

# Tag Me, Tweet Me if You Want to Reach Me: An Investigation Into How Sports Fans Use Social Media

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As social media continue to redefine communication between sports organizations and fans, increased scholarly attention is needed to understand why sports fans use various platforms to engage with their favorite teams. Based on research from Hanna, Rohm, and Crittenden suggesting that companies should view social-media platforms as pieces of an integrated network rather than focusing exclusively on 1 platform, this study investigated the various social-media platforms sports fans use and their motivation for doing so. Through a survey of college-age sports fans, the research found that there is no significant relationship between level of team identification and intensity of social-media use, but team identification and gender can predict the use of certain social-media platforms for sports fans. In addition, a clear pattern for social-media use by sports fans emerged, culminating in the development of the Social-Media Ecosystem for Sports Fans.

**Keywords:** team identification, uses and gratifications, fandom, college students

A challenge facing the sports industry is how organizations can strategically manage their social-media presence to gain a greater understanding of new technologies and their roles in relationship marketing (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Hanna, Rohm, and Crittenden (2011) suggest that companies should view social-media platforms as pieces of an integrated network rather than focusing on one alone. As social media continue to redefine communication between organizations and the public, increased scholarly attention is needed to study the relationship between sports fans and teams as facilitated through these various online platforms.

Clavio and Walsh (2013) attempted to understand why college sports fans engage in sport-focused social-media use through a survey of students at a large Division I university that was a member of the NCAA's Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS), the highest level of competition for college football. They found that fans were primarily using traditional media and/or Web 1.0 technologies for information purposes, with the highest level of social-media use emerging while watching embedded or live video. That research was the first attempt to understand

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why college sports fans engage in sport-focused social-media use, and this study attempts to follow the avenues of future research suggested, advocating for further inquiry into social-media use by college-student sport fans. This paper seeks to analyze multiple social-media platforms and reasons that fans elect to use these various social-media outlets to gather information by building on that research and other related studies that applied uses-and-gratifications theory (Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012; Hur, Ko, & Valacich, 2007; Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012).

In addition, researchers have studied team identification and the attachment sports fan feel toward their favorite teams for decades. As social media have become prominent, research has shown that Web sites and social media have become popular outlets for fans to display their team identification (Phua, 2008). Smith and Smith (2012) suggest that team identification provides a link for fans to connect with specific sport teams. Therefore, this research also seeks to examine the relationship between team identification and social-media use among sports fans.

## Literature Review

### Social Media and Sport

Sport communication has attracted much scholarly attention over the past decade, with social-media research making a significant contribution to the field (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Nadeau, 2014). New communication technologies provide fans with unprecedented access to athletes, making it so they no longer have to rely on information from television, print media, and sports talk radio (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). In regard to technology use and sports-fan activity, Gibbs, O'Reilly, and Brunette (2014) found that 79% of respondents checked Twitter several times per day, with respondents also reporting use of additional social-media sites including Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn. Professional sports teams and athletes use social media to connect with fans through a variety of platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat.

The majority of research on social media and sport has approached the topic with a narrow focus, centering the research on one platform. Despite this single-platform focus, Hanna et al. (2011) encouraged companies to view social-media platforms in terms of how they can work with one another, rather than as individual platforms or silos operating independently of one another, and advocated for a social-media ecosystem focusing on consumer experience.

In addition, much research on social media and sport focuses on how athletes are using social-media platforms, marketing efforts, and engagement, among other areas. Academics have investigated why athletes use Twitter (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010), fan–athlete interaction (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010), relationship marketing (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Reid, 2013; Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2012; Williams & Chinn, 2010), and the general effects of Twitter on sports journalism and communication (Schultz & Sheffer, 2010; Sheffer & Schultz, 2010), among other topics. Little research has been completed from the fan perspective, which is an important focus considering that fans (and the general public) are the ones being targeted through a team's information dissemination.

Based on this literature, the current study sought to examine how fans use various social-media sites to gain insight into how these platforms may function in a social-media ecosystem rather than working independently.

## Theoretical Framework

**Uses-and-Gratifications Theory.** Uses-and-gratifications theory developed in the 1940s as a result of interest in audience engagement with various forms of media behavior (Wimmer & Dominick, 1983). The theory gained prominence in the late 1950s and early 1960s and reflected a desire to better understand audience involvement in mass communication (Blumler, 1979). Broadly, uses-and-gratifications theory assumes that people have inherent needs that the media can satisfy (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Uses-and-gratifications research is concerned with the social and psychological origins of needs, which generate expectations from the mass media or other sources, which lead to differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in need gratifications and other consequences, perhaps most unintended (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974, p. 20).

Many view uses-and-gratifications theory as a guide to outlining motivations for how audiences obtain information from media outlets (Lariscy, Tinkham, & Sweetser, 2011). The theory was originally used to study traditional media including radio and television. Wimmer and Dominick (1983) referenced the theory as a method for research on newspaper readership, specifically the motives that drive people to read the newspaper and the resulting personal and psychological rewards. Recently, researchers began studying the theory in the context of the Internet (Luo, 2002). Communication scholars suggest that while users may seek new media for the same reasons they sought or continue to seek traditional media, it is possible that the Internet and new communication technologies have fostered the development of new gratifications (Sundar & Limperos, 2013).

**Uses-and-Gratifications Sport Research.** As uses-and-gratifications research has been applied to study the relationships between audiences and digital media and new communication platforms, the theory has also been applied in a sport context, albeit in a limited number of studies. Hong and Raney (2007) determined that the uses and gratifications associated with viewership of mediated sports could be transferred to the online context of sport. They found that the “enjoyment and emotional satisfaction that comes from cheering on a favored team as it follows an unpredictable, though hoped for, path to victory” (p. 6) is the leading motivational factor for engaging with sports teams. In addition, they cited fan aspirations to be considered “walking encyclopedias of sports knowledge and trivia” (Hong & Raney, 2007, p. 6); desires for cognitive stimulation to learn about the sport, team, and players; and the informative and entertainment purposes of watching sports as reasons why sports fans visit online sports platforms. Clavio and Kian (2010) argue for more research in this area due to the prominence of sports stars and organizations on social media. With these motivations in mind, this research sought to uncover specific motivations sports fans have for using various social-media platforms.

Using a single-platform focus, Gibbs et al. (2014) investigated how sports teams use Twitter to gratify fans; the demographic, usage, and technology-use characteristics of Twitter followers; the gratifications sought and obtained by

Twitter followers; and whether Twitter users were satisfied. They found that the most desired gratifications sought include hearing about players and roster moves as they happen, learning information faster than other people, reading tweets if unable to watch the game, and learning about upcoming games. Also focusing on Twitter, Blaszka et al. (2012) applied uses-and-gratifications theory to examine how the hashtag #WorldSeries was used during the 2012 World Series, finding fanship and interactivity as two driving factors for the use of the hashtag, results that were consistent with previous research (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hambrick et al., 2010).

A particular focus is placed on gratifications sought by sports fans on social media, based on Seo and Green's (2008) Motivation Scale for Sport Online Consumption (MSSOC). This scale suggests the following categories of gratifications sought: information, entertainment, interpersonal communication, escape, pass time, fanship, team support, fan expression, economic, and technical knowledge. Additional uses-and-gratifications research conducted in the context of sport includes examination of the uses and gratifications of a retired female athlete's Twitter followers (Clavio & Kian, 2010) and a proposed model of online sport consumption when using the Internet for sport information and shopping (Hur et al., 2007). This research seeks to expand on this body of literature to investigate the various social-media platforms sports fans use to get information about their favorite teams and their motivations for doing so.

**Research Question 1 (RQ1):** What social-media platforms do sports fans use to follow their favorite team?

**RQ2:** What motivations drive sports fans' use of social media to follow their favorite team?

**Team Identification and Social-Identity Theory.** Social-identity theory has been applied to study the psychology of sport fans, particularly sport fans' identification with teams. The theory is concerned with in-group and out-group behaviors, with the basic assumption that social groups can be led to differentiate themselves from one another because of a desire to evaluate one's own group positively through comparisons of these groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Smith and Smith (2012) suggest that social-identity theory assumes that individuals use categories to help make sense of the social world and their place in it and that sport fans often exhibit behaviors motivated by in-group and out-group bias. Through team identification, fans psychologically become part of the team they support, becoming part of the in-group. This identification creates an "us versus them" environment and provides fans with feelings of solidarity and belongingness (Phua, 2010). Sports fans across the world often illustrate this dichotomy by favoring other fans of the team they support while marginalizing fans of the opposition (Wann & Grieve, 2005).

Phua (2010) argues that it is important to understand how media use influences sport fans' identification with teams and players, their attitudes, and their behaviors due to the popularity of mediated sports spectatorship in the United States. Team identification is displayed in a myriad of ways including public displays of fandom on fan forums, blogs, Web sites, and message boards (End, 2001); purchasing team merchandise and wearing team apparel (Madrigal, 2000; Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000); and following games throughout a season (Phua, 2010, 2012). Phua (2008)

reveals that the use of Web sites and social media to display team identification has skyrocketed. Team identification provides a link for fans to connect with specific sport teams despite the fact that they are not members of the team or directly connected to competitions (Smith & Smith, 2012). Often fans see their favorite team as extensions of themselves (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001).

Fans express various levels of team identification and fandom. Wann and Branscombe (1993) found that fans with high identification were more involved and invested in the team than those with moderate or low identification. In addition, Smith and Smith (2012) suggest that fans with high levels of team identification are more likely to display group-based self-esteem than are fans with low levels of team identification. In studying the relationship between fans' use of social-networking sites and social-capital formation, Phua (2012) found that a sport fan's intensity of social-media use interacted with levels of fan identification, collective self-esteem, and satisfaction with life. Sports fans use media to achieve and maintain positive social identity with a team (Phua, 2010). Based on this literature, this study attempted to determine if there is a relationship between a fan's level of team identification and intensity of social-media use, as measured by the number of platforms used.

**RQ3:** What factors influence motivations for using social media to follow a team?

## Methodology

### Research Setting

This study examined how sports fans use social media to gather information about their favorite teams. Hanna et al. (2011) suggest that instead of focusing on one specific social media platform, companies should view these platforms as pieces of an integrated network. In addition, scholars have argued that sport communication is a ripe area for further scholarly attention due at least in part to the significant contribution that social-media research is making in the field (Abeza et al., 2014). Following the lead of Hanna et al. (2011) and with the goal of providing insight about a social-media ecosystem in professional sports, this study did not restrict its focus to one specific social-media site. In addition, we elected to examine sports fans in general, rather than specifically focusing on fans of one sport, league, or team, to allow for greater generalizability across sport leagues.

### Data Collection

To answer the proposed research questions, this study featured an online survey created using Qualtrics survey software. The survey included four sections: questions regarding social-media use, questions measuring online consumption of sports content via social-media sites, questions measuring team identification, and demographic questions. Data were collected by distributing this survey to members of a research-participation database at a public research university in the mid-Atlantic United States.

## Sample

Due to the nature of this research, sports fans were recruited to participate in this survey. The following statement served as a mechanism to restrict the study to this target population: "Because of the nature of this project and its main research focus of how sports fans use social media, it is preferred if you are currently following at least one sports team or have done so in the past."

A total of 472 participants completed this survey. From that total, 2 were excluded because they did not provide responses beyond indicating that they wished to proceed with the survey ( $N = 470$ ). Participants were students from various majors, but all were enrolled in a communication class that required research participation for course credit. Participants were 33.6% male ( $n = 158$ ) and 65.7% female ( $n = 309$ ), with 0.2% ( $n = 1$ ) identifying as other. The mean age of the participants was 19.85 years, with 3.4% being college freshmen ( $n = 16$ ), 49.6% sophomores ( $n = 233$ ), 27.2% juniors ( $n = 128$ ), and 19.4% seniors ( $n = 91$ ).

When providing information regarding sports fandom, 82.1% of participants ( $n = 386$ ) identified themselves as sports fans. Furthermore, 80.6% ( $n = 379$ ) of participants indicated that football was one of their favorite sports, followed by basketball, with 42.6% ( $n = 200$ ) of participants. Just above 33% (33.4%;  $n = 157$ ) of participants indicated that baseball was one of their favorite sports, while 27.9% ( $n = 131$ ) did so for soccer, 19.4% ( $n = 91$ ) for hockey, 8.3% ( $n = 39$ ) for swimming, 6.8% ( $n = 32$ ) for both golf and tennis, and 3.2% ( $n = 15$ ) for wrestling. A little over 11% (11.3%) of participants ( $n = 53$ ) indicated they considered another sport to be one of their favorites, with responses including gymnastics, lacrosse, track, field hockey, NASCAR, softball, water polo, cheerleading, cycling, and equestrian sports.

In addition to providing information regarding their favorite sports, participants also indicated which professional sports leagues they followed. Almost three fourths (73.2%) of participants ( $n = 344$ ) followed the National Football League (NFL), 35.1% ( $n = 165$ ) followed Major League Baseball (MLB), and 34.7% ( $n = 163$ ) followed the National Basketball Association (NBA). In addition, 21.1% ( $n = 99$ ) followed the National Hockey League (NHL) and 7.0% ( $n = 33$ ) followed Major League Soccer (MLS). Another 14.5% of participants ( $n = 68$ ) reported following another professional sports league including the Professional Golfers' Association (PGA) and various international soccer leagues.

Participants also reported which social-media platforms they used, with 97.7% ( $n = 459$ ) using Facebook, 93.0% ( $n = 437$ ) Snapchat, 87.0% ( $n = 409$ ) Instagram, 73.4% ( $n = 345$ ) Twitter, 58.3% ( $n = 274$ ) Pinterest, 22.1% ( $n = 104$ ) Tumblr, and 20.2% ( $n = 95$ ) other. Other social-media platforms used included Reddit, Vine, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Yik Yak.

## Measures

**Social-Media Use.** Social-media use was measured through a series of questions that determined the various social-media sites used by the participants. Participants were provided with a series of yes-or-no questions asking if they had accounts on the following social-media sites: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, or Pinterest. They were also given the opportunity to list any

other social-media sites on which they had accounts. Based on responses to each of these questions, participants were asked to respond to a series of questions adapted from the MSSOC (Seo & Green, 2008) for each platform for which they indicated having an account.

**MSSOC.** Seo and Green's (2008) MSSOC was adapted for this study. This scale measured participant motivations for following sports online—information, entertainment, interpersonal communication, escape, pass time, fanship, team support, fan expression, economic, and technical knowledge. These items were measured using a 10-item 5-point scale ranging from *not at all likely* to *very likely*. Scale reliability was calculated for each social-media platform under investigation. All scales were found to be reliable with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .93 to .99.

**Team Identification.** Wann and Branscombe's (1993) Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) was used to solicit information regarding participants' levels of team identification. These items were measured using a 5-point scale with bipolar responses provided with Wann and Branscombe's original questions. In developing this scale, one of the first for measurement of team identification, Wann and Branscombe constructed a 7-item scale that they successfully tested for reliability and validity through two studies. They concluded that the scale appeared accurate in determining allegiances fans hold to a team and would be an appropriate construct for future studies of sport fans. Phua (2012) applied the SSIS to assess the psychological connection fans have toward football teams. In addition, Wann and Grieve (2005) applied the scale in an evaluation of in-group and out-group spectator behavior at sport events. Both of these studies, among others, indicate that the SSIS is the leading scale for the measurement of team identification in research. For the current study, team identification was measured with a 7-item Likert scale. This scale was found to be reliable ( $\alpha = .917$ ).

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 22. Frequencies and percentages were reported for RQ1, and means and standard deviations for RQ1 and RQ2. Motivations for using social media for each platform were collapsed to form a social-media-use-for-sports variable. Regression analysis and Pearson correlation were used to answer RQ3.

## Results

RQ1 investigated the various social-media platforms used by sports fans. Participants indicated having an account on the following platforms: Facebook ( $n = 459$ , 97.7%), Snapchat ( $n = 437$ , 93%), Instagram ( $n = 409$ , 87%), Twitter ( $n = 345$ , 73.4%), Pinterest ( $n = 274$ , 58.3%), and Tumblr ( $n = 104$ , 22.1%). Twenty percent of the sample indicated they used a social-media platform not listed, including LinkedIn, Vine, Reddit, Yik Yak, and YouTube. Analysis of each social-media platform revealed that respondents in the sample tended to use Facebook more for sports ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ), followed by Instagram ( $M = 2.19$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ) and Twitter ( $M = 2.13$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ).

RQ2 examined the motivations for using social media to follow sports. Motivations under investigation include information, entertainment, interpersonal communication, escape, pass time, fanship, team support, fan expression, economic, and technical knowledge. Table 1 provides the mean and standard deviation for each motivation and platform.

Among Facebook users, respondents were more likely to use Facebook for information about sports ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ), fanship ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ), team support ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ), and entertainment ( $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ). Among the motivations, fan expression ( $M = 1.91$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ), interpersonal communication ( $M = 1.86$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ), and technical knowledge ( $M = 1.86$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) were not influential motivations for using Facebook.

Similarly, respondents indicated using Twitter for information ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = 2.00$ ), entertainment ( $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ), fanship ( $M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = 1.91$ ), and team support ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ). However, it should be noted that these scores are slightly lower than those for Facebook. Interpersonal communication with other fans ( $M = 1.78$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ) and technical knowledge about the game ( $M = 1.86$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) were not likely to lead to Twitter use.

Motivations for using the photo-sharing site Instagram included entertainment ( $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ), fanship ( $M = 2.63$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ), and pass time ( $M = 2.59$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ). Technical knowledge ( $M = 1.46$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) and fan expression ( $M = 1.53$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) were not driving factors for using Instagram.

Respondents indicated that they would use Snapchat to follow sports for entertainment ( $M = 2.17$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ), pass time ( $M = 2.13$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ), escape ( $M = 1.99$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ), and fanship ( $M = 1.99$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ). Fan expression ( $M = 1.33$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ), technical knowledge ( $M = 1.33$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ), and economics ( $M = 1.37$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ) were not driving influences for using Snapchat for sports.

Results indicated that respondents were not likely to use Tumblr or Pinterest for sports. Mean scores for each motivation were 1 or lower (see Table 1).

RQ3 investigated the role of outside factors, specifically team identification and gender, in use of social-media platforms for sports. Team identification was found to be a significant predictor for using Facebook,  $F(1, 467) = 133.173$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .22$ ; Twitter,  $F(1, 467) = 60.706$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .115$ ; Instagram,  $F(1, 467) = 47.434$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .092$ ; and Snapchat,  $F(1, 467) = 21.229$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .043$ . Team identification was not a significant predictor of using Tumblr or Pinterest to follow sports. Furthermore, a Pearson correlation revealed that team identification had a positive, significant correlation with Facebook ( $r = .471$ ,  $n = 467$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Twitter ( $r = .340$ ,  $n = 467$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Instagram ( $r = .304$ ,  $n = 467$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and Snapchat ( $r = .209$ ,  $n = 467$ ,  $p < .001$ ). See Table 2 for results of the Pearson correlation.

A second linear regression evaluated the role of gender in using social media for sports. Results indicated that gender was a significant predictor of use of Instagram,  $F(1, 467) = 133.173$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .22$ ; Tumblr,  $F(1, 467) = 133.173$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .22$ ; and Pinterest,  $F(1, 467) = 133.173$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .22$ . Gender was not a significant predictor of the use of Facebook, Twitter, or Snapchat. Observed differences in the means between the two groups revealed that women tended to have higher scores related to using Instagram (women  $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ; men  $M = 1.87$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ), Tumblr (women  $M = .43$ ,  $SD = .823$ ; men  $M = .12$ ,  $SD = .444$ ), and Pinterest (women  $M = 1.25$ ,  $SD = .15$ ; men  $M = .15$ ,  $SD = .515$ ) than the male participants. See Table 3 for regression-analysis results.

**Table 1 Motivations by Platform**

	Facebook		Twitter		Instagram		Snapchat		Tumblr		Pinterest	
	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Information	2.91	1.45	2.61	2.00	2.49	1.69	1.84	1.34	0.33	0.79	0.88	1.08
Entertainment	2.84	1.41	2.52	1.94	2.80	1.77	2.17	1.58	0.35	0.85	1.04	1.30
Interpersonal communication	1.86	1.10	1.78	1.61	1.58	1.25	1.44	1.04	0.30	0.69	0.70	0.76
Escape	2.38	1.33	2.09	1.77	2.46	1.66	1.99	1.48	0.35	0.83	1.01	1.26
Pass time	2.65	1.38	2.31	1.87	2.59	1.71	2.13	1.54	0.36	0.86	1.07	1.35
Fanship	2.89	1.40	2.42	1.91	2.63	1.68	1.99	1.46	0.36	0.86	0.96	1.19
Team support	2.85	1.41	2.41	1.90	2.48	1.66	1.82	1.33	0.32	0.75	0.90	1.09
Fan expression	1.91	1.15	1.81	1.66	1.53	1.21	1.33	0.93	0.31	0.74	0.70	0.76
Economic	2.57	1.37	1.87	1.66	1.84	1.41	1.37	0.99	0.31	0.74	0.89	1.10
Technical knowledge	1.86	1.13	1.54	1.46	1.46	1.16	1.33	0.96	0.28	0.65	0.72	0.80
Overall	2.48	1.02	2.13	1.59	2.19	1.31	1.74	1.07	0.32	0.73	0.87	0.95

**Table 2 Correlations: Team Identification and Social-Media Use**

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Team ID						
2 Facebook	.471**					
3 Twitter	.340**	.330**				
4 Instagram	.304**	.399**	.431**			
5 Snapchat	.209**	.338**	.152**	.365**		
6 Tumblr	-0.023	0.035	.128**	0.08	.142**	
7 Pinterest	-0.017	.129**	.144**	.305**	.192**	.282**

\*\*Significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

**Table 3 Predicting Social-Media Use**

	B	SE B	$\beta$	t	p
Facebook					
team identification	0.488	0.042	0.471	11.54	<.001
gender	-0.019	0.1	-0.009	-0.193	.847
Twitter					
team identification	0.549	0.07	0.34	7.791	<.001
gender	-0.045	0.155	-0.013	-0.287	.774
Instagram					
team identification	0.402	0.058	0.304	6.887	<.001
gender	0.449	0.125	0.164	3.594	<.001
Snapchat					
team identification	0.225	0.049	0.209	4.608	<.001
gender	0.104	0.104	0.046	1.003	.316
Tumblr					
team identification	-0.017	0.035	-0.023	-0.487	.627
gender	0.302	0.07	0.197	4.328	<.001
Pinterest					
team identification	-0.016	0.045	-0.017	-0.365	.716
gender	1.073	0.078	0.543	13.825	<.001

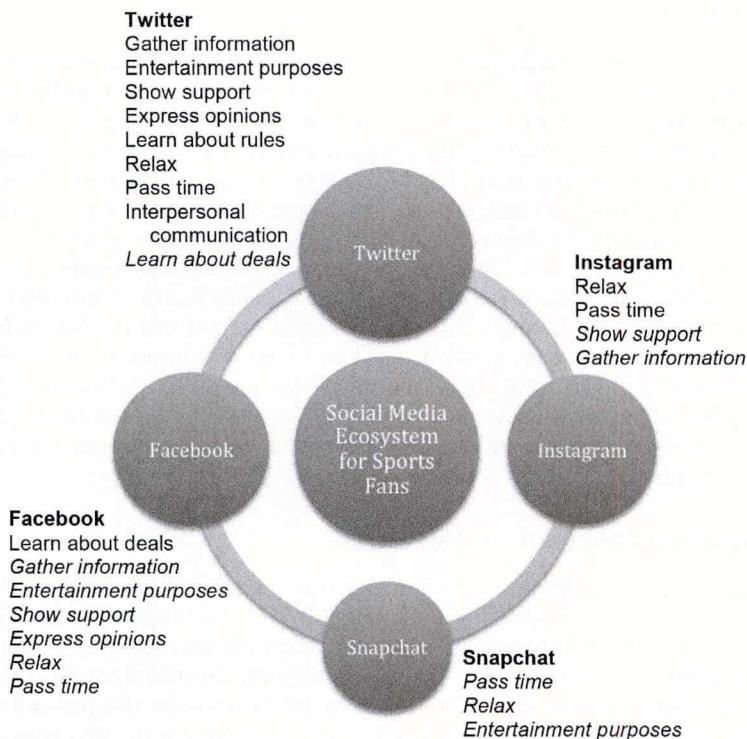
## Discussion

This research examined the various social-media platforms sports fans use, as well as their motivations for using each of these platforms. In an effort to investigate a social-media ecosystem that sports teams and organizations could use to best reach fans, this analysis focused on six social-media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, and Pinterest. Every participant reported having at least one social-media account, with the average being accounts on more than four platforms. These results indicate a socially active demographic, consistent with previous research regarding sport and social media (Clavio & Walsh, 2013; Gibbs et al., 2014). Those studies, along with the results from this research, support the idea that sports fans represent a strong target population to reach via social media.

The results of this study found that Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter were the four most popular platforms used by sports fans, in that order; Pinterest and Tumblr were not widely used for sports. Furthermore, in examining the motivations sports fans have for using various social-media platforms, these four platforms outranked Tumblr, Pinterest, and other social-media platforms as the four most popular destinations for six of the nine motivations examined. Across nearly all measures, Facebook seemed to be the most used for sports according to the motivations examined. For all nine motivations, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were the most popular platforms to use to satisfy the specific gratification sought, although the order of preference for these platforms did vary by motivation. Respondents used Facebook and Twitter for more informational purposes, while they tended to use Instagram and Snapchat for more affective motivations (i.e., entertainment, pass time, escape).

The prevalence of these platforms warrants the development of a social-media ecosystem for sports fans, as the use of various social-media platforms for various reasons indicates a need for users to be targeted on more than one platform. This is consistent with Hanna et al. (2011), who suggest that companies should view social-media platforms as part of an integrated network as opposed to focusing on only one platform. Based on these results, we propose the Social Media Ecosystem for Sports Fans centered around Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat (See Figure 1). Twitter is the leading destination for fans wishing to gather information, seek entertainment, show support for a team, express opinions, and learn about rules and strategies pertaining to a sport. Instagram and Facebook are secondary destinations for fans reporting these motivations for social-media use. A social-media ecosystem should incorporate all three platforms for these motivations but focus primarily on Twitter, using Instagram and Facebook as supporting platforms.

Sports fans seeking to relax or pass time are more likely to visit Instagram and Twitter, with differences being less than 1% between platforms. A social-media ecosystem should target these platforms with appropriate material for these motivations. Previous research from Clavio and Walsh (2013) indicated that the highest level of social-media use among their sample of college sports fans was to watch videos, a task both Instagram and Twitter could certainly facilitate within the Social Media Ecosystem for Sports Fans. By knowing which platforms fans use and the reasons behind their choices, sports organizations can tailor their content to these platforms to better reach fans.



**Figure 1** — The Social Media Ecosystem for Sports Fans. Italics indicate a secondary destination for the specific motivation.

While Snapchat was not the most preferred destination for any of the nine motivations examined, it was a prominent platform that 94.0% of sports fans use and ranked above Tumblr and Pinterest for nearly every motivation. This research suggests that Snapchat is an emerging platform with immense popularity among college-age sports fans, and, thus, it should hold a place in the Social Media Ecosystem for Sports Fans, if only in a supporting capacity.

The finding that there is not a significant relationship between level of team identification and intensity of social-media use measured by number of platforms used is not surprising given the prevalence of social media in everyday life. It is unlikely that sports fans would create a new account on an existing social-media platform simply to follow sports; it is more probable that they would already have accounts and integrate sports or team pages into their social-media use. However, results did indicate that team identification could predict the use of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat to follow sports. In addition, gender can predict the use of Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest to follow sports, with women being more likely to use these platforms for sports than men are.

## Limitations

Using college students as the participants for this survey provided a broad spectrum of results for the research, as college students represent a diverse population with unique backgrounds. Furthermore, as there is no professional sports team located in the city in which the participants attended college, the students could not rely on traditional media such as local newspapers or television reports to follow their favorite teams and had to seek out alternative methods for gathering information. However, using a population of college students could be seen as a limitation of this research, as young adults and college-age students are often thought to be more socially active and engrained in a culture of social media than people of other ages.

Furthermore, the findings from this research suggest that the Social Media Ecosystem for Sports Fans could be used by sports organizations to reach fans and affect their engagement. However, this study should be replicated to determine how such an ecosystem may be used by teams rather than consumers, as the proposed ecosystem is focused on the social-media habits of only one segment of the market (the fans).

## Implications and Future Research

Overall, the findings from this study contribute important knowledge about the social-media habits of sports fans, culminating in the proposal of the Social Media Ecosystem for Sports Fans. This ecosystem has practical implications for sport organizations who can use the findings and conclusions from this research to develop social-media strategies to employ for information dissemination and engagement with sports fans. The findings and contributions of this research are invaluable for sports teams seeking to develop social-media strategies and facilitate strong communication with fans via social media. For teams wishing to develop such a strategy, the Social Media Ecosystem for Sports Fans will help them use their time and social-media resources to maximize the engagement and return they are seeking from fans on these platforms.

This study extends the research done by Clavio and Walsh (2013) by providing additional information about social-media use by college-student sports fans, particularly in the context of Web 2.0 and new-media technologies. In addition, the findings regarding how gender can predict the use of various social-media platforms to follow sports have interesting implications for sports teams looking to reach fans, suggesting that Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest might be good platforms to use when targeting a female audience.

Theoretically, this study adds to the existing body of research on both uses and gratifications of sports fans and social media, as well as research on team identification. Future research is needed to further study the relationship between team identification/sports fandom and social-media use. One potential avenue for such research could be to focus on sport-specific social-media platforms such as Fancred or team mobile apps. Another interesting approach would be to focus on the social-media use of one specific sports team to investigate how the Social Media Ecosystem for Sports Fans operates in a practical setting with an individual team focus.

In addition, this study is one of the first attempts to understand how various social-media platforms can operate simultaneously and work in conjunction with one another to create a complete social-media experience for sports fans that extends beyond the use of only one platform. Future research should continue this direction of research to further examine the proposed ecosystem, especially from a team perspective rather than a fan perspective. As various social-media platforms gain traction and others are developed, there will be an increased need for scholarly research done on these platforms to best understand why sports fans are using them and the position they hold in the overall social-media landscape. In addition, future research should examine the various content posted on different social-media sites to better understand how social-media platforms can operate simultaneously, beyond an understanding of which platforms are preferred for a certain gratification, as was the focus of this paper.

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