: (i) relationship quality consists 5 constructs, (ii) relationship quality influences word of mouth, media consumption, licensed-product consumption, and attendance behaviors, and (iii) the link is mediated by psychographic and demographic factors
Kim, Trail, & Ko (2011)	Defining construct/ Studied relationship quality in sport consumer behavior contexts, and its link with three sport consumer behavioral intentions	A relationship quality approach	Collegiate and a football team/ consumer focused	Each construct reflected a unique side of the different relationship quality dimensions and the holistic nature of relationship quality, supporting a general-specific model

Kim, Trail, Woo & Zhang (2011)	Defining constructs/ Developed the SCTRQS	A relationship quality approach	College sport/ consumer focused	Tested and found their SCTRQS showing preliminary validity and reliability in assessing the quality of relationship between sport organisation and their consumers
Lachowetz, McDonald, Sutton, & Clark (2001)	Industry application/ The authors, taking NBA, as a case study discuss the importance of LTV and the incorporation of a RM practice in a marketing strategy	RM practice	Professional sport/organisation focused	The authors showed the LTV of an NBA value through an illustration and the importance of adopting a RM approach
Lapio & Speter (2000)	Industry application/ The study discussed NASCAR's success credited to IMC, RM, and differentiated marketing	RM practice	Professional sport/ organisational focused	The authors discussed NASCAR's success providing various examples that they considered as an RM practices
Magnusen, Kim, & Kim (2012)	Defining construct/ Examined impact of the relationship quality construct of reciprocity on outcome of attendance intention through relational mediators of trust and commitment	A relationship quality approach	College sport/ consumer focused	Their study supported the hypothesis that the direct and mediated effects of reciprocity on sport consumer attendance intentions
McDonald & Milne (1997)	Industry application/ Developed a conceptual framework for evaluating marketing relationships in professional sport franchises	RM application	Professional sport/ organisational focused	Arguing the standard measure of customer relationship value (i.e., LTV), while inform on customer financial value, it fails to offer insights for improving retention levels and strengthening relationships, the authors proposed a framework
Shani (1997)	Industry application/ presents a framework for implementing RM in the sports industry	RM application	Professional sport/ organisational focused	Shani (1997) developed a framework to apply RM in sport that specifically focused on teams building strong bonds with customers to foster repeat attendance and encourage additional purchases
Stavros, Pope & Winzar (2008)	Industry application/ Explored the adoption and application of a RM strategy across a diverse range of Australian professional sport	Shani's RM framework	Professional sport/ organisation	Reported that while practitioners are cognizant of the workings of RM, there is some reluctance to embrace and apply these principles
Tower, Jago, & Deery (2006)	Defining constructs/ identified influences on relationships and determinants of successful and unsuccessful partnerships	Partnership/ stakeholders relationship management	Not-for-profit sport/ organisation	Found that a key feature of successful relationships is complementary expertise and knowledge. Unsuccessful relationship results from poor communication, incompatible management styles, lack of commitment, staff turnover, and lack of satisfaction
Wang, Ho, & Zhang (2012)	Defining constructs/ examined the effects of relationship quality and calculative commitment on sport consumers' game attendance, donation intentions, and customer referral in intercollegiate athletics	A relationship quality approach	College sport / consumer focused	Found that relationship quality and calculative commitment together explain large portions of the three sport consumer behaviors

2.3.4. Relationship Marketing in the Sport Management Research: Summary

The review of the literature informs that the majority of the studies (that have examined the practice of RM in sport) have largely focused on basic and reactionary tactics that are indeed common in the transactional marketing/ short-lived relationship, rather than undertaking the effort of establishing a long-term relationship based on mutual understanding. It is the 'I know what is good for you [customers], and here it is' approach. In other words, some of the studies, to some degree of generalisation risk, mismatch the conceptual interpretation and industry application–the reality and the rhetoric. As Adamson et al. (2006, p.159) described it, some may be "'talking the talk' of relationships, but then 'walking the walk' of transaction marketing", which mainly focuses on only short-term benefits. None of the studies were found to have adopted an identified RM school of thought, and thereby, a defined theoretical framework of RM. Rather, RM has simply been understood and interpreted as a marketing tactic, wherein the majority of (if not all) of the studies reviewed here adopted the definition proposed by Berry (1983) or Morgan and Hunt (1994).

Despite this, (i) consumer behaviour-centered studies help us further understand the drivers and motivations of people who wish to establish an on-going connection to an organisation or brand, and (ii) the outcome of RM in sports were identified as game attendance, media consumption, merchandise purchase, word of mouth/ customer referral, and donation intentions for college sports, and, lastly (iii) all of these studies suggested the need for sport organisations to incorporate an RM approach into their strategies to develop their loyal fan bases.

At this junction, it can be argued that, when Grönroos conceptualised the interaction element of his RM theory or when Shani (1997) proposed (the first sport-centered RM conceptual framework) the role of databases in translating efforts to RM, there is an implication that their attempt has been a pursuit used as a means to allow businesses and customers to

engage in on-going interaction and dialogue. Fast rewind, and one can see that a direct contact between a seller and a buyer ended after an era of mass production wherein the producer lost touch with the consumer with the emergence of middlemen and distributors, and, thereby, direct interaction and dialogue between customers and businesses disappeared. However, the emergence of SM resurged the long lost concept of direct interaction between businesses and customers, thereby engaging in on-going interactions and making dialogue possible. Further, as was briefly indicated at the beginning of this work, SM is providing new directions and benefits to RM. As a communication platform, SM is making relational exchanges both more affordable and more effective for sports marketers (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Today, SM is increasingly becoming an accepted set of digital tools that helps businesses meet RM goals (Williams & Chinn, 2011).

Before presenting the literature review on the different aspects of SM (which is discussed in more detail under section 2.6), the following sections provide the literature on professional sport. As can be observed, the discussion so far in this literature review has been presented in generic terms, such as marketing, products, and consumers; even the sport industry has been discussed in general terms. Hence, offering specifications of the research setting of the study at hand will be appropriate. The following two sections present a discussion on professional sport teams (and their unique features) and sport fans (and their unique characteristics), respectively.

2.4. Professional Team Sport: Nature of the "Product" and the Business

This section presents the literature on professional sport. First, an overview of professional team sport is provided, including the different types of professional sports and some unique features of professional leagues in different parts of the world. Second, the unique features of professional team sport (as a 'product') that distinguish the concept from the

traditional mainstream market is discussed. And, the third sub-section presents the factors that potentially distinguish professional sports from other businesses.

2.4.1. Overview of Professional Team Sport

Professional sports are any sport activity or skill in which athletes compete individually or on teams and perform for compensation in the form of salary, bonuses, reimbursements, or other direct payments (Burden & Church, 2012; Gladden & Sutton, 2014; Masteralexis, 2015). These activities can be individual (e.g., running, golf), dual (e.g., boxing, Tennis), team sports (e.g., baseball, football or sport entertainment [e.g., World Wrestling Entertainment – WWE] (Gladden & Sutton)). These undertakings are a large part of the entertainment, social, political, economic, legal, and cultural fabric of North America (Gladden & Sutton; Noll, 2003). Today, the four major league professional team sports (the "Big 4") dominate the market (e.g., sponsorship spending, media coverage, and SM presence) and are the focus of this study, namely the National Hockey Association (NHL), the National Football Association (NFL), the Major League Baseball (MLB), and the National Basketball Association (NBA) (Brown et al., 2010). Adding Major League Soccer (MLS) to this list, Burden and Church (2012) state that the five major North American men's leagues totaled 149 teams in 2007. As Masteralexis (2015) pointed out, new leagues are formed each year; some survive, such as the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) and the National Lacrosse League (NLL), etc., and some do not.

In the Canadian sport context (applicable also to the North America Market), O'Reilly and Séguin (2013) classified professional sport into five categories: (i) Tier One professional sport, the highest level professional sport entity in North America, and usually globally as well, for example, the "Big 4", (ii) Tier Two professional sport, the highest level of professional sport in Canada or North America but not globally, i.e., the Canadian Football League (CFL), American Hockey League (AHL), and the NLL; (iii) Tier Three professional sport, a lower level

of professional competition in a specific North American sport, such as the United Soccer League (USL); (iv) Professional sport competitions, those that have no major professional league or tour operating exclusively in Canada, such as the Roger Cup for Tennis; and (v) sports entertainment sports, those whose popularity made them an important part of the professional sport even if they do not fit into the usual category of professional sport, i.e., the WWE.

The minor league teams in North America are larger in number and can include baseball, basketball, hockey, arena football, women's football, tennis, soccer, indoor and outdoor lacrosse, and others too numerous to list here (Masteralexis, 2015). Individual professional sports are also staged in different parts of the world and scheduled around a tour of events, meets, or matches (Masteralexis). Some of the most popular professional individual sport tours include the NASCAR, the Professional Golfers' Association (PGA), and the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), and sport competitions include boxing and horse racing (Burden & Church, 2012). Table 2-2 presents some of the major professional team sports in North America.

Table 2-2

Number of Professional Sport Teams in North America (as of 2013, unless the year specified)

Sport	**League**	**Number of Teams**
Baseball	Major League (MLB)	30
	Minor League affiliates	189
	Minor League independents	55 (inc. Mexican league)
Basketball (Men's)	Major League (NBA)	30
	Minor Leagues	16
Basketball (Women's)	Major League (WNBA)	12
Football (Men's)	Major League (NFL)	32
Ice Hockey (Men's)	Major League (NHL)	31 (in 2016)
	Minor Leagues	84
Soccer (Men's)	Major League (MLS)	20 (in 2016)
	Minor Leagues (NASL[1], USL Pro)	24
Soccer (Women's)	Major League (NWLS[2])	9

[1]National American Soccer League, [2]National Women's Soccer League

Outside North America, a number of professional leagues operate in different parts of the world, including Europe, Australia, Asia, South America, the Middle East, and Africa (Masteralexis, 2015). Fort (2000) has argued that North American professional team sport is

different from its European counterpart in three major ways, namely its fans (national vs international interest), sport organisations (e.g., relegation and promotion), and team objectives (profit vs win maximisation). Indeed, Burden and Church (2012) discuss the structure of professional sport in North America as being different from, for instance, professional sport in Europe. Some of these entities include the categories of member (single vs multiple league), membership in a league (fixed vs variable/relegation and promotion), hierarchy in team sport leagues (major and minor, as many as 10 levels), relocation (far more experience vs less experience), talent pool (college vs lower-division clubs). A unique case in Australia is the Australian Football League, which is made up of 18 professional teams; nine of those are based in the city of Melbourne, the second largest city in Australia. These teams highly rely on membership, commonly referred to in the North America market as season ticket holders.

2.4.2. The Nature of the Professional Sport Team "Product"

A number of scholars (e.g., Armstrong, 2014; Beech & Chadwick, 2007; Mason, 1999; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2014; Smith & Stewart, 2010) have discussed the unique features of professional team sport that distinguish the concept from the traditional mainstream market. According to these scholars, professional teams in a league compete against each other in a fixed schedule or for a series of games, with an uncertain outcome, in a league-designated home territory of one of the teams. Consumers help produce the product/the competition that can vary in quality and then consume it as it is produced. A number of sport fans exhibit a high degree of optimism, and at times, their demand may even exceed the available seats. Still the supply remains fixed in terms of number of tickets or games played. A list of unique features of such a sport "product" is presented in Table 2-3. It is apparent that, given the unique features of sport, its management and marketing demand a customised set of practices to ensure its effective operation (Armstrong, 2014; Brooks, 1994; Chadwick, 2009; Smith & Stewart, 2010).

Table 2-3

Unique Features of Sport (What Makes It Different from Other Products)

Features	**Authors discussed the features**
Uncertainty of outcome	Beech & Chadwick (2007); Mason (1999); Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton (2014); Smith & Stewart (2010)
Consumers help to produce a product – the presence of other customers is vital	Beech & Chadwick (2007); Mason (1999)
Consumed irrationally - People develop irrational passions	Beech & Chadwick (2007); Armstrong (2014); Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton (2014)
Sport receives a higher media interest	Beech & Chadwick (2007); Mason (1999)
Differences in judging performance/ a heterogeneous and ephemeral experience	Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton (2014); Armstrong (2014)
Interdependency – a team's existence reliance upon other teams	Beech & Chadwick (2007); Mullin, Hardy & Sutton (2014); Taylor (2008)
Sport product (a game or contest) is of variable quality (e.g., playoff series games)	Smith & Stewart (2010); Armstrong (2014); Mason (1999)
It enjoys a high degree of product or brand loyalty - Unwavering loyalty	Beech & Chadwick (2007); Smith & Stewart, 2010
It engenders vicarious identification	Smith & Stewart, 2010
Sport fans exhibit a high degree of optimism	Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton (2014); Smith & Stewart (2010)
A fixed supply schedule	Smith & Stewart (2010); Armstrong (2014)
An intangible, experiential, and subjective nature	Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton (2014)
Simultaneously produced and consumed	Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton (2014)
Investment in training (continual)	Taylor (2008)

From a financial point of view, as Humphreys and Mondello (2008) state, a distinguishing characteristic of sport franchises which differentiate them from traditional businesses is the sport businesses' dependence on intangible assets. These intangible assets, according to the authors, include player contracts, television rights, stadium agreements, and relationships with fans. As opposed to the traditional assets such as plants and equipment, intangible assets are important factors that contribute to the overall financial status of professional sports teams. In terms of consumers of the professional team sport "product," Mason (1999) discusses four distinct groups of "consumers" who consume this "product" but for very different reasons: the fans; television and other media; communities that construct facilities and support local clubs; and corporations that interact with the leagues and teams.

2.4.3. The Nature of the Professional Team Sport Business

Authors (e.g., Brown et al., 2010; Mason, 1999) have discussed several factors that potentially distinguish professional sports from other businesses, including stadium lease arrangements, monopolistic bargaining for broadcasting rights, territorial rights in predetermined geographic markets, and the capital depreciation of player contracts. Gladden and Sutton (2014), for their part, identified four unique aspects that do distinguish professional sport from other industries. These include interdependence (teams need to compete and cooperate simultaneously – e.g., profit sharing), structure and governance (leagues, owners, board of governance, administrative unit), labor-management relations (collective bargaining, free agency, salary caps, and a player draft), and the role of electronic and new media. Professional sport teams generate billions of dollars each year through media rights, gate receipts, luxury seating, sponsorships, and properties (Gladden & Sutton). As explained above, despite the fact that there has been a substantial increase in revenue in the sports industry over the years, the cost of running a sports organisation has increased at a much faster rate (Kim & Trial, 2011). Sport organisations are not only facing spiralling costs, but are also dealing with increasing fan discontent and disconnection, the impacts of new technology (Gladden & Sutton; Kim & Trail, 2011), competitions within the sports industry, the increasing expectations of customers, and competitions from multiple other leisure choices (Stavros & Westberg, 2009; Kim & Trail, 2011).

In North America, professional team sports are structured under a league organisation, where owners act as the Board of Directors, and the Commissioner of the League acts as the Chief Executive Officer (Brown et al., 2010; Masteralexis, 2015). As an umbrella organisation for franchises, the leagues govern franchises so that they can cooperate in business while competing on the playing field. The league handles rule making and enforcement and also

imposes restrictions on various ownership issues, including permission and eligibility to own the sports franchise, limit on the number of franchises/teams allowed, restrictions on franchise location, and granting of territorial rights (Brown et al., 2010; Masteralexis, 2015). In terms of league revenue, while league-wide revenue derives from national television and radio contracts, league-wide licensing, and sponsorship programs, the individual franchises can collect revenues from local broadcasting, gate receipts, preferred seating sales, and similar other forms of stadium revenue (Gladden & Sutton, 2014). As Masteralexis noted, the disparities in local markets, and thereby also the locally derived revenue, have caused competitive balance problems among numerous teams. All professional sport leagues adopt restrictive practices (drafts, reserve systems, salary caps, free agent restrictions, and free agent compensation) to provide financial stability and competitive balance for their teams (Brown et al., 2010; Gladden & Sutton; Masteralexis). In order to maintain competitiveness, as Mason (1999) described, teams independently vie for players, coaches, trainers, executives, and other non-player personnel.

It is also worth mentioning that professional sport teams do operate in a business environment that involves different stakeholders. As Beech & Chadwick (2007) state, the three main immediate actors are team/management, athletes, and fans. Other actors include the league, championships, commercial partners, media partners, and governing bodies. Similarly, Foster, O'Reilly, and Dávila (2016) outline ten major stakeholders in the sports business ecosystem with an in-depth discussion on each of the stakeholders. These include (i) leagues, federations, and associations; (ii) clubs and teams; (iii) players, coaches, agents, and player associations; (iv) events; (v) facilities, arena, and stadiums; (vi) health and sport medicine bodies; (vii) apparel and equipment providers; (viii) media content and distribution; (ix) branding, marketing, and sponsorship; (x) ticketing.

2.5. Sport Fans: Defined, Unique Features, and Typologies

In the mainstream marketing literature, the people who purchase goods and services are commonly referred to as consumers. In the sport management literature, the term “consumer” is also at times interchangeably used with spectators and/or fans, although there exists a certain difference. However, there has been a scholarly discussion among sport consumer behaviour academics, and the literature offers greater understanding of the motivational, behavioral, and attitudinal differences and similarities, and thereby, the conceptualisation of consumers compared to sport fans/spectators. A number of authors (e.g., Foster, O'Reilly, & Dávila, 2016; Funk & James, 2001; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Hunt, Bristol & Bashaw, 1999; Tapp, 2004; Stewart, Smith, & Nicholson, 2003; Wann & Branscombe, 1990) contributed to the advancement of this body of literature. These scholars suggested that sport consumers are not only distinct from the consumers of other businesses, but that they also have a varying level of sport consumption attachment, indeed displaying a range of values, attitudes, and behaviours.

Consumers experience sport in different ways (e.g., regular vs occasional game attendance, following games on media, merchandise purchase) and they usually identify with a sport or sport object to meet a diverse range of personal needs (Funk & James, 2001; Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). Hence, sport fans are not homogenous, as some may too easily assume, and it is thus difficult to view fans as a singular group (Foster et al., 2016; Stewart et al., 2003). Sports fans vary in their allegiance or psychological attachment to a team (Foster et al., 2016; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Also, the notion that all sport fans are determinedly and unwaveringly loyal is also naive and even idealistic (Harris & Ogbonna, 2008). Lastly, sport fans may not necessarily attend live games all the time, but they will often consume sport by watching games on television, and/or purchasing apparel and licensed products (Funk & James, 2001; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Tapp, 2004; Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001).

The difference between a spectator and a fan, according to Wann (1995), is that a spectator is an individual who is observing a sporting event, and a fan is someone who is enthusiastic about a particular sport or athlete. The differences in someone's interest in sport as either a spectator or a fan is also captured by Pooley (1978), who touched on the enthusiasm aspect noted by Wann (1995, p. 14):

> Whereas a spectator of sport will observe a spectacle and forget it quickly, the fan continues his interest until the intensity of feeling toward the team becomes so great that parts of every day are devoted to either his team or in some instances, to the broad realm of sport itself.

The difference between a fan and a spectator, by implication, is the difference in the degree of devotion to a sport object (e.g., team, player, coach). According to Anderson (1979), a fan can be defined as an ardent devotee of sport. Similarly, Hunt et al. (1999) described a sports fan as an enthusiastic consumer of organised sports or as a consumer who is motivated to engage in behavior related to sports and has some level of attachment to a sport object. Since there are differences among and between spectators and fans (e.g., the difference from fan to fan in terms of the level of attachment to a sport object, namely, the underlying motivation for consumption of sports, and actual sports-related behavior), several authors have attempted to construct precise typologies or classifications of sport fans.

To offer an example from the abundant literature, in the context of an individual's psychological connection to sport and the temporal process through which that connection moves, Funk and James (2001) proposed the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) to help outline, among other aspect, the sport spectator and the sport fan involvement level to a team. For this purpose, the authors integrated the body of research to examine the differences among and between spectators and fans. According to the PCM, there are four levels of categories along a continuum: awareness, attraction, attachment and allegiance. *Awareness* signifies when an

individual is first introduced to a given sport or team (e.g., media, friend, moving to a new city, etc.); *attraction* designates when an individual recognises he or she has a favourite team or a favourite sport; *attachment* is when an individual manifests psychological connection with the sport object (e.g., a favourite team); and *allegiance* signifies when an individual become a loyal (or committed) fan of a particular sport or team. Allegiance also produces influential attitudes that create consistent and durable behavior. In a separate study on fan behavioral loyalty, Tapp (2004) argued that game attendance is not necessarily the best measure of fan loyalty. According to the author, while fans with low levels of loyalty develop from such factors as team success or recent relocations, high levels of loyalty derive from factors like family history and self-identity.

While these examples may offer some insight, as pointed out above, a substantial body of knowledge already exists on sport spectators and fans that is grounded in a multi-disciplinary approach that includes the field of sociology, psychology, consumer behaviour, and marketing (Funk & James, 2001). Drawing their theoretical conceptualisations from these different fields, several studies proposed different classifications of sport fans, which Stewart et al. (2003) then synthesised into three ways of classification—dualistic typology, tiered typology, and multidimensional typology. Dualistic typology was proposed by a number of authors (e.g., Boyle & Haynes, 2000; Nash, 2000), and these authors' classification can be summed up as follows: fans who identify themselves with a team, and those who only consume sport for entertainment purposes. While the dualistic classification offers insight, it also conflates the range of behavioral differences among sport consumers (Stewart et al., 2013).

Building on the dualistic approach, other studies classified fans into different tiered typologies that take into account the different levels or intensities of team attachment. These tiered typologies were proposed by different authors (e.g., Mullin et al., 2014; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), but they can be summarised as: top tier (vested/highly committed), middle

tier (expressive and focused), and bottom tier (social and camaraderie) consumers. The tiered typologies inform that consumers approach their sport consumptions in different ways such as emotional commitment, reading and talking about sport, social interaction, camaraderie, etc. However, according to Stewart et al. (2003), the tiered typologies do not provide the full picture regarding the underlying beliefs and motives that drive an individual's loyalty and attachment to sport and their sport consumption behaviour, which has been only partially addressed by these declared multidimensional typologies of sport consumers.

Based on the different ways in which consumers can express their sport interest, a number of authors (e.g., Foster et al., 2016; Funk & James, 2001; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Hunt et al., 1999; Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000; Stewart & Smith, 1999) proposed multidimensional typologies for sport consumers. These authors based their classification on

a. consumption motives (escape, eustress, social interaction);
b. emotional commitment (strong, conditional, and fragile);
c. economic commitment (strong, moderate, and weak financial interest);
d. level of identification – as an extension of self-identity (civic and community pride, and/or social and cultural identity);
e. loyalty (through game attendance, displaying team colors, chatter, and conversation);
f. connection point (primary point of connection is a team, a sport/league, or a player); and
g. frequency of game attendance (frequent, moderate, and low).

These typologies, in general, differentiate sport consumers based on a number of factors that include emotional attachment to teams, loyalty, and identity, which then link to a specific pattern of consumption, namely game attendance, television viewing, and the purchase of team merchandise. From this list, as Wann, Grieve, Zapalac, and Pease (2008) and Wann et al. (2001) stated, the eight most common factors that motivate individuals to consume sport (although the

list of potential motives is quite extensive) are: escape, economic (e.g., gambling), eustress (positive level of arousal), self-esteem, group affiliation, entertainment, family, and aesthetics qualities (i.e., artistic).

The different sport consumer typologies proposed (and the various factors on which these classifications are based) provide an understanding that the consumption of sport has a uniqueness in to it, and particularly, as Madrigal (1995) stated, involves considerable emotional significance. And yet, these typologies also imply the clearly multifaceted nature of sport consumption. After reviewing a number of scholarly works that attempted to classify sport consumers, Stewart et al. (1993) argued that there is no single best typology, as all the classifications have both strengths and limitations and,

> as a result, researchers should be encouraged to examine sport consumption behaviour in accordance with an individual's self-perception, since it produces more personalized and divergent responses. While recording every microscopic difference creates mass of disparate data waiting to be classified, these subjective experiences can also reveal distinctive sport consumer traits that previously went unrecognized. (p. 212)

This view might have been best captured by Wann and Branscombe (1993), who stated that a sport fan is someone who says they are a sport fan. As Stewart et al. (2003) argued, sport consumption is actually a self-defining phenomenon.

Thus far, the review of the literature has discussed two of the three major topic areas on which the study at hand is focused (i.e., RM and professional sport). The literature review on these two major topic areas were further organized and presented in five sections. The following and remaining sections of the chapter present a review of the literature on the third (and last) major topic area of the study, namely SM. The literature in this portion of the chapter is organized in two sections – section 2.6 and section 2.7. Section 2.6 below provides an overview of SM, including the different definitions and platforms, its history and current trends, defining characteristics, and its different types of users. Following this, the final section of the chapter

(section 2.7) presents an overview of a critical review of the SM scholarship in sport management research.

2.6. Social Media

Nearly two decades ago, SM did not exist. Its history dates back to 1997 with the launch of the first recognizable major SM site, Six Degrees. In the past few years, however, the one-way communication that dominated the internet sphere for over two decades has been transformed into a dynamic two-way and multiple-way of communications through SM. The combined effects of three factors have contributed to the expansion of SM (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). These factors include:

i) *Users easy and quick access to tools* for the creation of SM content. Today, users have quick access to relatively cheap, user friendly, and portable (e.g., carried in pocket) tools (e.g., smartphone, iPad/tablets, portable laptops) that allow them to easily create SM contents and upload them instantly or long afterwards. For instance, users can create contents such as pictures while taking a bus ride, texts while enjoying coffee at a cafe, videotaping while in the streets, and audio files recording while at a concert.

ii) *Internet speed and storage capacity* is the second factor that contributed to the expansion of SM. Today, in a large part of the world, there is a wider access to Internet bandwidth. Along with the bandwidth, individual users and owners are getting access to an enhanced data storage capacity (e.g., cloud storage).

iii) *Acquaintance to technology* is the other factor that played a role to SM's expansion, where there is a rise of a young generation with significant technical acquaintance and enthusiasm to engage online. Even if SM consumption is heavily skewed towards the younger generation, there is a growing familiarity with the Internet and an increasing interest to SM among the older generation.

With the expansion of SM, users today are consumers, producers, and distributors of contents (i.e., photos, video, audio files, and videos) (Jiao, Gao, & Yang, 2015). They create, listen, learn, contribute and circulate interests, experiences and, most importantly, commentary through collaborative writing, content sharing, social networking, and social bookmarking (Jiao et al., 2015). All these are happening instantaneously, making real-time information exchange an inherent behaviour of today's society. For example, Twitter allows users to get fresh and breaking news, to connect with people with whom users have no means of connecting otherwise, and to follow important topics, people, and conversations that are relevant or interesting to them. Clearly, the advantages that SM platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) have brought to users, such as simplicity, accessibility, contact availability, transparency, etc., have also contributed to the popularity of SM.

2.6.1. What is social media?

SM takes many different forms, and some of the most popular examples include social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and Tumblr, content-sharing sites such as YouTube, Flickr, Pinterest, and Instagram, and blogs. The phrase "social media" means different things to different people (McNary & Hardin, 2013). Given the expansive nature and scope of SM, it is not surprising to find that there are numerous definitions provided by various authors. However, the term "social media" is a construct from two areas of research, communication science and sociology (Peters, Chen, Kaplan, Ognibeni, & Pauwels, 2013). A medium, in the context of communication, is simply a means for storing or delivering information or data. In the realm of sociology, and in particular social (network) theory and analysis, social networks are social structures made up of a set of social actors (i.e., individuals, groups or organisations) with a complex set of dyadic ties among them. Combined, SM is a communication system that allow its social actors to communicate along dyadic ties. As a consequence, and in contrast to

traditional and other online media, in SM, organisations are no longer an authority in a hierarchical structure that can impose an exposure to commercial messages as in other media (Peters et al., 2013). While the way the term is constructed provides an understanding of its basic essence, the term "social media" could mean different things to different people (Carr & Hayes, 2015; McNary & Hardin, 2013). As Carr and Hayes stated, there is a limited understanding of what the term precisely means, and the term still has no universally agreed-upon academic definition. Nevertheless, as noted in Table 2-4, there are some commonalities that can be encompassed under the definition provided by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010): "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" (p. 61). This work uses this definition provided by Kaplan and Haenlein.

Table 2-4

Sample Definitions of Social Media

Authors	Sample definitions of social media
Kaplan and Haenlein (2010)	SM is "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" (p. 61).
Drury (2008)	SM as online resources (e.g. blogs, social networks, message boards, podcasts, public bookmarking, and wikis) that people use to share content on popular SM applications (e.g., Facebook).
Mangold & Faulds (2009) citing Blackshaw & Nazzaro, (2004)	SM as "a variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers with intent to educate each other about products, brands, services, personalities, and issues" (p. 357).
Weinberg (2009)	SM "relates to the sharing of information, experiences and perspectives through community-oriented websites" (p. l).
Safko & Brake (2009)	SM refer to "activities, practices, and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media . . .Web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios." (p. 6)
Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre (2011)	SM employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, cocreate, discuss, and modify user-generated content.

Sheffer & Schultz (2013)	SM refers to "the interactive media technologies that allow consumers to create and disseminate their own content, connect with media outlets and other users and voice their opinions on any number of topics" (p. 210).
Solis (2010) in Stoldt & Vermillion (2013)	SM is "the democratization of information, transforming people from content readers into publishers. It is the shift from a broadcast mechanism, one-to-many, to a many-to-many model, rooted in conversations between authors, people, and peers" (p. 7).
Strauss & Frost, 2009	SM is a network tool and platform, where users can jointly investigate network contents, share their opinions and experiences, and build up relations for commercial activities or amusement activities.

The phrase "Web 2.0" is also used interchangeably with SM in most literature (Jiao et al., 2015), although the two are not entirely the same. Indeed, Web 2.0 is considered a derivative of the original Web (i.e. Internet websites Web 1.0), which largely carries a one-way message supplied by publishers on a static page (Drury, 2008). For example, the official website of the NFL, www.nfl.com, which is Web 1.0, largely carries a one-way message supplied by publishers or the league. Web 2.0 refers to the second generation of Internet-based applications (Miller & Lammas, 2010); it is formulated to reflect the shift in content and applications of Web 1.0.For example, on the NFL's official Facebook page, www.facebook.com/NFL, both the organisation and its fans contribute content (pictures, audio, text and videos). The term is used to echo the change wherein users are not passive viewers any more, and contents are no longer generated and published only by an individual publisher, but instead all users engage in participatory and collaborative content generation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Thackeray et al., 2008).

It is worth noting here that, while Web 2.0 and SM are to found to be used interchangeably in most literature, the two are not entirely the same. For some, the term Web 2.0 is a catch-all phrase for a few well-known sites like Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, and Twitter; for others (e.g., Constantinides & Fountain, 2008), the definition is broader and includes Web 2.0-enabled blogs. For a few others still (e.g., Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, 2012), it includes collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia) and gaming applications (e.g. World of Warcraft). In this work, SM is considered to be a part of the social aspects of Web 2.0 applications (these

platforms are discussed below)—including, but not limited to, users' participation, openness, conversation, community, connectedness, etc. The term Web 2.0 will refer to the technologies used to enable and facilitate online platforms on which collaborative and user-friendly SM communications occur. Web 2.0 platforms are discussed below.

2.6.2. Web 2.0 Platforms

The most commonly used Web 2.0 technologies include blogs, social networking sites, photo- and video- sharing sites, and message boards. Classifying these Web 2.0 technologies into distinct categories is not easy. As O'Reilly (2007), who came up with the term Web 2.0, noted, "Web 2.0 does not have a hard boundary, but rather, a gravitational core" (p. 18). Yet, some of the technologies and applications share certain similarities that help classify them into particular categories. For example, Constantinides and Fountain (2008) classified Web 2.0 technologies based on the types of application into five main categories: blogs, social networks, content communities, forums and bulletin boards, and content aggregators. Table 2-5 below presents brief descriptions of the major categories of SM with the corresponding sport related examples.

Table 2-5

Web 2.0 Platforms

Web 2.0 Platforms	Description	Examples
Blogs	Blogs are online journals or personal websites usually managed by an individual. Readers can post a response to a particular entry. The author of the initial content can then read these responses in real time and react to readers' comments, creating a virtual dialogue (Dittmore, Stoldt, & Greenwell, 2008).	MLB blog (www.mlb.com/blogs/), Raptors blog (www.nba.com/raptors/archive/blogs), Detroit Tigers Weblog (www.detroittigersweblog.com), Maple Leafs fans blog (www.mapleleafshotstove.com)
Social network	A platform that allows users to initiate communication with other users who share interest by posting information, comments, messages, images, and creating a community for participation (Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009).	UFC Twitter (www.twitter.com/#!/UFC), NBA Facebook (www.facebook.com/nba), Maple Leaf Google+ (www.plus.google.com/+TorontoMapleLeafs)

Content communities	Content communities are websites used to organise and share particular types of content like videos, photos, audio files, podcasts, live broadcasts, etc. (Thackeray et al., 2009; Ioakimidis, 2010)	NHL YouTube (www.youtube.com/user/NHL) Montreal Canadiens Instagram (www.instagram.com/CanadiensMTL), Maple Leaf Pinterest (www.pinterest.com/mapleleafs), Bruins Tumblr (www.nhlbruins.tumblr.com)
Forums and bulletin boards	Forums and bulletin boards are platforms where users with similar interest share ideas on different topics, activities, concerns, etc. (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008)	Calgary Flames Message Board (www.fans.flames.nhl.com/community/) New York Giants Fan Zone (www.boards.giants.com/)
Content aggregators	Content aggregators are applications used to manage, summarise, and deliver content that users are interested in accessing (Williams & Chinn, 2010).	Calgary Flames Rich Site Summary (RSS) (www.flames.nhl.com/club/page.htm?id=40224) MLB RSS (www.mlb.mlb.com/news/rss/index.jsp), Bruins RSS (www.bruins.nhl.com/club/feedinfo.htm)

2.6.3. History and Current Trends of Social Media

From a historical point of view, SM has had a short but eventful life span (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). A number of platforms exist under the umbrella name of SM, and currently there are around 200 active social networking sites. As it has been observed over the past few years, SM has a dramatically evolving nature and is continuously reinventing itself. Some SM sites have already stopped existing, others exist under a different name, and some others may not exist in few years from now (Billings & Hardin, 2014). Based on the work of Boyd and Ellison (2008), Figure 2-5 presents the updated timeline of the launch dates of many of the major SM sites.

As shown in Figure 2-4, the first recognizable major SM site, Six Degrees, was launched in 1997. Two years after, three social networking sites emerged (Live Journal, AsiaAvenue, and BlackPlanet) and most of the current *major* SM sites emerged in the 11 year between 2002 and 2013. Google+, Snapchat, and Vine are the latest additions to SM.

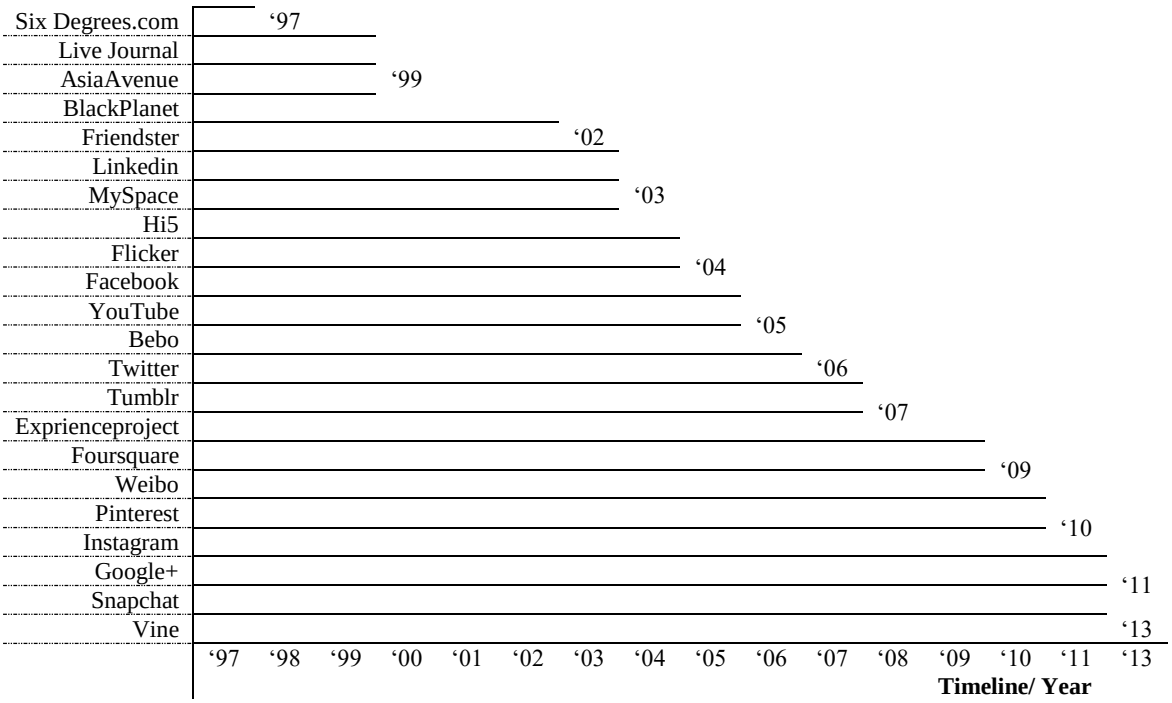

Figure 2-5. Timeline of the launch dates of the major social media sites

Estimates on the use of SM vary widely across reports, mainly because SM itself has had a short albeit eventful life and, most importantly, continues to reinvent itself. Bearing in mind the constantly changing estimates, Alexa (2016) reported that YouTube (2nd), Facebook (3rd), Twitter (8th), LinkedIn (14th), and Instagram (15th) are among the top 15 most visited Web sites in the world, following first placed Google. Data from self-claimed reports released by the corporations that own SM platforms indicated that millions of users have become enamoured with SM (Rowe, 2014). For instance, the most popular SM site is Facebook with 1.65 billion monthly active users (Facebook, 2016). Twitter has 310 million monthly active users generating more than 500 million tweets per day (Twitter, 2016). The video-sharing Web site, YouTube, is visited by more than 1 billion users each month and, every minute, 100 hours of video are uploaded to the site (YouTube, 2016). For its part, the content-sharing site Instagram has 500 million active monthly users (Instagram, 2016).

2.6.4. Defining Characteristics of Social Media

SM platforms, as Hennig-Thurau et al. (2010) observed, have defining characteristics. These include:

- *Visibility:* users' activities can be seen by others. For example, messages posted on Facebook can be seen by users' friends, or entries posted by a contributor in forums or blogs can be tracked by other users;
- *Real-time and memory:* users access SM contents at the time they are being produced and also long afterwards. For example, Twitter followers will have virtually immediate (in milliseconds) access to Tweets, pictures, or videos posted on the page that they follow, and the postings stay online long afterwards, unless the owner of the page take them down.
- *Ubiquitous:* users reach other users almost anywhere at any time. For example, Twitter allows the Boston Bruins hockey team to reach to its fans where they play, work, travel, and through their preferred channel.
- *Pro-active:* users contribute from simple product reviews to extensive product co-creation. For example, fans comment and express their views and opinions on their favorite team's game performance on Facebook or Twitter before, during, and after the game.
- *Digital:* no "gate keeper" such as a publisher to edit one's work and almost no additional cost to include added digital products. For example, fans post pictures, videos and messages of any nature or form without any party's approval on their own Facebook pages or comment on content posted on their favourite sport team.
- *Networks:* users create and share content, communicate with one another, and build relationships with other consumers. For example, users of Facebook connect and network with friends and members, and other people that they care to keep in touch with, to participate and engage in conversation on the topic of their interest.

These defining characteristics of SM enable sport marketers to be informed of the unique features of SM and enables them to develop a marketing communication strategy that is based on and that takes into account these features.

2.6.5. Social Media Users

Today, online consumers have become more sophisticated and confident in their use of the Internet, and can join SM for different reasons, such as family relations, friendships, business relations, interests, hobbies, religion, and numerous others. SM users are found to be the foremost players in all categories of the SM platforms. That is mainly why the terms 'prosumer' (i.e., users having a blended role as a producer and consumer) and User-Generated Content (UGC) are often used to underline the fact that today's users are not only consumers but also the prime content contributors (Abeza, O'Reilly, Séguin, & Nzindukiyimana, 2015). Some users dedicate substantial time producing and consuming multimedia content, others do not. Hence, users' levels of commitment (i.e., some people are more active than others in their SM involvement) and participation ranges from passive visitor through to committed contributor. At the same time, users' level of attachment to the owner of a SM site (e.g., sport team, athlete) varies; and users of SM are not all necessarily fans of the site owner, and not all offline fans of a SM site owner are necessarily users of SM (Ang, 2011; Miller & Lammas, 2010). Identifying the behaviour of SM users and their level of involvement will be, therefore, insightful.

Based on the different levels of involvement that users of SM exhibit, various researchers (e.g., Harridge-March & Quinton 2009; Kozinets, 2006) attempted to develop different groupings or classifications of SM users. For instance, Harridge-March and Quinton, deriving from the RM loyalty ladder, proposed different types of SM users, particularly social networkers. These are: lurkers, newbies/tourists, minglers, and evangelists/celebrities/ insiders/ devotees (see Figure 2-6).

- "Lurkers" are social network members who prefer to observe before making contributions, mainly with an intention of familiarizing themselves with the network's culture.
- "Newbies" or "tourists" are those who have just started to contribute discussions but do not exhibit tangible commitment or engagement.
- "Minglers" are those discussants who place comments but with no particular regularity.
- "Celebrities" are those who are committed in terms of time and energy, and make frequent comments with a high degree of substance.

Figure 2.6. Social network contributors' ladder. Adapted from Harridge-March and Quinton (2009, p. 176)

The interesting points for marketers from these classifications are (even though the classifications need updating) the varying level of commitment of SM users and the influence that those users on the top level of the ladder (e.g., celebrities) may have on the lower level. Therefore, there is a need to identify, differentiate, and take into account the differences in the behavior of SM users and their level of involvement. In identifying SM users' involvement, marketers will be able to better understand their online consumers and manage them accordingly.

2.7. Social Media Scholarship in Sport Management Research

The scope and extent of use of SM is rapidly and constantly evolving across the globe (Rowe & Hutchins, 2014), and the transformation has been significant in the global sporting culture (Pedersen, 2014). Particularly, SM's popularity, penetration, and scope has been tremendous among athletes, coaches, managers, teams, leagues, fans, events, and sport governing bodies (Hutchins, 2014). The growing use and increasing penetration of SM in the sport sector has intrigued a number of social and behavioral scientists (Hutchins; Pedersen). In light of this dynamic, scholars are examining SM in various sport settings and gaining insights into its manifestations, characteristics, usage trends, etc. Indeed, a range of research topics associated with SM were investigated in diverse fields of sport management research (Pedersen, 2013). SM is, by nature, a communication platform, and the preponderance of studies on the topic have been conducted within the sub-disciplines of sport communication (e.g., Emmons & Butler, 2013; Sanderson, 2013) and sport marketing (e.g., Walsh, Clavio, Lovell, & Blaszka, 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010). However, the study of the dynamic interrelationship between sport and SM has a cross-disciplinary nature (Pedersen, 2013), and is studied through the lens of and in the context of the different sub-disciplines of sport management, such as sport law (e.g., Cornish & Larkin, 2014; Wendt & Young, 2011), sport governance (e.g., Van Namen, 2011), organisational management (e.g., Alonso & O'Shea, 2012), sport, race, and gender (e.g., Antunovic & Hardin, 2012), and sport event management (e.g., McGillivray, 2014).

While the SM scholarship in sport management research is still in its infancy (Billings & Hardin, 2014), published research on the topic is growing significantly (Pedersen, 2014). In this regard, with an intention of producing an empirical evidence on the current state and historical evolution of the SM scholarship in sport studies, Abeza et al. (2015) examined the topic areas that received the sport management research community's attention, the platforms that are

studied, the theories used, advanced, and developed, and the prevalence and nature of research methods employed and the software programmes used, along with historical trends on each of these areas addressed. For this, a cross-disciplinary census review of the SM academic literature published from 2008 (the earliest found) to June 2014 in academic journals in sport studies was conducted. The study identified 123 published SM articles in the period of six years and half. Out of these, 96 were empirical research papers (excluding commentaries and interviews) sourced from 29 journals.

While the SM scholarship in sport studies has a short history (six and half years by mid-2014), research activity in the area has grown at an increasing rate. Particular growth was observed since 2012, both in the published articles and the number of journals that published the articles. The platform that received the most scrutiny (41.7%) is Twitter, followed in distant second by Facebook (12.5%). Blogs come in third (10.4%). From the 96 articles analysed, Abeza et al. (2015) found that 47 of them made references to 21 theories. Unfortunately, those aspects typically considered to be the primary components of theory construction per se, such as proposing a theory, testing a new theory, critique of a theory, and comparison of theories are absent in SM scholarship in sport studies. In fact, these would not be of a high expectation from a scholarship that has just started emerging. However, it would the next step that the research community have to take.

Quantitative methods (50.6%) are the majority, however it has been observed that the use of qualitative methods (43.7%) has undergone a consistent growth over the six-and-a-half-year period analyzed. It has also been found that the research community has paid scant attention to both mixed and multi-methods research approaches. In terms of the data gathering instruments used, content analyses (50%) and surveys (28.9%) far exceeded any other method of data gathering. Interviews ranked third (16.7%) followed by experimental method (2.2%).

In examining the topic areas that received the attention of the SM research community in sport studies, the articles gathered were grouped into one of the six streams of research emerged from the analysis. These include: nature of SM, defining constructs, SM as a tool, legal & ethical considerations, industry applications, and issues and impacts. The streams represent the topics most commonly addressed in literature and do not necessarily cover all the aspects of SM that merit scholarly inquiry. Some of the streams are relatively developed and have accumulated a considerable body of knowledge, whereas others consist of only a few studies.

Based on their critical review, Abeza et al. (2015) organized the literature into five research streams (Figure 2-7) and summarised their findings as follows: (a) the SM literature provides a solid foundation for an understanding of SM in sport management research, (b) a significant concentration of the sport management research is on the topic of two SM platforms– Twitter and Facebook, (c) the utilisation of theories is still in the early stages, (d) there is a limited scope and range in the research methods adopted and data collection instruments employed, and (e) there is a lack of a framework that provides a summary of the current literature and that provides direction for future research.

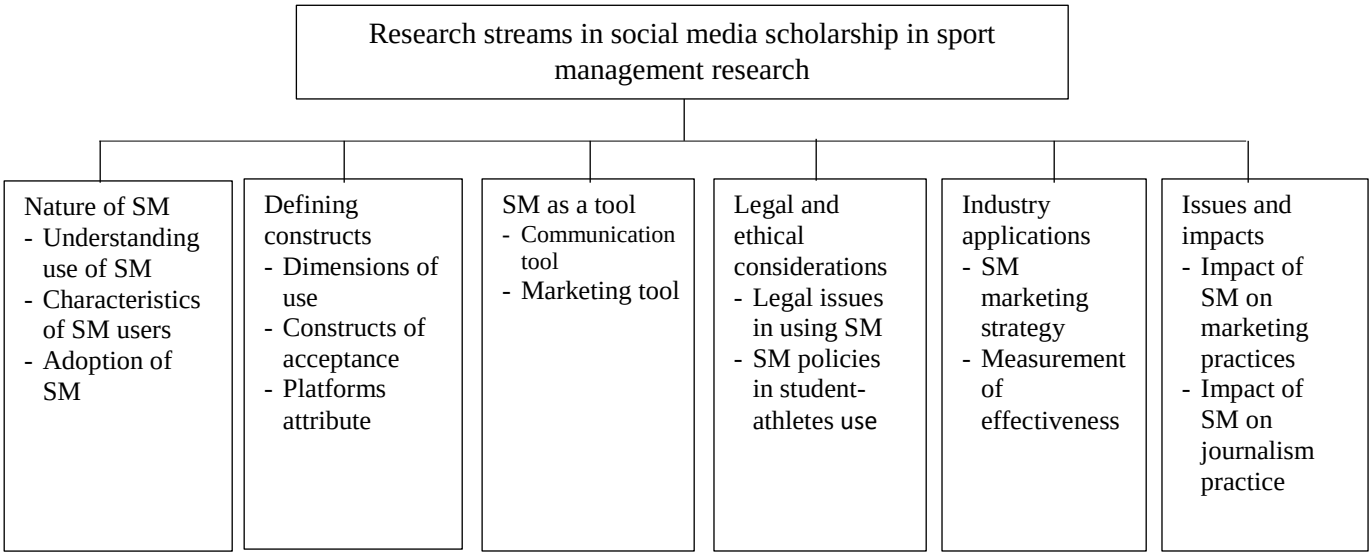

Figure 2-7. Summary of the research streams in social media in sport management research

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter provided an overview of the literature on the three major topic areas of the study (which are presented in seven sections): RM, professional sport, and SM. The chapter not only explored the different dimensions of the three topic areas, i.e. the scope, parts, and components, it also helped the work identify and specify its position on each of the topics discussed, such as working definitions (of RM, SM, sport fan), RM school of thought, and research gaps (in RM in sport, in SM scholarship in sport management). The concepts presented in the literature review are captured in Table 2-6 below, with the concepts on which the work has taken a position are emphasised.

Building on the foundational literature discussed thus far, the work then addresses the four guiding research questions in three different but related studies. These three studies are presented in chapter 3 (study #1), chapter 4 (study #2), and chapter 5 (study #3). Each of the three studies is based on the overarching literature reviewed in this chapter, although each of them also has their own tailored literature review section. The literature used in study #1 (chapter 3) touches on and is an extension of the different topics covered in the current chapter. Study #2 (chapter 4) takes an organisational perspective and its literature focuses on professional sport teams (RM in professional sport, SM use in professional sport, etc.). Study #3 (chapter 5) considers consumers' perspective and its literature concentrates on sport fans (unique characteristics of sport consumers, types of sport fans, etc.).

Table 2-6

Topic Areas on Which the Work at Hand Took Positions

Topic areas	Descriptions	
Emphasis of the study (the first italicized row)	*Business-to-customer marketing* (but does not mean that relationship building with other stakeholders is ruled out) Business-to-business	
Adopted School of thought of RM (the first italicized row)	*Nordic school* Industrial Marketing and Purchasing [IMP] Anglo-Australian approach North American school	
Working definition - RM	RM is "the process of identifying and establishing, maintaining, enhancing, and when necessary terminating relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties involved are met, where this is done by a mutual giving and fulfillment of promises (Grönroos, 2004, p. 101).	
Categories the RM research streams, and the focus of the study at hand (the first two italicized rows)	*Objectives of RM* *Instruments/tools of RM* Defining/underlying constructs of RM Issues related to RM Industry applications/ Implementation of RM	*Customer satisfaction, customer delight, share of customer, customer retention, loyalty, etc.* *Direct marketing, database marketing, customer partnering, one-to-one marketing, CRM* Trust, commitment, cooperation, closeness, relationship quality Privacy, cultural impact, impact of gender, impact of technology Implementation programmes, industry practices
RM theoretical framework	The three processes – communication, interaction and value – form a theory of RM.	
Value	The concept of value in RM refers to "adding more value" or "extras" to the core product that the customer perceives important, beneficial and unique.	
RM in sport	It is well accepted in sport focused RM studies (close to two dozens) that the sport industry benefits from RM approach	
Research setting	The four major league professional team sports (the "Big 4") dominate the market and are the focus of this study, namely NHL, NFL, NBA, and MLB.	
Sport fan	Sport fans who are considered in this study are self-reported sport fans. As Wann and Branscombe (1993) stated a sport fan is someone who says they are a sport fan or, as Stewart et al. (2003) contend, sport consumption is actually a self-defining phenomenon.	
Social Media	"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).	

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CHAPTER 3: Study 1

The Use of Social Media as a Relationship Marketing Tool in Professional Sport: A Netnographical Exploration

The magnitude and the extent of use of social media (SM) has been significant in the sport industry over the past decade (Hutchins, 2014; Pedersen, 2014; Rowe & Hutchins, 2014). In professional sport, various stakeholders are increasingly embracing different SM platforms. These include professional sport teams (Meng, Stavros, & Westberg, 2015), leagues (Hambrick & Kang, 2014), professional athletes (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2012), professional sporting events (Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012), and sport fans (Williams, Chinn, & Suleiman, 2014). As the popularity, penetration, and scope of social media consumption grows among the various stakeholders of the professional sport, the growing presence offers a multitude of opportunities for sports organisations (Watanabe, Yan, & Soebbing, 2015). Today, marketers are using SM as a medium to implement a variety of marketing communication elements such as news updates, sales, advertising, public relations, internal communication, and relationship marketing (Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015; Schultz & Peltier, 2013). While SM is a valuable resource to realise these marketing communication elements (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010), it predominantly appears to be an ideal tool to achieve relationship marketing goals (Hambrick & Svensson, 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010).

RM (relationship marketing), both as a theoretical framework and as a management approach, is a marketing orientation that goes beyond creating a single exchange and that focuses on building long-term relationships with customers, which is established on mutual satisfaction (Grönroos, 2004, 2012). RM is defined as “the process of identifying and establishing, maintaining, enhancing, and when necessary terminating relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties involved are met, where this is done

by a mutual giving and fulfillment of promises" (Grönroos, p. 101). As a process, building a long-term relationship requires communicating, and interacting and, thereby, engaging in dialogue with customers, so that relationships are established, maintained, and enhanced on an on-going basis (Grönroos, Williams & Chinn, 2010). Through a two-way continuous dialogue, businesses will be able to listen to and understand customers' needs, to deliver a co-created product, and to build long-term relationships (Grönroos; Gummesson, 1998; Peppers & Rogers, 2011). To ensure successful communication and dialogue, businesses are required to employ effective communication platforms (Williams & Chinn). Among these, SM platforms are rapidly becoming an ideal tool for ongoing two-way dialogue (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015; Williams & Chinn), and are providing new directions and benefits to RM; making the RM approach practical and affordable (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Reid, 2013; Williams & Chinn).

While SM has clearly become an important RM tool (Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015; Schultz & Peltier, 2013; Vernuccio, 2014), the majority of studies' appraisals are confined to the theoretical (and/or conceptual) benefits of SM as a RM tool (Dixon et al., 2015; Hambrick & Kang, 2014). Within the sport marketing literature that addresses SM's role, the medium has been discussed as a valuable conduit capable of building meaningful relationships between two parties (e.g., Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Meng et al., 2015; Wang & Zhou, 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010). However, within the context of professional sport teams, the use of SM in meeting RM goals is not yet fully understood and empirically supported. Therefore, producing empirical evidence that demonstrates how professional sport organisations use SM as an RM tool will be imperative.

In order to address the purpose of the study, three specific research questions are developed:

(i) How do professional sport teams use SM for an RM purpose (S_1RQ_1)?

(ii) What are the values, if any, professional sport teams create on SM as a RM tool (S_1RQ_2)?

(iii) What discernible differences and shared features exist among the professional sport teams' use of SM as an RM tool (S_1RQ_3)?

In addressing the three research questions, the work empirically informs us on the use of SM as an RM vehicle in a professional sport setting, and contributes to the existing literature by filling the information gap on the use of SM as an RM tool, and extending and augmenting previous SM studies in the context of professional sport. The findings provide an up-to-date understanding of the topic, which has the potential to serve marketers as an input in developing an informed marketing strategy in the realisation of an effective use of SM as an RM tool.

Literature Review

Relationship Marketing and the Sport Industry

Sport today is a social activity that operates in a commercial environment as an industry (Chadwick, 2009; Smith & Stewart, 2010). It is a part of the culture of many societies in the modern world (Chadwick, 2009; Coakley, 2014) where it is increasingly becoming the attraction point for families, neighbours, citizens, and nations (Coakley). Sport has occupied and will continue to occupy the interest of a significant portion of spectators and viewers across the globe (Stavros & Westberg, 2009), and today, there are more sport fans than ever before (Kim & Trail, 2011; Stavros, Pope, & Winzar, 2008). However, the cost of sport consumption is rising, such as entry fees, television viewing, and team merchandise (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2014: Stavros & Westberg, 2009), and repetitive ticket purchases and frequent fan attendance at major sports is declining (Stavros, et al., 2008). Sport consumers are confronted today with numerous choices (e.g., locations and events) on which to spend their time and money (Shank & Lyberger, 2014). This situation is worsened by the continuing upsurge of new media channels and technologies (Rein, Kotler, & Shields, 2006). As the result of the increasing cost of sport consumption as well

as the continually expanding alternative entertainment options, among other reasons, fans today are finding themselves in the difficult position of continuing to display and monetise their loyalty to a sport team (Mullin et al., 2014; Rein et al., 2006). Some sport consumers have the view that moneymaking is the prime focus of sport organisation (and players) rather than caring for their fans (Harris & Ogbonna, 2008; Kim & Trail, 2011).

Fan loyalty to a sports team is far stronger than the loyalty that other customers give to any other brand (Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2011); however, as Adamson, Jones, and Tapp (2006) indicate, taking fan loyalty "as a given" will lead to nothing but failure. Also, despite the increasing number of sport fans today (Kim & Trail, 2011; Stavros, et al., 2008), the decline in repeat ticket purchases and in frequent fans attendance at major sports events implies that loyal customers are being replaced by newer, less committed ones (Stavros, et al., 2008; Lachowetz, McDonald, Sutton, & Clark, 2001). Even if this situation does not have an immediate effect on sport teams, as Stavros et al. (2008) have stated, it erodes a loyal fan base in the long term, and thus threaten the financial security and stability of an organisation. Hence, retaining an enthusiastic fan base, and intensifying fan loyalty and involvement is becoming the foremost challenge for today's sport marketers (Mullin et al., 2014; Rein et al., 2006; Stavros & Weisberg, 2009). Additionally, in spite of a substantial increase in revenue in the sports industry over the years, the cost of running a sport organisation has increased at a much faster rate (Kim & Trail, 2011). Sport organisations are not only facing spiraling costs, but also increasing fan discontent and disconnection (Gladden & Sutton, 2009; Magnusen, Kim, & Kim, 2012; Kim & Trail, 2011), competitions within the sport industry, increasing expectations of customers, and competition from multiple entertainment services (Adamson, Jones, & Tapp, 2006; Stavros & Westberg, 2009; Kim & Trail, 2011). In this regard, a number of researchers (e.g., Gladden & Sutton, 2009; Harris & Ogbonna, 2008; Stavros et al., 2008; Tsiotsou, 2013; Kim & Trail, 2011)

have advocated for a fundamental shift in sports marketing that moves from the more traditional transaction marketing to a RM approach.

In today's sport business environment, RM presents a compelling marketing approach as opposed to the widely practiced short-term transactions and immediate profits practice (Gladden & Sutton, 2009; Kim & Trail, 2011; Stavros et al, 2008; Wang, Ho, & Zhang, 2012). Kim, Trail, and Ko (2011) empirically support this claim, as an enhanced relationship quality results in stronger sport customer behavioral outcomes, including greater media consumption, licensed-product consumption, and attendance behaviours. Howard and Crompton (2004) and Kim, Trail, Woo, and Zhang (2011) also point to the power that a strong fan base has in attracting sponsors and media, indeed still one of the main sources of revenue for most sport organisations. Howard and Crompton (2004), Kim and Trail (2011) and Wang et al. (2012) also add that any decline in loyal fan base can mean a threat to that sport team's sponsorship sales, naming rights, licensing agreements, and team merchandise sales.

By developing a strong relationship with their fans, as Stavros et al., (2008) and Kim and Trail (2011) have illustrated, sport organisations can both enhance and maintain fan repeat purchasing behaviour, psychological attachment, and relational attitude and, in general, strengthen their fan base. Bee and Kahle (2006) indicated that in order for sport companies to be successful in their businesses, they should view their fans as lifetime customers, and make a strong effort to deeply understand their wants, desires, and values on a continuing basis. The RM approach enables sport marketers to go beyond short-term ticket sales and to develop a meaningful, beneficial relationship that is proactive, interactive and enduring (Bee & Kahle, 2006; Kim & Trail, 2011). Understanding the needs of fans and listening to their concerns on an ongoing basis is a prudent approach today for the survival of sport teams, and it is where a RM approach will be of a great importance. As discussed above, SM are rapidly becoming an ideal

tool for ongoing two-way dialogue (Filo et al., 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010), and are providing new directions and benefits to RM. While different tools exist in RM practice (e.g., database marketing, Stavros et al., 2008; sport talks, Bee & Kahle, 2006), SM is becoming an ideal medium that is making the RM approach much more practical, affordable, and meaningful (Abeza et al., 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010).

Social Media and Relationship Marketing in Professional Team Sports

In professional team sports, SM (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) is increasingly becoming an accepted set of digital tools that are being used as part of their marketing and communication approach (Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Wang & Zhou, 2015; Williams et al., 2014). All 123 major professional sports teams in the four major North American leagues, for example, have a presence on Twitter. As SM's presence grows, scholarly research on SM and its role in RM in sport from an organisation perspective is advancing. Taking an organisational perspective in professional sport context, half a dozen studies (i.e., Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Pronschinske et al., 2012; Stavros et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2011; Williams & Chinn, 2010; Witkemper et al., 2012) highlighted the role of SM in building a two-way collaborative relationship through a dialogue between teams and their stakeholders. These studies underscored how RM requires a heightened focus on communication, interaction, and value, and demonstrated how SM can aid these efforts by creating an environment of two-way communications between organisations and consumers, in particular. The findings of the existing studies that addressed SM in RM approach in professional sport are briefly presented below.

The pioneering work that conceptually demonstrated the place of SM in an RM approach in the context of sport is the work of Williams and Chinn (2010). Williams and Chinn extended Grönroos' (2004) RM model (i.e., communication, interaction, and value) by focusing more specifically on RM and SM, and applying it to the sport industry. Linking their theoretical

grounding to Williams and Chinn's work, Hambrick & Kang (2014) explored how four North American professional sports leagues use Pinterest as an RM tool. The authors found that Pinterest is used to promote the fan group experience, provide team and game information, and sell team-related merchandise.

Waters et al. (2011) explored the National Football League's (NFL) relationship cultivation via Facebook pages and official websites. The authors found that Facebook usage centered on relationship nurturing followed by highlighting team partners and game promotions. Pronschinske et al. (2012) studied RM efforts practiced by teams in the four North American major leagues through Facebook, and how these teams connected and built relationships with their fans. The authors found that page attributes signaling authenticity (directed from the office site) and user engagement (dyadic interaction) have the greatest impact on attracting and maintaining a Facebook fan base. The authors concluded that sports organisations could benefit from RM by developing ongoing interactions through this medium. Wang and Zhou (2015) on their part explored how 30 National Basketball Association (NBA) teams used Twitter to build relationship with the public, which involved professional, personal, and community relationships. The authors found that NBA teams tend to use SM to develop professional relationships with their publics via sharing information and promoting products. The authors interpreted professional relationship as the adoption of a professional role when dealing with key public members; personal relationship as close connections and interactions between organisations and their individual stakeholders; and community relationship as organisations' commitment to and interaction with the community they serve.

O'Shea and Alonso (2011) examined the role of SM alongside traditional media in professional sports teams in Australia. They surveyed organisational executives and identified challenges and opportunities associated with the role of SM in facilitating RM within sports. In

terms of opportunities, organisations can gain a better understanding of how SM users access and process information provided through these platforms. They can also learn how to leverage these conduits alongside traditional media outlets. Hopkins (2013), in his study, identified how a professional sports franchise in Australia utilised SM platforms to improve the level of engagement with their fan base. According to the author, over one-year period, the club improved its level and quality of communication using SM. Hopkins stated that organisations are using SM to turn their attention to their customers' interactions through constructive use of consumer feedback, rather than simply focusing solely of transactions.

Theoretical Framework

According to Grönroos (2000) and Ravald and Grönroos (1996), the basic perspective of RM is based on the idea that a relationship between two parties creates additional value for the customer as well as for the supplier or service provider. That additional value exists on top of the value of products and/or services that are exchanged. As Grönroos (2004) stated, the principal relationship is the one between provider of goods/services and buyers or users of goods/services, and hence, RM is primarily harnessed towards the management of relationship between providers and users. In an RM perspective, as opposed to the transaction-oriented perspective, products (i.e., physical goods and equipment) are offerings that are bundled with a host of services that enhance the value of the products. Hence, according to Grönroos (2004), beyond the offering of the core product, what matters is delivering the additional elements better than the competitors to create an added value for customers. Such orientation translates the product (the tangible goods) into a process of service (or a total service offering); in other words, it is the product (tangibles) plus a host of services (intangibles).

Grönroos (2004) noted that RM is first and foremost a process. He elaborated his original definition by stating how the process of RM moves:

> from identifying potential customers to establishing a relationship with them, and then to maintaining the relationship that has been established and to enhance it so that more business as well as good references and favorable word of mouth are generated. Finally, sometimes relationships are terminated either by the supplier or by the customer (or by any other party in a network of relationships), or they just seem to fade away. Such situations must also be managed carefully by the supplier or service provider (Grönroos, 2004, p. 102).

Grönroos (2004) then identified and discussed the three areas of focus that are required in the implementation of a successful RM strategy: (i) a planned communication process supporting the development and enhancement of relationships, (ii) an interaction process as the core of RM, and (iii) a value process as the outcome of RM. As Grönroos underscored, "when all three processes are in place and well understood we have a good part of a theory of RM" (p. 103).

Therefore, for an RM strategy to be successful, an integration of all marketing communication (IMC) messages (as an important part of RM) will be required to carry out the process of relationship establishment, maintenance, and enhancement (Grönroos, 2004). The central focus of RM being a total service offering, the management of an interaction process becomes the core of RM the same way the exchange of a product is the core of transaction marketing. In the interaction process, businesses (suppliers of goods or providers of services) interact with their customers and stakeholders through their people (e.g., in-person contact) and technologically supported platforms. For a relationship to develop, through the creation and sharing of knowledge between businesses and customers, a value-enhancing interaction needs to take place. In the interaction process, the dialogue facilitates the co-creation of value with customers and ultimately the transfer of the value to the customers. Thereby, the three processes – communication, interaction, and value – form a theory of RM.

In adopting an RM approach, sport marketers communicate, listen, address customer needs and desires, and maintain and enhance their particular fan base (Bee & Kahle, 2006; Kim & Trail, 2011). In addition, maintaining relationships between a sport organisation and a large

number of worldwide sports consumers has been more limited in the past due to the lack of any easy-to-use technology (Kim & Trail, 2011). Today, the emergence of SM encourages sport marketers to engage in communication and interaction (Filo et al., 2015; Hambrick & Svensson, 2015), as well as maintain and enhance the relationships that the organisations build with their worldwide fans (Abeza et al., 2013). As indicated above, SM is providing new directions and benefits to RM; making relational exchanges affordable and more effective to sport marketers (Williams & Chinn, 2010).

Method

The overall purpose of this study is to investigate how professional sport teams in the North American "Big Four" (i.e. NBA, NFL, MLB [Major League Baseball National], and NHL [National Hockey League]) use SM as an RM tool. To accomplish this, the study employed the netnographic method. Netnography is an ethnographic approach applied to the study of social interaction in online environments (Kozinets, 1998, 2006, 2012). It emerged as an adaptation of some premises of the ethnographic method that was originally designed to investigate offline culture (Braga, 2009). While traditional ethnography is concerned with observing people (Edwards & Skinner, 2010), netnography studies "conversational acts", including "the act, type and content of the posting, the medium, and so on" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 7). Accordingly, the unit of analysis is the exchanged information online rather than 'the person'. A good netnography, as Kozinets (1998) underscored, is built on the same foundation as a good ethnography, such as persistent observation, gaining rapport and trust, and researcher introspection" (p. 7).

Kozinets (2006) identified three types of netnography: observational, participant-observational, and autonetnography. For the purpose of the current study, observational netnography was deemed the most appropriate, similar to the work of Stavros et al. (2013). It is worth mentioning here that the study's research questions can, admittedly, be addressed through

other established conventional methods of content studies such as discourse analysis, textual analysis, content analysis (quantitative or qualitative), or thematic analysis. However, each of the aforementioned conventional methods individually fail to serve as a sufficient method to fully address all the research questions. By contrast, netnography, "encompasses multiple methods, approaches and analytic techniques" (Kozinets, 2006, p. 132), and shares elements of each of the abovementioned established methods. In connection with this, the current study goes beyond treating the SM messages/content as a manifest content; it adopts an anthropological method to examine the online latent content as embedded expression of meaning through the researcher immersion into the "culture" and extensive and deep exposure to the setting. The approach helped the researcher gain insight into the way professional teams attempt to communicate and co-create added value through interaction with their fans.

The study follows Kozinets'(2006) methodological procedures for conducting netnography: *making entrée* (i.e., formulation of research questions and identification of appropriate online for a for study), *data collection* (obtaining data from the computer-mediated communications and observations of the communication), *data analysis and interpretation* (classification, coding analysis, and contextualisation of communicative acts), and ensuring *ethical standards*. Each of these procedures are briefly described below.

Entrée

To investigate how professional sport organisations use SM as an RM tool, the study is primarily guided by the three research questions. For this purpose, the identification of an appropriate online setting, and, by extension, the data collection process are informed by three conditions. This includes: (i) the selection of a SM platform to serve as a source of evidence, (ii) the identification of professional sport teams that use a verified SM account on the identified platform, and (iii) the specification of a period of time over which data is gathered.

Selection of a social media platform. Twitter has been selected as a SM platform from which data can be gathered that help find answer for the study's three research questions. Twitter is a widely embraced (Hull, 2014; Williams et al., 2014), rapidly growing platform (Lee, Ryu, Clavio, Lovell, Lim, & Pedersen, 2014) that is becoming a permanent fixture within the sport industry (Frederick et al., 2012). Twitter is a portal to get fresh and breaking news, to connect with people with whom users have no means of connecting otherwise, and it is live and public (Abeza & O'Reilly, 2014). Twitter also presents an opportunity for organisations to engage in a timely and direct contact with their audiences (Witkemper et al., 2012). It allows sport organisations to share information, communicate, and interact with their stakeholders (Frederick et al., 2012; Hambrick, 2012). All the 122 professional sport teams in the "Big 4" are using Twitter. Interestingly, as Meng et al. (2015) suggested after examining the Twitter account and Facebook pages of 30 NBA teams, Facebook is used by NBA teams "as a vehicle to push certain messages," while Twitter is used "as more of an interactive tool" (p. 211).

Identification of professional sport teams. Due to the time-consuming nature of data immersion performed in netnography, the identification of a reasonably justifiable number of professional sport teams with a verified Twitter account amongst the 122 teams has been found practical. Each of the four major league professional sport teams' verified Twitter accounts was visited, and a list was compiled which organised teams from highest to lowest number of followers by league (as of February 29th, 2016). From the list, From the list, the three teams with the most Twitter followers and the two teams with the lowest number of Twitter followers for each league were selected. This resulted in a total of 20 teams' verified Twitter accounts (five from each league), and the teams with the third highest number of followers in each league was used for a pilot study (one from each, for a total of four teams). See Table 3-1 for the list of the identified teams. While the teams were selected based on the number of their followers, the

sample resulted teams with a wide range of characteristics such as market size, locations, performance, and history.

Table 3-1

Selected Professional Sport Teams with A Verified Twitter Account

Rank by followers	League/Team	Twitter handle	# of followers as of February 29th, 2016
	NFL		
1	New England Patriots	@Patriots	2,328,295
2	Denver Broncos	@Broncos	1,677,409
3	Dallas Cowboys	@dallascowboys	1,612,681
31	St. Louis Rams	@RamsNFL	358,696
32	Jacksonville Jaguars	@Jaguars	296,170
	NBA		
1	Los Angeles Lakers	@Lakers	4,659,661
2	Miami Heat	@MiamiHEAT	3,264,622
3	Chicago Bulls	@chicagobulls	2,517,070
29	Utah Jazz	@utahjazz	430,167
30	New Orleans Pelicans	@PelicansNBA	428,337
	NHL		
1	Chicago Blackhawks	@NHLBlackhawks	1,225,493
2	Toronto Maple Leafs	@MapleLeafs	1,161,022
3	Montreal Canadiens	@CanadiensMTL	1,004,231
29	Phoenix Coyotes	@ArizonaCoyotes	199,446
30	Florida Panthers	@FlaPanthers	198,337
	MLB		
1	New York Yankees	@Yankees	1,576,169
2	Toronto Blue Jays	@BlueJays	1,258,710
3	Boston Red Sox	@RedSox	1,200,726
29	San Diego Padres	@Padres	218,725
30	Miami Marlins	@Marlins	185,791

Specification of a study time period. In an attempt (i) to specify a time period during the year meant to capture the in-season and the offseason for each of the four leagues, and (ii) to capture an overlapping time period for all the four leagues in the 2015-16 season, it was found that August 2015 - February 2016 presents the best balance (see Table 3-2). Based on this specification, data was collected retrospectively from February 29, 2016 to August 1, 2015. Any earlier or later time period did not offer the balance between regular and off-season of the four

leagues. In addition, this time period allowed us to capture at least 3 months of regular season and 2 months of off-season from each league. The time period was also contained to seven months as factors such as the amount of "traffic" (i.e., volume of content exchanged) on the user's account and the number of Tweets available constrains the retrospective retrieval of Twitter data.

Table 3-2

Data Collection Period - Regular/Off-season

League	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Remark
NBA			27						13				4RGL&3OFF
NHL			7						9				5RGL&2OFF
NFL		10				3							5RGL&2OFF
MLB				1					5				4RGL&3OFF
Data													

Key: gray shade - regular season, #s - dates, black shade - period data collected, RGL- months in regular season, OFF- months in off-season

Data Collection

Informed by the above stated three conditions, the publicly available seven months of Tweets (from August 1, 2015 to February 29, 2016) and related Twitter usage data of the 20 professional teams were gathered retrospectively. This was done using Open Broadcaster Software (OBS), an open source software for live streaming and recording (Zhang & Liu, 2015). Using OBS, all the 20 selected teams' official Twitter accounts were live-computer-screen video recorded as one navigated and scrolled-through tweets posted over the seven-month period. Live-computer-screen recording allowed the recording of every engagement with the Twitter interface. In other words, as the researcher navigates through a Twitter page, watches videos, views Graphics Interchange Format (GIFs), pictures, and 'views conversations' (expand retweets (RTs), replies and quotes to read them), the software captures these activities and video records them. A total of 63 hours of video-recorded data was gathered, averaging 3 hours per team.

With the purpose of the study at hand, where Twitter interaction/conversation being at the core of the study's interest, it is worth noting here that other commonly used data capturing software programs that are commonly reported in the literature (e.g., NCapture) do not allow the mining/retrieval of fans replies. The data captured through software programs also do not allow a researcher to come into direct contact with the dataset in its original (cultural/natural) setting, nor does it capture multimedia content. The use of the other commonly used data capturing software programs would have limited the retrieval of Twitter conversation.

It is important to underscore the relevance of the data collection method chosen for this study. Indeed, netnography allowed the researcher to answer the research questions most appropriately than any other competing methods could permit. More specifically, the data immersion component allowed researchers to gain an understanding of the latent contents. The immersion particularly facilitated the deciphering of a culture's particularity (e.g., nature of inside jokes that transpire in communications and interactions, perception of tone) in a better way than other competing content study methods.

Upon the completion of the data gathering, the researcher went through the recorded files to initially familiarise himself with it and then to run a preliminary assessment of the use of Twitter for communication, interaction, and value creation purpose. As per Grönroos (2004), in RM theory, a communication process is an act of transmitting or broadcasting a content by the team (e.g., tweeting content without engaging in conversations) that is meant to inform the consuming public of a good or service; an interaction process is a two-way or reciprocal exchange of content (e.g., engaging in conversation with followers); and the creation of value is adding greater/extra value, on top of the core product offering (i.e., the game), that emerges through the process of communication and interaction (i.e., dialogue). These three are the sequential core components of an RM process (per Grönroos, 2004).

Data Analysis

To enhance the reliability of the data analysis, a research assistant helped conduct a pilot study with the researcher. The pilot study used the dataset of the teams with the third most followed teams in each league (four in total). The two researchers carried out the pilot analysis independently, through a constant comparison by reading, visualizing content such as pictures, videos, weblinks, and text (Tweets, RTs, hashtags, and mentions). Through a number of successive discussions and clarifications, the researcher ensured that the assistant researcher read and fully understood the literature and was familiarised with the data. Upon the completion of the pilot study, the emergent themes were compared and differences were discussed until a 100% agreement was reached. The pilot study informed the analytical procedure that was applied to the entire dataset in terms of recording observations, using reflective 'field notes,' running team-to-team comparison, and employing the inductively derived thematic analysis.

Informed by the pilot study, the researcher conducted the analysis going through the rest of the data of the 16 teams, and running a constant teams-to-teams comparison upon the completion of each team's dataset. Through the process, the researcher developed, clarified, and enhanced emergent observations. In examining the dataset, the communication, interaction, and value processes of RM were developed through a thematic analysis, employing an inductive approach. In addition, the researcher also had close, extensive, and prolonged exposure to the setting by immersing himself into the data as a form of anthropological approach. The immersion allowed the author to gain valuable insight into the way the teams communicate, interact, and create values. During this process, the researcher recorded his observations, used reflective 'field notes', and run team-to-team constant comparative analysis. The author followed the processes of noting, abstracting and comparing, checking and refining, and generalizing, which corresponds to Kozinets' (1998; 2006; 2012) recommendation. Some of the values of RM

emerged through the researcher's immersion into the seven months' Twitter data recordings. The immersion also facilitated a deeper understanding of the culture of using Twitter as a RM medium, which has helped to produce "thick descriptions" on the teams' use of Twitter and the identification of informative practices.

Findings

(i) How do professional sport teams use SM for an RM purpose?

The examination of professional sport teams' SM use for an RM purpose is grounded upon, and guided by, the three sequential core components of an RM process: communication, interaction and value. Findings on the communication and interaction activities carried out on the platform are presented below. Value, the third component and outcome of RM, emerges from the sequential process of communication and interaction, and the findings on the emergent values are presented under the section that follows.

Communication. A communication process, according to the RM theory, is an act of transmitting or broadcasting a content by the team that is meant to inform the consuming public about a good or service. The process involves an integration of marketing communication messages (Grönroos, 2004). The use of Twitter for communication purpose has been found on all the teams' Twitter account. The teams used Twitter to disseminate a range of information from live game update to merchandise sales and fan appreciation events. Although the level at which each team uses their Twitter account for different communication purposes varied, it was found that the teams' communication focused on seven observed purposes (UPSPASS), which were inductively developed and refined through team-to-team constant comparative analysis. The purposes included updating, selling, publicizing, promoting, spreading, appreciating, and servicing. Below, each of these observed purposes of communication are described briefly, and examples are presented in Table 3-3.

- Updating – keeping users informed about pre-, live, post-game update, players/ coaches statements, injuries, team/player stats, trades, behind the scenes information
- Publicizing – public relations or image building activities such as charity and community support, visit to community (e.g., hospitals and schools), fund raising, kids' activities
- Selling - attempts to persuade users make purchases of merchandises from the teams' stores, tickets to games, auctioning of signed jersey and balls
- Promoting – activities to stimulate or boost sales through contest, sweepstakes, giveaways, lottery, raffles
- Appreciating – recognizing fans' support through activities such as fan meetings, birthday and holiday wishes, fans-players meet-and-greet, show-your-fanship campaign
- Spreading – expanding and diffusing the reach of information - Retweeting players and celebrity fans tweets, retweeting team's reporters and staff (e.g., PR, management, mascot, dancers/cheerleaders) tweets, directing fans to teams' website and other SM platforms
- Servicing – providing sponsors an added platform to publicise their association through appreciation of their support, promoting their services/products, sponsors gestures

Table 3-3

Communication Process – Emergent Purposes

Communication type	Examples of Tweet
Updating	**@Lakers:** Get a behind the scenes look at today's practice session in San Antonio here: on.nba.com/1T3KY9u (Feb. 5th, 2016)
	@Marlins: Rough start. Braves take a 4-0 lead in the top of the 1st. @FlashGJr will lead things off in the bottom of the inning. #LetsGoFish (Sep. 25th, 2015)
Publicizing	**@ArizonaCoyotes:** Our Annual Telethon raised $67,000 for @PhxChildrens Expansion! Our fans are the best. ☞bit.ly/1nPXAEv (Jan. 27th, 2016)
	@utahjazz:.@rudygobert27 reading with the kids at St. John the Baptist Elementary for the "Be A Team Player –Read!" contest. 📚 [Picture of Gobert reading with a group of kids] (Feb. 24th, 2016)
Selling	**@Padres:** After Christmas sale at the team store! Store hours are Monday- Saturday 10am to 5pm and Sunday from 11am to 4pm. (Dec. 26th, 2015)
	@Jaguars: Rock your Bold at The 'Bank for TNF! Expedited shipping now available for #BeBold gear: http://jagrs.com/BoldRushShop111515 (Nov. 15, 2015)

Promoting	**@Yankees:** Time to tweet #NYYSunrunSaves & enter to win a signed ball from a former #Yankees reliever! atmlb.com/1J92MG23 @Sunrun (Sep. 14th, 2015) **@NHLBlackhawks:** It's our final day of #HawksHolidays giveaways! Win a trip to the #StadiumSeries in Minny: csnchicago.com/hawksholidays (Dec. 17th, 2015)
Appreciating	**@dallascowboys:** Come meet @RandyGregory_4 at @belk in the Dallas Galleria until 5pm! #Cowboys4komen (Oct. 5th, 2016) **@Patriots:** Thanks for all the love #PatriotsNation! A round-up of reactions from famous fans: buff.ly/1S74phP (Jan. 25th, 2016)
Spreading	**@Lakers:** RT @TSN_Sports: .@StephenCurry30 gets @KobeBryant to sign his jersey after the game. #NBAAllStarTO (Feb. 14th, 2016) **@BlueJays:** RT @MStrooo6: Never had this much fun playing the game I love. (Sep. 27th, 2016)
Servicing	**@chicagobulls:** We're at @dunkinchicago at 1500 Larkin Ave in Elgin until 1 pm. Stop by for some donuts and to say hi! [Pictures of mascot] (Sep. 25th, 2016) **@PelicansNBA:** Who wants to cook over the holidays? Enjoy some @Dominos victory pizza! 50% OFF large pies online with the code PELICAN tomorrow. (Dec. 26th, 2015)

Interaction. An interaction process, according to RM theory, is a two-way or reciprocal exchange of content. In examining the teams' culture of interaction, different practices were uncovered. Some of the teams displayed consistent and frequent interaction (e.g., Chicago Blackhawks), others displayed irregular and occasional interaction (e.g., Denver Broncos), and some others carried out infrequent and limited amount of interaction (e.g., Los Angeles Lakers). These practices represented a spectrum of interaction observed on the teams Twitter accounts. Despite the disparity observed in the practice, interaction of some degree (e.g., frequent or infrequent) was observed on all teams' Twitter accounts. The interactions were at times dyadic (between the team and an individual user), and mostly multiple (between the team and users at large). A variety of interaction episodes emerged during the data immersion. Those that stood out included casual exchange, customer service, rally message, fan spotlight, players' question and answer period (Q&A). Table 3-4 presents dialogue examples of each interaction episodes.

- In *casual exchanges*, conversations had the particularity of being largely unrelated to the core product (the game) and centered around other aspects of fans' relationship to the team (e.g., sharing enthusiasm for players and team, being followed back by the team account, receiving a birthday wish from the team, etc.).

- In *customer service,* interactions were taking place to address fans' varied questions about the team (from issues about game day uniforms to team management), and troubleshooting issues with online access, mobile applications, or contest clarifications. This type of interaction particularly involved clearing up confusions and addressing concerns and requests.

- *In rally message,* conversations were carried out revolving around team campaign messages/slogans. The messages helped build a hub where fans interact, express their fanship and engage in dialogue with other fans. Some of these include *#BroncosCountry -Denver, #JazzNation -Utah, #GoHabsGo -Montreal, #LetsGoFish –Marlins,* #ColorRush – Rams, #GoCat – Panthers, #TakeFlight – Pelicans.

- *In fan spotlight,* conversations were often initiated by fans and revolved around game experience. Using pictures during live (or post) games, for example, fans reached to share their appearance at a game, and the team replied, acknowledging their attendance or viewership on television.

- In *player Q&A,* teams invited fans to submit specific questions to which a player answered in real time through text or short video. Interaction occurred between the player and the fan, but was facilitated and monitored through the team's account.

- In *content delivery*, conversations (usually brief) were carried in response to fans' request for team related digital contents, such as a video or GIF for a play made during the game or the request for a live stream of a practice session.

Table 3-4

Various Episodes of Interaction Between Fans and The Team Through Twitter

Episodes interacted topic	Examples of related dialogue
Casual exchange	**@TauniaHottman tweeted:** Omg @Broncos when I saw you were following me back, I might have just peed a little. #loveyoumore. **@Broncos replied**: @TauniaHottman Hmmm … Thanks? ☺.

	@TauniaHottman replied: @Broncos well, I initially stood up at my desk and screamed like I was on fire. Then...the other. 😂😂 **@LikeACouplet**: @CanadiensMTL it's my birthday today!! #gohabsgo **@CanadiensMTL replied**: @LikeACouplet Happy birthday! How old are you now, 7 years old? 😊 ^ER **@LikeACouplet replied**: @CanadiensMTL Thanks, and I guess you could say I'm 5 now haha! I can't wait to celebrate & see the habs at the game on Wed with my friend!
Customer service	**@craignicoll16:** @RedSox could you tell me If/when there would be tickets for the games v yankees in September might become available to purchase **@RedSox replied:** @craignicoll16 Yankees tickets will become available after a drawing for the opportunity to purchase. Likely within the next 2 months. **@Broncos:** .@DEN_Broncofanss wanted a #Peyton-signed football. Wish granted, thanks to @ArrowGlobal! What's your #BroncosWish? **@alison_maclean replied**: @Broncos @ArrowGlobal my #BroncosWish is a sideline pass for Sunday. Travelled from Scotland to the US for the first time for #SDvsDEN 🏈🔷 **@Broncos replied**: @alison_maclean DM us when you can! Your #BroncosWish is in the works!
Rally message	**@RamsNFL:** Join the Rush! Follow the steps 👇 to #ColorRush your Twitter profile avatar and win sweet #Rams prizes! **@scothoffman replied:** @STLouisRams Me with @daniklup....and @a_quality_guy, @dvond and @seattlerams_nfl in the background. #GoRams!! **@RamsNFL:** @scothoffman @daniklup @a_quality_guy @dvond @seattlerams_nfl Great pic! Great event! #ColorRush 🏈 [Picture by @ scothoffman treated with golden Rams' filter] 3 **@NHLBlackHawks**: Keep sharing your #Blackhawks goals on Twitter and Instagram using #WhatsYourGoal. They'll be displayed here: http://onego.al/HoRDA **@Erin_Catalyst11 replied**: @NHLBlackhawks My goal is to get @SDarling_33 jersey and maybe meet him someday. #WhatsYourGoal **@NHLBlackHawks replied**: We know you're all the way in Alabama but we're sending you a @SDarling_33 jersey! And we'll have Scott sign it, too https://t.co/nTBM5bPx4G **@Erin_Catalyst11 replied**: Holy Smokes! That's so amazing! @NHLBlackhawksTHANK YOU SO MUCH!! #DayMade 🙂 https://t.co/35vFPN34Xk
Players' Q&A	**@Marlins:** Marcell Ozuna will be taking over @Marlins for a Twitter Q&A. Submit your questions using hashtag #AskTheFish **@lorenzo_bacchin replied:** @Marlins Marcell, what's your NBA team? Good luck this season! Go Fish! #AskTheFish **@Marlins replied:** .@lorenzo_bacchin #AskTheFish [short video answer]3 **@Redsox:** It's just about time for @RusneyCastillo to answer your questions! #Rusneychat #SoxWinterWeekend [Picture of Castillo in front of a laptop] **Redsox:** "I have a barber in Miami. I asked him if he wants to do something new, do it with my hair." #RusneyChat **@Redsox quoted @Urkiel31:** @RedSox @RusneyCastillo #rusneychat who cuts your hair?
Fan spotlight	**@utahjazz** RT @jessicaabeere: swoop lake city with #dramabay @utahjazz #wedemgirlz [picture of two women at game] **@utahjazz:** @jessicaabeere Go Jazz @j**amminjoe23**: celebrating national margarita day and watching @arizonacoyotes - solid for a Monday! #LetsGoCoyotes [picture of drink] @**arizonacoyotes replied**: [fist bump emoji]
Content delivery	**@mynameisheather:** @NHLBlackhawks all i want is a gif of Jonny celebrating the 2nd period goal on one leg. 🤷 #movesliketazer #OhCaptainMyCaptain **@NHLBlackhawks replied:** @mynameisheather one moment please **@NHLBlackhawks replied:** @mynameisheather ta-da! [GIF of Jonathan Toews celebrating goal] **@Padres:** Hey Padres fans! You get to pick tomorrow's photos/videos! Reply to let us know what you'd like to see from #PadresST! **@ontheMark86 replied:** @Padres Shots of Yangervis Solarte's new hair! **@Padres replied:** .@ontheMark86 Here ya go! Looks like Cashner may be rubbing off on him 😂

(ii) What values, if any, professional sport teams create on SM as an RM tool?

The creation of value, according to RM theory, is adding greater/extra value, on top of the core product offering (i.e., the game), that emerges through the process of communication and interaction (i.e., dialogue). The values (co) created on Twitter varied from teams to teams, which is, partly, a reflection of the observed differences in the practices of communication and interaction among the teams. Mainly, the differences resulted from such factors as frequency of interaction (e.g., frequent or infrequent), length of the interaction (e.g., one-time back-and-forth conversation or thread of exchanges), game day (e.g., game day vs off-days), etc. Despite the variance, different emergent values identified that were created over the following three different periods: *during game, pre-and post-games,* and *ongoing*. Table 3-5 presents the summary of the emergent values along with examples.

During games. It was observed that the use of Twitter extended, and thereby enhances, fans' live game experiences. It provided an avenue for fans to stay up-to-date and to be informed instantly and directly by the team, and to unite around a team to celebrate victory or discuss a loss. The three emergent values created during games were: enhanced game experience, enhanced game-extended experience, and voicing game experience. While the first two are team-initiated values, the latter were Twitter facilitated fans-initiated values. See Table 3-5 for examples.

Pre- and post-games. The values created in pre- and post-games periods were team initiated. Teams used Twitter to bring fans closer to the team, to enable fans be informed consumers, and to present fans rewards. Twitter, as a communication medium, allowed teams to bring fans closer to an organisation through the provision of behind-the-scene stories. Teams provided updates on the state of the team's performance before and after games that enabled fans to be informed consumers. Twitter was used as a venue to reward fans. The three emergent

values created during per-and post-games were: closer fans, informed spectator, and rewarding fans.

Ongoing. Twitter facilitated the co-creation of value between teams and their fans on an ongoing basis. The values were not necessarily game directed but related to their fanship to a team. The four values identified are: enriching fanship, humanizing brand, venue for voicing, and hub for fans. The teams initiated the first two values while the latter two were Twitter facilitated fan-initiated values.

Table 3-5

Profiling Emergent Values (Co) created on Twitter – Professional Sport Teams

Dimensions/Values	Examples
During Game	
Enhanced game experience • Offering live play-by-play updates, scores, highlights, seat upgrades, injury report, featuring fans' Tweets on jumbotron	**@utahjazz:** #UtahJazz Final Stat Leaders 📊 PTS - Favors 22 REBS - Favors/Gobert 8 ASTS - Mack 6 BLK - Gobert 5 STL - Hayward 4 #UTAatPOR @UtahJazz Final Stat Leaders: PTS – Favors 22 **@MiamiHEAT RT @jgortiz_:** I love how the @MiamiHEAT Twitter provides videos and vines when I can't watch the games. #HeatNation
Enhanced game-extended experience • Providing real time and direct customer service, e.g., assistance with technical issues with apps, weblinks, etc., reply to questions about the game	**@DessDess__:** The Blackhawks are my fav on snapchat but they've been slacking lately @NHLBlackhawks **@NHLBlackhawks replied:** Snapchat doesn't always follow the team on the road, sorry! **@belford93:** @Jaguars Why hasn't Monday been posted on jaguars.com yet? **@Jaguars replied:** @belford93 Due to technical difficulties, it will not be posted this week. **@belford93 replied:** well that stinks!
Voicing game experience • Fans express the glory or failure of their team on SM. Fans also use hashtags to initiates and engage in conversation with other like-minded users, and may get their Tweets retweeted or displayed on teams' other platforms (e.g., jumbotron, website, Facebook).	**@Mpakolas13:** Just getting ready to head to #RogersCentre to go watch our #ALFirstPlace @BlueJays go for the #Sweep. #getthebrooms **@Bluejays replied:** Have fun today! **@Broncos:** When we hit the end zone at @SportsAuthField … Tweet about it with #DBTD and get on Thundervision! **Quoting @JustinR1chards:** YES!!! COME ON!!!!! #BRONCOS TOUCHDOWNNNNNNNNNNN #DTBD **@melycutie:** Coincidence? I am wearing my Gallagher Tshirt and we have a 4-1 lead!!! #gohabsgo @canadiensMTL **@CanadiensMTL replied:** @melycutie Not a coincidence. #GoHabsGo ^ER

Off-Game (Pre- and Post-Games)

Closer fans

- Providing access to behind the scene/ insider information on issues such as team (e.g., lineup, backstage video, training) and players' status (e.g., injuries, trading), and players' off-the-field activities (e.g., charity, community, fan meetings).

@FlaPanthers: Panthers Vision gives you all access to yesterday's #NHLAllStar Red Carpet! (Jan. 31st, 2015)

@RamsNFL: Zach Hocker starting at kicker today #STLvsCIN [Picture of Hocker's locker]
@ScalabrineBrain replied: @STLLouisRams Can we see @MichaelBrockers locker? #ForeverLSU
@RamsNFL replied: . @ScalabrineBrain You got it! Big @MichaelBrockers & his #MobSquad brother @AaronDonald97 [Picture of Brockers and Donald's locker]

Informed spectator

- Informing fans about upcoming or past games through exclusive team related content shared on Twitter (e.g., videos of game highlights, training & warmups, access to variety of information about team, injury updates).

@broncos: ICYMI: #Broncos quarterback update j.mp/1RQEcCB [Picture of Peyton Manning] (Dec. 15th, 2016)

@Marlins: LIVE on #Periscope [link]: Bullpen session from #MarlinsST https://t.co/43J75lxRsw

Rewarding fans

- Teams use Twitter to announce contests and prize winners, promotions and discounts from sponsors, and sweepstakes and giveaways

@Patriots: @schnemix51 Congrats! You're today's #PatsHatFrisay winner. Check your DM for details. (Sep. 25th 2015)

@PelicansNBA: Don't miss out OFFICIAL WATCHING PARTY Sunday + a chance to win this autographed ball! on.nba.com/1AUwUBA (Feb. 20th, 2016)

Ongoing

Enriching fanship

- Hosting Q&As with players and other informal forms of communications (e.g., GIFs, inside jokes), creating and sharing emotional content (e.g., pictures of fans' families and friends, and Tweets that convey affection for team). Some also use nostalgia (throwback to team's history) as a tool to activate attachment.

@utahjazz: This day in Jazz History: 12/17/94 @TheDeliverer_32 had 30p/14r leading the Jazz to a 97-89 win in Chicago. #TBT

@Padres: The #PadresTownHall is underway NOW on @FoxSportsSD! Tune in and tweet your questions using the hashtag!

Humanizing brand

- Giving a team a personality (e.g., jokes and funny pictures), engaging in a friendly tone, and creating a closer relationship through personalisation (e.g., fans' personalised birthday wishes).

@veronii_98: There's nothing better then [*sic*] having ur favorite @CanadiensMTL player score on your birthday 😍 @AGally #GoHabsGo ^ER
@CanadiensMTL replied: @veronii_98 Happy birthday! #GoHabsGo ^ER
@veronii_98 replied: @CanadiensMTL thank you 💜

@chicagobulls: SO MUCH IS HAPPENING
@nataliaromnovaa replied: @chicagobulls STOP YELLING
@chicagobulls replied: @nataliaromnovaa WE CAN'T CONTROL THE SOUND OF OUR VOICE RIGHT NOW
@nataliaromnovaa replied: THIS IS SO WILD

Venue for voicing

- Fans use Twitter to voice their comments, concerns, questions, and complaints, and most teams respond to such voices. For fans, being heard, validated by the team (responding to their tweet), and the issue being possibly solved

@DessDess__: The Blackhawks are my fav on snapchat but they've been slacking lately @NHLBlackhawks
@NHLBlackhawks replied: @DessDess__ Snapchat doesn't always follow the team on the road, sorry!

@SGrant91: its pathetic and unjustifiable that the @MapleLeafs get 4pm starts wherever they play. Why do other NHLorganisations allow it? #nhl
@MapleLeafs replied: this is factually incorrect.
@SGrant91 replied: not every game. Fine. But every Saturday is a fact.

Hub for fans • Serving as the online "headquarters" for partisan pride in "nations" or "countries" (e.g., #BroncosCountry, #HeatNation), and as a venue where fans reunited outside of the stadium and access content to react to and bond over (team to fans, fans to fans). Occasionally, teams acknowledge fans tweets, and others often address congratulatory messages to those fans.	**@JDonaldson_20:** If you see me tweet #Whiff a lot today I'm sorry just helping the @BlueJays out 😅☺ **@BlueJays replied:** @JDonaldson_20 no problem **@JDonaldson_20 replied:** @BlueJays can I get a follow from my favorite team??☺ **@BostonJag9:** Tell coach we got better this week. San Francisco's newest @BoldCityBrigade member. Aedan says "Go @Jaguars!!" [Picture of man holding a newborn wearing a Jaguars toque] **@Jaguars replied:** @BostonJag9, We posted this photo in our weekly Social Snapshot and will feature it on our Facebook page later. **@BostonJag9 replied:** @Jaguars you guys are the best. Proud to be a STH! **@Jaguars replied:** @BostonJag9 @BoldCityBrigade Congrats! Send us video of Aedan's first words being Duuuval! **@Jaguars replied:** @Jaguars @BoldCityBrigade need positive vibes. Little man admitted to hospital last night. Needs surgery to correct Pyloric Stenosis.

As presented above, SM as an RM tool enabled the (co) creation of added/extra values on top of the core product offering (i.e., the game) during games, off-games, and on an ongoing basis. Value being the outcome of an RM approach, the emergent values demonstrate the benefits that SM presents to professional sport teams.

(iii) What discernible differences and shared features exist among the teams use of SM as an RM tool?

A description of each of the 20 teams' use of Twitter as an RM tool was documented. Some of these teams engaged in frequent and regular interaction, such as the San Diego Padres, the Toronto Maple Leafs, the Utah Jazz, the Jacksonville Jaguars, and the Chicago Blackhawks. From these teams, Chicago Blackhawks is randomly selected to illustrate the use of the platform for the purpose of an RM, although, it is worth mentioning that the selection does not imply that the team's practice is the best (as no criteria has been developed for such an assessment in this study). In addition, the selection of any one illustrative case out of the 20 could be justified on a number of different grounds. However, as the purpose of the selection is the illustration rather than identification of an exemplary use, random selection (from the teams that engaged in frequent interactions) is considered a preferable approach. Some unique features observed in the

teams' use of Twitter as an RM are briefly discussed below, followed by a presentation on the Blackhawks case.

Unique features. As noted above, all 20 teams used Twitter for communication purpose but differed in their use of Twitter for the purpose of interaction. Some unique features were observed in the teams' use of Twitter for the purpose of interaction including: frequency of interaction, emphasis put on the different categories of interaction, tone of communication, the frequency of use of a particular content type, the practice of capitalizing on brand personalities, particular type of entities with which teams often interacted, and differences in interaction over different seasons of the leagues. For example, in terms of the frequency of interaction, while most teams such as the Utah Jazz and the Chicago Blackhawks interacted often and multiple times in a week, small number of teams such as the Chicago Bulls and the New England Patriots interacted sporadically with their fans. Uniquely, the Los Angeles Lakers rarely interacted, and when they did, it was random.

In terms of the tone of communication, while some teams reverted to a neutral or impersonal tone, others maintain the same friendly, humour laced tone even when communicating dry game updates. In terms of the type of content the teams frequently used in their communications, teams such as the Denver Broncos featured pictures in the majority of their communications, while the Toronto Maple Leafs communicate and interact more often with text and hashtags. Although it is not clear whether the teams seek out celebrity fans tweeting about the teams, some retweeted celebrities' messages more frequently (e.g., New England Patriots, Denver Broncos, New York Yankees, and Dallas Cowboys), and while others did so only on occasion (e.g., New Orleans Pelicans and Miami Heat).

Along with these general observed features, it is worth noting that during off-seasons teams continued to interact with fans, but less frequently. Yet again, some teams (e.g., the San

Diego Padres) maintain a similar rate of interaction over different seasons. Relatedly, there was no relationship between the number of followers and the amount of interaction carried on the teams Twitter account. Some highly followed teams (e.g., Chicago Blackhawks) responded often, while some teams with a low number of followers (e.g., Miami Marlins) did not interact often.

Case illustration - Chicago Blackhawks. The Chicago Blackhawks' use of their Twitter for RM was influenced by the way the team manages its account. The Blackhawks actively interacted with fans and humanised the team with the use of humour, wittiness, and clever topical comments both when interacting with fans and sharing information. The team interacted with fans on a variety of issues such as casual exchange, answering customers' questions, rewarding fans, appreciating fans support, conversing around the team's slogan, responding to fans request for content, etc. As pointed out above, these interactions facilitated the creation of a range of values identified in this study.

The Blackhawks showed enthusiasm about their players, the team's achievements, and about fanship. The tone of the messages communicated was friendly, entertaining, and enthused. The team often framed key players in humour, inviting fans to share inside jokes. In fact, players were a part of the fan experience created by the account and they were used to elicit conversations. During games, the team's Twitter comments were not simply basic facts (e.g., play-by-play and stats), but included quick, entertaining, and thoughtful remarks (e.g., complements the on-ice action). The Blackhawks also used Twitter's different features (embedding short videos, pictures, GIFs, and links). It was found that the Toronto Maple Leafs also display many of the same qualities, although they relatively used less videos, GIFs, etc. The level of interactions, on the Blackhawks Twitter account, during both game days and off days are comparable.

Discussion

With the current exponential growth and expansion of SM in the sports industry, marketers are using SM as a medium to implement a variety of marketing communication strategies. In sport-related studies, SM has been discussed as a valuable conduit capable of building meaningful relationships between two parties (e.g., Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Meng et al., 2015; Wang & Zhou, 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010). However, within the context of professional sport teams, the use of SM to achieve RM goals has not yet been fully understood and empirically supported. This exploratory study fills in some of the prevailing information gaps, offering data that supports and extends the findings of a number of previous studies that have grounded their works on RM. Guided by an RM theoretical framework, this study investigated professional sport teams' use of Twitter for the purpose of RM, specifically communication, interaction, and value (co)creation. The study found that SM is a valuable RM tool that is both practical and affordable, a finding supported by Abeza et al. (2013) and Williams & Chinn (2010) in their works. Although different teams use Twitter for different RM purposes, this study found that all 20 teams used the platform to communicate and interact with fans. Some teams rely heavily on Twitter for communication, with limited interaction, while others use it for both communication and interaction.

The first RQ of this study attempted to gain an understanding of the use of SM as an RM tool, if any, in the context of professional sport teams – for the purposes of communication and interaction. The study's findings show that all 20 teams used Twitter for communication, with the objectives of emergent updating, selling, publicizing, promoting, spreading, appreciating, and servicing. Overall, the teams used Twitter to disseminate a variety of information, from live game updates to merchandise sales and fan-appreciation events. One unique practice observed in this study was that while a communication process has been assumed to facilitate interaction and

ultimately create value (per Grönroos, 2004), the emergent communication types themselves merged with value creation. For instance, while updating (e.g., coaches' statements, injuries) and appreciating (e.g., personalised birthday wishes, fans-players meet-and-greet events) are ways in which a team transmits or broadcasts content (without necessarily resulting in interaction), these communication types enable fans to be informed and, thereby, gratified. Such communication channels as Twitter have value in that they facilitate and enrich fans' relationship with their teams. Dialogue through these channels facilitates the co-creation of value with customers, and, ultimately, the transfer of value to the customers (Grönroos, 2004), although this is not always the case in the context of sport and SM.

According to Meng et al. (2015), teams using SM should make a concerted effort to personalise their communications, genuinely inform and involve fans, and provide relevant marketing communications. The illustrated case presented in this work (i.e., the Blackhawks) is an example of such a practice. The Blackhawks consistently acknowledged their fans, personalised their communication, and included them in the "conversation." On a related topic, communication via Twitter can have a 'megaphone' effect, whereby a team's reply to a follower's request (e.g., voicing a complaint or seeking clarification) can be 'heard' by others. This feature of Twitter, as a customer service provider, helps teams address the requests of a particular fan and simultaneously reach out to many others with similar interests. This was observed in a number of instances, where other fans join a conversation (reflecting the case) after a team replies to a fan's request. In this regard, Williams et al. (2014) stated that most of their study's participants (fans) used Twitter mainly to visit and observe, rather than participate/tweet (in other words, they were 'lurkers').

The interaction process is the second component of RM assessed under RQ#1. In examining the teams' culture of interaction, different practices were observed. The findings

support Filo et al. (2015) and Williams and Chinn (2010) who claim that SM is rapidly becoming an ideal tool for ongoing two-way dialogue. Yet, even though some degree of interaction was observed on all teams' Twitter accounts, disparities among the teams was observed in practice (e.g., frequent, occasional, limited). A variety of interaction episodes emerged during the data immersion. Such notable episodes included casual exchange, customer service, rally messages, fan spotlight, and players' Q&A. The study found that Twitter was an avenue whereby fans could express their support and allegiance to their brand (team). Simultaneously, Twitter serves as a platform to enhance fans' sport consumption experiences during, before, and after a game. In this regard, the teams used Twitter to invite fans to submit specific questions to which a player could answer in real time through text or a short video.

Interaction also occurred between the players and fans, but was facilitated and monitored through the team's account. Similarly, some teams engaged in conversations (usually brief) in response to fans' requests for team-related digital contents, such as videos or GIFs of plays made during a game or requests for a live stream of practice sessions. These observations support the claim by Stavros et al. (2013) that fans, using SM, satisfy needs that are not fully addressed through other forms of sport consumption, such as game attendance and television viewership.

It is important to mention here that the values (co)created on Twitter varied from team to team, which is partly a reflection of the observed differences in the practices of communication and interaction among the teams. As stated above, the difference emanated mainly from such factors as frequency of interaction (e.g., frequent or infrequent), length of interaction (e.g., one-time back-and-forth conversation or thread of exchanges), and game day (e.g., game day vs off-days).

Data gathered on the second RQ informed us about the values professional teams (co)created on SM, specifically over three time periods (game, off game, and ongoing). During

the games, Twitter allowed for the co(creation) of values during live games, such as enhanced game experience, enhanced and extended game experience, and voicing game experience. Twitter provided an avenue for teams to offer live play-by-play updates (e.g., scores, highlights), to feature fans' Tweets on JumboTron, to provide real time and direct customer service (e.g., assistance with technical issues with apps, replies to questions about the game), and to enable fans to express the glory or failure of their team on SM. The platforms facilitated the delivery of these additional elements or the creation of added values for customers beyond the offering of the core product (i.e., the game), which is the core purpose of RM, according to Grönroos (2004). Such values, as Bee & Khale (2006) indicated, have impacted fans' sport consumption as well as their allegiance to their favorite team.

Before and after a game, Twitter facilitated the creation of values such as closer fans, informed spectators, and rewarding fans. These values strengthened fans' attachment to a team, provided access to exclusive insider information about the team directly from the team. They allowed fans to consume the sport they support as informed and knowledgeable fans, and to get the opportunity to participate in competition for rewards. In this regard, as Witkemper et al. (2012) stated, sport marketers, by keeping fans informed and getting them close to the players through Twitter, can build and maintain their relationship with fans.

In terms of the ongoing values identified, both teams and fans are able to (co)create a variety of values independent of direct game consumption. These values include enriching fanship, humanizing the brand, establishing a venue for voicing, and creating a hub for fans. According to Williams et al. (2014), Twitter facilitates an exchange of content that can increase "fan involvement, strengthen associations and allow closer connections to the team" (p. 46). In this regard, the teams initiate and create the first two values; for example, humanizing a brand helps redress the perception of some sport consumers that (per Harris & Ogbonna, 2008; Kim &

Trail, 2011) moneymaking is the prime focus of sport organisation (and players) rather than teams caring for their fans. With regard to the latter two fan-facilitated values (i.e., a venue for voicing and establishing a hub for fans), the observations of these studies support Stavros et al.'s (2013) idea that SM helps fans to connect with other like-minded fans and to carry, extend, and amplify a fresh game experience outside the sport arena. This partly addresses Adamson et al.'s (2006) concern about taking fan loyalty "as a given," and helps maintain the fan base.

The findings aggregately informed us that Twitter 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). Yet again, it is worth noting that the values (co)created on Twitter vary from team to team, which is partly a reflection of the observed differences in the practices of communication and interaction among the teams.

This work supports the studies of Abeza et al. (2013) and Williams and Chinn (2010), who claim that SM is becoming an ideal medium that is making the RM approach much more practical, affordable, and meaningful. It should be noted, however, that this study's findings do not imply that the identified communication types, interaction practices, and (co)created values are the only ways SM can be used as an RM tool. Rather, this study shows how professional sport teams use SM as a platform for RM. However, it should be noted that the study found that not all teams are using SM to achieve their full RM potential, which, in the sports context, aims to build long-term relationships and engage in ongoing communication and dialogue with fans. Some teams even seem to sideline the potential of SM in RM by engaging in rare interactions. This demands a research effort that investigates why teams are not using the platform to its full potential in building relationships. Although the number of followers could make the effort

challenging, this was not found to be the case in this study. For instance, some teams with a large number of followers (e.g., the Chicago Blackhawks) displayed consistent and frequent interaction, while other teams with a small number of followers (e.g., the Miami Marlins) carried a limited amount of interaction.

Contributions to Scholarship

While the study contributes to the literature on SM in sport by supporting and augmenting previous studies (some discussed above) and providing new insights, the study makes specific academic contributions in a number of areas.

Although the existing literature on RM in SM, conceptually discusses the value of SM as an RM tool, the literature is limited in that it does not provide a theoretically driven production of empirical data that articulates RM in terms of its three components. This study contributes to the literature by extending our understanding of the use of SM as an RM tool grounded on the theoretical framework of RM, emphasising on each of the three different components – the communication process, the interaction process, and the value that emerged through the two processes. The study informed us of the usefulness of SM, particularly in the context of professional sport in the four leagues from an RM perspective.

The work also responded to calls made by sport-related SM studies. Such calls include the need to investigate the use of SM as an RM tool in a professional sport setting (e.g., Abeza et al., 2013), the use of SM over different seasons (e.g., Meng et al., 2015) from the perspective of different professional sport teams (e.g., Stavros et al., 2014), and the use of netnographic study (e.g., Stavros et al., 2014). It also contributes to our understanding of the sequential nature of value creation in RM. This study informed us that values are not always created in sequential fashion. At least in the context of SM in sport, the first process in RM, communication, can sometimes facilitate and create added value for fans.

Practical Recommendations

In light of the findings, the below discussed practical recommendations are identified. Organisations that aim to go beyond creation and maintenance to enhancing RM are encouraged to display a good balance between communication and interaction with fans, as outlined in the illustrative case (i.e., the Chicago Blackhawks). By observing the interactive nature of SM platforms and the use of Twitter by all 122 professional teams, this study found that some of the teams underutilise the platform and engage only in limited, if not rare, interaction. As this study shows, managers benefit from Twitter as it allows the creation of a number of values that enhance and enrich fans' identity, which translates into building a fan base. Most importantly, the values help address some of the challenges managers face in the competitive sport business environment (e.g., increasing fan discontent and disconnection). Setting up a SM platform but engaging in rare interaction would not make the medium any more effective than the original Web (i.e., Internet Websites Web 1.0), which carries mostly a one-way message supplied by publishers on a static page. As pointed out above, the benefits of Twitter in this regard include, among others, enhancing game experience, providing customer service, enabling fans to be informed consumers and providing fans access to behind-the-scenes information.

Because of the ubiquity, real time functioning, connectivity, openness, and other similar features of SM, the teams are able to initiate and create the identified values. The creation of value initiated by fans is a further benefit Twitter presents to sport marketers. This study found that these values, for example, include a hub for fans and a venue for expressing their opinions, which enriches their sport consumption experience and plays a role in strengthening their allegiance. As a hub for fans, Twitter serves as a venue where they can reunite outside of the stadium and access content to react to and bond over. As a venue for voicing, fans use Twitter to express themselves. Some teams respond to such expression, which creates a feeling of being

heard, because the team (responding to their tweet) validates their comments, which attends to any issues the fans may have. With the global interest in professional sports, these and other similar values (e.g., closer fan personalisation, voicing game experience), build teams' brand by humanizing their image, creating a positive attitude towards the organisation.

While the sole use of Twitter for communication purposes goes against the very nature of SM, with a balancing act of communication and interactions, managers can use the platform for at least seven different communication types identified in this study. These include updating, selling, publicizing, promoting, spreading, appreciating, and servicing. Specifically, three of these communication types create values without merging into interaction (c.f. Grönroos, 2004). These are updating (keeping fans informed about players'/coaches' statements, injuries, trades), public relations (communicating team visits to hospitals, schools, fundraising, kids' activities), and appreciating (recognizing fans through personalised best wishes and fans-players meet-and-greet events).

As interaction is the core of relationship building, managers are advised to capitalise on the different interaction types (team vs fan initiated) identified in this study, such as fan spotlight, rally messages, player Q&A, content delivery, casual exchanges, and customer service. For example, in engaging in rally messages initiated by a team, conversations covering team campaign messages/slogans can be held. The messages help build a hub where fans interact, express their fanship, engage in dialogue with other fans, and bond together with them. In a similar manner, by engaging in "fan spotlight' conversations, which are often initiated by fans, teams can interact on issues related to game experience using different content such as fans' pictures during games or after them or requesting fans to share their experiences at a game, and acknowledging their responses.

Future Research and Limitations

This study informed a number of avenues where future research can be conducted. Some areas are outlined here. A study that investigates best practices on the use of SM as an RM tool (i.e., who uses it best, how, and why) has a practical contribution to make. It allows sport managers to design an informed strategy that enables the effective implementation of SM as an RM tool. Similar studies can address issues such as the optimal balance between communication and interaction, the optimal level of interaction, the optimal number of messages per day (on game day, pre- and post-game, and off season), the combination of tweet and content types employed, the manner in which messages should be framed, and the tone of the messages communicated. Additional works will be recommended to investigate the reasons why some teams do not engage in dialogue with fans or consistently ignore fan-initiated communications or requests. Along with this, it will be informative if studies address the impact a large number of followers may have in the management of SM platforms.

Additional work that investigates the topic (of the study at hand) on randomly selected teams (and on a different SM platform) may generate distinct insights that advance our understanding and enrich the literature in the context of sport. Importantly, there is a need for an exploration of the study's research questions in other parts of the world (e.g., Europe – soccer), and other leagues (e.g., tier II professional sports). In line with this, while this study's data is content based, studies that investigate the use of SM from the perspective of SM managers (e.g., interviews) as well as fans (e.g., surveys, focus groups), will advance our knowledge on the topic.

This study observed that several SM users who interacted frequently with the teams were identifying themselves as avid fans of that particular team. Future research is encouraged to investigate the value SM offers users in the realm of professional sport. These users can be

identified, as has been recurrently done in this study, through their Twitter profile description or in their profile pictures. Further research should be conducted on the practice of capitalizing on brand personalities (e.g., retweeting celebrities team-related tweets), a practice that has been observed regularly in this study. Further study on the role celebrity fans have in attracting new fans to teams on SM or offline would also be useful. The branding and endorsement literature, has widely discussed the influence of brand personalities on consumers' perception of a product through the transfer of their symbolic quality to the endorsed product. Those studies can inform the suggested research in the context of SM.

While the study makes the above theoretical and practical contributions, some limitations must be recognised. The findings cannot be generalised on three grounds: one, they cannot be generalised to all SM platforms, mainly due to the differences in the features of different SM platforms. Two, the findings cannot be generalised to all professional sport teams or all SM platforms. While the study generated insight into the teams' use of SM as an RM tool, it found there is no pattern across teams or leagues. The teams displayed varied frequency and level of use. Three, the exploratory nature of the study permitted an analytical/theoretical generalisation but not a statistical generalisation. In addition, although careful measures were taken to maintain the quality of the study (including a pilot study), the addition of a second netnographer could have added more value to the study.

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CHAPTER 4: Study 2

The Use of Social Media as a Relationship Marketing Tool in Professional Sport: The Senior Manager Perspective

The emergence of SM over the past decade has changed the speed and scope of communication and interaction among and between individuals and organisations across the globe (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015; Hambrick & Svensson, 2015; Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015). A platform that began for individuals to connect and engage in conversation with others, has rapidly expanded to organisations (Hambrick & Svensson, 2015). Today, the use of SM goes beyond simple social communication (Ngai et al., 2015), and, in the sport industry, marketers are using the platforms to implement a variety of marketing communication elements such as branding (Walsh, Clavio, Lovell, & Blaszka, 2013), athlete endorsements (Brison, Baker, & Byon, 2013), promotion (Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011), public relations (Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2011), news update (Reed & Hansen, 2013), and relationship marketing (Williams & Chinn, 2010). While SM is a valuable resource to realise these marketing communication elements (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010), it predominantly appears to be an ideal tool to achieve RM goals (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015; Hambrick & Svensson, 2015; Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp, & Agnihotri, 2014; Williams & Chinn, 2010).

As both a theoretical framework and as a management approach, RM is primarily a management of customer relationships with an interest in the management of stakeholders' relationship (Grönroos, 2000, 2004, 2011). Its central purpose is retaining customers through long-term mutual satisfaction between businesses and customers (Grönroos, 2004; Kotler, 2010). 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 co-created product, build long-term relationships, and, eventually, secure a long-term profit (Grönroos, 2000; Gummesson, 1998; Peppers & Rogers, 2011). By extension, the dialogue enables businesses to achieve goals such as increased loyalty, reduced marketing costs, increased profitability, and increased stability and security (Christopher, Payne, & Ballantyne, 2002; Grönroos, 2004; Gumsoon, 2002). In this regard, SM has become an ideal medium to achieve RM goals (O'Brien, 2011; Williams & Chinn, 2010).

While SM has clearly become an important RM tool (Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, & Bloching, 2013; Schultz & Peltier, 2013; Trainor et al., 2014), most studies' appraisals are confined to the theoretical (and/or conceptual) benefits of SM as a RM tool (Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Pronschinske et al., 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., Boehmer & Lacy, 2014; Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Stavros et al. 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010). However, as ideal as SM is for a relationship building approach with lists of opportunities (at least theoretically), an understanding on its role in terms of addressing RM goals in the context of *professional sport* is emerging but is not yet fully understood. Empirical evidence that demonstrate SM's role as an RM tool in professional sport is limited, particularly from the practitioners' perspective. Also, it has been reported in recent years that an effective realisation of many SM efforts has been challenging (Boehmer & Lacy, 2014; Schultz & Peltier, 2013). As Pronschinske et al. (2012) and Schultz and Peltier (2013) stated, having a presence, and developing and launching SM initiatives has not been difficult for most companies. Rather, the authors pointed out that the challenge is in making the platforms truly engaging and valuable to consumers. Therefore, understanding the challenges of using SM as an RM tool will help develop adaptive strategies.

In order to addresses the purpose of the study, three specific research questions are developed:

(i) How do professional sport teams use SM in terms of meeting RM goals *(S_2RQ_1)*?

(ii) How do managers of professional sport teams see the opportunities of SM in meeting RM goals *(S_2RQ_2)*? and

(iii) How do managers of professional sport teams see the challenges of SM in meeting RM goals *(S_2RQ_3)*?

In addressing each of the three research questions, this research produces empirical evidence that demonstrates the use of SM as an RM tool and the opportunities and challenges that it presents in terms of meeting RM goals in the context of professional sport. In doing so, the study makes a contribution to the existing literature by filling the information gap on the use, opportunities, and challenges of SM as an RM tool, and extends and augments previous SM studies in the context of professional sport. The findings will inform sport marketers in developing an informed and/or adaptive marketing strategy in the realisation of an effective use of SM as an RM tool.

Literature Review

Relationship Marketing as a Managerial Approach

As a basic term, RM is the management of a collaborative relationship between a company and its stakeholders (Grönroos, 2000; Gummesson, 1996; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The collaborative relationship is maintained and enhanced through communication and interaction, with the intent of producing added/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 made in their communications, companies will be able to deliver a co-created and customer valued product (Grönroos, 1994, 2000, 2004; Gummesson, 1997, 1998). The process facilitates business efforts to enhance

intimacy, greater customer satisfaction and retention, increase loyalty, long-term relationships, reduce marketing costs, and eventually secure a long-term profit (Berry, 1995; Christopher et al., 2002; Grönroos, 2000; Gummesson, 1998; Peppers & Rogers, 2011).

Tactically, the RM approach is designed to get in closer touch with customers to gain more information about them that then enables businesses to learn more about those particular customers and deliver greater value to them (Peppers & Rogers, 2011). In maintaining closer touch with customers, learning about them, communicating and interacting with them, and developing a mutual understanding, companies become valuable to customers (Grönroos, 2000; Gummesson, 1998; Peppers & Rogers, 2011).

In their meta-analysis of the RM empirical research, Palmatier, Dant, Grewal & Evans (2006) analyzed how relational constructs (trust, commitment, relationship satisfaction, and/or relationship quality) mediate the effect of RM on businesses performance. The authors found that empirical studies strongly support the positive effect that RM has on businesses performance such as sales growth and profits. In their Delphi study of 12 European RM scholars/experts on the state of RM, Bonnemaizon, Cova & Louyot (2007) reported that RM approaches all have at their core a desire to improve the customer experience. Studies (e.g., Bauer, Grether & Leach, 2002; Kim & Trail, 2011) also reported that attracting new customers can be up to five times more expensive than maintaining existing customer relations. In a similar note, Feinberg and Kadam (2002) stated that increasing customer retention rates by 5% results in a profit enhancement of 25% to 80%. Hence, these studies reported that losing an existing customer results in losing the entire revenue stream that the company can get from the customer over time; an existing customer does not only represent a single encounter or a particular sale.

Importantly, in a competitive market environment and with ever changing customer expectations, customer retention and loyalty is a concern of many companies. As Ha and Janda

(2011) pointed out, a RM approach can also play a role in communicating positive word of mouth, building a strong brand, fostering loyalty among customers, and reducing the cost of serving customers over time. In a broader context, RM will result in benefits such as increased profitability, and increased stability and security (Peppers & Rogers, 2011; Gummesson, 1997).

Customers also gain a number of benefits by becoming involved in relational exchanges (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Stavros & Westberg, 2009). In fact, as Szmigin, Canning & Reppel (2005) stated, in business transactions, each stakeholder acts to satisfy their own interest, whereas in relational exchange partners are given special recognition for their interest, and such previous recognitions inform an exchange that takes place at a particular time and influence future actions. In this regard, Szmigin et al., (2005) echoing Gummesson's (1987) statement, described relational exchange as an affiliation where "either party has the capacity to affect, and the propensity to be affected by, the actions of the others" (p. 481). Hence, customers also benefit from an RM approach (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Stavros & Westberg, 2009).

The RM approach benefits customers by providing a preference for choice reduction, which provides efficiency in decision, lesser search costs, and increased cognitive consistency in decisions (Bee & Kahle, 2006; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). Bee and Kahle (2006) also noted that RM reduces the complexity of the buying situation and the amount of resources required for information processing. Additionally, if consumers are engaged in a relationship with an organisation they are likely to be familiar with the services that they are offered, which reduces the perceived risks associated with future purchase choices (Bee & Kahle, 2006; Stavros & Westberg, 2009). Grönroos (2004) stated that RM provides enhanced security to customers, a sense of trust and a feeling of control, minimises purchasing risks, and reduced the costs of being a customer.

While there are a number of benefits of RM, both for companies and their partners, discussed in the literature, its implementation is not as simple as its interpretation. First and foremost, the effectiveness of the RM approach may vary depending on the specific RM strategy and exchange context (Palmatier et al., 2006). As Adamson, Jones and Tapp (2006) stated, some businesses, at times, do not commit the necessary resources for the implementation of RM, and thus fail to produce the desired benefit. The authors also added that some businesses see RM as a strategic alternative to be experimented with instead of considering it as a set of long-term philosophies that will affect all aspects of the business. RM is a marketing approach that requires a long-term outlook, an embrace of technology, and a commitment to a customer focused approach (Stavros, Pope, and Winzar, 2008). Yet, despite implementation challenges, the importance of RM is well accepted across different industries (Peppers & Rogers, 2011).

Relationship Marketing in Sport Industry

By its very nature, the sports industry provides fertile ground for RM (Gladden & Sutton, 2009; Harris & Ogbonna, 2008; Kim & Trail, 2011). A number of sports consumption and fan behaviour studies have reported that both the attitudes and the behaviour of sport consumers toward their clubs exhibit relational characteristics (Harris & Ogbonna, 2008; Farrelly & Quester, 2003) (for more see the section under Sport Fans). A sport consumer is an enthusiastic consumer that is motivated to engage in behavior related to sports (Hunt, Bristol & Bashaw, 1999). In most cases, the sport marketing transactions themselves involve some type of RM (Bee & Kahle, 2006; Williams & Chinn, 2010) where the teams, leagues, athletes, coaches, managers, and fans have relationships with one another; these relationships depend on successful management (Bee & Kahle, 2006). In some cases, these relationship efforts are explicit, while in other cases they are hidden or even unrecognised (Bee & Kahle, 2006). Sports fans are often highly involved personally with their favourite team (Harris & Ogbonna, 2008), and display that

commitment through repeat ticket purchases, continued game attendance, viewership, and the purchase of team kits and team merchandise (Bee & Kahle, 2006; Funk & James, 2001; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Tapp, 2004). This behaviour, according to Bee and Kahle (2006), reflects these fans' desire to become involved in, engage in, and maintain a strong relationship with the sport entities they support.

The nature of the relationships between sport and sport consumers are unique in several ways (Kim, Trail, Woo & Zhang, 2011; Shani, 1997). 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). Also, even when actual sports-related engagement behavior varies from fan to fan, their distinction from consumers of any other brand remains as sports fans express their level of attachment to their sport team by referring to themselves as "we" or referring to their team as "our team" (Hunt et al., 1999). Harris and Ogbonna (2008), citing a number of studies that discussed the conducive relational character that sport fans exhibit toward a sporting team (e.g., Farrelly & Quester 2003; Redden & Steiner 2000), argued that a relationship perspective provides the best scenario for understanding the true dynamics of sport consumption.

Through RM, sport marketers can communicate, listen, address customer needs and desires, and maintain and enhance their particular fan base (Bee & Kahle, 2006; Kim & Trail, 2011). In addition, maintaining relationships between a sports organisation and a large number of worldwide sports consumers has been more limited in the past due to the lack of easy-to-use technology (Kim & Trail, 2011). Today, the emergence of new technology encourages sport marketers to engage in more and better communication, and maintain and enhance the relationships they build with their worldwide fans (Stavros & Westberg, 2009; Stavros et al.,

2008; Kim & Trail, 2011). Consequently, RM represents compelling marketing approach in the sport industry as opposed to the widely practiced short-term transactions and immediate profits (Gladden & Sutton, 2009; Stavros et al., 2008; Kim & Trail, 2011). As it has been briefly indicated in the beginning of this work, SM is providing new directions and benefits to RM; making relational exchanges affordable and more effective to sport marketers (Williams & Chinn, 2010).

Social Media in the Sport Industry

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 (Rowe & Hutchins, 2014). In the sport industry, the penetration and magnitude of SM use (Pedersen, 2014) has been driven by the industry's various stakeholders such as professional athletes (e.g., LeBron James - @KingJames - with over 31 million Twitter followers), coaches (e.g., Seattle Seahawks head coach - @PeteCarroll - with over 1.4 million followers), teams (e.g., all 122 professional teams in the "Big 4" use Twitter, with a total of 50 million followers), sponsors (e.g., Nike - @Nike - with more than 20 different Twitter accounts), sporting events (e.g., Major League Baseball All-Stars Game - @AllStarGame with over 100,000 followers), mega-sport events (e.g., Sochi 2014 - @Sochi2014 - with over 200,000 followers), and sports media (e.g., the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) - @espn - with 12 million followers), and fans. Today, both professional sport teams and fans embrace SM platforms, and, over the past decade, all 122 teams in the four major professional sport leagues have adopted Twitter, among others, as a main SM outlet. As indicated in Table 4-1, the Sacramento Kings was the first team from the four major professional

sport team to join Twitter (January 2007), and the Arizona Cardinals was the last team from the four major professional sport to join Twitter (October 2011).

Table 4-1

Professional Sport Team Adoption of Social Media, Twitter as an Example

Fact Item	Facts
First mover and last mover	While the *Sacramento Kings* were *the first from the four major professional sport* team to join Twitter (January 2007), the Arizona Cardinals were the last team from the four major professional sport leagues to join Twitter (October 2011).
Major League Baseball (MLB)	The Oakland Athletics was an early Twitter adopter (January 2009), and the Rockies was the last MLB team to join Twitter (June 2010). MLB teams, on average, joined Twitter later than teams in the other three leagues.
National Basketball Association (NBA)	The Sacramento Kings joined Twitter before all other NBA teams (and also, before any team in major professional sport), while The Toronto Raptors was the last NBA team to join (September 2009).
National Football League (NFL)	The San Diego Charger was the second professional sport team to join Twitter (January 2007) in the "Big 4", and the Arizona Cardinals were the last to join Twitter (October 2011).
National Hockey League (NHL)	The Chicago Blackhawks was the first NHL team to join Twitter (April 2008). The Winnipeg Jets was the last (May 2011).

Relationship Marketing and Social Media in Sport

As stated above, RM is based on shared communication between a sport organisation and its customers with the aim of establishing, maintaining, and enhancing long-term mutually rewarding relationships (Hambrick & Svensson, 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010). SM platforms are the most suitable mediums that make such marketing approaches workable and practical (Dixon, Martinez, & Martin, 2015; Wang & Zhou, 2015). Particularly, the features of SM make it a powerful platform in realising RM goals that have been long dominated by offline activities (Williams, Chinn, & Suleiman, 2014). These features include instantaneity, ubiquity, time unrestrained access (Williams & Chinn, 2010), and simplicity and ease of access, networking, participation, and collaboration (Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015). 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 (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Essentially, SM presents an

opportunity to sport marketers to reach almost every customer anywhere and anytime (both in real-time and long afterwards) (Stavros et al., 2013), to engage in dialogue with them, and to create, in due course, a mutually valued product (Hambrick & Svensson, 2015).

In scholarly research, SM and its role in RM in sport has been studied for the past half-decade, and the scholarship is evolving (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). Presently, a dozen sport-related SM studies can be found to have grounded their research in RM. Table 4-2 presents the roster of these articles, listing the studies' purpose, focus, source of evidence, perspective, context of sport, and their findings. A number of these studies (e.g., Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Williams & Chinn, 2010) highlighted the role of SM in building a two-way collaborative relationship through a relationship dialogue between sport organisations and their stakeholders. As can be seen in Table 4-2, sport-related SM studies that grounded their research in RM made significant contribution to our understanding on the place of SM in RM.

The majority of these works conducted their study from an organisational perspective, a few centered on consumers' perspective (i.e., Stavros et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2014; Witkemper et al., 2012), and one was a conceptual paper (i.e., Williams & Chinn, 2010). An examination of the studies that adopted an organisational perspective reveals two research dimensions (and research gaps) that, among other points, 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 a RM tool (e.g., Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Wang & Zhou, 2015), but all these studies used SM content as their sources of evidence and the perspective of practitioners is missing (e.g., interviews), and (ii) the remaining studies that adopted an organisational perspective (i.e., Abeza et al., 2013; Dixon et al., 2015; Hambrick & Svensson, 2015) focused on practitioners (i.e., managers and employees) and employed an interview method to investigate the use, benefits and concerns associated with the use of SM in RM. But these latter studies have

been conducted in sports other than professional sport, namely, in the context of college sport (Dixon et al., 2015) and niche sports (i.e., Abeza et al., 2013; 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 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.

Table 4-2

Sport-Related Social Media Studies that Grounded their Research in Relationship Marketing

Authors	**Research Purpose**	**Focus/ Source of Evidence**	**Perspective/ Sport Context**	**Finding**
Abeza & O'Reilly (2014)	Investigated how sport organisations used their official Facebook page and Twitter account to create relationship dialogue with their stakeholders	Industry practice/ SM content	Organisational/ Canadian National Sport Organisations	Canadian NSOs' Facebook and Twitter use did little to create a relationship dialogue.
Abeza, O'Reilly, & Reid (2013)	Explored the opportunities and challenges facing managers. In sport organisations in using SM in an RM strategy.	Industry practice/ Managers interview	Organisational/ Canadian running events	Found opportunities, and challenges of using SM as RM tool
Boehmer & Lacy (2014)	Examined how interactivity on Facebook relates to readers' browsing behaviors	Industry practice/ SM content - Facebook posts	Organisational/ 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 & Martin (2015)*	Explored the usage and perceived effectiveness of SM in accomplishing various organisational objectives	Industry practice/ Marketing staff members- online survey	Organisational/ College sport	Found most employing SM to raise awareness and support marketing objectives, but few use it for fundraising and volunteer recruitment
Hambrick & Kang (2014)	Explored how the four North American professional sport leagues use Pinterest as a communications and relationship-marketing tool	Industry practice/ SM content – Pins	Organisational/ Teams from the 4 major leagues	Found that Pinterest is used to promote the fan group experience, provide team and game information, and sell team-related merchandise
Hambrick & 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	Organisational/ Sport-for-development-and-peace (SDP) organisation	SPDO uses SM to disseminate news, educate stakeholders & promote events. Faces challenges in engaging users in conversations and ensuring conveying organisational goals
Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker (2012)*	Studied relationship-marketing efforts conducted by teams in the four North American major leagues through Facebook, & how teams connected and built relationships with fans	Industry practice/ SM content - Facebook	Organisational/ Teams from the 4 major leagues	Identified four primary Facebook elements used to accomplish their objectives. Concluded that the teams could benefit from RM by developing ongoing interactions through SM

Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly (2013)	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 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 & Zhou (2015)	Explored National Basketball Association teams use of Twitter to build relationship with the public	Industry practice/ SM content – Twitter	Organisational/ National Basketball Association teams	Found NBA teams tend to use SM to develop professional relationships with their publics via sharing information and promoting products
Williams & Chinn (2010)	Discussed SM and RM in sport, and extended Gronroos (2004) RM model within context of SM in sport setting	Conceptual	Organisational & Consumers	Articulated that Gronroos's (2004) framework could be extended and applied within context of SM in sport
Williams, Chinn & Suleiman (2014)*	Investigated the value of tweets for the fans, and if there is a relationship between value and team identification	Consumers/ SM content & survey	Consumers/ NBA fans	Found team identification influencing how much people value specific categories of sports tweets (news, opinion, & promotion)
Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger (2012)*	Investigated sport Twitter consumption (STC) motivations and constraints in following athletes	Consumers/ Survey	Consumers/ Twitter users	Motivations (information, pass time, entertainment, fanship) positively & constraints (accessibility, economic, skills, social) negatively relate to STC

*These studies adopted additional theoretical perspective to their study

Opportunities and Challenges of SM in RM

As stated in the beginning of this work and as pointed out in the preceding section, there is a need for producing empirical evidence on the opportunities and challenges of SM in RM from the perspective of managers of professional sport teams. In this regard, previous studies conducted on this specific topic area (Abeza et al., 2013; Dixon et al., 2015; Hambrick & Svensson, 2015) inform an identification of areas of focus of the study at hand.

Abeza et al. (2013) explored the opportunities and challenges facing managers of eight Canadian mass-participation road races in using SM in an RM strategy. The authors found different SM opportunities presented to race directors in their RM approach. According to the authors, SM enabled the directors to gain a closer knowledge of their consumers; to maintain an ongoing dialogue with customers by keep track of their constantly changing needs, wants and interests; to allow customer to voice their opinions because having their voices considered makes them feel as though they have a say in the management; to obtain customers' comments,

opinions, and complaints at a much cheaper budget but at higher quality than before; and to quickly learn relationship status with customers at a given point in time. While these opportunities make SM a suitable RM medium, the race directors informed the authors of four particular hurdles that arose in their use of SM as an RM tool. These challenges include: setbacks in the allocation of proper resources (e.g., time, manpower, skill) to manage SM platforms; issues related to fact that the content, timing, and frequency of the conversations as well as the credibility and reliability of messages that appear on one's own SM platforms are outside the direct control of the platform owner; and the difficulties in identifying the "true online identity/customers" of a company among the members of a company's SM platform. Having identified these, the authors recommended future studies to reinvestigate their findings in other sports (other than participatory sport) across a wider range of disciplines. Considering the constantly evolving nature of SM and changes in fans' usage pattern over time, the authors also recommended that a similar study to theirs should be conducted at a different time period. The latter has also been echoed by O'Shea and Alonso (2011) and Meng, Stavros and Westberg (2015).

Hambrick and Svensson (2015) explored the benefits and challenges facing staff members of a Sport-for-development-and-peace (SDP) organisation in their use of SM. The case under consideration (i.e., the SDP) provides sport-based programming for youth in a post-conflict East African community. The authors found that the SDP uses SM to disseminate news, educate stakeholders, and promote events. The benefits of SM to disseminate news and information appear to be possible due to the ubiquity, reach, and low cost nature of SM. Promoting events by using SM to raise awareness among the SDP's SM users is the second benefit identified. The third benefit identified by the authors was the ability to educate stakeholders through the provision of information about the organisation's service and related

development issues. While the above three benefits emerged through an effort to broadcast and disseminate information to the SDP public, Hambrick and Svensson (2015) also identified hurdles that surface in the staff members' attempt to engage users in a two-way ongoing conversation. According to the authors, SDP staff members face difficulties in receiving SM users' replies to conversations that are initiated on the organisations' SM platforms. The second challenge is inconsistency in messages communicated through different channels. As the data was collected from a small group of participants, building on the study's limitation, the two authors recommended that similar studies be conducted with a larger number of research participants and with participants of organisations that are based in different geographic areas.

Dixon, Martinez, and Martin (2015) explored the use and value of SM in addressing different organisational objectives within intercollegiate athletics departments, such as awareness creation, raising funds, recruiting volunteers, and promotional purpose. As the authors pointed out, there is a paucity of research on the adoption, effectiveness and implementation of SM. Dixon and his colleagues gathered responses from 158 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I marketing professionals and found that most employ SM to raise awareness and support marketing objectives, but few use it for fundraising and volunteer recruitment. According to the authors, the marketing professionals found SM to be an important and the most frequently used medium for raising awareness and supporting marketing activities. The issue of lack of proper resources for manage SM platforms (e.g., lack of full-time staff members devoted for the management of SM) is the prime concern the authors identified. Dixon et al. (2015) recommended future studies to consider a variety of SM platforms other than Facebook and Twitter (focus of their study).

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. The reviewed works also served as an input in the development of the interview questions, and informed a further exploration of their findings.

Method

Data Collection

The purpose of this study is to obtain a first-hand and in-depth understanding of the use, opportunities, and challenges of SM in meeting RM goals from the perspective of senior managers of professional sport teams. For this purpose, the study adopted a semi-structured interview, which, as Bryman, Bell, and Teevan (2012) and Jones (2015) pointed out, helped to define the areas to be explored and, at the same time, allowed flexibility in discussing issues in more detail. More specifically, employing the semi-structured technique facilitated the exploration of the views, experiences, and beliefs of senior managers of professional sport teams on the stated topic of interest.

Interview guide. An interview guide was developed that contained a set of guiding semi-structured questions (See Appendix C). As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and Patton (2002) recommended, the semi-structured questions were derived from previous studies. In the case of the study at hand, questions were derived from studies that examined SM and RM in sport context, and specifically from sport-related SM studies that grounded their research in RM (Patton, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The interview guide comprised questions that were used to elicit information on four areas: (i) general questions on the adoption of RM and use of SM, (ii) the opportunities, and (iii) the challenges of SM in RM in professional sport context, (iv) additional points, and (v) concluding questions.

Pilot Interview. Pilot interviews were conducted with three SM managers–two Canadian professional sport clubs (the first from the Canadian Football League [CFL] and the second from the Major League Soccer [MLS]) and a United States based MLS club. After each pilot

interview, a debriefing session was conducted. The sessions helped improve the interview guide as well as the conduct of the interview, such as avoiding jargon (e.g., the need to describe RM), clarifying/assuring ethical issues related to the research, question probes (e.g., "So it was just basically…"), interpreting questions (e.g., "From what you just said, …"), and silences ("Aha"–pause).

Participants. The interviews were conducted with 26 senior managers of professional sport teams in the four North American major leagues (i.e., the NBA, MLB, NHL, and NFL). In locating informants (per Andrew, Pedersen & McEvoy, 2011; Neuman & Robson, 2012), the identification of a participant who have knowledge of a phenomenon being investigated and their willingness to discuss the phenomenon in detail was considered. 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. Potential participants from a number of professional sport teams (in the four leagues) were contacted first through email, followed by a phone call, to request their participation in the study. In the correspondences, the letter of information (See Appendix A) was provided. In some cases, the contacted informants (mostly, SM Managers) directed the researcher to senior 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. Finally, the interviews were conducted with 26 senior managers who are directly responsible for the management of different aspects of SM in their respective sport organisations.

The number of informants was determined based on data saturation (per Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013; Neuman & Robson, 2012). About midway through the set interviews, the surfacing of new insight started to diminish, particularly after the 20th interview. Yet, to ensure full saturation, the interviews were continued until the 26th informant, at which

stage it is decided that adding new interviewee added no new data. A brief description of the participants and their teams are presented in Table 4.3. Given the confidentiality agreements signed with each participant, the names and companies of participants will remain anonymous.

Table 4-3

Participants' Description in the Order of the Interviews

Interviewee Code	Pointers - participants and their team
NFL1	Manager, Social Media at an NFL team, NFC* East Conference
NHL1	Director, Digital Marketing & Analytics at an NHL team, Eastern Conference, Atlantic Division
NFL2	Director, Communication at an NFL team, AFC** North Conference
NFL3	Manager, Social Media at an NFL team, NFC* East Conference
NBA1	Director, Social Media at an NBA team, Eastern Conference, Central Division
NHL2	Director, Game Entertainment & Content at an NHL team, Western Conference, Pacific Division
NHL3	Manager, Digital Media Sales at an NHL team, Eastern Conference, Atlantic Division
NBA2	Director, Social Media at an NBA team, Western Conference, South Division
NHL4	Director, Digital Media at an NHL team, Eastern Conference, Atlantic Division
NFL4	Corporate Sponsorship & Business Development at an NFL team, AFC** East Conference
NBA3	Vice President, Public Relations at an NBA team, Eastern Conference, Atlantic division
MLB1	Exec. Director, Communications at an MLB team, National League, East division
NHL5	Chief Marketing Officer at an NHL team, Eastern conference Atlantic division
NBA4	Director, Digital Marketing at an NBA team, Eastern conference Central division
NFL5	Director, Partnership Sales and Activation at an NFL team, AFC** North conference
NBA5	Manager, Digital at an NBA team, Eastern conference, Atlantic Division
MLB2	Manager, Social Media at an MLB team, American League, East 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
MLB3	Director, Interactive & Social Media at an MLB team, American League, West Division
NHL8	Manager, Events at an NHL team in Western conference Pacific division
NHL9	Director, Digital & Marketing Services at an NHL team, Western Conference, Central Division
MLB6	Director, Digital Media at a MLB team, American League, East 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

*NFC – National Football Conference; **AFC – American Football Conference

Conduct of the interview. Prior to the conduct of each interview, informed consent (see Appendix B) was obtained from those who agreed to participate. A set of interview questions were also emailed to the agreed participants a few days before the interviews were conducted. This was done with the expectation that it generates a more detailed response and provides some degree of comfort during the interview (cf. Andrew, Pedersen & McEvoy, 2011, p. 94). The interviews were conducted over a period of four months–January to February, 2016. Each interview took place over the phone, and lasted approximately 45-65 minutes. Before the start of

each interview, the interviewees had the opportunity to ask for further clarification relative to the consent form and once clarification was provided (when needed), interviews began. The interviews were recorded (with the informants' consent) on digital devices, and notes were taken during the interview for further clarifications. After each interview, interviewees received a thank you email and a reminder that they will be contacted to comment on the transcribed verbatim and preliminary findings. Data were transcribed verbatim from the audiotapes into 387 pages of text.

Data Analysis

Overall, the data analysis was conducted as follows: the raw data collected from the interviews was first assembled (i.e., transcribed), parts were fitted together (by listening to the audio files and reading the verbatim transcripts), text was processed into manageable form(i.e., data reduced, through editing and deleting redundancies), data was condensed topically (i.e., data displayed and quotes extracted), and finally, verification process were undertaken and conclusion were drawn (per Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Patton, 2002; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013).

The study adopted both deductive and inductive approaches to analyse the transcribed data. Deductively (data from the structured side of the semi-structured interview questions), data was analysed to determine whether the opportunities and challenges identified in previous studies (i.e., included in the interview guide) were recognised by professional sport teams' managers. For this purpose, the analytical technique of pattern match was used, wherein the managers' replies to each interview questions were compared and contrasted against the findings reported in previous study. 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 questions with each other (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013; Patton, 2002). This helped to

uncover any commonalities and differences between the interviewees on each question. Certain issues were more prevalent in some cases than others, but a number of commonalities eventually became apparent. Upon the completion of the cross comparison, conclusions were drawn about each question.

Inductively (data from the flexible side of the semi-structured interview questions), the study identified emergent themes from data which surfaced during events such as follow-up questions, open-ended questions, switching/transitioning from topic to topic, and elaborations. This data provided new insights, but fall outside the dominion of the structured questions derived from the literature. These data were compiled (copy and pasted and saved on the side) during the data reduction and data display stages, as it did not fit into what have been reported in the literature. This dataset was analysed inductively, per Creswell (2014), first, by clustering similar topics and organising the topics into three parts: as major topic, unique topic, and leftovers. Next, for the development of a higher order coding for each setting, the data were reanalysed.

Quality Control

Member checking (from the lens of study participants). Two forms of collaborative member checking (respondent verification) were employed. First, the transcribed verbatim interview was sent back to the interviewees (per Amis, 2005; Sparkes & Smith, 2009 recommendation), and, second, the "polished product" (i.e., the preliminary findings) was emailed to the respondents (per Creswell, 2003 recommendation). Performing member checking has helped to ensure for accurate reflection and capturing of the interviewees' responses. In both cases, minor modifications have been suggested and applied accordingly. Some took the opportunity to elaborate on some of their responses by detailing and adding information to the transcript. A few made minor revisions and suggestions on the preliminary findings.

Peer Debriefing **(**from the lens of people external to the study). A peer debriefer, a doctoral candidate who has published on the topic area, played a devil's advocate role (per Creswell & Miller, 2000) by scrutinising the research design, and specifically the data collection and analysis undertakings. The reviewer offered advice, and the key outcomes from this consultation process were the decisions to employ both a deductive and inductive approach for analysis. As Creswell and Miller (2000) stated "peer debriefers … serve as a sounding board for ideas. By seeking the assistance of peer debriefers, researchers add credibility to a study" (p.127).

Reliability Check (from the lens of another researcher). With an intention of enhancing the reliability of the data analysis process, the first two interviews' data analysed by the researcher was submitted to a researcher colleague (who published on the topic area) for review. This collaborator was provided with sufficient background information on the study, including the front-end of the paper (up to the method section), after which they performed an analysis on the two datasets. There were minor differences, which were discussed until a 100% agreement was reached, and the remaining analysis performed accordingly.

Findings

A number of key issues around the use of SM, and the opportunities and challenges of SM in meeting RM goals in the context of professional sport teams were identified by interviewees and are presented here. Results are presented in three sections: (i) professional sport teams' use and practice of SM (S_2RQ_1), (ii) the opportunities SM presents in meeting RM goals (S_2RQ_2), and (iii) the challenges (limitations) of SM in meeting RM goals (S_2RQ_3).

Professional sport teams' use of SM

An examination of the opportunities and challenges of SM as a RM tool first demands an understanding of how the platforms are used by the professional sport teams. To gain such an

understanding, data has been gathered on the different SM platforms that are adopted by the teams, the teams' objectives for using the platforms, and the human resources allocated to manage the platforms.

All the 26 teams adopted at least five or more SM platforms, while some teams are using more than nine different platforms. The platforms include Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, Periscope, Tumblr, YouTube, Vine, Google+, LinkedIn, and Weibo. In terms of the platforms that teams frequently use to communicate with their fans (e.g., posting messages), a common finding amongst all interviewees was that Twitter is their primary platform 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 of use. This was especially true for nascent platforms such as Snapchat. In their use of the platforms, the managers stated that they are capitalizing on each platforms' unique features, such as live transmission on Periscope and Facebook live, fast and 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.

Professional sport teams' objectives of SM use can be categorized in to six types. These include: interaction, update, ticket sales, sponsorship, public relations, and customer service. All teams use the platforms to achieve each of these objectives, but teams also put varying levels of emphasis on each of them, dictated by their market and organisational goal. All managers highly emphasised that interaction is the prime objective in their use of SM, followed by customer service, although they do not give less weight to the other objectives that can be implemented traditionally elsewhere, namely news updates, sales, sponsorship, and public relations. The managers stated that they strive to maintain content topic balance, particularly between ticket

sales, sponsorship, sales promotion, news update, etc. Table 4-4 presents the summary and brief description of the objectives.

Table 4-4

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, to build, maintain, and enhance relationships. To attract new customers, and to humanise 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), 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 publicise community involvement, team and members' visit to hospital, schools.
Sales	Ticket sales, merchandise sale, sales promotions such as fan reward campaigns, including contests and giveaways.
Sponsorship	To monetise 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.

To achieve these objectives and keep their SM channels robust, the managers stated that they strive to build a team with dedicated professionals and company insiders who have creativity in their approach and the 'know-how' as to the use of different platforms. As [MLB1] stated, managing SM takes "a lot of time and effort and resources. It is a 24/7 platform that doesn't sleep and takes a lot more time than people think to manage if you want to do it properly." All the managers who participated in this study have a full-time SM team. On average, there are two staff members per team. While the majority of the teams have two full time employees and two to three part-time employees or interns, a small number of teams have a single full-time employee. Most SM teams receive support from other departments (within their organisation) in terms of digital media content production. In fact, for teams within large markets, the SM team is a part of the digital department where they have staff members who

produces rich 'micro-content' tailored to SM (e.g., Graphic Interchange Formats (GIFs), video clips, pictures, audio files) but do not necessarily fall under the SM team.

Related to human resources, managers noted the trust that teams need to have in their SM team as the voice of their brand. As one manager stated, teams need to have confidence in "the persons they're trusting with the voice of their brand" [NHL9]. Another added that "managing social is, first and for most, an art, supported by scientific data. It is a human doing it, it can't be an algorithm or an agency. You have to trust the people who you put as the front face of the teams" [NBA5]. Reflecting the same sentiment, [NFL1] stated that "[the organisation] 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 in meeting RM goals

A total of seven opportunities that SM present in realizing RM goals are identified, and briefly discussed below (see Figure 4-1). In their discussion of the merits of SM as an RM tool, the managers underscored a number of features of SM that facilitated the identified opportunities. These features are also widely acknowledged in SM literature and include instantaneity, ubiquity (including reaching out to large number), time unboundedness, and border unrestricted, simplicity of use, ease of access, networking, participation, collaboration, direct and real-time conversation, and listening to each other. The SM opportunities are described below, followed by the challenges in the following section.

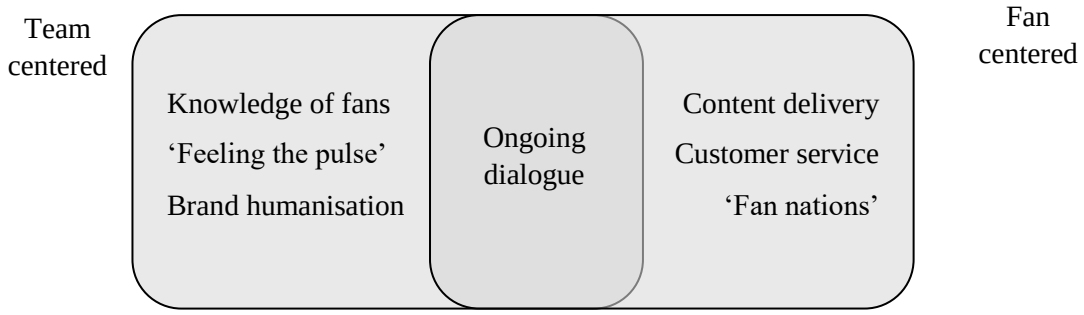

Figure 4-1. Opportunities that social media presents in realizing relationship marketing goals

Knowledge of fans. All managers agreed that knowledge of fans, particularly the opportunity to learn, know, and understand their constantly evolving interests, needs, and wants, is one of the primary benefits that SM offers in 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 and where they live), psychographic (e.g., what fans want and their sentiments and comments), and behavioral (e.g., what they buy) information. This information, as an input, inform managers in developing a marketing campaign strategy that responds to the fans' interest in a timely manner. As [MLB3] stated, SM facilitates "not only knowing fans but also knowing what they are asking for." According to the managers, this ability also allows for the delivery of tailored offerings. It is also mentioned that SM does not only help know a fan base in proximity, but that it also enables an organisation to reach out, know, expand and grow fan bases worldwide. On this subject, [NHL3] notes 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 fans' opinions on certain projects, to 'test the water,' and to get their input quickly. As some managers described, SM can initiate a larger study or give insight into a particular problem that organisations may need to address. In this regard, [NHL1] stated 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's when we'll go take the next step and do some sort of survey to confirm."

Ongoing dialogue. A common finding amongst all interviewees is the opportunity that SM offers to professional teams to engage in a real-time and dynamic one-on-one dialogue with their 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's position more closely, and how this can be carried on an ongoing basis. Through continuous dialogue, managers are able to know and understand the constantly changing needs of their fans. The emphasis that the interviewees put on interaction can reflected in [NHL3's] statement:

> 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 re-tweets.

As one manager further reported, 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" [NFL5]. And as [NBA5] noted, on SM, "it's not necessarily us conducting the conversation or pushing it in any direction; fans also engage in dialogue among themselves." In connection with this, a number of managers insist on the importance of SM enabling fans to feel that they have a venue to express themselves and their feelings towards their team. Knowing that there is a venue, that their opinions can be heard, and having a likelihood of getting a reply, according to the managers, makes fans feel gratified. 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 another manager 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 [are] gratified [NFL3].

Content delivery. Across all respondents, managers put an emphasis on the value that SM delivered in bringing fans closer to their organisation. According to these managers, SM removed barriers and brought fans, players, and teams closer, particularly by enabling fans to connect with players and teams with whom they otherwise have a slim chance of directly connecting and interacting with on a one-on-one basis. Managers stated that SM removes third-party 'middle persons,' providing them the ability to directly offer behind-the-scenes stories and exclusive content to fans, enhancing their experience and bringing them much closer to the team. As [NFL4] specified:

> 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 organisation. 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.

Particularly, using the live streaming capabilities of the different platforms (i.e. Periscope and Facebook live), a number of teams are nowadays broadcasting players' behind-the-scenes activities such as players training, getting on or off a plane, and dinning at the hotel. Similarly, teams use Twitter for Q&A purposes. [NFL2] reflects on this by stating that "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 fulfil one of their six objectives (i.e., *update*), teams use SM to offer exclusive team related supplemental content to their fans, such as game day updates (e.g., live play-by-play updates, scores, highlights) and upcoming or past games content (e.g., training and warmups, injury updates, game highlights). The interviewees claim that delivery of such exclusive team related content directly by the team to the fans extends fans' games experience, adds value to their enjoyment of consuming games (as informed consumers), and these, among other factors, enhance fans' identification.

Customer service. All managers referred to customer service as one of the main values that SM offered in maintaining their organisation's relationship with fans. As 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 on the fact that, using different SM platforms (particularly Twitter), fans are today directly informing teams of any customer or experience related issues such as in-stadium services (e.g., parking, traffic, concessions) and troubleshooting technological issues. Equally, SM is the fastest and immediate means for teams to provide answers to fans and address their concerns. Examples of the type of questions fans may send include:

> "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?" [NFL3]

Managers frequently mentioned that their fans today want issues to get resolved quickly and want solutions at their fingertips. As one of the managers, [MLB6], stated, fans face a number of issues that their team would not be aware of without SM, particularly at the speed it is happening today. [NBA4] stresses on this point by noting that "probably the biggest value for me is that it's the best customer 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.

Furthermore, most interviewees claim that SM is a very public reflection of how teams treat their customers. Managers are in agreement that when a team responds to a fan's inquiry on SM, a public forum, the response can be seen by others. In this regard, SM does not only help teams address the concern of a particular fan, it also allows teams to respond to others with a

similar issue. It is worth mentioning here, however, that responses do not include complaints or comments that require high-level management decision such as trading and players signing.

'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, and gauge sentiments, at a given point in time. These interviewees claim that SM provides an insight into fans' reaction, at an aggregate level, to issues ranging from a team's performance to management related decisions. And so, "Good or bad, you'll know it right away" [NFL1]. The managers also added that their organisation uses SM to gauge fans' responses and sentiments in real time. As [MLB6] stated, "you would know exactly how your fans are feeling at any given point and […] you can create a tailored content to those feelings and capitalise on the highs and try to work through the lows, whenever those happen." Adding to that, [NHL8] says, "you can hear fans screaming in the stadium, but the best way to monitor fans sentiment is through social media".

Brand Humanisation. As an additional benefit of SM, the majority of the interviewees cited professional sport teams' ability to present themselves as an accessible (open and available) and as a within-reach entity. The opportunity to exhibit humour, cheer along with fans, offer rewards, and announce contests is mentioned as one value SM presented to sport teams which enables the humanisation of a brand. For instance, some managers made reference to the entertainment value of friendly banters with rival teams on SM. And most managers noted that they actively interact on SM to humanise the team with the use of humour, wittiness, and clever topical comments both when interacting with fans and sharing information. The managers, therefore, recognise that SM presents professional sport organisations with an opportunity to build a character of their own; by exchanging jokes and funny pictures, communicating with a consistent and friendly tone, and by personalising their replies (e.g., fans' personalised birthday wishes), professional sport team organisations build personality. A humanisation of the brand, as

one manager stated, “gives fans another reason to support the organisation […] [fans] feel justified in their investment in the organisation” [NHL5]. 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.

‘Fan nations’. A number of managers insisted on the fact that SM allows the creation of a fan hub. As a hub for fans, SM platforms, serves as a venue where conversations about a team are carried out among fans–‘fan nations’. 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 sports arena by discussing it with other fans. This, according to some managers, prolongs and enhances fans’ game experience.

In a similar manner, teams, for instance using Twitter, can create an environment that facilitates conversation between fans and that brings them together. Using slogans, a number of teams (e.g., #BroncosCountry - Denver, #JazzNation - Utah, #GoHabsGo - Montreal) create hubs (‘fan nations’) where passionate fans unite outside of the stadium and engage in conversation, bringing them together as a community. ‘Fan nations,’ as some managers argue, enrich fans’ identity. [NBA4] indicated that teams are “creating environments so that conversations take place that make fans feel that they’re bonded together.” In connection with this, [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.”

Challenges of SM in meeting RM goals

A total of seven challenges that professional sport teams face in using SM as an RM tool are identified and briefly discussed below (see Figure 4-2). The challenges include: change

management, operational management, influential opinion leaders, internal conflict of interest, anonymity, actionable data, and lack of control over messages.

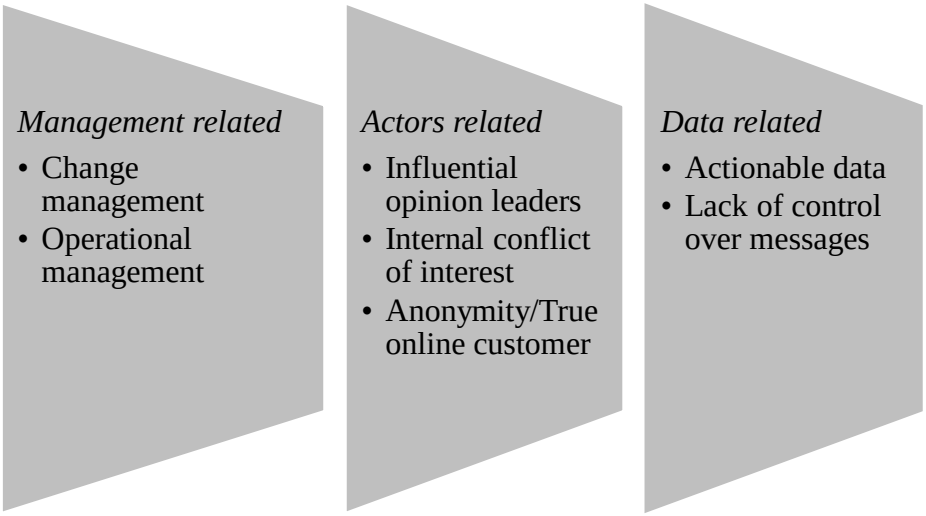

Figure 4-2. Challenges that social media poses in realizing relationship marketing goals

Change management. Coping with the constantly evolving technology of the exiting platforms, as well as repurposing the emerging platforms have been mentioned as one of the challenges of SM. It was underscored by the managers that the platforms evolve so fast that they demand constant adaptation. But most managers pointed out that the effort is always expended to find the best ways of managing them. As one manager stated, SM "is changing a lot and there is a new platform popping up every now and then, so, usually, we need to readjust ourselves" [NBA2]. As a number of managers stated, they ensure that they have a good plan and a good understanding of a platform before they adopt it. Additionally, ensuring that the new platforms are right for the team demands resources. Notably, [NHL3] stated that manager have to work 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—[and] 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 a constant change. It’s like saying, ‘what’s the next platform going to be?’ […] You just don’t really know.” Most interviewees underscored that, with the constantly evolving nature of SM, they are learning and teaching themselves through the process. As [NFL3] stated, “We may do something to realise, ‘Oh, wow. We’ve been doing this wrong,’ or ‘We didn’t realise that this would drive this kind of traffic’. We experiment things." Having discussed change management related issues, [NHL5] noted that “even though a number of teams have a lot of followers, and are very active and have a very dedicated team, I would say that the industry is still in the infancy of how we manage our social content.”

Operational management. In connection with the change management challenge, running the day-to-day operation (or real-time content management) has been mentioned as a challenge. Although the managers agree that it is part of their job and that their teams are aware of it, they find that balancing speed, creativity, and accuracy to be a challenge. According to some of the managers, 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” [NBA5]. As [NHL3] noted “I say to my team all the time, it’s important to be first but we’d rather be right.”

The managers are in agreement: they are well aware of the different aspects of the available SM platforms, yet, at the same time, they are learning the best way of managing the platforms through the process. There is a lack of exemplary or practice model that they can adopt. A number of managers have mentioned that they are still experimenting to figure out a fitting operational approach (for the day-to-day operation). As [NBA1] remarked, managing SM “is a trial and error process.” This is mainly, due to the constantly changing nature of SM both within the existing platforms as well as new emerging ones. The frequently mentioned

operational issues amongst most interviewees include constantly producing fresh, diverse, and different content, and identifying the type of content that most appeals to fans, in terms of both the topic and the framing of a message.

Influential opinion leaders – Interestingly, most of the managers stated that they know a reasonable number of their SM users, particularly the influential ones. In this regard, [MLB2] stated 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 recognise but there are […] a good number of people that I 'see' [on Twitter] every night [at the baseball game]." As some managers pointed out, influential SM users (i.e. fans who have a significant following and who frequently post about the team) have more "authority," and their opinion, as a third party, is considered more "real" because they are not a part of the organisation and are not bound by a 'marketing' label.

A number of managers are in agreement that fans are more likely to listen to another fan, and particularly to key influencers. However, these managers underscored the fact that influential opinion leaders can also sway opinions in a negative way, which demands a redirection of resources to handle the matter. As one manager 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" [NBA3]. [NHL6], adding to this, stated that "naysayers who are social influencers, are the difficult customer to deal with."

A number of managers suggested that empowering opinion leaders would be beneficial. In fact, some teams organise a hospitality service for digital influencers, while some others suggested that they empower influencers by providing them with exclusive content. One manager [NHL2], for example, discussed "social street nights" that are organised for the top influencers and in which they are treated to food and drinks. In a like manner, [MLB1] stated

that the organisation provides opinion leaders with insider information in an attempt to supply them with accurate information and enhance their fanship. However, the manager noted that some of the individuals may see the offer as an attempt to buy their opinion.

Internal conflict of interest. Although conflict of interest among different departments of an organisation over the use of SM has not been identified as a critical challenge, a number of managers revealed that balancing the different objectives of SM within the organisation is difficult. Within a sport organisation, different departments have different interest when it comes to the use of SM, such as ticket sales, sponsorship, merchandise sales, public relations, and marketing. According to the managers, as SM is primarily perceived as a channel where informative, entertaining, and interactive content are exchanged, caution has to be used to avoid excessive (and overt) use of SM for monetisation purposes. A number of mechanisms have been developed, according to the managers, which are intended to reconcile and address conflicting interests.

In a like manner, a number of managers pointed out the lack of control that they have over their internal stakeholders (e.g., players, coaches, staff, and cheerleaders) as a challenge. As [NHL1] stated:

> "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"

Relatedly, conflict of interest with a SM team member has been mentioned by a small number of managers. Their sentiment is illustrated by [NHL8]'s words:

> We lost a key social employee two years ago and the one thing we realised is that our fans were following him and not the content. He had his own personality on the handle. So, we created a playbook that guides on the tone and type of voices. A social employee can't be layering in his own personal personality. It is the team's personality not an individual's.

Anonymity. A number of managers indicated that anonymity is a potential challenge, although not a challenge that teams encounter often. According to the managers, over the years they came to learn that if users impersonate the organisation to make certain comments or to disseminate false information, they are easily identified and dealt with. Managers have also indicated that fans tend to also be knowledgeable and savvy, and that they report such anonymous actor to the organisation through its official channels. Recognising anonymity as a drawback of social media, [NFL1] noted that "people can kind of hide behind social media." This, however, did not represent a significant challenge as [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.

Actionable data. The issue of transforming big data into actionable data is one of the major challenges identified by managers across-the-board. The challenge has been located in two areas: in filtering data and in responding to all fans' voices. A number of managers made note of the fact that the volume of content exchanged on SM is not only large, but that comments and opinions can be impulsive. Thus, size and impulsiveness can swamp the 'genuine' comments. As [MLB3] puts it, "teams are so strapped for manpower in the social field that a lot of those messages [fans' inquiries] that go to the team may get overlooked." In that same vein, [NFL5] indicates 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 is made difficult by the volume of the data. In this regard, as most managers specified, their teams are constrained by the

knowhow, the human resources, and 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, this has been consistently mentioned by managers as one of the major challenges. Relatedly, while there is the ambition and motivation for most of the teams, according to the managers, to respond to as many fan messages as possible, most managers agreed that it is a formidable task to be able to respond to all. And yet, some teams are developing basic mechanisms in an attempt to subside the challenge, such as redirecting messages to departments that are directly responsible for particular inquiries, prioritizing messages depending on their weight. Fans' self-policing is the other SM-born solution that managers rely on. In this regard, [NBA5] mentioned that on SM teams have "hundreds of thousands—a million advocates who defend you in this spaces because the team is a part of their own personal identity, as their own personal brand."

Lack of control. Regarding the lack of control over content posted by users on teams' SM platforms, the study data informs us that almost all managers are in agreement that it is a concern, but that it is not out of control. All managers report that they do not stifle outside views, unless comments step over the civil boundary. According to the managers, fans are entitled to expressing their opinions. 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], stated "that is the nature of sport". When posted content is vulgar, obscene, or offensive (e.g., curse words, racial slurs, threats, sexist), or otherwise lack civility, teams remove it or block the user when found necessary. And when the comments are service related, statements that lack factuality (e.g., "Game schedule is fixed"), or are brand/organisation/management related, the team endeavours to respond to the contents. In the latter two cases, teams may also let their fans self-police the content. For instance, when messages come from fans of rival teams'

fans, other fans will step in and react on the team's behalf. This is an experience that has been raised by a number of managers. For instance, as [MLB1] stated:

> 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.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to obtain empirically supported understanding of the use, opportunities, and challenges of SM in meeting RM goals in the context of professional sport teams. The study, based on the perspective of senior managers of professional sport teams in North America, produced data that allowed to accomplish the intended purpose. All of the 26 teams who participated in this study are active on at least five SM platforms, with a reported intention of achieving six different objectives: interaction, update, ticket sales, sponsorship, public relations, and customer service. These six objectives can be further captured into four overarching organisational objectives (the four Rs): Relationship (interaction), Relevance (news update and public relation), Revenue (ticket and merchandise sales, and sponsorship), and Resolving issues (customer service). This is in line with previous studies (e.g., Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015; Schultz & Peltier, 2013; Vernuccio, 2014) that reported that marketers are using SM as a medium to implement a variety of marketing communication elements such as news updates, sales, public relations, and relationship marketing. It is important to note that all the participants of the study highly emphasised the predominant value of SM as an RM tool.

According to the managers (respondents), the value of SM is the ability to communicate, interact, and engage in two-way dialogue with fans on an ongoing basis. Through a two-way continuous dialogue, managers stated that they are able to listen to and understand customers' needs, respond accordingly, and are able to create and co-create additional value for fans. These

are the core intent of RM, both as a management approach and as a theoretical framework. In this regard, this work supports previous studies (e.g., Hambrick & Svensson, 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010) that conceptually claimed the conduciveness and idealness of SM as a tool in meeting RM goals, and those that argued for SM's role in making the RM approach practical and affordable (e.g., Abeza et al., 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010). However, as ideal as SM is for a relationship building approach, with lists of opportunities, previous studies also suggested (e.g., Pronschinske et al., 2012; Schultz & Peltier, 2013) that using SM poses challenges, involves drawbacks, and has limitations. Those studies' claims, in terms of SM challenges encountered in attempting to meet RM goals, are observed and identified.in this study. Figure 4-3 presents the opportunities and challenges of social media as a relationship marketing tool.

Opportunities	**Challenges**
Team centered	*Management related*
Knowledge of fans	Change management
'Feeling the pulse'	Operational management
Brand humanisation	
Ongoing dialogue	*Actors related*
Fan centred	Influential opinion leaders
Content delivery	Internal conflict of interest
Customer service	Anonymity/True online customer
'Fan nations'	*Data related*
	Actionable data
	Lack of control over messages

Figure 4-3. Opportunities and challenges of social media as a relationship marketing tool

In terms of opportunities, this study found seven major values that SM presented in meeting RM goals. These include ongoing dialogue, knowledge of fans, 'feeling the pulse', brand humanisation, content delivery, customer service, and 'fan nations'. All seven opportunities facilitate the building, maintenance, and enhancement of relationships between teams and fans. RM is primarily about teams communicating, interacting, and engaging in dialogue with their fans on an ongoing basis. Therefore, identified opportunities such as 'knowledge of fans' and 'feeling the pulse,' enable teams to design an informed strategy and

develop a customised approach in their marketing endeavors. Particularly, the opportunity of ongoing dialogue is the prime benefit of SM as an RM tool as identified by managers across-the-board; it should also be noted that ongoing dialogue is the core component of an RM approach (Grönroos, 2004).

Managers stated that via the use of SM, teams are now able to communicate, interact, and engage in two-way interactions with their fans on an ongoing basis. The managers emphasised the fact that, through continuous dialogue, teams are able to listen to and understand their fans' constantly changing needs, and to deliver a co-create value that facilitates (as mentioned above) the building, maintenance, and enhancement of long-term relationships. In this regard, and as pointed out above, one manager stated 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." In a similar manner, [MLB3] stated that SM facilitates "not only knowing fans but also knowing what they are asking for." Stressing on the point, [NHL3] asserted "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 re-tweets." Therefore, the finding is in line with the RM three process model suggested by Grönroos (2004) and Williams and Chinn (2010).

While a variety of relational values emerge through ongoing dialogue, 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 becoming a "go to" medium to seek help on a number of customer related issues, from in-stadium services to technological troubles. The advantage that SM provides in responding to fans' inquiries quickly and publicly makes it a best customer service tool. Most importantly, it

allows teams to have satisfied customers, which enhances fans' sport consumption experience and, by extension, enhancement of fan identification.

Similarly, teams today 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, adds value to their enjoyment of consuming games (as informed consumers) and these, among other factors, enhance fans' identification. Similarly, 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 a team.

While SM presented three team centered opportunities (ongoing dialogue, knowledge of fans, and 'feeling the pulse') and three fans oriented benefits (content delivery, customer service, and build 'fan nations'), the platforms have also provided professional teams with the stage to humanise their brand. Through SM, teams build a personality and are presenting themselves as open and accessible entities. By communicating SM content with humour, by using a friendly tone, and by participating in real-time personalised 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.

The challenges that SM poses in meeting RM goals can be seen from three different dimensions (MAD): Management related, Actors (stakeholders) related, and Data related. The

"Management related" dimension include issues about change management and operational management; "Actors related" include concerns in connection with influential opinion leaders, internal conflict of interest, and anonymity; and "Data related" include limitations in terms of actionable data and concerns related to lack of control over messages. An examination of these identified challenges informs us that the two management challenges are hurdles that can be resolved over the course of time with the evolution of the use of SM and advancements in technology. These management challenges include change management (i.e., coping with the constantly changing technology of the exiting vs new platforms), and operational management (e.g., a lack of exemplary or practice model).

The data related challenges are concerns that can be addressed with the advancement of technology (e.g., filtering actionable data); they involve questions of capacity or resource (e.g., responding to all fans voices) and can be handled through different coping mechanisms that emerge over course of time such as the four basic mechanisms used to manage the problem of lack of control over content (these next paragraph for more on these basic mechanisms.) Finally, actors related challenges are perceived by managers as either potential (and occasional) challenges or concerns that are controllable. In this regard, the issue of anonymity is, according to the managers, a potential challenge but not one that teams encounter often. The challenges that SM managers find controllable, and for which they have been devising preventive approaches over the course of time, include the potential impact of influential opinion leaders (e.g., through the provision of exclusive access, and organising hospitality events), and internal conflict of interests (e.g., through the practice of balancing the different departments' objectives).

Regarding the issue of lack of control over content posted on the teams' SM platform, all managers remarked that fans are entitled to their opinions. Thus, when the (negative) opinions are performance related or administrative decisions (e.g., player signing), teams tend to "let it

go" and "let that happen." Content is only censored when it is deemed inappropriate (e.g., derogatory or vulgar). When content is service related (e.g., parking), lack factuality (e.g., incorrect comments about the game schedule), or is brand related, teams respond respectively. Regarding operational management, all teams are found to be managing their SM platforms largely on day-to-day basis. Although managers claimed that "they know what they are doing," none of the teams have a written plan of action for managing their SM platforms; the constantly changing nature of SM platforms is the main reason cited by the interviewees. Therefore, some teams manage their SM guided by their department's strategy, while others follow an ad lib procedure ("in the moment"). Managers' in the latter position can be understood, however, their adopted approach limits the SM teams' vision in terms of diversifying the use of SM for different marketing communication purposes.

A common finding amongst all interviewees is that the industry is still developing best practices for managing SM platforms. It is clearly observed in this study that, over the past few years, managers have gradually accustomed themselves to the changing nature of SM, including adaptation to new and emerging SM platforms, changes within exiting platforms, day-to-day content management of the platforms, and fans' SM consumption patterns. As SM evolves, professional sport teams are learning and teaching themselves through the process, experimenting with content management, and readjusting themselves accordingly. These factors, among others, are molding the managers' experiences and perceptions; challenges that were unmanageable a year or so ago are either under control today or are understood by the SM community as being a part of the nature of SM. Hence, challenges are evolved over time and come to simply be perceived as drawbacks. In fact, few of the challenges that were reported in the previous studies are found to be perceived challenges today (e.g., true online fans). Hurdles

that managers are facing are also controllable within the resource limit of the teams, although the managers admitted that some (notably, data and change management) require extra resources.

Contributions to Scholarship

The study contributes to the scholarship by supporting and augmenting previous sport related SM studies, specifically in the area of SM and relationship marketing in the context professional sport. First, we responded to calls made by sport-related SM studies. Such calls include the need to investigate the use of SM as an RM tool in a professional sport setting (e.g., Abeza et al., 2013), the use of SM from the perspective of different professional sport teams (e.g., Meng et al., 2015; Stavros et al., 2014), the use of SM in RM from the management perspective (e.g., Williams & Chinn, 2010), and the need to reinvestigate the topic after a suitable period to see the changes over time and in a wider range of sport contexts (Abeza et al., 2013).

This work filled the research gaps that were identified in the literature review section of this study (of chapter 3). As discussed in the literature review section, sport related RM articles that adopted an organisational perspective (i) used SM content as their sources of evidence and the perspective of practitioners was missing (e.g., interviews), and (ii) the three studies which were found using interviews were conducted in the context of niche sports (e.g., Abeza et al., 2013; Hambrick & Svensson, 2015) and college sport (e.g., Dixon et al., 2015). Hence, this study investigated the topic area by interviewing senior managers of professional sport teams. More importantly, 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.

Applied Implications

Across all respondents, managers put an emphasis on the ability that SM provides to communicate, interact, and engage in two-way dialogue with fans on an ongoing basis. Through a two-way continuous dialogue, managers stated that they are able to listen to and understand customers' needs, respond accordingly, and are able to create and co-create 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 three basic approaches identified: "let it go", delete it, or reply to it. As stated previously, when (negative) opinions are performance related, teams "let it happen." When posted content is found to be inappropriate (e.g., derogatory, vulgar, racist), teams remove it. And, when content is service related, lack factuality, or is brand related, teams respond. On a related issue, as a few of the managers stated, a great deal of messages for the team might be overlooked as a result of such factors as a shortage of manpower 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 address specific inquiry within an organization. This involves, for example, setting up SM accounts for the different departments.

As [MLB2] and [NFL3] underscored, with the evolvement of SM there needs to be a shift from merely posting messages on a platform to creating creative and rich data that resonates 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 organise 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, the below discussed practical recommendations are identified. While SM has been shown to be an effective RM tool, professional sport clubs can also use it as a revenue generating source, although the issue of balancing engaging content and promotional content must be handled very carefully. For instance, by utilizing data generated within SM platforms (e.g., number of people who saw, engaged with, replied to a post, and/or clicked on a post's embedded link), teams would be able to come up with metrics and return on investment (ROI) ideas that help them attach a value to their platform for potential partners. This can include data on such engagement as the number of users who entered a contest or the number of people who use a product code supplied by a team's partner. Relatedly, in order to reach out to a target audience of a particular fan base (rather than sending out a message to the mass), as some of the teams have stated, organisations can use new SM features such as Facebook's new targeting capability in which you can target individuals through their interests. This feature enables organisations 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 want to promote.

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 emphasised that an in-depth understanding of a teams' audience is imperative in the management of SM. Such an understanding allows SM teams to customise 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, etc., it is recommended that managers capitalise 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.

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 that examines data warehouse management used in a business sectors other than sport and that present its customisation to professional sport teams will have both academic and managerial contributions. As the managers indicated, such data enable them to utilise that information to have a benchmark against which they can compare themselves with other organisations within their leagues. This helps organisations learn what other teams are doing well, why they are doing well, how other teams could catch up to them, etc. In connection with this, additional study will be needed to investigate how organisations sort

out, filler out and distill 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). Studies will also be recommended to investigate the emerging practice of sponsorship on social media, as teams invite partners to align their brands with teams' brand in the social space. In this regard, a few of the managers who participated in this study stressed on the growth of revenue they are able to generate when their partners capitalise on the team's brand and on their audience of thousands/millions on SM platforms. This can, for instance, be subtly accomplished through sponsored video series. With this, a number of teams mentioned that although they are at the infancy stage of using SM for monetisation, there is a growing trend of using SM for promoting partners and generating revenue. As the SM department generate income, it will be able to build capacity and legitimacy.

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. Further studies are equally recommended on the use and impact of social media in expanding and growing the fan base (or introducing a particular sport) to non-traditional market. Example include, hockey in China and basketball in different parts of Canada. Furthermore, 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), #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 (CORFing) and Basking In Reflected Glory (BIRGing) surface online, etc.

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 CFL and 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 the course of specific period of time will be recommended.

While the study makes theoretical and practical contributions, some limitations must be recognised. All interviewees were not the individuals who directly manage organic content (i.e., who create and post content on the platforms on a daily basis), although some have done it in the past and their current tasks consist in giving strategic direction. There is also a proportional difference in the representation of the four different leagues in the study.

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CHAPTER 5: Study 3

The Use of Social Media as a Relationship Marketing Medium in Professional Sport: The Fan Perspective

Social media (SM) use is a phenomenon that has grown rapidly in the sport industry over the past decade (Pedersen, 2014). Its popularity and acceptance by athletes, coaches, managers, teams, leagues, fans, events, and sport governing bodies is widespread (Hutchins, 2014; Pedersen, 2014), and the expansive reach of SM's use in sport has presented a multitude of opportunities to different stakeholders in the industry (Abeza, O'Reilly, Séguin, & Nzindukiyimana, 2015). It provided the ability to reach greater numbers of audiences at a time, place, and frequency that is convenient to consumers (Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly, 2013). Marketers are using SM as a medium to implement a variety of marketing communication elements such as news updates, sales, advertising, public relations, internal communication, and relationship marketing (Schultz & Peltier, 2013; Vernuccio, 2014).

While SM is a valuable resource to carry out these marketing communications elements (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010); it predominantly appears to be an effective vehicle for achieving RM goals (Meng, Stavros & Westberg, 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010). 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., Boehmer & Lacy, 2014; Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Stavros et al. 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Although SM seems to offer numerous opportunities for relationship building (at least conceptually) (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Reid, 2013), there is only a limited understanding in the literature as to how sport fans see the value of SM in maintaining and enhancing relationships with their favourite sport teams. In fact, a number of sport related SM studies centering on sport fans have contributed to our understanding of fans' motivation, behaviour, and attitude in using

SM for purposes other than RM (e.g., Clavio & Walsh, 2013; Gibbs, O'Reilly & Brunette, 2014; Mahan et al., 2014; Wang, 2013). And, a dozen sport-related SM studies can be identified that grounded their research in RM as a theoretical framework or as a management approach (e.g., Abeza et al., 2013; Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012; Stavros et al., 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Notably, the latter studies have made significant contributions to the RM literature through the lens of SM in the sport context. However, a gap remains in the literature regarding the perspective of sport fans on the benefits of SM as a channel to communicate, interact, and co-create value with their favourite sport teams, which are (per Gronroos, 2004 and Williams & Chinn, 2010) the core intent of RM.

Given that SM is suggested to be an ideal RM tool and a context where sport consumers are primary active collaborators (Stavros et al., 2013), this study attempts to gain a deeper and empirically informed understanding of the benefit of SM, if any, as a RM medium from the perspective of sport fans. Two research questions guide the current study:

(i) How do fans of professional sport teams see the benefits of SM, if any, as a medium that enhances long-term relationship with their favourite sport team *(S_3RQ_1)*?

(ii) What are the benefits, if any, fans of professional sport teams see in SM as a medium that enhances long-term relationship with their favourite sport team *(S_3RQ_2)*?

An understanding of the benefits or values of SM from fans' perspective will allow sport managers to better recognise fans' perspective on the use of SM as an RM tool, and to be more proactive and purposeful in their interactions. Gaining a rich sense of fans' perspective on the benefits of SM as an RM tool will also have significant importance for academics, as it contributes to the advancement of RM literature in the sport context.

Literature Review

Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing (RM), both as a theoretical framework and as a management approach, is about building a two-way collaborative relationship through communication and interaction between organisations and their stakeholders (Williams & Chinn, 2010). This relationship involves fulfilling promises, building trust and commitment where two parties, on an on-going basis, talk to each other, listen to each other, learn from each other, become familiar with each other, and in due course, reach a common understanding (Grönroos, 2004; Peppers & Rogers, 2010). When organisations reach an understanding with their stakeholders by fulfilling promises they made in their communications and interactions, they produce and deliver a co-created, customer-valued product (Grönroos, 2004; Peppers & Rogers, 2010). In maintaining and enhancing this process on a continuing basis, organisations understand stakeholders' ongoing needs, build intimacy, develop long-term relationships and ultimately secure long-term mutual benefits (Grönroos, 2000; Gummesson, 1998; Peppers & Rogers, 2011). Customers also gain benefits such as familiarity with service offerings, achieving greater efficiency in decision making, minimizing searching costs, reduction of perceived risks associated with future purchase choices, and achieving cognitive consistency in decisions (Bee & Kahle, 2006; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995; Stavros & Westberg, 2009). Grönroos (2004), on his part, stated that RM provides enhanced security to customers, a sense of trust and a feeling of control, minimises purchasing risks, and reduced the costs of being a customer. In this regard, SM has become an ideal medium to achieve RM goals (Williams & Chinn, 2010). It is worth noting here that not all types of dialogue lead to relationships; only dialogues based on mutual interest and trust will lead to a long-term relationship and the co-creation of value (Abeza & O'Reilly, 2014).

Hitherto, the assumption has been that all parties are interested on establishing a long-term relationship or in staying in relationship. However, RM is not an approach that is fitting for all customers in all situations; a customer could be interested in RM in one situation and not in another (Grönroos, 2004). It should be also noted that not all customers are interested in a long-term relationship or in staying in relationship (Jackson, 1985). To address this assumption, Grönroos (1996) suggested a continuum of relationships, from transaction-based to relationship-based, in which "for some types of products and in some situations or for some types of customers a one-deal-at-a-time approach may be a good strategy" (p. 11). As Palmer et al. (2005) also stated, relationship and transaction marketing can be concurrently practiced, and businesses can adopt mid-range positions appropriate to the context in which they operate. It should also be noted that developing a relationship is not always easy. To engage in a relationship process, the product or service offering has to first be considered valuable in the mind of the consumer. Moreover, as Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Saren and Tzokas (1998) stated, relationships are not contractual agreements, and as a result have to be based on trust, commitment, and mutual benefit. The above-mentioned caveats of an RM practice—namely, interest to engage and stay in relationship, type of customers and conditions of relationship, concurrent practice, the value of product in consumers' mind, and the notion of contractual agreement—are arguably minimal (concerns) in the context of sport fans. This has been supported in a number of sport related RM studies discussed below following a brief discussion on sport fans.

Sport Fanship and Relationship Marketing

Sport fans consume sport in different ways, such as attending games, following games on media, purchasing merchandises, etc. (Tapp, 2004; Kim & Trail, 2011). The underlying motives, attitude and behavior of sport consumption make sport fans distinct from the consumers of other businesses (Funk & James, 2001; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Tapp, 2004). As an enthusiastic

consumer (Wann, 1995) or an ardent devotee (Anderson, 1979), a sport fan is motivated to engage in behavior related to sport and has some level of attachment to a sport object (Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999). Sport fanship is shaped by different factors, starting from the media, friends, moving to a new city, to team success and recent relocations to family history and self-identity (Tapp, 2004). Funk and James (2001) present fans involvement level (to a sport team) into four levels of categories along a continuum: awareness, attraction, attachment, and allegiance. Depending on the different levels of allegiance or psychological attachment to a team, fans display a range of attitudes, and behaviors (Funk & James, 2001; Gladden & Funk, 2002). And despite the varying levels of attachment to their favorite sport object, fans usually identify themselves with a sport or sport object to meet a diverse range of personal needs (Funk & James, 2001; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Tapp, 2004; Wann et al., 2001). Fans consume sport for such reasons as self-esteem, group affiliation, entertainment, family, eustress (positive level of arousal), aesthetics qualities (i.e., artistic), escape, and economic (e.g., gambling) (Wann et al., 2008; Wann et al., 2001).

Based on the level of intensity of attachment and the different motives, attitude and behavior of sport consumption, various authors introduced different typologies of sport fans (see Stewart, Smith & Nicholson, 2003 for more on this). After reviewing around two dozens of scholarly works that attempted to introduce different typologies of sport fans, Stewart et al. (2003) argue that there is no single best typology as all the classifications present strengths and limitations. As a result, the authors recommended researchers “to examine sport consumption behavior in accordance with an individual’s self-perception, since it produces more personalised and divergent responses” (p.212). This view is reflected by Wann and Branscombe (1993), who state that a sport fan is someone who says they are a sport fan or, as Stewart et al. (2003)

contend, sport consumption is a self-defining phenomenon. Hence, the sport fans who are considered in this study are self-reported sport fans.

The attitudes and behavior of sport fans toward their favorite sport object (e.g., a team, a player) exhibit conducive ground and desire for relationship building (Harris & Ogbonna, 2008; Farrelly & Quester, 2003). Sport fans are motivated to engage in behaviors related to sports (Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999), and as such are often highly connected and involved personally with their favourite team (Harris & Ogbonna, 2008). They display their commitment through repeat ticket purchases, continued game attendance, viewership, and the purchase of team kits and team merchandise (Bee & Kahle, 2006; Gladden & Funk, 2002). This behavior, according to Bee and Kahle (2006), among other factors, reflects the desire of these fans to become involved in, engage in, and maintain a relationship with the sport entities they support. The emotions, experiences, and feelings associated with sport consumption is one aspect that initiates a need for intimacy and relationship building (Kim, Trail, Woo, & Zhang, 2011; Shani, 1997). Waters, Burke, Jackson & Buning (2011) argue that the strong level of loyalty that sport fans display to their sport team is higher than the loyalty that other customers give to any other brand. According to the authors, this sets a fertile ground for relationship building endeavors.

Taking the sport consumers' perspective into account, a number of sport-related RM studies have been conducted since *Sport Marketing Quaterly*'s first special issue on the topic in 1997. Table 5-1 presents a summary of the studies. These studies advanced our knowledge on relational exchanges from the perspective of both the industry practice and the development of constructs of relational qualities. From an industry practice perspective, Bee and Kahle (2006) suggested the importance of moving sport consumers from a reward based transaction marketing approach to a relational interaction focused on a mutual exchange and shared values. Harris and Ogbonna (2008), for their part, recommended that marketers embrace a broader categorisation of

customers and reach out to a wide range of fan base taking the different relationships that a particular segment of fan form with a team.

Table 5-1

Sport Consumer-Centered Relationship Marketing Studies

Authors	**Research Purpose**	**Sport Context**	**Finding**
Bee & Kahle 2006	Conceptual – Examine how and why consumers develop, enter into, and maintain relationships in a sports marketing context	Professional sport	Proposed a framework for understanding how and why consumers engage in RM. The framework presented three levels for understanding relationship formation and maintenance: compliance, identification, and internalisation.
Tsiotsou (2013)	Defining constructs – Examine the formation process of sport team loyalty by integrating an RM perspective and a hierarchy of effects model	Professional soccer teams	Centering on both cognitive (team involvement, trust, self-expression) and affective (team attachment) aspects of sport team relationships, the authors found all their hypothesised constructs constitute either direct or indirect determinants of sport team loyalty.
Harris & Ogbonna (2008)	Defining constructs – Explore the extent to which various types of customers exhibit relational links with service firms, and to generate insights into the manner in which such identification is manifested	Professional soccer teams	Identified three key issues: (i) the vast majority of soccer fans believe that they have a relationship with the club or team they support, (ii) in most cases, however, intimacy, mutuality, trust, or commitment is lacking, and (iii) only a significant minority of fans appear to develop and sustain meaningful relational ties with their soccer club or team.
Kim & Trail (2011)	Defining constructs – Discuss psychological factors that affects sport consumption behaviour in RM context, and propose a conceptual framework of consumer-organisation relationship quality	Professional sport	Proposed a conceptual framework of sport consumer-organisation relationship quality consisting of 3 components: (i) relationship quality consists 5 constructs, (ii) relationship quality influences word of mouth, media consumption, licensed-product consumption, and attendance behaviours, and (iii) the link is mediated by psychographic and demographic factors
Kim, Trail, & Ko (2011)	Defining constructs – Study relationship quality in sport consumer behaviour contexts and its link with three sport consumer behavioural intentions	College and a Football team	Each construct reflected a unique side of the different relationship quality dimensions and the holistic nature of relationship quality, supporting a general-specific model
Kim, Trail, Woo & Zhang (2011)	Defining constructs – Develop the Sports Consumer-Team Relationship Quality Scale (SCTRQS)	College sport	Tested and found their SCTRQS showing preliminary validity and reliability in assessing the quality of relationship between sport organisation and their consumers.
Magnusen, Kim, & Kim (2012)	Defining constructs – Examine the impact of the RQ construct of reciprocity on outcome of attendance intention through relational mediators of trust and commitment	College sport	Their study supported the hypothesis that the direct and mediated effects of reciprocity on sport consumer attendance intentions
Wang, Ho, & Zhang (2012)	Defining constructs – Examine the effects of relationship quality and calculative commitment on sport consumers' game attendance, donation intentions, & customer referral in intercollegiate athletics	College sport	Found that relationship quality and calculative commitment together explain large portions of the three sport consumer behaviors

In a series of publications, Kim and his colleagues (e.g., Kim, Trail, Woo, & Zhang, 2011; Kim & Trail, 2011) attempted to define the dimensions of RM from the perspective of developing and testing relationship constructs, specifically relationship quality (i.e., assessment of the strength of a relationship). Their constructs included trust, commitment, intimacy, self-connection, reciprocity, and satisfaction. In their empirical study, Kim, Trail, and Ko (2011) found the relational constructs influencing behavioral intention of consumption such as attendance, media consumption, and licensed merchandise consumption. The studies underlined the key role played by nurturing high quality relationships (between fans and teams) in converting RM efforts into desirable business outcomes.

Social Media and Relationship Marketing from the Sport Fans' Perspective

As was briefly indicated at the start of this work, SM platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) are providing new directions to RM, making relational exchanges both more affordable and effective (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015; Hambrick & Svensson, 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Today, SM users are producers, consumers, and distributors of contents (i.e., photos, video, audio files, and videos) (Jiao, Gao, & Yang, 2015), including sport fans. The simplicity, accessibility, contact availability, transparency, and related other features of SM enabled users to create, listen, learn, contribute, and circulate interests, and experiences instantaneously and, mainly, to provide commentary through collaborative writing and networking (Jiao et al., 2015). Users' participation ranges from passive visitor to committed contributor (Harridge-March & Quinton, 2009). Some dedicate substantial time producing and consuming content, others do not. Relatedly, users/followers of a given SM site (e.g., an NBA team's Facebook account) are not all necessarily fans of the team, and not all offline fans of the team are necessarily users of the team's SM site (Abeza et al., 2015).

Taking into consideration the potential benefits of using SM to meet RM goals in sport, scholars (e.g., Pronschinske et al., 2012; Stavros et al., 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010) acknowledged the need for a better understanding of the underlying dimensions of SM in an RM approach from fans' perspective. In fact, there exists a number of sport related studies that centered on sport fans (e.g., Clavio & Walsh, 2013; Gibbs, O'Reilly, & Brunette, 2014; Hull & Lewis, 2014; Mahan et al., 2014; Wang, 2013). While these studies made significant contribution to our understanding of fans' motivations, behaviour, and attitude in using SM, missing from the literature is how fans of professional sport teams see the benefits of SM in RM. In other words, the value of SM as a channel to communicate, interact and co-create value, and thereby build, maintain, and enhance the long-term relationship with their sport team, i.e. the core intent of RM (per Grönroos, 2004; Williams & Chinn, 2010).

As can be seen in the brief discussion presented here and the summaries presented in Table 5-2, SM studies related to sport fans that grounded their research in RM made significant contribution to our understanding of the place of SM in RM. Stavros et al. (2013), through a content analysis of NBA fans interaction on Facebook, reported on what motivates fans to engage with sport on SM, and identified four key motives: passion, hope, esteem, and camaraderie. In their analysis, the authors demonstrated that Facebook provides an avenue for fans to satisfy motives that are not fully met through other forms of sport consumption such as game attendance and/or TV viewership. SM helps fans connect with other like-minded individuals and carry, extend, and amplify a fresh game experience outside the sport arena. In line with Pronschinske et al.'s (2012) findings, Stavros et al. (2013) reported the opportunity that SM provides to serving as a venue for genuine and honest conversations and engagement. Based on four major professional sport clubs in North American, Pronschinske et al. (2012), grounding their study in the RM framework, explored the Facebook attributes that attract the most fans. The

authors found that page attributes signaling authenticity (being the verified official site) and user engagement (the two-way dialogue) have the greatest impact on attracting and maintaining a Facebook fan base. According to the authors, fans may be enthusiastically looking for engagement with a sport team's marketing efforts.

Table 5-2

Sport-Related Social Media Studies that Grounded their Research in Relationship Marketing from Fans' Perspective

Authors	**Research Purpose**	**Focus/ Source of Evidence**	**Finding**
Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker (2012)*	Studied relationship-marketing efforts conducted by teams in the four North American major leagues through Facebook, & how teams connected and built relationships with fans	Fans and SM attributes/ Facebook content – 4 major leagues' teams	Identified four primary Facebook elements used to accomplish their objectives. Concluded that the teams could benefit from RM by developing ongoing interactions through SM
Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly (2013)	Explored the motivations underpinning the desire of fans to communicate on the Facebook sites of sport teams	Consumers/ Facebook content – 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
Williams, Chinn & Suleiman (2014)*	Investigated the value of Tweets for the fans, and whether there is a relationship between value and team identification	Consumers/ Twitter content & survey – NBA fans	Found team identification influencing how much people value specific categories of sports Tweets (news, opinion, & promotion)
Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger (2012)*	Investigated sport Twitter consumption (STC) motivations and constraints in following athletes	Consumers/ Survey – Twitter users	Motivations (information, pass time, entertainment, fanship) positively & constraints (accessibility, economic, skills, social) negatively relate to STC

*These studies adopted additional theoretical perspective to their study

Williams, Chinn, and Suleiman (2014) investigated the value of Tweets for the sport fans, and whether there is a relationship between value of Tweets and team identification. They found that team identification influences how much people value specific categories of sports Tweets (news, opinion, and promotion). Twitter allows fans to voice their interests and be heard by the team and other fans. Also according to Williams and her colleagues, Twitter facilitates an exchange of content that can increase "fan involvement, strengthen associations and allow closer connections to the team" (p. 46). They also reported that some fans' Twitter consumption might predominately be visiting but do not tweet (i.e., some are 'lurkers'). In a related study,

Witkemper, Lim, and Waldburger (2012) investigated motivations and constraints for following athletes on Twitter among college students, and found them using Twitter as a platform to enhance their experience, to gain information, to pass time, and as a form of entertainment. The authors stated that sport marketers, by keeping fans informed and getting them close to players through Twitter, can built and maintain relationship with fans. Witkemper et al. (2012) added that Twitter is a conducive platform through which a relationship with fans can be enhanced.

Other closely related studies include Meng, Stavros, and Westberg (2015), and Williams, Heiser, and Chinn (2012), although they are not explicitly grounded in RM. Meng et al. (2015), for instance, addressed the enrichment of fan identity through relationship building that is based on communication and interaction. The studies informed that, first, SM enables fans to be informed (i.e., to access up-to-date information on the team, players, coaches, etc.) and, thereby, be gratified (through real-time updates and behind-the-scene news). Second, SM allows fans to enrich their relationship with their teams (through teams' humanised and personalised communications). Third, SM makes fans feel that they have a say in teams' management (by eliciting feedback and opinions, and teams' commitment to involve fans in dialogue). For their part, Williams et al. (2012), informed us that both 'lurkers' (SM users who visit and follow but do not actively participate), and 'posters' (those who actively post and contribute) identify themselves with their teams and are likely to attend games. Interestingly, however, the authors found that lurkers attend games more frequently than posters. These results implying that it is following, and not necessarily posting, that reveals an intention to consume sport through game attendance.

The above discussed studies made a substantial contribution to our understanding of sport fans' SM consumption through an RM lens. An examination of these studies reveals three research dimensions (and research gaps) that were an inspiration for the study at hand: (i) the

majority of studies with a grounding in RM investigated *the motivation* underpinning fans use of SM (e.g., Stavros et al., 2013; Witkemper et al., 2012); (ii) a significant majority of these studies concentrated on SM use in relation to fan identification; and (iii) methodologically, the majority (except Williams et al., 2014 and Williams et al., 2012) gathered their source of evidence from content communicated on SM, specifically Facebook or Twitter. This study aims to gain an understanding of fans' perspectives on how (not why) they use SM and the benefits of SM as an RM tool. For this, the study uses the firsthand account of fans on SM as its source of evidence.

Method

This study employs an adaptation of the focus group method, dubbed the sequential funnel-based focus group, which is a multi-phase, stepwise version of the established method (see Figure 5-1). Terminologically, 'focus group,' as the method is commonly known, refers to a research method that involves a small-group, facilitated by informal discussion 'focused' around a particular topic or set of issues (Morgan, 1997; Wilkinson, 2004). As opposed to the traditional practice of using the same questions for each focus group, 'sequential' refers to a process in which questions for succeeding phases are developed from the phases that precede. 'Funnel-based' refers to the evolvement of data production within a study from unstructured to semi-structured to structured questions. The method – sequential funnel-based (SFB) focus group design – is described, developed, and employed (as a three phase design) in this study. The unique feature and value of a focus group as a method of inquiry are discussed below, followed by the explanations for the choice and appropriateness of the SFB focus group.

Focus Group

The unique feature and value of a focus group that distinguishes it from other research methods is the interactions among research participants (Kitzinger, 1994; Parker & Tritter, 2006). Focus group participants are usually brought together with the understanding that all have

experienced the focal discussion point (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). As the participants exchange views and opinions on a selected topic or set of issues, members start to understand others' perspectives, build upon the responses of other like-minded contributors, propose alternative and competing ideas, provide further insights into the comments made by other participants, reconsider their own views, and possibly retreat their preconceived views and understandings (Krueger, 1998; Zikmund, 1997). In other words, participants share, clarify, explain, verify, revise, and defend their positions and experiences while also challenging others' ideas (Wilkinson, 1998). As group discussions progress, the group participants collectively construct their shared (divergent) views or differences on a given topic area that would otherwise remain concealed (Kidd & Parshall, 2000; Krueger, 2000; Morgan, 1997). The synergistic effect of the focus group, therefore, facilitates the production of rich information about a range of perspectives and experiences that are less forthcoming through other methods (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014; Zikmund, 1997).

Over the past 20 years, focus group has undergone considerable advancements and, today, extensive literature examines the practical details of planning and conducting focus groups (e.g., Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999; Krueger & Casey, 2014; Morgan, 1997; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). The practical details (or rule-of-thumb guidance) include how to select and recruit participants (e.g., homogenous profile), length of focus group discussion (e.g., 1 to 2 hours), number of groups (e.g., 3 to 5 per project), and participants per group (e.g., 4 to fewer than 12), questions development (e.g., relatively structured interview), focus group setting (e.g., a relaxed and friendly environment), the role of the moderator (e.g., to guide and encourage participants to share their views), and note-taking and recording. However, simply following such accepted guidance does not necessarily guarantee valid and reliable findings (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). As Morgan (1997) stated, "a choice to go with a rule of

thumb […] needs to be a careful decision that is based on the needs of the specific project" (p. 35). In this regard, Morgan (1997) cautions that such general guidance should not to be taken as standards for planning focus groups, but rather guidelines as to how they should be conducted.

Therefore, when using a focus group as a self-contained method, the key aspect requiring the researcher's diligent attention is how well the method can be customised to generate data that produces a sound and sufficient body of knowledge. For instance, while the decision on how many focus groups to use depends on the needs of a specific research project (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997), using multiple focus groups allows a researcher to assess the extent to which saturation is achieved (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Similarly, the number of times a focus group meets can vary from a single meeting to multiple meetings (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Often, the same questions are asked of several groups in a focus group (Krueger, 2000). Hence, this work designed a sequential funnel-based focus group, as a self-contained method, to address the two research questions developed in the study (for more, see the section that follows).

Method Choice

As Creswell (2014) and Krueger and Casey (2014) argued, no method is perfect and research methods are highly situational. Indeed, the ultimate ground for a choice of research method rests with the purpose (and research questions) of a particular research (Creswell, 2014; Morgan, 1997; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Below, the explanations for the choice and appropriateness of the sequential funnel-based focus group design, as a standalone method of inquiry are provided.

Purpose of the study. The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the benefits of SM as a RM tool from the perspective of professional sport fans, and to identify and specify the emergent benefits. In this regard, a focus group method generates rich information from group interactions by exploring the range and patterns of subjective

perspectives, such as perceptions, opinions, attitudes, and feelings, which other methods (e.g., survey) might not produce (Jarrett, 1993; Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999; Krueger & Casey, 2014). Particularly, when a topic of interest focuses on non-sensitive private life information (as in the case of the study at hand), but rather elicits impersonal views, attitudes, opinions, and understandings on common experiences or concerns, a focus group is an appropriate method of inquiry (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014).

Topic of the study. The study's topic area – the value of SM in RM from fans' perspective – is relatively new, there is a lack of systematic and academic research, and little is understood about the research problem that the current study is attempting to address. In that case, where little work has been done, few definitive hypotheses exist and little is known about the nature of the phenomenon, an exploratory study is typically the recommended approach (Neuman, 2006; Patton, 2002). In this regard, Wimmer and Dominick (2013) stated that a focus group is particularly appropriate for generating new thoughts and ideas about a set of issues. A SFB focus group facilitates a production of rich data that address the study's two research questions (and this new topic area) through a group interaction that would have been difficult to obtain otherwise.

Rationale of methodology. Methodologically (related to the second point), as opposed to the other conventional research methods (e.g., interviews, survey) where a researcher takes what the individual participant tells them, focus groups serve as a forum where ideas are challenged, tested, fought over (participants often reconsider their views and perceptions based on the perspectives of others) and agreement can be reached through discussion and negotiation. Also, this study aims at exploring fans' views and experiences with minimal preconceived expectations. Along with this, the scope (end goal) of the current study is not statistical generalisation from sample to population, but rather to seek conclusion or analytical

generalisation through an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of interest with a smaller number of participants. Hence, the SFB focus group, through an iterative process, allows for the identification, specification, refinement, and verification of the values of SM from the perspective of fans of professional teams.

Epistemological Reasoning. The technology behind SM evolves constantly and fans' usage patterns change over time (O'Shea & Alonso, 2011; Meng et al., 2015). In SM consumption, people are using the platforms while at same time learning from what others are doing and how others are using the platforms (Abeza et al., 2013; Thackeray, Neiger, Hanson, & McKenzie, 2008). In such an evolving environment, the SFB focus group allows the researcher to bring people who share an experience together around a focal discussion topic to clarify, explain, verify, revise, and defend their positions and experiences while also challenging others' ideas. The specific iterative and structured approach of the SFB focus group, therefore, provides a synergistic effect on the discussion; this facilitates the production of rich information about a range of perspectives and experiences that are less forthcoming through other methods (including the traditional focus group), which is fitting to the research at hand.

Method customisation. As a number of focus group methodologists (e.g., Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999; Krueger & Casey, 2014; Morgan, 1997) have emphasised, the best use of the focus group, as a stand-alone method, rests on how well the method is customised to generate data that produces a sound and sufficient body of knowledge. In this regard, Morgan and Spanish (1984) stated that the focus group as a self-contained method facilitates intriguing 'design' possibilities. The SFB focus group design is an example of such a custom adaptation. The SFB focus group allows the production of data that sufficiently and fittingly answer the how (exploratory) and then the what (descriptive/confirmatory) questions developed in this iterative study.

Research Design

In adapting the focus group method to a SFB focus-group design, discussion questions are developed for each phase of the focus group in an iterative process, i.e., questions for the later phases are built based on each preceding phase's results. For this study, a total of ten sequential funnel-based focus groups were conducted in a three-phase design over a two-month time period. Phase 1 was comprised of a series of two exploratory focus groups (#1 to #2). With the purpose of exploration, open-ended questions were used to facilitate free discussion, to ensure that a range of relevant issues are covered, and to help generate questions that were used in the subsequent phases. Next, following an iterative process, Phase 2 (focus groups #3 to #6) used semi-structured questions (built from Phase 1 results). Lastly, phase 3 concluded with four additional confirmatory focus group discussions (#7 to #10), held sequentially (one after another) using structured questions that were developed from phase 2. This research design is graphically outlined in Figure 5-1.

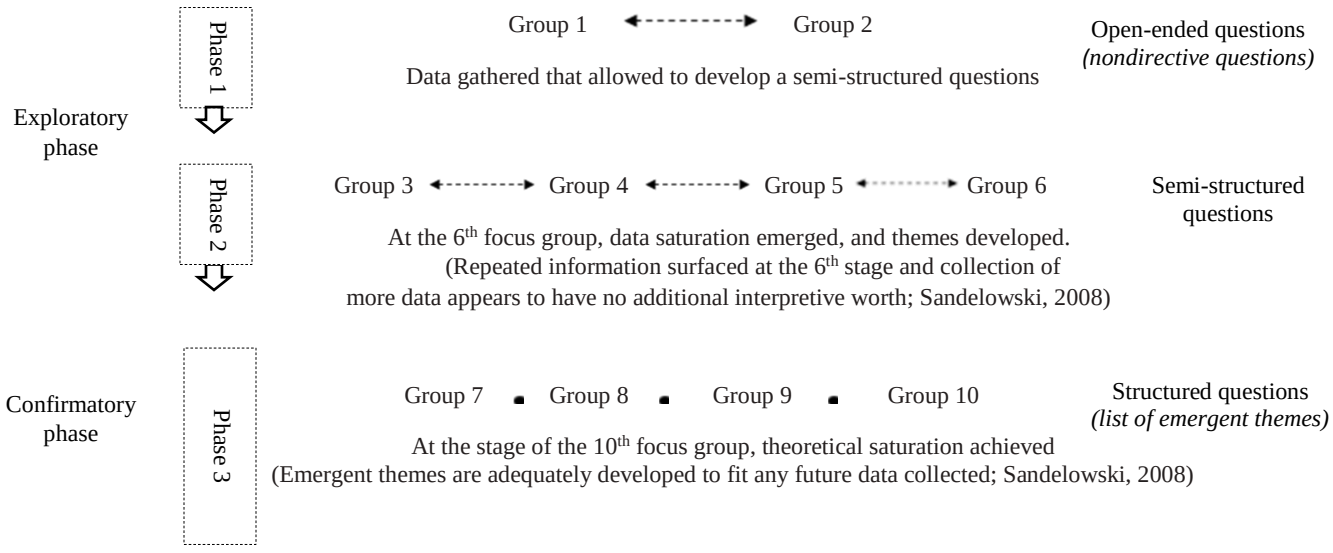

Figure 5-1. A sequential-funnel-based focus group design

Participants. Focus group participants were selected based on their shared experience as fans of a major North American professional sport team and as followers of/visitors to their favourite team's official SM platforms (at least, Twitter and/or Facebook). A total of 81 sport fans (29 women and 52 men) of 23 different professional teams participated in the study. The participants are graduate and undergraduate students at universities in the Southern part of U.S. and Southeastern part of Ontario, Canada. Some of these fans support more than one professional team from the four biggest leagues (i.e., National Hockey League (NHL), National Basketball League (NBA), National Football League (NFL), & Major League Baseball (MLB)). The fans' average age was 23 years, ranging from 17 to 36 years (young age group). The fans were invited to take part in the study through a poster posted in the universities with the chance of winning a $25 gift card.

The first twelve participants (i.e., participants in the first two focus groups (Phase 1)) were fans of two professional hockey teams. The number of participants in these two groups was limited to six to avoid the risk of insufficient interactions or the failure to challenge the views of a dominant individual. The remaining participants (focus groups #3 to #10 (Phases 2 and 3)) were fans of a variety of professional sport teams in the four major leagues. In Phase 2, the size of the groups ranged from six to eight participants (a total of 27 in the four groups). The manageable size of these groups (per Krueger & Casey, 2014), as well as the emerged semi-structured guiding questions, helped the moderator control the direction of the group discussion. Phase 3 had a relatively large size of 9 to 12 participants in each of the four groups for a total of 42 participants. These relatively larger sized groups were recruited to ensure that a diverse range of views and experiences were represented on the emergent themes from the preceding two phases. Given the structured nature of these confirmatory focus groups, a larger group with more points of view was considered appropriate. The groups' size (9 to 12) was not observed to pose

difficulties for the moderation and management of the discussions, since the purpose of Phase 3 was to acquire confirmatory views on the emergent themes (see Table 5-3).

Table 5-3

Profiling Participants in The Three Phases

Phase	Focus Group	# of participants	# of supported teams* / league(s)
1	1	6	1st team / NHL
	2	6	2nd team / NHL
2	3	6	5 teams/4 leagues
	4	6	4 teams / 3 leagues, except NFL
	5	8	7 teams / 4 leagues
	6	7	5 teams / 3 leagues, except MLB
3	7	12	11 teams / 4 leagues
	8	9	4 teams / 4 leagues
	9	10	9 teams / 4 leagues
	10	11	8 teams / 4 leagues

*the four leagues considered in this study are: NHL, NFL, NBA, & MLB

Groups. The optimal number of focus groups that need to be used in a given study is determined by the research objectives (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). In this study, while the required number of groups had not been pre-determined, purpose and saturation were the two reasons used to determine the optimal number of groups. The first two focus groups generated sufficient data that allowed to develop semi-structured questions used in phase 2. In phase 2, data was collected using semi-structured questions, and repeated information started surfacing at the 5th focus group and collection of more data appears to have no additional interpretive worth after one more (#6) focus group was added. Results of the first two phases produced sufficient data that (i) answered RQ#1 (i.e., the "How do fans see the benefits of …?" exploratory stage), and (ii) informed the development of major themes to be used in phase 3. Hence, a list of emergent themes was developed from the results of the first two phases. These emergent themes, constructed as a series of structured questions, were used and discussed in phase 3. In phase 3, repetitive information started to surface during focus group #9. With the intention of ensuring that conducting additional focus groups would not provide new insight, one focus group (#10)

was added, following which it was believed that adding more was unnecessary (per Sandelowski, 2008).

Setting. The sessions were all conducted in a relaxed and friendly environment. Each session started with a welcome statement and introduction, followed by an explanation of the purpose of the study, the nature of the questions, and the discussion rules. Participants signed a consent form assuring the voluntary and confidential nature of their participation. The sessions were audio recorded with the participants' agreement. The discussion questions were asked with minimal intervention (and no influence) from the facilitator. The moderator sought to facilitate a free flow exchange of ideas and new insights. To control for the effect of a dominant participant, the moderator invited and encouraged all participants to express their views.

On average, the focus groups lasted an hour and 15 minutes. The participants were asked about their views, opinions, and experiences on the use, benefit, and significance of SM in building long-term relationships with their favourite teams. The moderator probed further when clarification was necessary or when the discussion warranted it. Notes were taken during each focus group. Examples of phase 1 questions included (see appendix E for more), "what does social media mean to you as sport fan?", "How does social media affect the relationship that you have with your team?" Examples of phase 2 questions included (see appendix F for more), "how do you see the benefit of social media in building long-term relationship with your team?", "Can you tell me in your own words at least five benefits that you have gained, as a fan, in using your favourite team's Twitter and Facebook platforms to build a long-term relationship?" (See the section below to find how the data analysed).

During phase 3 (i.e., the confirmatory phase), a list of emergent themes (from the first two phases) was distributed to participants of each focus group. Participants were asked to take a few minutes to go through the list of emergent themes and to identify the themes that they did

not find representative of the benefits of SM in meeting RM goals. The moderator then collected participants' written responses to create a list of themes that participants did not consider to reflect the benefits of SM in RM. The moderator asked participants to discuss those "crossed off" themes. After seeking the participants' clarification, the majority of the participants reached a consensus that some themes should not be kept on the list. The same process was sequentially repeated in the following three focus group discussions (#7 to #10 in phase 3) wherein the procedure resulted in the same outcome (list of themes).

Data Analysis and Interpretation. Data from the first six focus groups was analyzed via constant comparison analysis. As Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) highlighted, where there are multiple focus groups within the same study, constant comparison analysis allows a researcher to assess saturation in general, and cross-group saturation in particular. Hence, the verbatim transcription of the data from each focus group within Phase 1 and Phase 2 was sorted and edited, redundancies rationalised, items collated into themes, and themes condensed topically (as per Patton, 2002). Data reduction, per Miles and Huberman (1994), was then conducted by selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the transcription data. The reduction helped to sharpen, sort, discard, and organise data so that it would be ready for verification. This was followed by the data display step, where the reduced data was displayed in an organised and compressed manner so as to allow the researcher(s) to make sense of the data. For that process, data was displayed in the form of tables so that it can be accessed immediately and in a compact form.

At the end of each of the first two phases (Phase #1 and #2), the data were analyzed through constant cross-phase comparison to identify convergence patterns around the emergent themes. The cross comparison, in general, revealed the prevalent themes that are commonly shared across the different groups. Phase #1 helped develop the semi-structured questions used in

the succeeding phase. In Phase #2, once the data used to answer the first research question (i.e., "How do fans see the benefits of …?", then list of themes are collated to be used in phase 3 of the confirmatory phase (i.e., "What are the benefits fans see in ….?"). In Phase 3, the identified themes were organised into categories of similar themes, creating a list of theme categories, which resulted in the identification of both major themes and subthemes. This process produced insight into the value of SM from the perspective of professional teams' fans. Participants' agreement on each theme was also quantified to show the level of agreement, and - by extension - the level of importance of a given benefit of SM.

Findings

The exploratory phase of the study, through group interaction, facilitated a deeper understanding of the topic than would have otherwise been possible. The confirmatory phase allowed the identification, specification, refinement, and verification of the various types of benefits that are provided by social media (SM) from the perspective of sports fans.

How do fans see the benefits of social media in enhancing their long-term relationship?

The two focus groups' discussions in phase 1 began with open-ended questions in order to explore fans' views and experiences with a minimum of preconceived expectations. Hence, discussion questions were asked with no influence (and minimal intervention) from the moderator. This approach facilitated the free exchange of ideas and new insights, and participants described the role that SM plays in their consumption of professional sports today. Examples of questions included (see appendix E) "what does SM mean to you as sport fan?" and "How does SM affect the relationship you have with your team?" The data gathered from these questions helped us to develop and hone the semi-structured questions that were used in phase 2. The discussions in phase 1 revolved around several themes: information updates, voicing of

opinions, customer service, interaction, ‘fan nation,’ extending game experience, prizes, and enriching intimacy.

The participants, for instance, described the role that SM played in enriching their intimacy with their favourite team, stating: “There is always something going on even off season, and social media helps teams stay in touch with their fans. I feel like I know where the players are and what they are doing during the off season because of social media” [first focus group, participant #4–F1P4], or “I feel like I am super-connected with my team through social media. I would not have known what’s going on with my team if not for the random news that I hear on social media” [F2P3].

Informed by the data from phase 1, a total of 17 semi-structured questions were developed for use in phase 2. The questions in this phase included: “how do you see the benefits of social media, if any, in terms of facilitating interaction between your team and fans?” “How do you see the benefit of social media, if any, in addressing fans’ inquiries?” “How do you see the role of social media, if any, in enriching your intimacy with your team?” and “Can you tell me in your own words at least five types of benefits that you have enjoyed, as a fan, by using your favourite team’s Twitter and/or Facebook platforms to build a long-term relationship?” The data gathered helped identify seven themes and 18 sub-themes. The seven themes were information access, ongoing interaction, venue for voicing, fan service, hub for fans, bonding, and rewards. The themes and sub-themes are delineated in Table 5-4.

Table 5-4

Emergent Benefits of Social Media as a Relationship Marketing Tool from Fans' Perspective

Theme/ Sub-theme	Description
Information Access	
Live updates	
	- Social media gives the opportunity to receive live play-by-play updates. When fans unable to attend games live, social media will be the to go to source to get live update
Game-related content	
	- Social media offers the service of accessing pre-and post-game content (e.g., scores statistics, highlights, interviews, etc.), and upcoming games exclusive team content
Team-related content	
	- Social media gives the opportunity to gain access to behind the scene/ insider information on issues related to team (e.g., lineup, backstage video, training) and players' status (e.g., injuries, trading), and players' off-the-field activities (e.g., charity, community, fan meetings).
Ongoing interaction	
Engage in conversation	
	- Social media provided fans the opportunity to generate conversation and engage in dialogue with sport teams and other fans on a variety of issues from field performance to management decisions
Direct contact	
	- Social media gave fans an opportunity to carry out a direct one-to-one communication with sport teams, which was difficult (if not impossible) in the past
Endorsing opinion	
	- Social media offered fans the opportunity to take positions (and endorse or oppose) views posted on teams' social media platforms
Mutual understanding	
	- Through social media fans engage in dialogue with team management on various issues, and listen to and learn from each other, and ultimately reach a common understanding of each other's position
Venue for voicing	
Expressing opinion	
	- Social media gave fans the opportunity to voice their comments, concerns, questions, and complaints
Content contribution	
	- Social media provided fans an opportunity to create and share team related content - circulate interests, experiences, and commentary
Input for management	
	- Social media allowed fans to acquire their own voice and this has provided us the opportunity to give creative ideas, comment, and suggestions to the management.
Entertainment value	
	- Social media provided an entertainment value to fans. For fans, reading comments posted on social media is enjoyable and entertaining
Fans service	
Customer service	
	- Social media enabled fans to receive a real time and direct customer service support on inquiries ranging from services at a sporting venue to technical issues with apps, weblinks, etc.
Hub for fans	
'Fan nation'	
	- Fans use hashtags to initiates and engage in conversation with other like-minded users, and to express the glory or failure of their team on social media instantaneously and unreservedly
Extending experience	
	- Social media serve as a venue where fans reunited outside of the stadium and access content to react to and bond over
Bonding	
Access to players	
	- Social media offered opportunity to fans to access the Q&As hosted with players, where teams invite fans to submit specific questions to which a player answers in real time through text or short video.

Humanisation - Social media offered an opportunity for a personalised content through birthday wishes, pictures of with families and friends posted on team platforms, also teams exchange humours that gives them personality	
Bonding Family - Family members use social media to discuss about the team we support and that strengthened the family bond	
Rewards	
Access to promotional offers - Social media helps fans get latest information about team's ticket discounts, giveaways, merchandise sales, discounts from sponsors, etc.	

Access to information is one of the benefits that was frequently mentioned across all four focus groups. The access to information category included live updates, game-related content, and team-related content. Discussants emphasised the fact that SM today provides them the opportunity to receive live play-by-play updates, to access pre- and post-game content (e.g., scores, statistics, highlights, interviews), and to gain access to behind-the-scenes/insider information on issues related to the status of teams (e.g., lineup, backstage videos, training) and players (e.g., injuries, trading), as well as players' off-the-field activities (e.g., charity, community, fan meetings). The advantages of SM in providing a platform for ongoing interaction (the second benefit) between fans and professional sports teams has been the prime benefit emphasised by participants across the board—namely, the opportunity to engage in an ongoing conversation, to access avenues of direct communication that had not existed before social media, to express agreement or disagreement with the opinions of other fans, and to reach a mutual understanding with other fans and teams. As one participant stated:

> The teams post stuff and the reporters post stuff online but, getting the fan perspective as well. There are so many different fans tweeting their opinion and stuff like that. It gives you a feeling to the game, you know. Like you'll see a play, you'll be completely angry that [a player] didn't pass the puck across the ice. But then another fan will be like "Oh, he didn't pass because […] he wants to score. He's looking for point number 200." Like, they have—so many people have different opinions and aspects to the game that you may have not known going into the game.

Social media as a venue for voicing opinions (the third type of benefit) was discussed widely among participants. Through analysis, we found that discussions on this topic revolved around four sub-themes—expressing opinions, contributing content, providing input to management, and entertainment value. The first two (fans' opportunities to express their opinion and contribute content) were identified in all discussion groups; the latter two, however, received mixed reactions. While some (particularly, during FG#3) argued that they gain no entertainment value from SM content, a few others agreed that they derive enjoyment from content exchanged on SM.

Similarly, views on "input for management" revolved around the nature of the input provided, such as top management decisions (trading, changing coaches), as opposed to service-related issues. While some believed that fans' comments should play a role in top management decision making, others utterly objected to such a view. The majority of participants, however, did not show an interest in this sub-theme. Yet, some participants stated that social media provided them and other fans of their team the opportunity to contact and interact with team management directly. The idea of providing input for management is an interesting point that speaks to the uniqueness of sport marketing. In other business sectors, customers may not have the same feeling toward businesses as they do with sport organizations. Traditionally, it was difficult to make and maintain contact or interact on an ongoing basis. One participant explained this aptly, as follows:

> Yeah and that's the big thing—the immediacy of responding to especially negative comments. They go through a lot of stuff and they just like don't pay attention to most people out there, but it's the specific thing about the experience that they had, that the team has an effect on. Experience of the stadium, experience with customer service, experience with the phone, whatever it may be. They're immediately trying to get back to that person because every minute that ticks by is a minute that they're not responding and it shows. You can see the timeline, you can see exactly when the tweet went out, when they respond, so, working with organisations, that was the biggest thing. You're concerned with

> checking your phone constantly, making sure we would see those Tweets coming through, responding to them as fast as possible. You're showing that you care as an organisation.

The other two types of benefits (the fourth and fifth) consistently raised by participants in all four group discussions were customer service and hub for fans. The participants valued the real-time and direct customer service support they received from their teams through social media. Participants noted that, on game days, fans could post venue-related questions regarding issues such as parking or stores at the venue and receive a prompt response from their team, for example, on Twitter. Similarly, participants mentioned that they receive a quick response from their team when they have issues such as problems with live streaming, apps, or weblinks. In regard to the hub for fans, two sub-themes were identified— 'fan nation' and extending game experience. Participants mentioned that fans use hashtags to initiate and engage in conversations with like-minded users, and to express the glory or failure of their team on SM instantaneously and unreservedly. Equally, participants saw the merit of SM as a venue for fans to reunite outside of the stadium (attending live game) and access content that they can respond to and bond over.

The sixth benefit that was raised and discussed among participants was bonding. Three sub-themes emerged—access to players, humanisation of brands, and bonding with family. While the first two sub-themes were raised, discussed and agreed upon in all four focus groups, the latter (i.e., family bonding) received much less support. Access to players, according to participants, is one of the advantages of using SM. As participants mentioned, real-time interaction with players had been difficult prior to the emergence of SM; however, fans today are able, for example, to submit specific questions during the Q&A sessions hosted by players and receive answers in real time through text or short video. Similarly, humanisation of brand is a type of value that participants found in using their favorite team's SM platform. Participants mentioned that they find their favorite team to be accessible and responsive to their needs. In

particular, discussants mentioned that through SM, “lucky” fans can now receive personalised birthday wishes, pictures with family and friends can be posted on team platforms, and the exchange of jokes on SM gives teams a character of their own. One participant stated that:

> …social media gives the team a personality, so… like, you are on Instagram or you are on Twitter and they make a funny joke or they’re [conversing] on and off with other teams. I found that hilarious, and it’s really interesting to see. Like, if my favorite player is holding a puppy one day on Instagram, I will absolutely eat that up. Like, it’s the coolest thing. It’s so cool to see them act as like humans and get to interact with them that way.

As noted above, some participants did not support the view that family members use SM to discuss the team they support or that the conversation strengthens family bonds. Others see this as valuable, though. For example, one participant stated “I also do, like, bond with my dad through social media. ’Cause I see a post that I think will be interesting to my dad and then I repeat it to him and he’s like “Oh! That’s awesome!” Like, I do use social media in that sense...” Another respondent stated “Especially like people that have retired parents that are an older generation. Like, we use social media to find something to talk about, and we bring it to them in a different format.”The seventh theme identified was reward, where participants expressed that SM helped them obtain the latest information on their team’s ticket discounts, giveaways, merchandise sales, discounts from sponsors, and other related activities.

What types of benefit do fans see in SM that enhances their long-term relationship?

Building on the data gathered and analyzed in phase 2, a list of emergent themes was used to guide group discussions in phase 3. This phase was conducted to specify, verify and refine the themes. For this purpose, (as stated in the methods section), a list of emergent themes was distributed to participants in each of the focus groups in phase 3. Discussions were held on those themes that participants viewed as not reflecting the value of SM in RM (i.e., “crossed-off” themes). The participants clarified their views on the “crossed-off” themes, and the majority of

the participants agreed that all the themes, except for two, should be kept (see Table 5-5). These two themes—input for management and bonding family—received mixed views in the focus groups. In other words, while around 15% of the participants see SM providing these benefits, others do not see them as benefits (see Table 5-5).

Table 5-5

Scored Responses to The Emergent Themes

Theme/ Sub-theme	Score/# of agreement*	%age of agreement
Information Access		
Live updates	42	100.0%
Game-related content	42	100.0%
Team-related content	42	100.0%
Ongoing interaction		
Engage in conversation	42	100.0%
Direct contact	41	97.6%
Endorsing opinion	29	69.0%
Mutual understanding	38	90.5%
Venue for voicing		
Expressing opinion	39	92.8%
Content contribution	42	100.0%
Input for management	7	16.7%
Entertainment value	14	33.33%
Fans service		
Customer service	36	85.7%
Hub for fans		
'Fan nation'	35	83.3%
Extending experience	37	80.1%
Bonding		
Access to players	36	85.7%
Humanisation	38	90.5%
Bonding Family	6	14.3%
Rewards		
Access to promotional offers	33	78.6%

*From a total 42 participants took part in phase 3

As reported in Table 5-5, of the 18 themes that emerged in phase 2, 15 were supported by the majority of participants in phase 3. A common pattern observed in the process was that the themes which were dropped in focus group 6 were also dropped by subsequent groups. The list of themes and the agreement scores are presented in Table 5-5.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to, first, gain an empirically supported understanding of the role and benefits of SM as an RM tool from the perspective of professional sport fans and,

second, to identify, specify, verify, and refine the emergent benefits. For this purpose, the study employed an adaptation of the focus group method, dubbed the sequential funnel-based focus group, which is a multiphase, step-wise version of the established method. The sequential funnel-based focus group is conceptualised, developed, described, and employed in this work as a method. The adaptation allowed the identification of benefits of social media as a medium that enhances long-term relationships through a series of funnel-based focus group discussions in three sequential phases.

The study fills in some of the prevailing information gaps and offers data that support and extend the findings of a number of previous studies (e.g., Pronschinske et al., 2012; Stavros et al., 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010) that have grounded their works on RM. First and foremost, RM, as a theoretical framework and as a management approach, is about building a two-way collaborative relationship through communication and interaction between organisations and their stakeholders (Williams & Chinn, 2010). In this regard, the study identified seven major benefits (and 15 specific benefits) that fans see as opportunities that SM presents as a medium to enhance long-term relationship with their team. These include Ongoing Interaction, Fan Service, Bonding, Rewards, Information Access, Venue for Voicing, and Hub for Fans. It is clearly observed in this study that fans enthusiastically look for engagement, being involved, and maintaining relationship with their favorite sport team, which supports the claim made by previous studies such as those by Bee and Kahle (2006), Kim et al. (2011), Pronschinske et al. (2012), and Shani (1997). The findings imply that SM is providing new directions to RM, making relational exchanges more meaningful, affordable, and effective, which is in line with the argument made by previous studies (e.g., Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015; Hambrick & Svensson, 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010).

As depicted in Figure 5-2, while three of the identified opportunities of SM (namely, Information Access, Venue for Voicing, and Hub for Fans) are the innate features of SM that fans are capitalizing on, the three others are (Ongoing Interaction, Fan Service, and Rewards) team-facilitated benefits. Bonding is the benefit that is fan-utilised and team-initiated. Regarding the SM features that fans are capitalizing on, it is not surprising that Information Access and Venue for Voicing are the benefits that fans see in SM as an RM medium. Mainly the reason that sport fans keenly and continually expect up-to-date on- and off-the-field information about their favorite team (Abeza et al., 2013), they frequently share their experiences in social group/gathering scenarios (Pronschinske et al., 2012). In addition, as a Venue for Voicing, sport fans create and share team-related content and voice their instant comments, concerns, questions, and complaints on SM. In this regard, the speed, easy access, and public forum features of social media makes it a conducive medium for fans to express their voices.

The third benefit (namely, "Hub for Fans") is the unique benefit that the discussants found in SM. Sport fans, as enthusiastic consumers (Wann, 1995) or an ardent devotee (Anderson, 1979), look for venues in which to express the glory or failure of their team. In this regard, SM as "Hub for Fans" extended the avenue for fans to satisfy motives that are not fully met through other forms of sport consumption such as game attendance and/or television viewership. This has also been found in Stavros et al.'s (2013) study. As the discussants indicated, social media extended their game experience serving as a venue to reunite outside of the stadium and to access content to react to and bond over. In relation, fans typically join the 'fan nation' to initiate and engage in conversation with other like-minded users and to express the glory or failure of their team on social media, instantaneously and unreservedly.

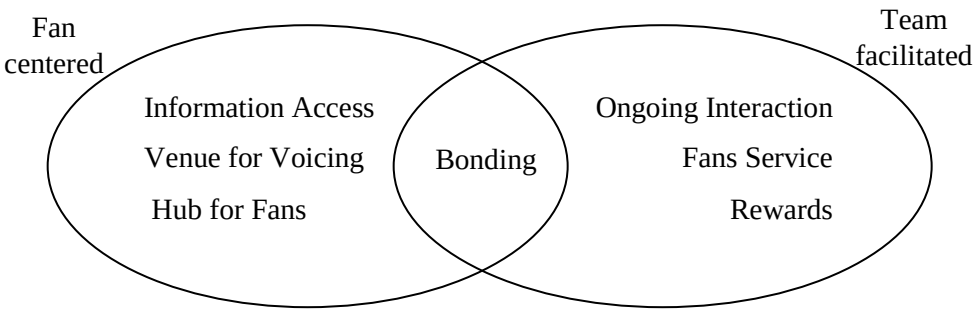

Figure 5-2. The merits of social media in relationship marketing from fans' perspective

In regard to the team-facilitated benefits (i.e., Ongoing Interaction, Fans Service, and Rewards), the benefit of SM as a venue where fans obtain access to Rewards (e.g., contest, sweepstakes, giveaways, lottery, raffles) also could be offered on other traditional mediums (e.g., websites and on game day at the venues). However, the benefit of SM as a venue to engage in an ongoing dialogue and the customer services can be considered unique, and the two benefits have also been highly emphasised by the discussants. Participants indicated that social media provided them the opportunity to communicate directly and engage in a dialogue with sport teams and other fans on a variety of issues ranging from field performance to management decisions. Implying that a team engages in two-way dialogue with fans has the greatest impact on attracting and maintaining a fan base on SM. Teams and sport fans—by talking to, listen to, and learning from each other—become familiar with each other and, in due course, reach a common understanding (per Grönroos, 2004; Peppers & Rogers, 2010). The process allows both parties to produce and deliver a co-created, fan-valued service, and achieve mutual benefit (Grönroos, 2004; Peppers & Rogers, 2010). Hence, the benefit of SM as a venue to engage in ongoing dialogue makes it a powerful platform in realizing RM goals. Equally, sport being a 'moment product', the advantage of SM in addressing customer inquiries aptly in real-time and in a publicly open medium is another unique benefit. SM is the fastest and most immediate way to

receive support on issues ranging from services at a sporting venue to technical problems with live streaming, apps, weblinks, etc.

Bonding is a theme identified from group discussions that takes two forms, a benefit that is fan-utilised and team-initiated. As a team-initiated and offered benefit, SM facilitated the opportunity where fans can interact in real-time with players through the Q&As to which a player answers in real time through text or short video. The opportunity of getting fans closer to players through SM, as Witkemper et al. (2012) argued and claimed in this study, help build and maintain teams' relationship with fans. Along with this, fans are in full agreement that SM allows them to enrich their relationships with their teams through teams' humanised and personalised communications. The fan-initiated segment of the "bonding" benefit (i.e., bonding family), even though debated among the discussants and received a relatively lower number of support, is not a merit that should be discounted. Particularly, it has implications to the branding literature. Future studies on the topic area would clarify the role that SM plays in facilitating family bonding in relation to sport-related content.

Contributions to Scholarship

In addition to supporting and extending previous studies (as noted above), the study made contributions by filling a research gap on the topic of the benefits of SM from fans' perspective. Specifically, while previous studies made significant contributions to our understanding of fans' motivations, behaviors, and attitudes in using SM, this study informed us as to how fans of professional sport teams see the benefits of SM as a channel to enhance long-term relationship with their sport team. In addition, while the majority of related studies (except Williams et al., 2014 & Williams et al., 2012) gathered their source of evidence from content communicated on SM, specifically Facebook or Twitter, the study at hand used the firsthand account of fans as its source of evidence.

Methodologically, the possibilities of focus group customisation employed to gather data that answered the how (exploratory) and what (descriptive/ confirmatory) questions developed in the study. As the study was more interested in the informants' perspective on a relatively new topic area, the adoption of a sequential funnel-based design focus group allowed us to bring people together with a shared experience on a focal discussion topic to clarify, explain, verify, revise, and defend their statements, rationales, positions, and experiences while also challenging others' ideas. For this, the study launched with a minimal preconceived expectation of the outcomes by adopting an open-ended questions and then progressing to semi-structured and structured questions. The approach facilitated an understanding of the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of the research problem.

Managerial Implications

It is clearly observed across the different focus group discussions that fans have the desire to become involved in, engage in, and maintain a relationship with the sport entities they support. In this regard, sport teams are recommended to capitalise on the benefits of SM that sport fans identified and are under the control of sport teams. These include Ongoing Interaction, Fan Service, and Rewards. Taking into consideration some of the challenges managers face in the competitive sport business environment today (e.g., increasing fan discontent and disconnection) (Mullin et al., 2014; Magnusen et al., 2012), teams can retain an enthusiastic fan base, intensify fan loyalty and involvement by delivering prompt customer service, and offer different reward programs. Most importantly, teams should invest in resources (e.g., man power and technological aids) that add capacity to the SM team to be able to engage in ongoing dialogue with fans that enables the SM team to talk to, listen to, and understand, and react aptly to fans' needs in an ongoing basis. In this regard, some of the discussants mentioned that, even if they see

the benefit of SM in facilitating an ongoing dialogue, not all teams engage in dialogue with their fans.

By the same token, teams are encouraged to build a personality to their brand by humanizing their organisation on SM with the use of humour, wittiness, and topical comments when interacting with fans and when sharing information. This has been keenly expressed among the discussants and it can be considered as a part of brand management strategy for marketers. In line with this, discussants noted that teams are not nowadays expected to only provide news updates and highlights and to communicate game-related contents but also the provision of a behind-the-scenes look at teams and facilities such as teams at a training field, players' off-the field activities, etc. In this regard, live streaming of field training and players' off-the-field activities also have been underlined by the discussants.

In relation to fan-oriented benefits, particularly Hub for Fans, managers are reminded that SM is a venue where fans extend their fresh game experience outside the sports arena by discussing it with other fans, which prolongs and enhances fans' game experience. In this regard, managers are informed to continue the established trend of building their virtual communities or 'fan nations' through the hashtag of their teams' slogan. As the discussants emphasised, social media serves them as a venue where they will have the chance to reunite outside of the stadium and access content to react to and bond with other like-minded supporters.

Future Research Directions and Limitations

This research has limitations that are typical to any study that seeks to propose (and empirically support) a new adaptation of an existing method. Most importantly, although the sequential funnel-based focus group method is employed using a study of fans, a new method requires a battery of ongoing studies and trials to assess its validity across samples, contexts, and situations. Replicability is essential and needs to be undertaken with future research. Thus, this is

both a limitation and a call for future research to test sequential funnel-based focus group. Along with this, the study informed other topic-related avenues where future research can be conducted. A study that investigates the different typologies of sport social media users (in terms of their level of SM consumption level) will be informative. Particularly, future similar study (i.e., the benefits of SM in RM), which takes into account different levels of fans–teams attachment scale into account will advance our knowledge on the topic. In addition, the participants of the study are, young age group, college students. Future studies are recommended to improve the findings by using a wider age group and fans from different sports (e.g., college sport, minor leagues).

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CHAPTER 6: Discussion and Conclusion

The overall purpose of this dissertation is to investigate the use of SM as an RM tool in the context of professional sport in North America. The specific research questions addressed are: 1) How do professional sport organisations use social media in terms of meeting RM goals; 2) How do managers of professional sport teams see the opportunities of SM in meeting RM goals; 3) How do managers of professional sport teams see the challenges of SM in meeting RM goals, and 4) How do professional sport team fans see the benefits of SM in enhancing long-term relationships with their team? To accomplish the overall purpose, the researcher adopted a multi-domain qualitative research approach. The multi-domain approach reflects the three sources of evidence used, that is the medium/SM platform, organizations/professional teams, and consumers/sport fans. Putting an individual emphasis on each of these three data sources, three separate but interrelated studies were conducted using an article-based format (chapter 3, 4 and 5). Data gathered from all three studies revealed that SM is used in professional sport for the purpose of meeting RM goals. This thesis also produced empirical evidence on the opportunities presented by SM and the challenges that it poses in terms of meeting RM goals in the context of professional sport.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. First is a recap of the background literature of the dissertation (section 6.1). Next is an integration of the findings of the three studies organised and presented under two sub-sections: the use and benefits of SM in meeting RM goals (section 6.2), and the opportunities and challenges of SM in meeting RM goals (section 6.3). The two sub-sections are also brought together to construct a comprehensive understanding of the use, opportunities, and challenges of SM in RM in professional sport. With that, the dissertation's overall practical contributions are discussed. This is followed by a presentation of the contributions to theory and scholarship (section 6.4). The chapter wraps up

with the presentation of future research directions (section 6.5) and limitations of the study (section 6.6).

6.1. Overview of the Dissertation Literature

Relationship marketing, both as a theoretical framework and as a management approach, is primarily a management of customer relationships with an interest in the management of stakeholders' relationship (Grönroos, 2004, 2011). As a theoretical framework, RM is a process of communication and interaction that leads to value creation. In line with the theoretical framework, the foundational premise of RM as a management approach is retaining customers through long-term mutual satisfaction between businesses and customers (Grönroos, 2004; Kotler, 2010). In order to secure long-term mutual satisfaction, businesses need to communicate, interact, and engage in dialogue with customers on an ongoing basis (Grönroos, 2004; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Through a continuous dialogue, businesses are able to listen to and understand customers' needs, to deliver a co-created product, to build long-term relationships, and, eventually, to secure a long-term profit (Grönroos, 2000; Peppers & Rogers, 2011). By extension, the dialogue enables businesses to achieve goals such as increased loyalty, reduced marketing costs, increased profitability, and increased financial stability and security (Grönroos, 2004; Gumsoon, 2002). See Figure 6-1 for a graphical summary of the background literature of the dissertation.

In the sport industry, researchers (e.g., Gladden & Sutton, 2009; Harris & Ogbonna, 2008; Kim & Trail, 2011; Stavros et al., 2008; Tsiotsou, 2013) have advocated for a fundamental shift in sports marketing from the traditional transaction marketing to an RM approach. Particularly, RM becomes a prudent approach in light of the challenges that sport fans and sport organizations are facing. Among other things, sport fans are increasingly confronted with the rising cost of sport consumption (e.g., ticket price, merchandising cost) (Mullin, Hardy, &

Sutton, 2014), and numerous other choices (e.g., locations and events) on which to spend their time and money (Shank & Lyberger, 2014). These and a few other factors are putting fans in the difficult position of continuing to display and monetise their loyalty to a sport team (Mullin et al., 2014; Rein et al., 2006). Similarly, despite a substantial increase in revenue in the sports industry, the cost of running a sport organisation has increased at a faster rate (Kim & Trial, 2011). Sport organizations have also been facing increasing fan discontentment and disconnection (Magnusen, Kim, & Kim, 2012; Kim & Trail, 2011), competition within the sport industry, rising expectations from fans, and competition from many other entertainment services (Adamson, Jones, & Tapp, 2006; Stavros & Westberg, 2009; Kim & Trail, 2011). Hence, retaining an enthusiastic fan base while intensifying fan loyalty and involvement are the foremost challenges for sport marketers (Mullin et al., 2014; Rein et al., 2006; Stavros & Weisberg, 2009).

As studies of sport consumption and fan behaviour have reported, both the attitudes and the behaviour of sport consumers toward their teams exhibit relational characteristics (Harris & Ogbonna, 2009; Farrelly & Quester, 2003). Capitalizing on the unique relational features that are inherent in the sport industry, and which provide a fertile ground for relationship-building efforts, RM arguably presents a more compelling marketing approach than the widely practiced short-term transactions and immediate profits practice (Gladden & Sutton, 2009; Kim & Trail, 2011; Stavros et al., 2008; Wang, Ho, & Zhang, 2012). In adopting an RM approach, sport marketers can listen to, and communicate with, customers and address customer needs and desires, while maintaining and enhancing their fan base (Bee & Kahle, 2006; Kim & Trail, 2011). In this regard, within the literature that addressed SM's role in sport marketing, it has been discussed that SM platforms are providing new directions to RM (e.g., Dixon, Martinez, & Martin, 2015; Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Meng et al., 2015; Wang & Zhou, 2015; Williams &

Chinn, 2010). However, as ideal as SM is believed to be as an effective channel for a relationship building approach, its use as an RM tool in professional sport had not been fully understood and empirically supported. This thesis responds to this research gap, and the findings are presented in the sections that follow.

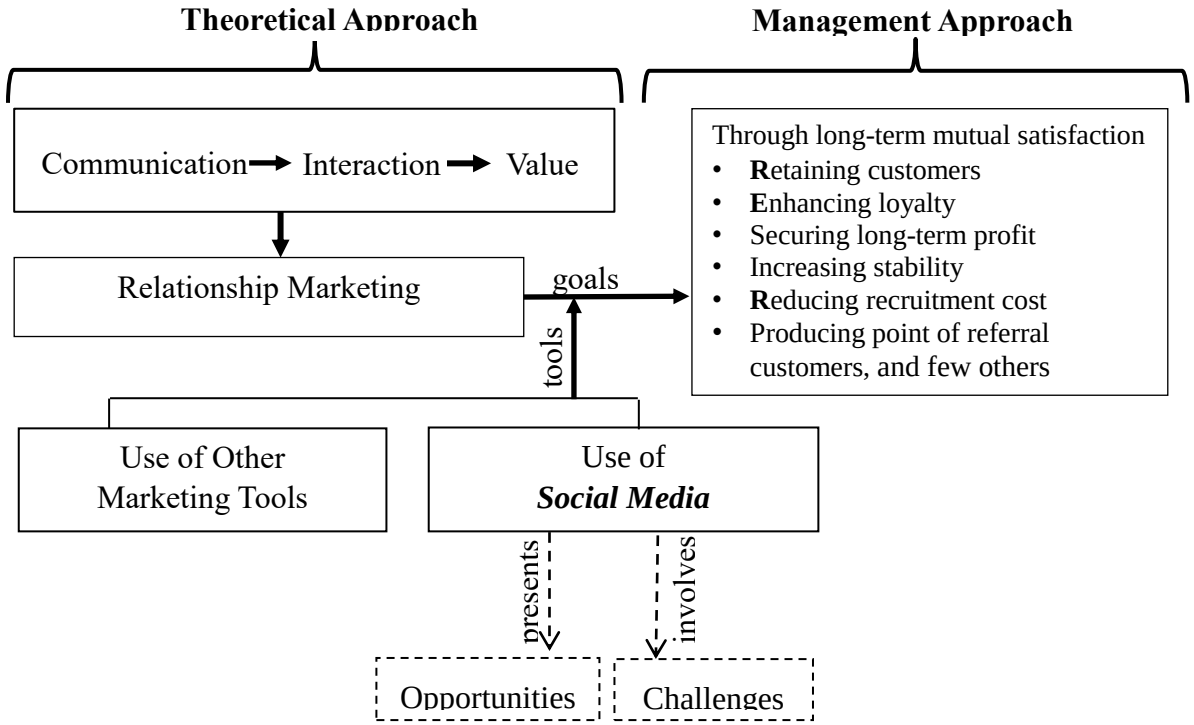

Figure 6-1. Graphical representation of the dissertation literature

As discussed in the following sections (and throughout the three studies of this dissertation), the findings empirically support that SM is a valuable, practical, and affordable channel in realizing RM goals in professional sport context. The findings are informed by data sourced from the three domains—medium, managers, and fans. The integrated findings on the use of SM as an RM channel are presented below, followed by the opportunities and challenges of SM in meeting RM goals, and the practical implications.

6.2. Use of SM in Meeting RM Goals in Professional Sport

This study explored the use of SM in professional sport from the perspective of three domains (medium, fans, and teams). First, data gathered from the 20 Twitter accounts showed

that professional sport teams use the platform for 13 different purposes (study 1). Second, data gathered through interviews with the senior managers resulted in six reported objectives of using SM (study 2). Lastly, the sequential funnel-based focus group study produced 15 refined fan benefits in using SM (study 3). While details can be found in each of the three studies, a cross comparative analysis of the three sources uncovers some commonly shared uses and benefits of SM across the domains (Figure 6-2).

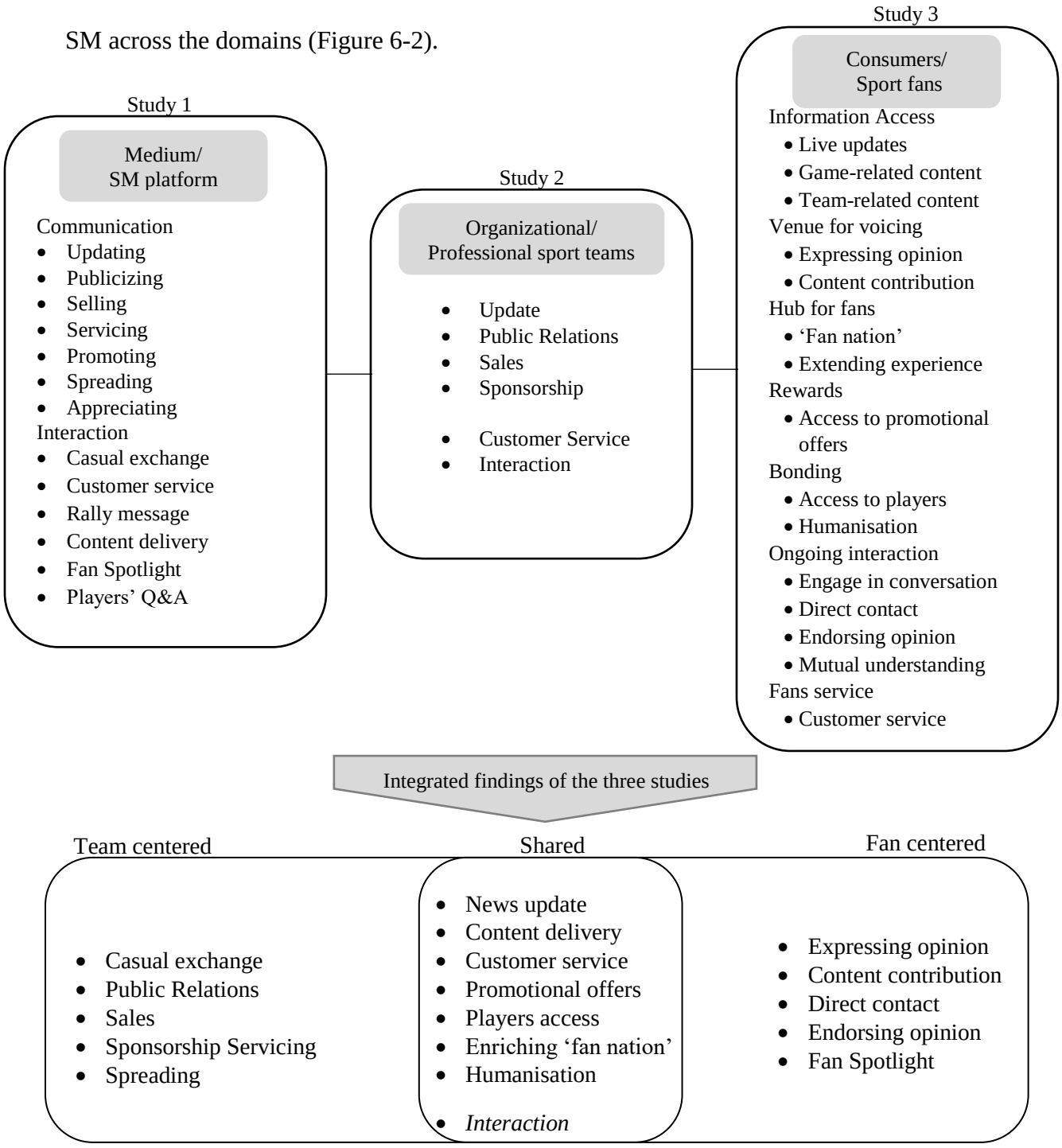

Figure 6-2. Use of social media as a relationship marketing tool in professional sport

As can be seen in Figure 6-2, the shared uses and benefits of SM include news update, content delivery, customer service, promotional offers, access to players, enriching 'fan nation,' humanisation, and interaction. From these eight uses of SM, the three sources of evidence informed that SM is primarily used for interaction purposes (by both fans and professional teams), followed by news updates and customer service. However, it should be noted that participants from, at least, the two primary sources of evidence (focus group and interviews) do not give less weight to the other uses.

In interacting on SM in real-time, teams and fans are talking and listening to each other, and engaging in an ongoing dialogue. As one manager [MLB3] stated, SM becomes a tool for "not only knowing fans but also knowing what they are asking for." The emphasis that the interviewees put on interaction is reflected in [NHL3]'s statement: "Team [xyz] a couple of years ago, they didn't talk to their fans and I find that very very… almost disturbing."

Through a continuing dialogue, a variety of fan needs (ranging from customer service issues to engaging in a direct conversation with players) can be met and potentially translate into the building, maintenance, and enhancement of relationships. Equally, teams will have the opportunity to learn about the changing needs of their fans. This benefit of SM is a claim that was put out conceptually by a number of sport related SM studies (e.g., Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Pronschinske et al., 2012; Williams & Chinn, 2010). The current study empirically supports those previous researchers' claim and highlights the value of SM as an interaction channel that has been a difficult marketing resource in the past. It implies the importance of SM as an RM tool, and supports the argument made by some researchers that SM is a valuable conduit capable of building meaningful relationships (through communication and interaction) in the sport industry (e.g., Dixon, Martinez, & Martin, 2015; Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Meng et al., 2015; Wang & Zhou, 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010). This also indicates that SM is providing new

directions to RM, making it a practical and affordable channel in realizing RM goals in the professional sport context.

Informed by the findings, it can be argued that in Grönroos' conceptualization of the interaction element of the RM process, or in Shani's (1997) (first sport-centered RM conceptual framework) emphasis on the role played by databases in RM efforts, the scholars have been in the search for a means to allow businesses and customers to engage in on-going interaction and dialogue. That was a challenge before the emergence of SM (unless frequent phone calls or letters are exchanged or radio talk shows are used). But today, even though businesses do not meet their customers in person, the emergence of SM resurged the long lost concept of direct interaction between businesses and customers that had faded during an era of mass production. Today, SM enables businesses and customers to engage in an on-going interaction, allowing for continuing dialogue. As Williams and Chinn (2010) stated, the interaction opportunity available on SM and its various platforms helps businesses meet RM goals.

The seven remaining shared uses and benefits of SM are briefly discussed below:

- Update – In all three studies, it is found that SM is used as a source of quick and fresh information, which is accessed before, during, and following games. For instance, all the managers stated that they use SM to provide news updates, i.e. to quickly and efficiently communicate a variety of information. Similarly, across the focus groups in study 3, fans mentioned that SM offers the opportunity to receive live play-by-play updates. When fans are unable to attend or watch games, SM will be the go-to source to get live updates. Study 1 also found that, in using SM for updating, teams communicate up-to-date information, for instance, about players and coaches (e.g., @Marlins: Rough start. Braves take a 4-0 lead in the top of the 1st. @FlashGJr will lead things off in the bottom of the inning. #LetsGoFish). Once again, this occurs before, during and following games.

- Content delivery – Related to news update, it was found in all three studies that SM allowed teams to bring fans closer to an organisation through the provision of exclusive stories, and enabled sport fans to gain access to team related behind-the-scenes content that was difficult to access in the past. SM also allowed the delivery of team related digital contents, such as a video or GIF of a play made during the game or a response to the request of a live stream of a practice session. For instance, in study 2, it is found that teams often use SM to provide a behind-the-scenes look at training sessions or players' whereabouts (e.g., traveling to competition, dining, etc.), as well as the latest on players' injuries and rehabilitation. In this regard, one manager [NFL4] stated:

> 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 organisation. 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.

One example of this in study 1 is the following Florida Panthers Tweet: "Panthers Vision gives you all access to yesterday's #NHLAllStar Red Carpet!" Similarly, study 3's discussants emphasised that, today, SM provides fans with the opportunity to gain access to behind-the-scenes/ insider information on issues related to the status of teams (e.g., lineup, backstage videos, and training) and players (e.g., injuries and tradings), as well as players' off-the-field activities (e.g., charity and community). The direct delivery of such exclusive team related content by the team to the fans extends fans' games experience, adds value to their enjoyment of consuming games (as informed consumers), and these, among other factors, potentially enrich fans' identification.

- Customer service – Customer service is one of the main benefits that SM offers to both sport teams and fans. All managers in study 2 stated that their teams use SM to serve as a direct line of communication to listen to questions, comments, or concerns, and address them. As one

manager [NBA3] described, “today, when there is any concern, the first place fans come to is the social media.” In line with this, the results of study 1 suggest that interactions are taking place to address fans’ varied questions about the team (from issues about game day uniforms to team management), troubleshooting issues with online access and mobile applications, and contests rules clarifications. The following conversation between a team and a fan illustrates the case:

> @DessDess: The Blackhawks are my fav on snapchat but they’ve been slacking lately @NHLBlackhawks.
> @NHLBlackhawks replied: Snapchat doesn’t always follow the team on the road, sorry!

In study 3, fans reiterated that SM enables them to receive real time and direct customer service support on inquiries ranging from service at a sporting venue to technical issues with apps, weblinks, etc.

- Promotional offers – Receiving or offering sales promotions are benefits found across the three studies. As reported in study 1, teams communicate activities that stimulate sales through contests, sweepstakes, giveaways, lotteries, and raffles (e.g., @NHLBlackhawks: It’s our final day of #HawksHolidays giveaways! Win a trip to the #StadiumSeries in Minny: csnchicago.com/hawksholidays). Similarly, interviewees in study 2 reported that teams use SM for the purpose of sales promotions such as fan reward campaigns which include contests and giveaways. Study 3’s focus groups results also confirmed that SM offers fans access to the latest information about a team’s ticket discounts, giveaways, merchandise sales, discounts from sponsors, etc.

- Players access – As managers indicated, access to players is made possible with SM as teams are able to provide behind-the-scenes exclusive content to their fans. In study 1, teams were found to be using Twitter to invite fans to submit specific questions for players to answer in real time through text or short videos. This is illustrated in this Tweet from the Red Sox: “It’s just about time for @RusneyCastillo to answer your questions! #Rusneychat

#SoxWinterWeekend [Picture of Castillo in front of a laptop].” In line with that, fans in study 3 noted that SM offered the opportunity to interact in real-time with players through the Q&As.

- Enriching ‘fan nation’ – As a hub for fans, SM platforms serve as a venue where conversations about a team are carried out among fans – ‘fan nations.’ In this regard, a number of managers (in study 2) insisted on the fact that SM allows the creation of a fan hub or virtual community. Specifically, one manager [NBA4] indicated that teams are “creating environments so that conversations take place that make fans feel that they’re bonded together.” As identified in study 3, SM serves fans as a venue where they have a chance to reunite outside of the stadium, access and react to content, and bond with other like-minded supporters. It is similarly shown in study 1 that SM serves as the online “headquarters” for partisan pride in “nations” or “countries” (e.g., #BroncosCountry, #HeatNation).

- Humanising brand – As uncovered in study 1, teams are humanising their brand through team personality (e.g., jokes and funny pictures), by engaging in a friendly tone, and by creating a closer relationship through personalisation (e.g., personalised birthday wishes to fans). Similarly, discussants of study 3 keenly expressed that teams build a personality for their brand in their use of humour, wittiness, and topical comments when interacting with fans and when sharing information. Equally, as the majority of study 2’s participants underscored, the opportunity to exhibit humour, cheer along with fans, offer rewards, and announce contests is one value SM presented to sport teams which enables brand humanisation. In fact, one manager stated that humanising the brand “gives fans another reason to support the organisation […]; [fans] feel justified in their investment in the organisation” [NHL5].

While the eight uses of SM have been shared and identified in all three domains, professional sport teams and sport fans have separate, albeit related, SM uses that appealed to both domains. In this regard, the integrated three studies’ findings (particularly, those from study

1 and 2) suggest five professional sport teams' centered SM uses: casual exchange, public relations, sales, sponsorship servicing, and spreading. In casual exchanges, conversations centered on other aspects of fans' relationship to the team (e.g., sharing enthusiasm for players and team, receiving a birthday wish from the team, etc.). For the purpose of public relations, SM platforms are used to publicise community involvement (e.g., @ArizonaCoyotes: Our Annual Telethon raised $67,000 for @PhxChildrens Expansion! Our fans are the best.). SM platforms are also used to sell tickets and merchandise (e.g., @Padres: After Christmas sale at the team store! Store hours are Monday- Saturday 10am to 5pm and Sunday from 11am to 4pm). As a medium for sponsorship servicing, SM platforms are used to service commercial partners and generate revenue. One example of that (from study 1) is this New Orleans Pelicans' Tweet: "Who wants to cook over the holidays? Enjoy some @Dominos victory pizza! 50% OFF large pies online with the code PELICAN tomorrow." For the purpose of spreading information, teams use the medium to augment the reach of information by retweeting their stakeholders' messages (e.g., @BlueJays retweeting from player Michael Stroman: "RT @MStrooo6: Never had this much fun playing the game I love").

These five team-centered uses and benefits of SM correspond with the common marketing communication elements that are applied by businesses in their marketing endeavours. The findings support Hennig-Thurau et al. (2013), Schultz and Peltier (2013), and Vernuccio's (2014) claims that marketers use SM to implement a variety of marketing communication elements such as news updates, sales, advertising, and public relations.

In addition to the eight shared and the five team-centered uses and benefits of SM, there are five types of SM uses and benefits specific to sport fans. These are: expressing opinion, content contribution, direct contact, endorsing opinion, and fan spotlight. The first three reflect the fact that, nowadays, sport fans keenly and continually expect up-to-date on- and off-the-field

information in real-time about their favourite team (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Reid, 2013), and frequently share their experiences in social group/gathering scenarios (Pronschinske et al., 2012). Sport fans are prime contributors in creating and sharing team-related content, and instantly voice their comments, concerns, questions, and complaints on SM. In this regard, the speed, easy access, and public forum features of SM makes it a medium conducive to fans' expression. A decade ago (e.g., 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 on sport radio shows or other similar types of means. These uses of SM are in line with Pronschinske et al. (2012) and Stavros et al.'s (2013) claim that one of the values of SM is its ability to serve as a venue for genuine and honest conversations and engagement. SM helps fans connect with each other as well as carry, extend, and amplify a fresh game experience outside the sport arena. As such, SM prolongs and enhances their game experience. By engaging in "fan spotlight" conversations (which are often initiated by fans), teams can interact on issues related to game experience by using different content such as fans' pictures during or post games, or by requesting fans to share their experiences at a game and acknowledging their responses. Such recognitions gratify fans, which potentially translates into enrichment of their fanship.

From the above discussed uses of SM as inputs and throughputs emerges the creation of value (outcome of RM) - as depicted in Figure 6-3. These values are discussed below.

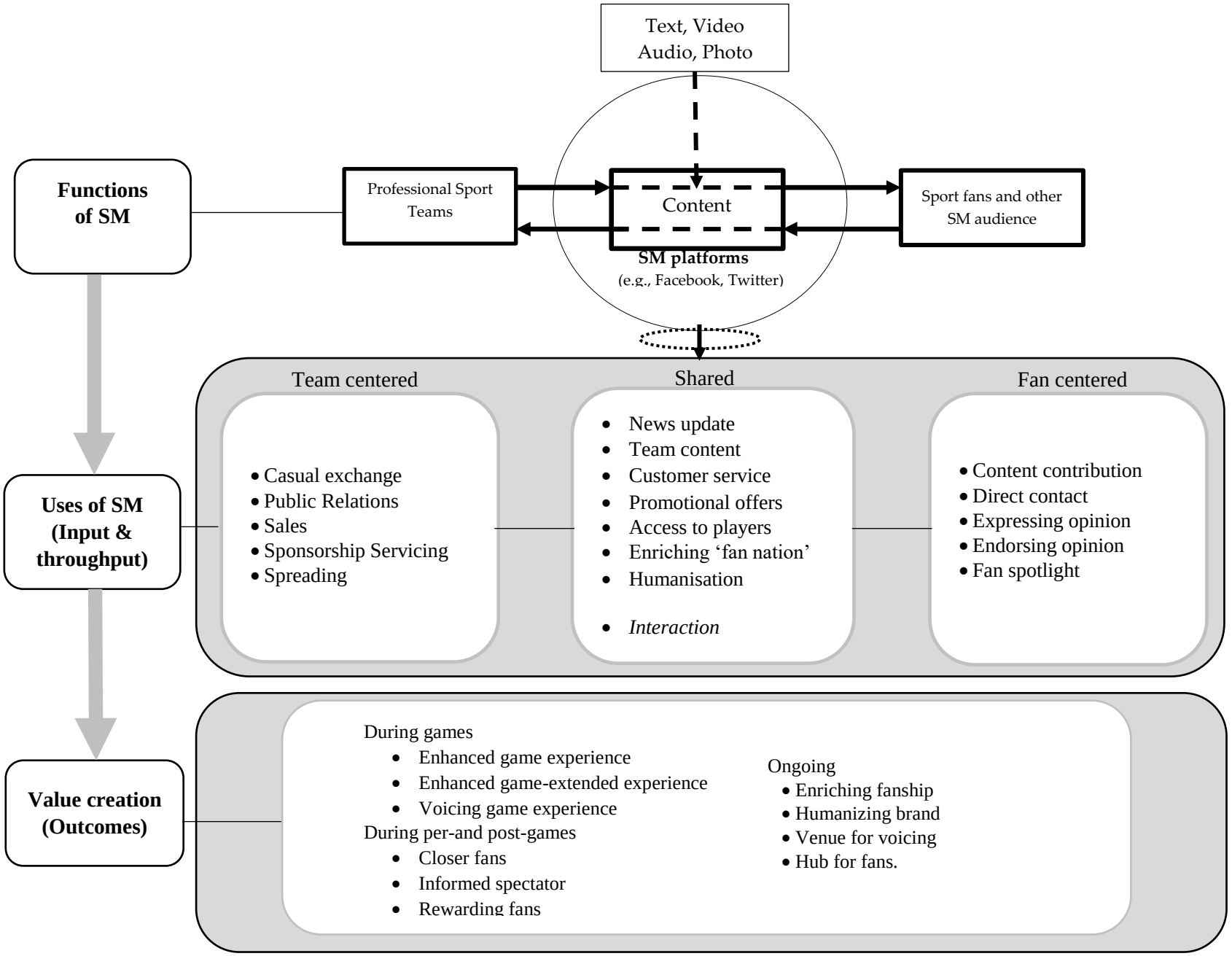

Figure 6-3. Use of social media in professional sport

The creation of value in RM emerging through communication and interaction is adding greater/extra value to the core product offering, i.e. the game. SM allows professional sport teams to communicate and interact with fans, understand fans' constantly changing needs, engage in an ongoing dialogue, fulfill promises, and eventually, deliver co-created value. This facilitates the development, maintenance, and enhancement of long-term relationships between professional teams and sport fans. As can be seen in Figure 6-3, SM platforms are facilitating the creation of value during games, off games, and on an ongoing basis. During games, three values emerge: enhanced game experience, enhanced game-extended experience, and voicing game experience. Off games, that is, before and after games, there are also three values: closer fans, informed spectator, and rewarding fans. On an ongoing basis, the values are: enriching fanship, humanizing brand, venue for voicing, and hub for fans. See Table 6-1 for more on these values.

Table 6-1

Emergent values/ outcomes of RM through SM

Emergent Values/ Outcomes of RM through SM
During Game
Enhanced game experience
• Offering live play-by-play updates, scores, highlights, seat upgrades, injury report, featuring fans' Tweets on jumbotron
Enhanced game-extended experience
• Providing real time and direct customer service, e.g., assistance with technical issues with apps, weblinks, etc., reply to questions about the game
Voicing game experience
• Fans express the glory or failure of their team on SM. Fans also use hashtags to initiates and engage in conversation with other like-minded users, and may get their Tweets retweeted or displayed on teams' other platforms (e.g., jumbotron, website, Facebook).
Off-Game (Pre- and Post-Games)
Closer fans
• Providing access to behind the scene/ insider information on issues such as team (e.g., lineup, backstage video, training) and players' status (e.g., injuries, trading), and players' off-the-field activities (e.g., charity, community, fan meetings).
Informed spectator
• Informing fans about upcoming or past games through exclusive team related content shared on Twitter (e.g., videos of game highlights, training & warmups, access to variety of information about team, injury updates).

Rewarding fans

- Teams use Twitter to announce contests and prize winners, promotions and discounts from sponsors, and sweepstakes and giveaways

Ongoing

Enriching fanship

- Hosting Q&As with players and other informal forms of communications (e.g., GIFs, inside jokes), creating and sharing emotional content (e.g., pictures of fans' families and friends, and Tweets that convey affection for team). Some also use nostalgia (throwback to team's history) as a tool to activate attachment.

Humanizing brand

- Giving a team a personality (e.g., jokes and funny pictures), engaging in a friendly tone, and creating a closer relationship through personalisation (e.g., fans' personalised birthday wishes).

Venue for voicing

- Fans use Twitter to voice their comments, concerns, questions, and complaints, and most teams respond to such voices. For fans, being heard, validated by the team (responding to their tweet), and the issue being possibly solved

Hub for fans

- Serving as the online "headquarters" for partisan pride in "nations" or "countries" (e.g., #BroncosCountry, #HeatNation), and as a venue where fans reunited outside of the stadium and access content to react to and bond over (team to fans, fans to fans). Occasionally, teams acknowledge fans tweets, and others often address congratulatory messages to those fans.

The majority of these values ("extras" to the core product) that fans perceive to be important, beneficial, and unique are specific to SM. Also, they are values that SM offers to professional teams as well as sport fans. By implication, the findings show that professional sport teams, by capitalising on the unique characteristics of both SM and sport fans, should embrace SM as an affordable tool that is making a RM approach practical. Above the practicality of an RM approach through SM, the values also help curb the challenges that professional sport teams face today, such as retaining an enthusiastic fan base and intensifying fan loyalty and involvement (Mullin et al., 2014), increasingly discontented and disconnected fans (Magnusen et al., 2012), and competition from other entertainment services (Kim & Trail, 2011).

6.3. Opportunities and Challenges of SM in Meeting RM Goals in Professional Sport

As discussed in the preceding section, professional teams and sport fans are using SM in the aggregate to maintain and enhance their relationship, with a potential of building a long-term relationship. In fact, building long-term relationships is the senior managers' primary objective,

as reported in study 2. Therefore, with the understanding of the use of SM from the three domains, the strategic, tactical, and operational management of the platforms fall in the hands of the professional teams or "useowners." In this regard, study 2 endeavoured to gain an understanding of the opportunities and challenges of SM in meeting RM goals. As noted at the beginning of this dissertation, despite the extent to which SM is an ideal and valuable conduit for a relationship building approach, with lists of opportunities (Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Williams & Chinn, 2010), an effective realisation of many SM efforts has been challenging (Schultz & Peltier, 2013). Pronschinske et al. (2012) and Schultz and Peltier (2013) stated that having a presence and developing and launching SM initiatives has not been the difficult part for most companies. Instead, the challenge is in making the platforms truly engaging and valuable to consumers.

In this regard, as detailed in study 2 and outlined in Figure 6-4 below, the study found seven opportunities presented by SM in meeting RM goals: ongoing dialogue, knowledge of fans, 'feeling the pulse', brand humanisation, content delivery, customer service, and 'fan nations'. SM also presents seven challenges in meeting RM goals which can be seen from three dimensions: Management related, Actors (stakeholders) related, and Data related (MAD). The management-related dimension includes issues pertaining to change management and operational management; actors-related includes concerns in connection with influential opinion leaders, internal conflict of interest, and anonymity; and data-related encompasses limitations in terms of actionable data and concerns related to lack of control over messages.

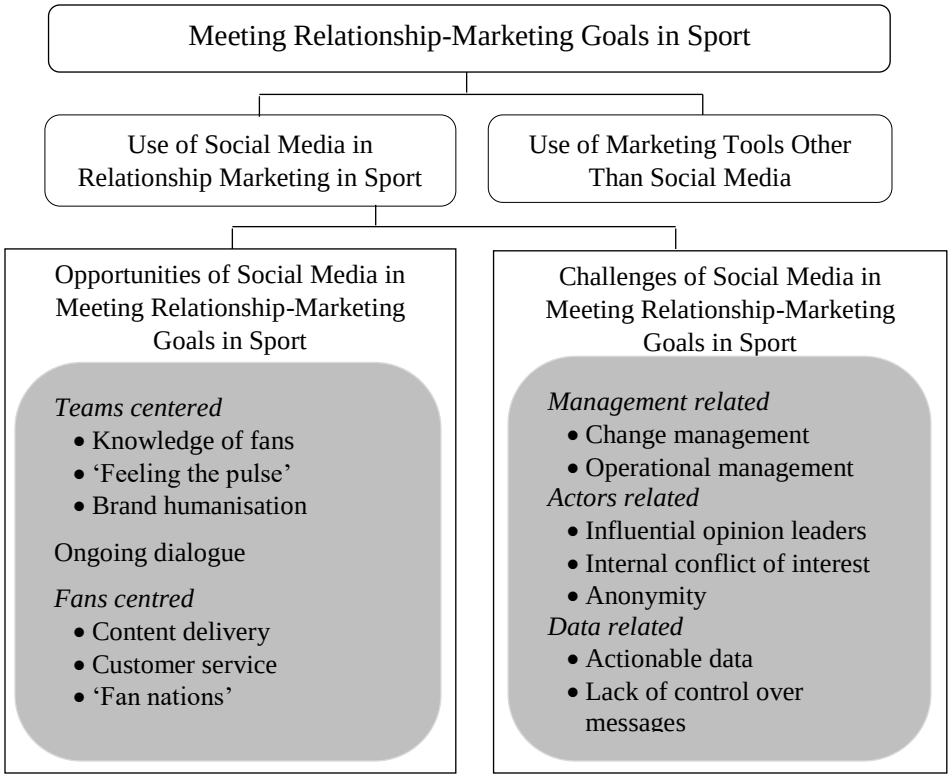

Figure 6-4. Opportunities and challenges of SM in meeting relationship marketing goals

As explained throughout this work, RM is primarily about teams communicating, interacting, and engaging in dialogue with their fans on an ongoing basis. Therefore, all seven opportunities facilitate the building, maintenance, and enhancement of relationships between teams and fans. Particularly, ongoing dialogue (the core component of an RM approach) is the prime benefit of SM as an RM tool; the managers underscored this across the board. Managers stated that, by using SM, teams are now able to engage in dialogue with their fans on an ongoing basis. They explained how, through continuous dialogue, teams are able to listen to and understand their fans' constantly changing needs, and to deliver a co-created value that facilitates the building, maintenance, and enhancement of long-term relationships. For instance, one manager [NFL5] noted 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." Reiterating the point, [NHL3] asked, "Why are you on SM if you're not going to interact back

and forth?" They also added that, "today, the currency is about engagement and interactions, and less about followers and likes and re-tweets." This is in line with the RM three-process model suggested by Grönroos (2004) and Williams and Chinn (2010).

While ongoing dialogue is the prime benefit of SM as an RM tool identified by managers across the board, the platforms have also provided (as discussed in detail in study 2) three team-centered opportunities (knowledge of fans, brand humanisation, and 'feeling the pulse') and three fan-oriented benefits (content delivery, customer service, and build 'fan nations'). Five of the opportunities are covered in the preceding section, and 'feeling the pulse' is discussed below.

As managers underscored, SM enables them to feel the 'pulse' of their fan base and gauge sentiments at a given point in time. The issues can range from a team's performance to management-related decisions. As one manager [NHL8] stated, "you can hear fans screaming in the stadium, but the best way to monitor fans' sentiment is through social media." [MLB6] statement elaborated on that point: "you would know exactly how your fans are feeling at any given point and […] you can create a tailored content to those feelings and capitalise on the highs and try to work through the lows, whenever those happen."

With regards to the challenges, the two identified management-related challenges 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. Finally, data-related challenges are concerns that can be addressed with the advancement of technology (e.g., filtering actionable data). Under data-related challenges, lack of control over SM messages is a concern raised by the literature and the managers. As some of the managers contended, that challenge can be

controlled by applying any one of the three basic approaches laid out: “let it go”, delete it, or reply to it.

It can be argued that the opportunities of SM in meeting RM goals significantly outweigh the challenges. As study 2 data 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 of the challenges that were once difficult to control are either manageable today or are understood by the SM community as being a part of the nature of SM. In other words, some challenges are evolving over time and are being perceived simply as drawbacks. Others are controllable within the resource limit of the teams, although the managers admitted that some of the challenges (notably, data and change management) require extra resources.

While a list of practical contributions has been detailed at the end of each of the three studies, some specific managerial implications are highlighted here. Across all the three sources of evidence, it is found that through a two-way continuous dialogue, sport teams are able to listen to and understand customers’ needs, respond accordingly, and are able to create and co-create additional value for fans. This value of SM helps curb today’s professional sport teams’ challenges, 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). In connection with this, it is worth noting that with the development of SM there needs to be a shift from simply posting

messages on a platform to generating creative and rich data that resonates even more with the SM world, such as player-centered interactive content. As the study findings informed, the nature of such content is not only creative, fresh, different, and interesting, it adds to fans' experience.

In this dissertation, it is clearly observed that fans desire to become involved in, engage in, and maintain a relationship with the sport entities they support. Given that sport consumers are primary active collaborators in SM (Stavros et al., 2013), sport teams are recommended to capitalise on the benefits that sport fans see in SM. Using SM platforms, teams can retain an enthusiastic fan base, and intensify fan loyalty and involvement by delivering prompt customer service and offering different reward programs. By the same token, it is noted that the study data informs that some of the teams underutilise their SM platform and engage only in limited, if not rare, interaction. As the findings show, however, managers benefit from SM's capacity to facilitate the creation of a number of values that enhance and enrich fans' identity, which translates into building a fan base. Most importantly, the resulting values help address some of the challenges managers face in the competitive sport business environment. Additionally, setting up a SM platform while rarely engaging in interaction would not make the medium much more effective than the original Web (i.e. Web 1.0), which carries mostly a one-way message supplied by publishers on a static page.

Although 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 the day-to-day practice of some managers, it should be emphasised that an in-depth understanding of a team's audience is imperative in the management of SM. Such an understanding allows sport teams to customise and frame their content delivery in a way that appeals to a target fan base on a particular type of SM platform. In line with this, managers need to understand the unique features of different platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Snapchat, and Instagram) 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, sales, it is recommended that managers capitalise on the uniqueness of individual platforms. For instance, 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 the arena.

Lastly, using SM, teams are encouraged to personalize their brand through humour, wittiness, and topical comments in their interaction with fans, as brand humanisation was an aspect of SM that was strongly emphasised by fans who participated in this research. The findings also show that teams today 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 and the like. In this regard, the focus group discussants underlined the importance of SM as a source of otherwise inaccessible content.

6.4. Contribution to Theory and Scholarship

Informed by the findings of the second and third studies, and centering on that of the third, this dissertation extends Grönroos' (2004) RM process model (Figure 6-5) through the lens of SM in professional sport context. This extended model is presented in Figure 6-6. The findings that informed the model extension/modification are recapped after the figures. Before that, the three specific modifications that are applied to Grönroos' original model are specified.

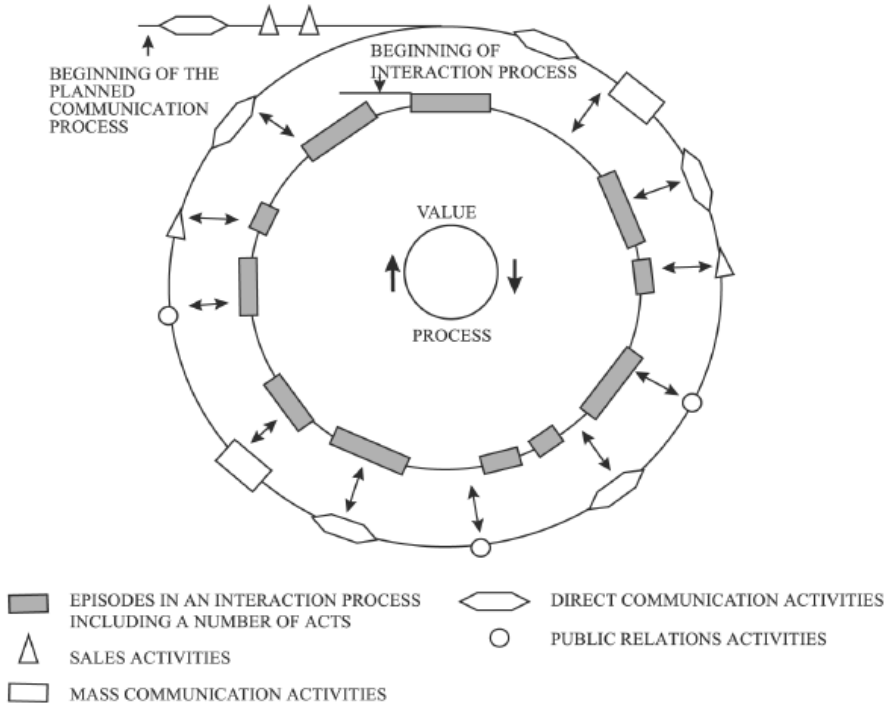

Figure 6-5 (Figure 2-2). Grönroos' model of the process of relationship marketing

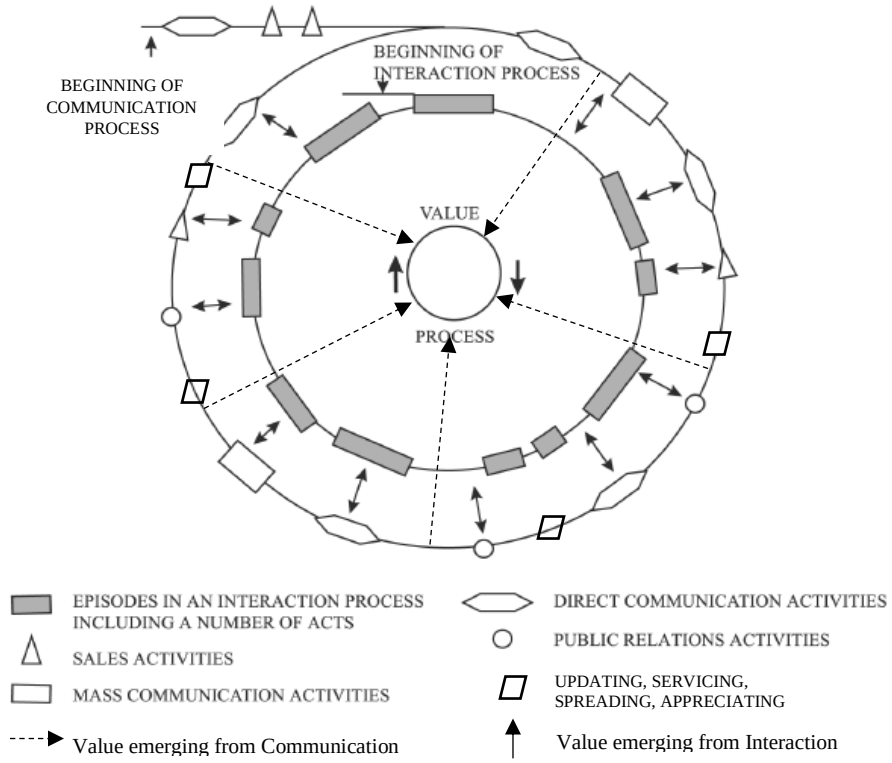

Figure 6-6. Grönroos's modified model of the process of relationship marketing

As can be seen in Figure 6-6, three modifications are applied to the original model: (i) "beginning of the planned communication process" is replaced with "beginning of communication process," (ii) four communication elements are added, namely updating, servicing, spreading, and appreciating (represented by a parallelogram key), and (iii) broken arrows are added to show the emergence of value from the communication process. These modifications are briefly described in the following paragraphs.

In his original model, Grönroos understandably proposed communication as a planned undertaking supported by public relations, mass communication (e.g., advertising, brochures), and direct and interactive communication (personally addressed letters containing information, offers, recognition of previous interactions, request of customer data). According to Grönroos, a planned communication process is initiated by businesses. However, with the emergence of SM, the assumption of planned communication messages is no longer valid (as this study data informs and as noted by O'Brien (2011) and Williams and Chinn (2010)). The flow of messages is two- or multi-way, and all communications are not initiated by businesses; customers also initiate communication. In fact, businesses can embrace SM platforms as part of planned promotional strategies (e.g., through Tweets and Facebook profile updates) – as Grönroos suggested. But businesses can also interact with SM users on a more informal, unplanned basis (e.g., replies to Facebook updates/Tweets or user-to-user conversations). The second modification made to the model is the addition of four communication elements. In addition to the commonly identified marketing communication elements that Grönroos included in his model, data from the three studies showed that communication through SM includes such elements as updating, servicing, spreading, and appreciating. Hence, these four additional communication elements are introduced into the model.

The examination of professional sport teams' SM use for an RM purpose is grounded in and guided by the three sequential core components of an RM process: communication, interaction, and value (per an RM theoretical framework). A communication process, according to RM theory, is an act of transmitting or broadcasting a content by the team that is meant to inform the consuming public about a good or service. The process involves an integration of marketing communication messages (Grönroos, 2004). An interaction process, according to RM theory, is a two-way or reciprocal exchange of content. The creation of value is adding greater/extra value on top of the core product offering (i.e. the game) that emerges through the process of communication and interaction (i.e. dialogue).

Although the level at which each team uses its SM platforms for different communication purposes varies, it is found, for instance in study 1, that the teams' communication focuses on seven observed purposes: updating, selling, publicizing, promoting, spreading, appreciating, and servicing (UPSPASS). One unique practice observed in this thesis was that while a communication process has been assumed to facilitate interaction and ultimately create value (per Grönroos, 2004), the emergent communication types themselves, at times, lead to value creation. For instance, while updating (e.g., coaches' statements and injuries) and appreciating (e.g., communicating personalised birthday wishes and fans-players meets-and-greets) are ways in which a team transmits or broadcasts content (without necessarily resulting in interaction), these communication types enable fans to be informed and, thereby, gratified. These types of communications facilitate and enrich fans' relationship with their teams. While interaction remains the core of RM in (co)creating value with customers and, ultimately, in the transfer of value to the customers (Grönroos, 2004), value can emerge from communication alone. This study informs that values are created in sequential fashion, but not all the time. Hence, Grönroos'

(2004) proposition that, in order for value to emerge, communications must evolve into interaction is only one of the ways value can be created in the context of sport and SM.

In terms of interaction, a much higher level of interaction can occur on SM than what Grönroos anticipated with the limited communication outlets that were available at the time he suggested the three focal areas of the RM process. On SM platforms, two parties acquire access to shared or common information through interaction and a variety of interaction episodes emerge on the teams' SM platforms. Among these are casual exchange, customer service, rally message, fan spotlight, and players' Q&A. While these interaction practices have the potential to produce a variety of values, the study identified several emergent values that were created over three periods: during game, pre-and post-games, and ongoing. The three emergent values created during games are enhanced game experience, enhanced game-extended experience, and voicing game experience. The three emergent values created during pre- and post-games periods are closer fans, informed spectator, and rewarding fans. On an ongoing basis, the four values identified are: enriching fanship, humanizing brand, venue for voicing, and hub for fans. (See Table 6-1 for more on these emergent values.) The teams initiate the first two values, while the latter two are Twitter facilitated, fan-initiated values.

Inspired by Grönroos' (2004) original model and informed by the study data as well as the modified version of the RM process model presented above, a specific RM process model that can be applicable to sport through the lens of SM is proposed in Figure 6-7. As shown in the figure, value predominately emerges from interaction, as the original model suggests. However, as discussed above, value can also emerge from the communication process. For instance, while updating (e.g., coaches' statements, injuries) and appreciating (e.g., personalised birthday wishes, fans-players meet-and-greet) are ways in which a team transmits or broadcasts content

(without necessarily resulting in interaction), these communication types enable fans to be informed and, thereby, gratified. It also facilitates and enriches fans' relationship with teams.

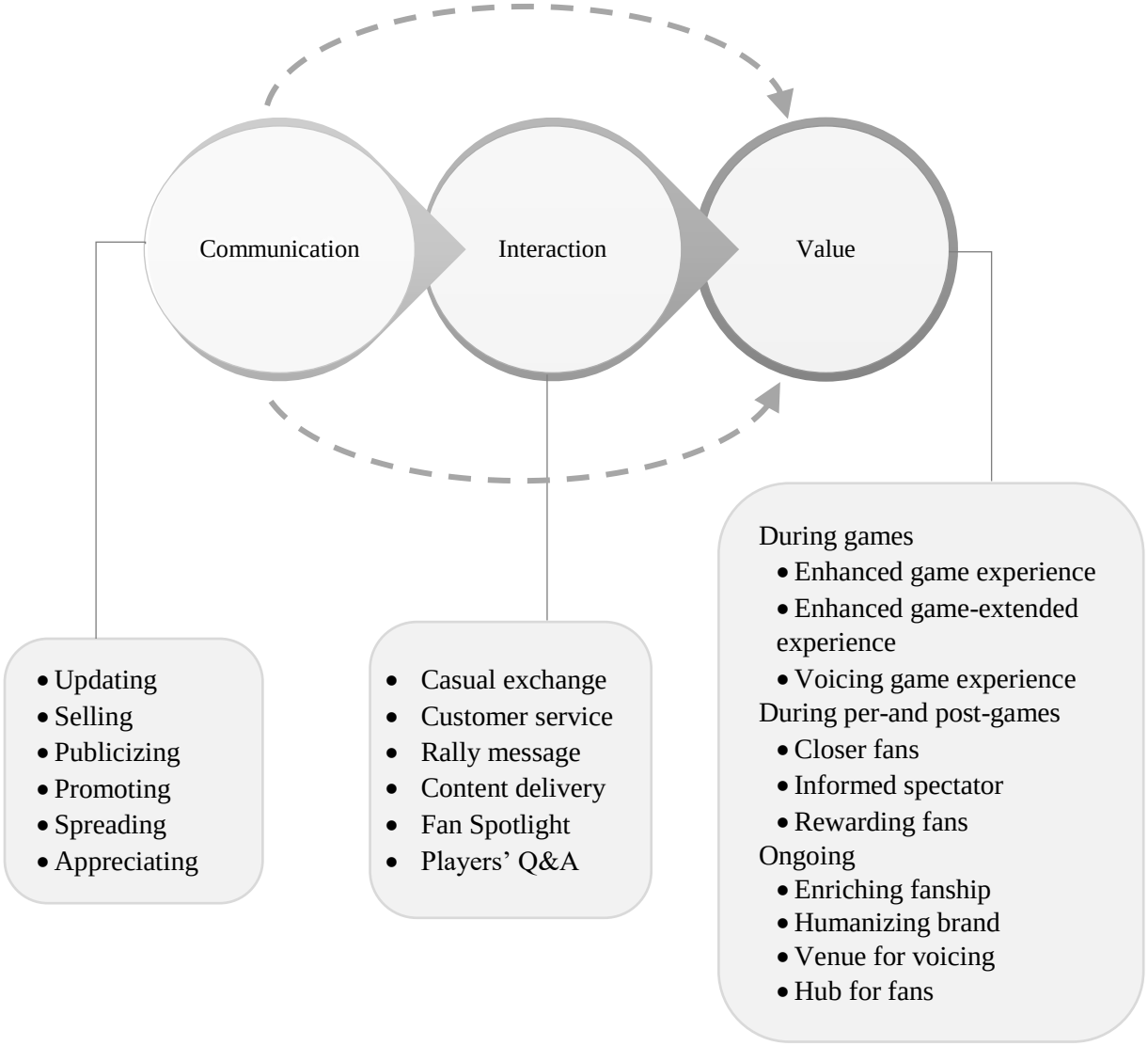

Figure 6-7. Relationship marketing process in sport through social media

SM platforms, in general, facilitate the delivery of these additional elements or the creation of added values for customers beyond the offering of the core product (i.e. the game), which is the central purpose of RM as per Grönroos (2004). Such values, as Bee and Khale (2006) indicated, affect both fans' sport consumption and their allegiance to their favourite team. Caution should be taken here (as also pointed out in study 1) that the study's findings do not

imply that the identified communication types, interaction practices, and (co)created values are the only ways SM can be used as an RM tool. Rather, findings show how professional sport teams are currently using SM in meeting RM goals.

While the dissertation makes the above discussed theoretical contribution, the work addressed some of the pivotal issues that confront the development of SM scholarship in sport marketing, particularly professional sport. The project makes a contribution to the field's literature by identifying the use, benefits, opportunities, and challenges of SM as an RM vehicle in the professional sport setting. It especially contributes to the scholarship by supporting and augmenting previous sport-related studies in the area of SM. The dissertation responded to calls made by previous scholars to investigate the use of SM from the perspective of different professional sport teams (e.g., Meng et al., 2015; Stavros et al., 2014), the use of SM in RM from the management perspective (e.g., Williams & Chinn, 2010), and the use of netnographic study (e.g., Stavros et al., 2014).

SM has been discussed, in sport-related RM studies, as a valuable conduit capable of building meaningful relationships between two parties (e.g., Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Meng et al., 2015; Wang & Zhou, 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010). However, within the context of professional sport teams, the use of SM to achieve RM goals had not yet been fully understood and empirically supported. This study produced empirical evidence to fill the research gap. The study informed us that SM is a valuable RM tool that is both practical and affordable, a finding that supports the claim made by Hambrick and Kang (2014) and Williams and Chinn (2010). Considering professional sport teams' sizeable presence on SM (Hambrick & Kang, 2014; Meng, Stavros, & Westberg, 2015), the findings are valuable and informative. The study's identification of the opportunities and challenges of SM in terms of meeting RM goals also updates and extends previous studies that have been conducted in sports other than professional sport,

namely, in the context of college sport (Dixon et al., 2015) and niche sports (i.e., Abeza et al., 2013; Hambrick & Svensson, 2015). Overall, the study also constructed a multi-dimensionally informed understanding of the use of SM in RM in professional sport from the perspective of senior managers of professional sport teams, sport fans, and SM platform.

Finally, the review of literature identified a dearth of research on sport fans' use of SM as a channel to communicate, interact and co-create value with their favorite sport teams, which are the core intent of RM (per Grönroos, 2004; Williams & Chinn, 2010). In fact, only four articles were identified on the topic of sport fans and RM (i.e., Pronschinske et al., 2012; Stavros et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2014; Witkemper et al., 2012). However, these studies investigated the motivation (behavioural) underpinning fans' use of SM (e.g., Stavros et al., 2013) or concentrated on SM use in relation to fan identification (e.g., Williams et al., 2014). The findings of this dissertation inform the scholarship on the ways fans of professional sport teams see the benefits of SM as a channel to enhance long-term relationship with their sport team. In this regard, the thesis identified seven major benefits (and 15 specific benefits) that fans see as opportunities presented by SM as a medium to enhance long-term relationship with their team. Moreover, while the majority of sport fan-centered SM and RM studies (except Williams et al., 2014 & Williams et al., 2012) gathered their source of evidence from content communicated on SM, specifically Facebook or Twitter, this dissertation study included the first-hand account of fans as its source of evidence.

6.5. Future Research Directions

While a list of avenues for future studies is provided in each of the three studies, some are highlighted below.

- A study that investigates best practices on the use of SM as an RM tool will have both academic and practical value. It allows sport managers to design a strategy that enables an effective implementation of SM as an RM tool.
- A study that investigates the different typologies of sport SM users (in terms of SM consumption) will advance our knowledge. This is particularly true for a future study similar to the present one, taking into account different levels of fans–teams attachment.
- Additional studies are equally recommended on the use and impact of social media in expanding and growing the fan base or introducing a sport to non-traditional markets.
- It is apparent in the SM world that usage patterns evolve constantly and that managers' usage is maturing with time. Therefore, a similar study to the present one is recommended over the course of a specific period of time.
- Importantly, there is a need for an exploration of the study's research questions in other parts of the world (e.g., European football leagues), and other leagues (e.g., tier II professional sports).
- Future study is recommended on the relationship between a team and SM opinion leaders (also known as social influencers or digital influencers). Such a study can also assess the power of these leaders, their characteristics, their role, and their impact on teams' brands.
- A study will be needed to investigate how organisations sort out, filler out and distill usable data from the voluminous amount of data available through their SM platforms into actionable data (i.e. a form of data ready to inform strategy development).
- Further research is recommended to investigate why some teams do not engage in dialogue with fans or consistently ignore fan-initiated communications or requests.

6.6. Limitation of the Dissertation

While the study makes several theoretical and practical contributions, some limitations must be recognised. In addition to those listed at the end of each of the three studies, further limitations are outlined below.

- The findings cannot be generalised to all sport, and are limited to professional teams in the "Big 4" in North America.
- As the study emphasises B-2-C, the findings may not translate to sport teams' relationship-building effort with other stakeholders such as sponsors.
- In conducting study 1, while all the quality control measures were taken, the addition of a second netnographer could have added much more value to the study. Along with this, although a justification for the selection of the first three and last two teams (in the netnographic study) has been provided, a random selection of the same number of teams from the four leagues might have resulted in different findings.
- There is also a limitation with regards to the application of RM theory. While Grönroos articulated the RM approach in a series of his works, both from theoretical and practical perspectives, the theory still remains a "theory-in-progress." In this regard, this work made contribution to the theory in the context of sport through a SM lens.
- Finally, both the professional teams and the sport fans 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 dissertation in the coming years. Yet again, it is believed that laying a strong foundation today will critically formulate and shape future inquiries.

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Appendix A

Letter of Information [Letter Headed]

Title of the study: Social Media in Relationship Marketing: A Multi-Stage Study of Professional Sport

Principal Investigator: Gashaw Abeza, Doctoral Candidate, University of Ottawa, School of Human Kinetics

Supervisors: Dr. Benoit Seguin, University of Ottawa, School of Human Kinetics, and Professor Norm O'Reilly, Ohio University

Invitation to Participate: You are invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Gashaw Abeza as part of his doctoral dissertation.

Purpose of the Study: This research seeks to investigate the use, value, and significance of social media in relationship marketing in professional sport from both organizations' and fans' perspective. Particularly, from organizational perspective, the study seeks to gain a better understanding of how managers in professional sport organizations see the opportunities and challenges of social media in maintaining an on-going communication and enhancing a long-term relationship with sport fans.

Participation: As a manager in a professional sport team, you are invited to share a practical experience of your teams' use of social media and the opportunities and challenges that social media presents as a relationship marketing tool. Your participation in the study will be highly valuable. The outcome of the study is also expected to help all of us empirically understand the value and significance of social media and its effects on today's sport marketing practice. The interview will take approximately an hour to one and a half hour of your time and, with your permission, the interview will be tape-recorded to facilitate accurate collection of the information. You do not have to answer to any questions that you do not wish to respond to or that make you feel uncomfortable. If you wish to participate in this study, please let me know at your earliest convenience. I will be sending you a notice of reminder in two weeks' time. Please note that the interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Benefits: The study is intended to produce empirical findings that can be used to design an informed strategy (based on identified opportunities) and develop adaptive strategy (from identified challenges) that enables the realization of an effective use of social media as a relationship marketing tool. Also, the study is intended to advance a relationship marketing theory through social media in the sport context, specifically by examining the unexplored component of the theory—the value element—from fans' perspective

Risks: The study offers no risk to yourself as a participant. Your identity will remain confidential and will not be shared with anyone other than the investigator himself and the thesis supervisory committee. Further, if you do not feel comfortable providing an answer to a given question, you can skip that question. If you choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be used in the study unless you inform the investigator that you do not wish for it to be used, in which case it will be destroyed.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: The information that you will share will remain strictly confidential and will be used solely for the purposes of this research. Only I, the investigator, and the thesis supervisory committee will have access to your data/responses. Your answers may be used verbatim in presentations and publications but neither you (nor your organization) will be identified. Results will be published in pooled (aggregate) format. Anonymity is guaranteed since you are not being asked to provide your name or any personal identifying information.

Conservation of Data: The interview data will be kept in a locked storage unit in the supervisor's desks, in password protected computer files, and in a hard-drive protected by a numeral password. Any documents in the form of hard copy will be scanned and saved in an external hard disk and will be destroyed immediately after. Data will be filed immediately following the investigator's doctoral thesis defense for a period of five (5) years, at which time they will be destroyed.

Voluntary Participation: You are under no obligation to participate in this study, and if you do, you have the right to withdraw at any time. If you choose to participate, you may refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. Should you withdraw from the study after having signed the consent form, data collected up until that moment will be destroyed, unless permission to use it is granted by you.

Information about the Study Results: The results will be available to the interviewee on request by email to the investigator.

If you have any questions or require more information about the study itself, you may contact the investigator himself with the contact information mentioned herein.

I have scheduled interviews starting from the week of [month, 2016 - depending on the date of ethics approval]. To proceed, once your have expressed your interest to me, I will contact you to confirm your participation and to discuss the consent form and the tenure of your interview.

If you have any questions with regards to the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact the University of Ottawa's Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research (Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, tel.: (613) 562-5387 or ethics@uottawa.ca.)

Please keep this document for your records.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Gashaw Abeza
Lecturer and Doctoral Candidate

Appendix B
Interview Consent Form

Consent Form

When printed, the consent form was on University of Ottawa letterhead.

Title of the study: Social Media in Relationship Marketing: A Multi-Stage Study of Professional Sport

Principal Investigator: Gashaw Zergaw Abeza, Doctoral Candidate, University of Ottawa, School of Human Kinetics

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Gashaw Abeza as part of his doctoral dissertation, and co-supervised by Professor Norm O'Reilly and Dr. Benoit Seguin.

Purpose of the Study: From this research, I understand that the investigator wishes to investigate the use, value, and significance of social media in relationship marketing in professional sport from both organizations and fans perspective. From organizations perspective, the study seeks to gain a better understanding of how managers in professional sport organizations see the opportunities and challenges of social media in maintaining an on-going communication and enhancing a long-term relationship with sport fans.

Participation: My participation will consist essentially of answering interview questions of approximately an hour to one and a half hour, during which I will be asked to answer questions and provide my opinion on my team's use of social media and the opportunities and challenges that social media presents as a relationship marketing tool. The interview will be tape-recorded to facilitate accurate collection of the information.

Risks: My participation in this study will entail no risks to me, as my answers will remain anonymous. I may provide an e-mail address to be contacted by the investigator and the supervisory committee only, in which case, this information will not be shared with anyone other than the investigator and the members of the supervisory committee. I understand that I am under no obligation to answer any questions to that I do not want to.

Benefits: My participation in this study help the study produce empirical findings that serve as an input to professional sport organizations in designing an informed strategy (based on identified opportunities) and developing adaptive strategy (from identified challenges) that enables the realization of an effective use of social media as a relationship marketing tool. If requested, I will have the opportunity to review transcripts of the interview and I will also receive a copy of the results.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have received assurance from the investigator that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for the purposes of this research and that my confidentiality will be protected.

Anonymity will be protected in the following manner by the investigator: Information will be kept securely locked in the investigators' offices and under no circumstances will my information be shared with anyone other than the investigator and the thesis supervisory committee members. If I am quoted in publications, my name or any other personal information shared with the research team will not be divulged.

Conservation of data: The data collected through the interview will be kept secure (locked in the investigators' offices) and only the investigators will have access to it. The data collected will be kept for a maximum of five (5) years before being securely deleted from hard drives and shredded.

Compensation: There are no compensation for my participation in the study. As indicated above in "Benefits", I will receive a copy of the results if I request it.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be destroyed immediately, unless I granted permission for it to be used.

Acceptance: I, _____, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Gashaw Abeza of the School of Human Kinetics, Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Ottawa. The study is funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Doctoral Scholarship.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the investigator at Tel: _____, Email: _____ or his co-supervisors: Professor Norm O'Reilly, Ohio University, Tel: _____, Email: _____ and Dr. Benoit Seguin, University of Ottawa, School of Human Kinetics, Tel: _____, Email: _____

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5
Tel.: (613) 562-5387
Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature: Date:

Investigator's signature: Date:

Appendix C

Interview Guide

Code # ____

I. General

1. Can you tell me about your organisation? (*e.g., what is your business, how long you have been in the business, estimated number of the team's fan, etc*.)
2. Could you please describe your business and products?
3. Who are your target markets? *(e.g., area [international, national, local], demography [men or women; kids or adult or everyone; disabled or abled or everyone], etc.)*

II. Relationship marketing

4. Do you have a marketing strategy or tactics/ techniques/ methods that aims to build a long-term relationship with your fans? *(e.g., do you retain and maintain relationships with your fans?)*
5. If your organisation attempts to build a long-term relationship with your fans or if you do not attempt, can you explain what your reasons are for doing so?
6. How do you design, implement, and evaluate relationship marketing strategies in the new, changing media environment?

III. Social media

7. As I have learned from your Website you are using different social media platforms. How many social media platforms / sites do you use? (*e.g., YouTube, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, etc.*)
8. How much does your organisation currently use social media – on a scale 1 to 7, where 1 being 'not at all' and 7 being 'extensively'?
9. How much do you feel your sport participants use social media– on a scale 1 to 7, where 1 being 'not at all' and 7 being 'extensively'?
10. What are your intended objectives in using social media platforms? (*e.g., to offer timely and useful information like ticket sale, to listen to customers, to have one-to-one contact, easy access, etc.*)

11. Does your organisation possess written/ formal objectives concerning social media activities? Do you have a copy?
12. It is reported that the vast majority of businesses that have ventured into SM have not had a well thought out strategy (or little strategic thought) on its use, and they have resorted to SM as an emergency and used it experimentally as a contingency in an effort to avoid being left behind. What do you make of this point from your organisation perspective?

    If so, your organisation will continue to use SM in an experimental and tentative manner?

Opportunities of Social Media in Sport Relationship Marketing

13. It is suggested that social media offers the opportunity to know and understand fans better than ever before. What do you make of this point? (*e.g., an in-depth, detail, individual and closer knowledge of fan's value, need, desire, and want than the "old-way" method that relies on research*)
14. If social media offered you the opportunity to know and understand your fans or participants, can you please describe what you have learned about your participants or fans?
15. It is suggested that social media advances the fan-organisation on-going communication and interaction. What is your take on this? (*e.g., an immediate, a direct and real-time conversation, talking and listening to each other, and then learning from each other and knowing each other closely*)
16. It is suggested that social media allows fans to be involved in the organisation's management and to make fans feel they have a part in the management. How do you respond to this suggestion? *(e.g., SM allows sport marketers to involve fans in their marketing activities, to make fans feel they have a part in the management, and to retain fans' trust in the companies' brand)*
17. It is suggested that social media allows sport organisations to obtain customers' comments, opinions, and complaints at a much cheaper budget but at higher levels of quality than before. How do you respond to this suggestion? *(e.g., customers' comments, opinions, and complaints conveyed through SM are personal, authentic, expressive but low-cost)*

18. In your point of view, what other opportunities do you see in using social media as a relationship marketing tool? If there are any, why do you think those are opportunities?

Challenges of Social Media in Sport Relationship Marketing

19. Do you see the issue of lack of control over social media messages as a challenge? Why? / Why not?

    If you see it as a challenge, how much is this an issue to your organisation?

20. Do you see the issue of credibility and reliability of messages posted by users on your social media platforms as a challenge? Why? / Why not?

    If you see it as a challenge, how do you or did you handle the issue?

21. On the issue of content management, how do you manage when you receiving content that go against your marketing objective? What is your experience on this matter?

22. Identifying the "true online customers" of a company among the members of a company's social media site has been mentioned as the difficult side of social media. What is your take on this point?

23. Do you see the issue of securing adequate organisational resources (human, financial, time) as a problem you are facing in managing social media platforms/ sites. What is your experience with this?

    If you have managed to get all the necessary resources, how do you explain the significance of having the resources?

    Does your organisation have a formal social media team or staff?

    What do you think are the most important resources needed to run social media platforms?

    If you are facing difficulties in securing one of the resources or all the appropriate resources, how impactful was the lack of the resource or the resources?

24. Do you think using social media is a question of choice from an organisation point of view? *(e.g., what do you think will happen if a business is not using any of the social media platforms?)*

25. Is there anything else you would like to add or feel is important for me to know that relates to this topic?

Appendix D
Focus Group - Consent Form

Consent Form

Title of the study: Social Media in Relationship Marketing: A Multi-Stage Study of Professional Sport

Principal Investigator: Gashaw Zergaw Abeza, Doctoral Candidate, University of Ottawa, School of Human Kinetics

Supervisors: Dr. Benoit Seguin, University of Ottawa, School of Human Kinetics, and Professor Norm O'Reilly, Ohio University

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Gashaw Abeza as part of his doctoral dissertation, and co-supervised by Professor Norm O'Reilly and Dr. Benoit Seguin.

Purpose of the Study: From this research, I understand that the investigator wishes to understand how sport fans see the value of social media in maintaining and enhancing relationships with their favorite sport teams. From a relationship marketing perspective, the researcher is trying to investigate the benefits that sport fans have gained, if any, in using social media.

Participation: My participation will consist of taking part in a focus group of approximately one to one and a half hour during which I will be asked to answer questions and provide my opinion on different subjects related to the Ottawa Senators' use of social media in building long-term relationship with its fans. I am aware that the discussion will be audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Risks: My participation in this study will entail no risks to me, as my answers will remain anonymous. All results will be presented and provided as summary data from the focus group only.

Benefits: My participation in this study will be to help the study produce empirical findings that serve as an input to professional sport organizations in designing an informed strategy (based on identified opportunities) and developing adaptive strategy (from identified challenges) to enable the realization of an effective use of social media as a relationship marketing tool. If requested, I will also receive a copy of the results.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have received assurance from the investigators that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for the purposes of this research and that my anonymity will be protected. I recognize that I will be sharing information with other members of the focus group but consent to not share the information they divulge beyond the focus group.

Anonymity will be protected in the following manner by the researchers: Information will be securely locked in the investigators' offices and under no circumstances will my information be shared with anyone other than the investigator and the thesis supervisory committee members. If I am quoted in publications, my name or any other personal information shared with the research team will not be divulged.

Conservation of data: The data collected through the focus group exercise will be kept secure (locked in the investigators' offices) and only the investigators will have access to it. The data collected will be kept for a maximum of five (5) years, immediately following the investigator's doctoral thesis defense, before being safely deleted from hard drives and shredded.

Compensation: I will be given the option to enter my name in a draw to win a $50 gift certificate in the focus group that I will be participating. I am aware that there will be one prize for the focus group that I will be participating in, and the draw will be open to all focus group participants who enter their name in the draw, regardless of whether a participant decides to withdraw from further participation in the research project. Upon the completion of the focus group discussion, a name will be randomly drawn from those who have entered and the person whose name is drawn will be announced in front of participants. To win the prize, the person must correctly answer a skill testing question. I am aware that if the winner does not take the prize within 14 days from the date of the draw, the prize will be awarded to the second name that is randomly selected and so on, until the prize has been awarded. The odds of winning a prize will depend on the number of participants in the focus group that I will be participating in, which could ranges from 6 to 10 participants. The prize must be accepted as awarded or forfeited, and cannot be redeemed for cash. The investigator reserves the right to cancel the draw or cancel the awarding of the prize if the integrity of the draw or the research or the confidentiality of participants is compromised. The draw is governed by the applicable laws of Canada.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. Given that focus group data are highly dependent on the overall group discussion, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be used in the study if I choose to withdraw.

Acceptance: I, _____, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Gashaw Abeza of the School of Human Kinetics, Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Ottawa. The study is funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Doctoral Scholarship.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the investigator at Tel: _____, Email: _____ or his co-supervisors: Professor Norm O'Reilly, Ohio University, Tel: _____, Email: _____ and Dr. Benoit Seguin, University of Ottawa, School of Human Kinetics, Tel: _____, Email: _____

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5
Tel.: (613) 562-5387
Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature: Date:

Investigator's signature: Date:

Appendix E
Discussion Guide – Phase 1

Focus Group Discussion Guide

Group # ____

As a guide for focus group discussion, five guiding open-ended questions have been developed which I will be asking you to respond to. I want to assure you that all of your responses will be kept confidential. I would like to thank you for your participation. Your input will be used to study the use, value and significance of social media in enabling sport fans to maintain and enhance a long-term relationship with their teams.

I will read the questions and give you a few minutes to respond and discuss your views.

Facilitator: _____

Date: _____ Place: _____

Meeting Time: Beginning_____ End_____

Discussion Questions:

1. As a sport fan, what do you lose if all SM platforms are not operational anymore?
2. As a sport fan, how long will you be able to last without using SM (i.e., a week, a month, a year)?
3. Why do we need, for example, Twitter, YouTube or Google+?
4. How does SM affect the relationship that you have with your team?
5. What does the relationship that you have with your team looks when you compare it before and after you start using their SM platforms?

Appendix F
Discussion Guide – Phase 2

Discussion Group –Discussion Guide

Group # ____

1. How do you see the benefit of social media in building long-term relationship with your team?
2. What preferences, desires, and wants have been met after the emergence of social media that could have been difficult to achieve prior to your team's adoption of the platforms such as Twitter and Facebook?
3. How much does your team engage in dialogue (e.g., involve in conversation with fans) on the team's official social media platform (i.e., Facebook and Twitter)?
4. Does your team take comments/views/ideas from fans (listen to fans)?

   If it does take comments, does it address the needs and desires of fans? Or does it explain and clarify the organisations position if it does not?

   How regularly does your team listen to fans?
5. Can you tell me in your own words at least five benefits that you have gained, as a fan, in using your team's Twitter and Facebook platforms to build a long-term relationship? (e.g., enhanced experience, psychological attachment, relational attitude, passion, camaraderie)

   Can you elaborate each of your term/phrase please?
6. How do you assess the way your team's Facebook and Twitter pages have been used so far? In other words, the platforms have been used for the purpose of transmitting messages (e.g., news update, ticket sales, etc.) or to engage in dialogue with fans (e.g., to address concerns, to receive comments)?

Appendix G

Locating Study 1, study 2 and study 3