

# Social Media as a Relationship Marketing Tool in Professional Sport: A Netnographical Exploration

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This study, guided by the relationship marketing theoretical framework, adopted an observational netnography method to investigate professional sport teams' use of Twitter as a relationship marketing tool. Specifically, the study focused on the three core components of the theoretical framework of relationship marketing: communication, interaction, and value. The observational netnography is based on data gathered from the official Twitter account of 20 professional sport teams in the four major North American leagues over a seven-month period. 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.

**Keywords:** interaction, value, major league sport, Twitter

The magnitude and extent of the use of social media (SM) has been significant in the sport industry over the past decade (Newman, Peck, Harris, & Wilhide, 2017), and in professional sport, various entities are increasingly embracing different SM platforms. These include professional sport teams (Meng, Stavros, & Westberg, 2015), leagues (Hambrick & Kang, 2015), 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 and scope of SM consumption grows among the various entities of professional sport, SM offers a multitude of opportunities for sport organizations (Dixon, Martinez, & Martin, 2015). Today, marketers are using SM as a medium to implement a variety of marketing communication elements such

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as news updates, sales, advertising, public relations, internal communication, and relationship marketing (Newman et al., 2017). While SM is a valuable resource for realizing these marketing communication elements, it particularly appears to be an ideal tool for achieving relationship marketing (RM) goals (Hambrick & Svensson, 2015).

Relationship marketing is defined as the process of “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 the fulfillment of promises” (Grönroos, 2004, 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 ongoing basis (Williams & Chinn, 2010). To ensure successful communication and dialogue, businesses are required to employ effective communication platforms (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Among these, SM platforms are rapidly becoming an ideal tool for ongoing two-way dialogue (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015), and are providing new directions and benefits to RM. Furthermore, SM platforms are making the RM approach practical and affordable (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Reid, 2013).

Most studies have focused on the conceptual benefits of SM as an RM tool (Dixon et al., 2015; Hambrick & Kang, 2015). 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, 2015; Wang & Zhou, 2015). However, within the context of professional sport teams, the use of SM in achieving RM goals has not yet been fully understood or empirically supported (see the discussion under the section titled Social Media and Relationship Marketing in Professional Team Sports in the present study). Therefore, this study attempts to produce empirical evidence on the use of SM as an RM tool by professional sport organizations.

## Literature Review

### Relationship Marketing as a Theoretical Framework and a Management Approach

According to Raval and Grönroos (1996) and Grönroos (2000), the basic perspective of RM is based on the idea that a relationship between two parties creates additional value for customers and suppliers or service providers. That additional value exists in addition to the value of products and/or services exchanged. As Grönroos (2004) and Williams and Chinn (2010) stated, 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 products. Hence, according to Grönroos (2004), beyond the offering of the core product, it is important for providers to create added value for customers by offering additional elements that are better than those of competitors. Such an 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) also noted that RM is a process; the author elaborated on 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. (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. More specifically, “when all three processes are in place and well understood we have a good part of a theory of RM” (Grönroos, 2004, p. 103).

Therefore, for an RM strategy to succeed, 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; Williams & Chinn, 2010). Because the central aim of RM is to be a total service offering, the management of an interaction process becomes the core of RM, in the same way product exchange 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, dialogue facilitates the cocreation of value with customers and ultimately the transfer of value to the customers. As per Williams and Chinn (2010), 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 (Grönroos, 2004). As per Grönroos (2004), the three processes—communication, interaction, and value—form a theory of RM. This study, guided by the relationship marketing theoretical framework, aims to investigate professional sport teams’ use of SM as an RM tool.

## Relationship Marketing in the Sport Industry

Today, sport is a social activity that operates in a commercial environment as an industry (Chadwick, 2009). It is a part of the culture of many societies in the modern world, and is increasingly becoming an attraction point for families, neighbors, citizens, and nations (Coakley & Pike, 2014). Sport has occupied and will continue to occupy the interest of a significant portion of spectators and viewers across the globe (Stavros & Westberg, 2009). However, the increasing cost of sport consumption—such as entry fees, television viewing, and team merchandise (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2014; Stavros & Westberg, 2009)—has resulted in a decline in repeat

ticket purchases and fan attendance at major sport events (Stavros, Pope, & Winzar, 2008). Today, sport consumers are confronted with numerous choices (e.g., locations and events) on which to spend their time and money (Shank & Lyberger, 2014). Due to the increasing cost of sport consumption as well as continually expanding alternative entertainment options, among other reasons, fans are now finding it increasingly difficult to continue displaying and monetizing their loyalty to a sport team (Mullin et al., 2014). Some sport consumers believe that moneymaking, and not care for their fans, is the prime focus of a sport organization and players (Kim & Trail, 2011).

Nevertheless, fan loyalty to a sport team is far stronger than the loyalty other customers display toward any other brand (Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Buning, 2011); yet again, as Adamson, Jones, and Tapp (2006) indicate, taking fan loyalty “as a given” will lead only to failure. In addition, despite the increasing number of sport fans today (Kim & Trail, 2011), the decline in repeat ticket purchases and infrequent fan attendance at major sport events imply that loyal customers are being replaced by newer, less committed ones (Stavros et al., 2008). 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 threatens the financial security and stability of an organization. Hence, retaining an enthusiastic fan base and intensifying fan loyalty and involvement are becoming the foremost challenges for today’s sport marketers (Mullin et al., 2014; Rein, Kotler, & Shields, 2006; Stavros & Westberg, 2009). 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 a fundamental shift in sport marketing that moves from the more traditional transaction marketing to an RM approach.

In the current sport business environment, RM presents a compelling marketing approach, as opposed to the widespread practice of short-term transactions and immediate profits (Kim & Trail, 2011; Wang, Ho, & Zhang, 2012). Kim, Trail, and Ko (2011) empirically support this claim, reporting that enhanced relationship quality results in outcomes such as greater media consumption, licensed-product consumption, and positive attendance trends. Kim, Trail, Woo, and Zhang (2011) also point to the power that a strong fan base has in attracting sponsors and media, which are the main sources of revenue for most sport organizations. The authors add that any decline in a loyal fan base could threaten that sport team’s sponsorship sales, naming rights, licensing agreements, and team merchandise sales.

By maintaining and enhancing their relationship with fans, as Stavros et al. (2008) and Kim and Trail (2011) have illustrated, sport organizations can retain fans; boost repeat purchasing behavior, psychological attachment, and relational attitude; and strengthen their fan base. Bee and Kahle (2006) have suggested that to succeed in their businesses, sport companies 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 develop meaningful, beneficial relationships that are 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 for the survival of sport teams today, and it is where an RM approach would be of great importance. 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).

## 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 for marketing and communication (Hambrick & Kang, 2015; Wang & Zhou, 2015). All 122 professional sports teams in the four major North American leagues, for example, have a presence on Twitter. As SM presence grows, scholarly research on SM and its role in RM in sport from an organization perspective is advancing. Taking an organizational perspective in the professional sport context, half a dozen studies (i.e., Hambrick & Kang, 2015; Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012; Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly, 2014; Waters et al., 2011; Williams & Chinn, 2010; Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012) have highlighted the role of SM in building a two-way collaborative relationship through a dialogue between teams and their stakeholders. These studies underscore how RM requires a heightened focus on communication, interaction, and value; the studies have also demonstrated how SM can aid these efforts by creating an environment of two-way communication between organizations and consumers. Next, we present the findings of existing studies that address the use of SM in RM in sport.

Williams and Chinn (2010) produced a pioneering work that conceptually demonstrated the place of SM in an RM approach in the context of sport. Williams and Chinn (2010) extended Grönroos's (2004) RM model (i.e., communication, interaction, and value) by focusing specifically on RM and SM, and applying it to the sport industry. Linking their theoretical grounding to Williams and Chinn's work, Hambrick and Kang (2015) explored how four North American professional sport 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 way in which the National Football League (NFL) cultivated its relationships using Facebook and official websites. The authors found that Facebook usage centered on nurturing relationships and highlighting team partners and game promotions. Pronschinske et al. (2012) studied how teams in the four North American major leagues used Facebook for RM, 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 sport organizations could benefit from RM by developing ongoing interactions through this medium. Wang and Zhou (2015) explored how 30 National Basketball Association (NBA) teams used Twitter to build professional, personal, and community relationships with the public. The authors found that NBA teams tended to use SM to develop professional relationships with their public by 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 organizations and their individual

stakeholders; and community relationship as organizations' commitment to, and interaction with, the community they serve.

O'Shea and Alonso (2012) examined the role of SM alongside traditional media in professional sport teams in Australia. They surveyed organizational executives and identified challenges and opportunities associated with the role of SM in facilitating RM in sport. In terms of opportunities, organizations 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. A study by Hopkins (2013) identified how a professional sport franchise in Australia used SM platforms to improve the level of engagement with its fan base. According to the author, the club improved its level and quality of communication over a one-year period using SM. Hopkins (2013) also stated that organizations are using SM to turn their attention to their customers' interactions through the constructive use of consumer feedback, rather than by focusing solely on transactions.

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 organization and a large number of worldwide sport 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 the organizations build with their fans globally (Abeza et al., 2013). As indicated above, SM is providing new directions, making relational exchanges affordable and effective to marketers (Williams & Chinn, 2010).

Therefore, to address the purpose of the study (i.e., producing empirical evidence that shows how professional sport organizations use SM as an RM tool), three specific research questions were developed: (i) How do professional sport teams use social media for relational marketing purpose? (ii) What are the values, if any, professional sport teams create on social media as a relational marketing tool? (iii) What discernible differences and shared features exist in professional sport teams' use of SM as an RM tool? In addressing the three research questions, this study empirically investigates the use of SM as an RM vehicle in a professional sport setting, and extends previous SM studies in the context of professional sport. The findings have the potential to help marketers develop informed marketing strategies in the use of SM as an RM tool.

## Method

To accomplish the study's purpose of producing empirical evidence that shows how professional sport organizations use SM as an RM tool, this work investigated how teams from the four major North American professional sport leagues (i.e., NBA, NFL, Major League Baseball [MLB], and the National Hockey League [NHL]) 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). 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, 2009), 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. As Kozinets (1998) underscored, “a good netnography 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 in terms of the extent of research participation in an online community, which vary from a distanced participation to one that is highly involved. The levels of participation are observational (no participation and unobtrusive), participant-observational, and autonetnographic (active participation). For the current study, observational netnography was deemed the most appropriate, as the researchers’ participation was not required to address the research questions. 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, (i) 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, (ii) 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 researchers’ immersion into the “culture” and extensive and deep exposure to the setting. The approach helped the researchers gain insight into the various ways that professional teams attempt to communicate and cocreate added value through interaction with their fans.

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

## Entrée

To investigate how professional sport organizations 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, three conditions informed the data collection process. These include (i) the selection of an 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 are gathered.

**Selection of a Social Media Platform.** Twitter has been selected as a sample SM platform from which data can be gathered to help find answers for the study’s three research questions. The selection of this platform is believed to help build on the existing literature, which has predominantly centered on Twitter. Twitter is a widely embraced (Hull & Lewis, 2014; Williams, Chinn, & Suleiman, 2014) and rapidly

growing platform that has become a permanent fixture within the sport industry. All 122 professional sport teams in the Big 4 are using Twitter. Of note is Meng et al.'s (2015) suggestion, after examining the Twitter accounts and Facebook pages of 30 NBA teams, that NBA teams used Facebook "as a vehicle to push certain messages," while Twitter was 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 among 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 that organized teams from highest to lowest number of followers by league (as of February 29th, 2016). With an intention of exploring any observable relationship patterns and/or differences between the number of followers (highest vs. lowest number of followers) and the amount of interaction carried on the teams' Twitter accounts, the three teams with the most Twitter followers and the two teams with the least Twitter followers for each league were selected from the list. This resulted in a total of 20 teams' verified Twitter accounts (five from each league), and the team 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 1 for the list of the identified teams. While the teams were specifically selected based on the number of their followers, the sample resulted in teams with a wide range of characteristics such as market size, locations, performance, and history.

**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 off-season for each of the four leagues and (ii) to capture an overlapping time period for all the four leagues in the 2015–2016 season, it was found that August 2015 to February 2016 presented the best balance. Based on this specification, data were collected retrospectively from February 29, 2016, to August 1, 2015. Any earlier or later time period did not offer a balance between regular and off-season calendars of the four leagues, while these seven months allowed us to capture at least three months of regular season and two 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 constrain the retrospective retrieval of Twitter data.

## Data Collection

Informed by the abovementioned 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. Data gathering occurred between a week and two months after the 29th of February to ensure the inclusion of responses to the content communicated in the last days of February. 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 profile pages were live-computer-screen video-recorded by one of the researchers, as he navigated and scrolled through tweets posted over the seven-month period. The researcher selected the "Tweets and replies" tab of



Table 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

each profile, and live-computer-screen recording allowed the recording of every engagement with the Twitter interface. In other words, as one navigates through a Twitter page, watches videos, and views Graphics Interchange Format (GIFs), pictures, and conversations (expanding replies made to fans and retweets [RTs] of fans' tweets to—or mentions of—the organization to read them), the software captures these activities and video-records them. A total of 63 hr of video-recorded data were gathered, averaging 3 hr per team, with a data size of 32.5 GB.

With the purpose of the study at hand, where Twitter interaction/conversation is at the core of the study's interest, it is worth noting that other used data-capturing software programs that are commonly reported in the literature (e.g., NCapture) do not allow the mining/retrieval of fans' replies. Other data-capturing 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. Indeed, netnography allowed the researchers to answer the research questions more appropriately than any other competing methods could permit. More specifically, the data immersion component allowed researchers to gain an understanding of the latent content, as the immersion particularly facilitated the deciphering of a culture's particularity (e.g., nature of inside jokes that transpire in communications and interactions, accompanied by GIFs, pictures, emojis, etc.; perception of tone; etc.) better than competing content study methods.

Upon the completion of the data gathering, the researchers went through the recorded files to initially familiarize themselves with it and then to run a preliminary assessment of the use of Twitter for communication, interaction, and value creation purposes. 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 (Grönroos, 2004).

## Data Analysis

Two of the authors, both of whom have published on the same topic, first conducted a pilot study on the dataset of the teams independently, using the third most followed teams in each league (four in total). The pilot analysis was carried out through a constant comparison by reading and visualizing content such as pictures, videos, web links, and text (tweets, RTs, hashtags, mentions, and replies/conversations), which were then organized using a spreadsheet and hand-written notes. It is worth mentioning here that fans' replies/comments were included in the analysis when a conversation was struck between the organization's account and a fan (i.e., when the organization replied to a fan's original tweet or to a comment made about an organization's tweet). Upon the completion of the pilot study and following several discussions and clarifications, 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 researchers conducted the analysis by going through the rest of the data of the 16 teams and running a constant team-to-team comparison upon the completion of each team’s dataset. Through the process, the researchers 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, as a form of anthropological approach, the researchers also had close, extensive, and prolonged exposure to the setting by immersing themselves into the data. The immersion allowed the authors to gain great insight into the way the teams communicate, interact, and create values. During this process, the researchers recorded their observations, used reflective “field notes,” and run team-to-team constant comparative analysis. The authors followed the processes of noting, abstracting and comparing, checking and refining, and generalizing, which correspond to Kozinets’s (1998; 2006) recommendation. Some of the values of RM emerged through the researchers’ immersion into the seven months’ worth of Twitter data recordings. The immersion also facilitated a deeper understanding of the culture of using Twitter as an RM medium; this has helped produce “thick descriptions” of the teams’ use of Twitter and the identification of informative practices.

**Ethical Considerations.** Ethics review has not been required for this study due to the publicly available nature of Twitter data and to the type of netnography adopted in the study—namely, by using observational netnography, the researchers’ participation in the conversations was not required to address the research questions.

## Findings

### Professional Sport Teams’ Use of SM for an RM Purpose

The examination of professional sport teams’ SM use for an RM purpose (RQ#1) is grounded on, 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 (RQ#2) 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 (Grönroos, 2004). The use of Twitter for communication purpose has been found on all the teams’ Twitter accounts. The teams used Twitter to disseminate a range of information from live game updates 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—namely, updating, publicizing, selling, promoting, appreciating, spreading, and servicing. Each of these observed purposes of communication are described briefly in the next paragraph, and examples are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 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: <a href="http://on.nba.com/1T3KY9u">on.nba.com/1T3KY9u</a> (Feb. 5th, 2016) @Marlins: Rough start. Braves take a 4–0 lead in the top of the first. @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. <a href="http://bit.ly/1nPXAev">bit.ly/1nPXAev</a> (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: <a href="http://jagrs.com/BoldRushShop111515">http://jagrs.com/BoldRushShop111515</a> (Nov. 15th, 2015)

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Communication type	Examples of tweet
Promoting	<p>@Yankees: Time to tweet #NYYSunrunSaves &amp; enter to win a signed ball from a former #Yankees reliever! <a href="https://t.me/atmlb.com/IJ92MG23">@Sunrun</a> (Sep. 14th, 2015)</p> <p>@NHLBlackhawks: It's our final day of #HawksHolidays giveaways! Win a trip to the #StadiumSeries in Minny: <a href="https://t.me/csnchicago.com/hawksholidays">csnchicago.com/hawksholidays</a> (Dec. 17th, 2015)</p>
Appreciating	<p>@dallascowboys: Come meet @RandyGregory_4 at @belk in the Dallas Galleria until 5pm! #Cowboys4komen (Oct. 5th, 2015)</p> <p>@Patriots: Thanks for all the love #PatriotsNation!</p> <p>A round-up of reactions from famous fans: <a href="https://t.me/buff.ly/1S74phP">buff.ly/1S74phP</a> (Jan. 25th, 2016)</p>
Spreading	<p>@Lakers: RT @TSN_Sports: @StephenCurry30 gets @KobeBryant to sign his jersey after the game. #NBAAIStarTO (Feb. 14th, 2016)</p>
Servicing	<p>@BlueJays: RT @MStroo06: Never had this much fun playing the game I love. (Sep. 27th, 2015)</p> <p>@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, 2015)</p> <p>@PelicansNBA: Who wants to cook over the holidays? Enjoy some @Dominos victory pizza!</p> <p>50% OFF large pies online with the code PELICAN tomorrow. (Dec. 26th, 2015)</p>

*Updating* refers to keeping users informed about live and pre- and postgame news, players/coaches statements, injuries, team/player stats, trades, and behind-the-scenes occurrences. *Publicizing* represents the public relations or image-building activities such as charity and community support, visit to community (e.g., hospitals and schools), fund-raising, kids' activities, etc. *Selling* refers to attempts to persuade users to purchase merchandise from the teams' stores and tickets to games, or buy signed jersey, balls, and other memorabilia at auctions. *Promoting* refers to activities meant to stimulate or boost sales through contest, sweepstakes, giveaways, lottery, or raffles. *Appreciating* represents recognizing fans' support through activities such as fan meetings, birthday and holiday wishes, fans-players meet-and-greets, or show-your-fanship campaigns. *Spreading* denotes expanding and diffusing the reach of information by retweeting players' and celebrity fans' tweets, retweeting team reporters' and staff's (e.g., PR, management, mascot, dancers/cheerleaders) tweets, and directing fans to teams' websites and other SM platforms. *Servicing*, the seventh observed purpose of communication, signifies providing sponsors an added platform to publicize their association through appreciation of their support, and promoting their services/products and gestures.

**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 (six) emerged during the data immersion. The major themes include casual exchange, customer service, rally message, fan spotlight, players' question and answer period (Q&A), and content delivery. Table 3 presents examples of each interaction episode.

In *casual exchanges*, conversations had the particularity of being largely unrelated to the core product (the game) and centered on 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 inquiries 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 confusion 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, and #TakeFlight-Pelicans.

In *fan spotlight*, conversations were often initiated by fans and revolved around game experience. Using pictures during live games or after games, for example,



Table 3 Various Episodes of Interaction Between Fans and the Team Through Twitter

Episodes interacted topic	Examples of related dialogue
Casual exchange	<p>@TauniaHottman tweeted: Omg @Broncos when I saw you were following me back, I might have just peed a little. #loveyoumore.</p> <p>@Broncos replied: @TauniaHottman Hmmm . . . Thanks?</p> <p>@TauniaHottman replied: @Broncos well, I initially stood up at my desk and screamed like I was on fire. Then. . . the other.</p> <p>@LikeACouplet: @CanadiensMTL it's my birthday today!! #gohabsgo</p> <p>@CanadiensMTL replied: @LikeACouplet Happy birthday! How old are you now, 7 years old? ER</p> <p>@LikeACouplet replied: @CanadiensMTL Thanks, and I guess you could say I'm 5 now haha! I can't wait to celebrate &amp; see the habs at the game on Wed with my friend!</p>
Customer service	<p>@craignicoll16: @RedSox could you tell me If/when there would be tickets for the games v yankees in September might become available to purchase</p> <p>@RedSox replied: @craignicoll16 Yankees tickets will become available after a drawing for the opportunity to purchase. Likely within the next 2 months.</p> <p>@Broncos: .@DEN_Broncofanss wanted a #Peyton-signed football. Wish granted, thanks to @ArrowGlobal! What's your #BroncosWish?</p> <p>@alison_maclean replied: @Broncos @ArrowGlobal my #BroncosWish is a sideline pass for Sunday. Traveled from Scotland to the US for the first time for #SDvsDEN</p> <p>@Broncos replied: @alison_maclean DM us when you can! Your #BroncosWish is in the works!</p>

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Episodes interacted topic	Examples of related dialogue
Rally message	<p><b>@RamsNFL:</b> Join the Rush! Follow the steps to #ColorRush your Twitter profile avatar and win sweet #Rams prizes!</p> <p><b>@scotthoffman replied:</b> @STLouisRams Me with @daniklup... and @a_quality_guy, @dvond and @seattlerams_nfl in the background. #GoRams!!</p> <p><b>@RamsNFL:</b> @scotthoffman @daniklup @a_quality_guy @dvond @seattlerams_nfl Great pic! Great event! #ColorRush [Picture by @ scotthoffman treated with golden Rams' filter]</p> <p><b>@NHLBlackHawks:</b> Keep sharing your #Blackhawks goals on Twitter and Instagram using #WhatsYourGoal. They'll be displayed here: <a href="http://onego.al/HoRDA">http://onego.al/HoRDA</a></p> <p><b>@Erin_Catalyst11 replied:</b> @NHLBlackhawks My goal is to get @SDarling_33 jersey and maybe meet him someday. #WhatsYourGoal</p> <p><b>@NHLBlackHawks replied:</b> 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 <a href="https://t.co/nTBM5bPx4G">https://t.co/nTBM5bPx4G</a></p> <p><b>@Erin_Catalyst11 replied:</b> Holy Smokes! That's so amazing! @NHLBlackhawksTHANK YOU SO MUCH!! #DayMade <a href="https://t.co/35vFPN34Xk">https://t.co/35vFPN34Xk</a></p> <p><b>@Marlins:</b> Marcell Ozuna will be taking over @Marlins for a Twitter Q&amp;A.</p> <p>Submit your questions using hashtag #AskTheFish</p> <p><b>@lorenzo_bacchin replied:</b> @Marlins Marcell, what's your NBA team? Good luck this season! Go Fish! #AskTheFish</p> <p><b>@Marlins replied:</b> @lorenzo_bacchin #AskTheFish [short video answer]3</p> <p><b>@Redsox:</b> It's just about time for @RusneyCastillo to answer your questions! #Rusneychat #SoxWinter Weekend</p> <p>[Picture of Castillo in front of a laptop]</p> <p><b>Redsox:</b> "I have a barber in Miami. I asked him if he wants to do something new, do it with my hair." #RusneyChat</p> <p><b>@Redsox quoted @Urkiel31:</b> @RedSox @RusneyCastillo #rusneychat who cuts your hair?</p>
Players' Q&A	

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Episodes interacted topic	Examples of related dialogue
Fan spotlight	@utahjazz RT @jessicaabeere: swoop lake city with #dramabay @utahjazz #wedemgirlz [picture of two women at game]
	@utahjazz: @jessicaabeere Go Jazz
	@jamminjoe23: 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 second 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

fans reached out 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 the live stream of a practice session.

## Values Created by Professional Sport Teams on SM as an RM Tool

The study, in its second research question, inquired about the values, if any, that professional sport teams create on social media as a relational marketing tool. According to RM theory, 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). 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. 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 were created over the following three different periods: *during games*, *before and after games*, and *ongoing*. Table 4 presents the summary of the emergent values along with examples.

**During Games.** It was observed that the use of Twitter extended, and thereby enhanced, 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 a 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 is Twitter-facilitated, fans-initiated value. See Table 4 for examples.

**Before and After Games.** The values created in pre- and postgame periods were team initiated. Teams used Twitter to bring fans closer to the organization, to enable fans to be informed consumers, and to present fans with rewards. As a communication medium, Twitter allowed teams to bring fans closer through the provision of behind-the-scene stories and to give updates on the state of the team's performance before and after games. Twitter was used as a venue to reward fans. The three emergent values created before and after games were closer fans, informed spectator, and rewarding fans.

**Ongoing.** Twitter facilitated the cocreation of value between teams and their fans on an ongoing basis. The values were not necessarily game directed but related to fanship of 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 4 Profiling Emergent Values (Co)Created on Twitter—Professional Sport Teams

Dimensions/values	Examples
During Game	
<i>Enhanced game experience</i>	
• Includes offering live play-by-play updates, scores, highlights, seat upgrades, injury reports, 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 #UTAtPOR @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 @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 dif- ficulties, it will not be posted this week. @belford93 replied: well that stinks!
<i>Enhanced game-extended experience</i>	
• Providing real time and direct customer service (e.g., assistance with technical issues with apps, web links, etc., replying to questions about the game).	

(continued)

Table 4 (continued)

Dimensions/values	Examples
<i>Voicing game experience</i>	<p>@Mpakolas13: Just getting ready to head to #Roger sCentre to go watch our #ALFirstPlace @BlueJays go for the #Sweep. #getthebrooms</p> <p>@Bluejays replied: Have fun today!</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Fans express their happiness at the glory or their disappointment at the 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).</li></ul>	<p>@Broncos: When we hit the end zone at @Sports-AuthField ... Tweet about it with #DBTD and get on Thundervision!</p> <p>Quoting @JustinRichards: YES!!! COME ON!!!!</p> <p>#BRONCOS TOUCHDOWNNNNNNNNNNN</p> <p>#DTBD</p> <p>@melycutie: Coincidence? I am wearing my Gallagher Tshirt and we have a 4-1 lead!!! #gohabsgo @canadiensMTL</p> <p>@CanadiensMTL replied: @melycutie Not a coincidence. #GoHabsGo ER</p>
Off-Game (Pre- and Post-Games)	
<i>Closer fans</i>	<p>@FlaPanthers: Panthers Vision gives you all access to yesterday's #NHLAllStar Red Carpet!</p> <p>@RamsNFL: Zach Hocker starting at kicker today #STLvsCIN</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>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).</li></ul>	<p>[Picture of Hocker's locker]</p> <p>@ScalabrineBrain replied: @STLLouisRams Can we see @MichaelBrockers locker? #ForeverLSU</p>

(continued)



Table 4 (continued)

Dimensions/values	Examples
<i>Informed spectator</i>	<p>@RamsNFL replied: . @ScalabraineBrain You got it! Big @MichaelBrockers &amp; his #MobSquad brother @AaronDonald97</p> <p>[Picture of Brockers and Donald's locker]</p> <p>@broncos: ICYMI: #Broncos quarterback update <a href="https://t.co/43J75lxRsw">j.mp/IRQEcCB</a> [Picture of Peyton Manning]</p> <p>@Marlins: LIVE on #Periscope [link]: Bullpen session from #MarlinsST <a href="https://t.co/43J75lxRsw">https://t.co/43J75lxRsw</a></p>
<i>Rewarding fans</i>	<p>@Patriots: @schnemix51 Congrats! You're today's #PatsHatFrisay winner. Check your DM for details.</p> <p>@PelicansNBA: Don't miss out OFFICIAL WATCH-ING PARTY Sunday + a chance to win this autographed ball! <a href="https://on.nba.com/1AUwUBA">on.nba.com/1AUwUBA</a> (Feb. 20th, 2016)</p>
<i>Ongoing</i>	<p>@utahjazz: This day in Jazz History: 12/17/94</p> <p>@TheDeliverer_32 had 30p/14r leading the Jazz to a 97-89 win in Chicago.</p>
<i>Enriching fandom</i>	<p>#TBT</p> <p>@Padres: The #PadresTownHall is underway NOW on @FoxSportsSD! Tune in and tweet your questions using the hashtag!</p>

(continued)

Table 4 (continued)

Dimensions/values	Examples
<i>Humanizing brand</i>	<p>@veronii_98: There's nothing better then [sic] having ur favorite @CanadiensMTL player score on your birthday @AGally #GoHabsGo ER</p> <p>@CanadiensMTL replied: @veronii_98 Happy birthday! #GoHabsGo ER</p> <p>@veronii_98 replied: @CanadiensMTL thank you @chicagobulls: SO MUCH IS HAPPENING</p> <p>@nataliaromnovaa replied: @chicagobulls STOP YELLING</p> <p>@chicagobulls replied: @nataliaromnovaa WE CAN'T CONTROL THE SOUND OF OUR VOICE RIGHT NOW</p> <p>@nataliaromnovaa replied: THIS IS SO WILD</p> <p>@DessDess_: The Blackhawks are my fav on snapchat but they've been slacking lately @NHLBlackhawks</p> <p>@NHLBlackhawks replied: @DessDess_ Snapchat doesn't always follow the team on the road, sorry!</p> <p>@SGrant91: its pathetic and unjustifiable that the @MapleLeafs get 4pm starts wherever they play. Why do other NHLorganizations allow it? #nhl</p> <p>@MapleLeafs replied: this is factually incorrect.</p> <p>@SGrant91 replied: not every game. Fine. But every Saturday is a fact.</p>
<i>Venue for voicing</i>	<p>Fans use Twitter to voice their 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.</p>

(continued)

Table 4 (continued)

Dimensions/values	Examples
<i>Hub for fans</i>	@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
• 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 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 Duuuvall! @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, before and after games, and on an ongoing basis. As value is the outcome of an RM approach, the emergent values demonstrate the benefits that SM presents to professional sport teams.

## Discernible Differences and Shared Features of Professional Sport Teams' SM Use as an RM Tool

The study's third research question inquired about the discernible differences and shared features that exist among the teams' use of SM as an RM tool. To address the question, a description of each of the 20 teams' use of Twitter as an RM tool was documented by two of the authors. 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 was randomly selected to illustrate the use of the platform for the purpose of RM, although it is worth mentioning that the selection does not imply that the team's practice is the best (as no criterion 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 was the illustration rather than identification of an exemplary use, random selection (from the teams that engaged in frequent interactions) was 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 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, a 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, humor-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 communicated and interacted 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), 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 periods. Relatedly, there was no relationship between the number of followers and the amount of interaction carried on the teams' Twitter accounts. Some highly followed teams responded often (e.g., Chicago Blackhawks), while others did not (e.g., the Los Angeles Lakers); and some teams with a low number of followers did not interact often (e.g., Miami Marlins), while others did (e.g., the Utah Jazz).

**Case Illustration: Chicago Blackhawks.** The Chicago Blackhawks' use of Twitter for RM was influenced by the way the team manages its account. The Blackhawks actively interacted with fans and humanized the team with the use of humor, 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. (see Table 5). As pointed out earlier, the 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 humor, inviting fans to share inside jokes. In fact, players were a part of the fan experience created by the accounts, 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 various features (embedding short videos, pictures, GIFs, and links). It was found that the Toronto Maple Leafs also display many of the same qualities, although by comparison they used less videos, GIFs, etc. The level of interactions on the Blackhawks Twitter account during both game days and off days is comparable.

## Discussion

With the current expansion of SM in the sport 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, 2015; 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 support and extend 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 and Chinn (2010). Although different teams use Twitter for different RM purposes, this study found that all 20 teams used the platform to communicate and

Table 5 Sample Twitter Conversations—Chicago Blackhawks: @NHLBlackhawks

Feb. 3rd, 2016	<p>@NHLBlackHawks: Keep sharing your #Blackhawks goals on Twitter and Instagram using #WhatsYourGoal. They'll be displayed here: <a href="http://onego.al/HoRDA">http://onego.al/HoRDA</a></p> <p>@Erin_Catalyst11 replied: @NHLBlackhawks My goal is to get @SDarling_33 jersey and maybe meet him someday. #Whats YourGoal</p> <p>@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 <a href="https://t.co/nTBM5bPx4G">https://t.co/nTBM5bPx4G</a></p> <p>@Erin_Catalyst11 replied: Holy Smokes! That's so amazing! @NHLBlackhawks THANK YOU SO MUCH!! #DayMade <a href="https://t.co/35vFPN34Xk">https://t.co/35vFPN34Xk</a></p>
Feb. 4th, 2016	<p>@mynameisheather: @NHLBlackhawks all i want is a gif of Jonny celebrating the second period goal on one leg. #movesliketazer #OhCaptainMyCaptain</p> <p>@NHLBlackhawks replied: @mynameisheather one moment please</p> <p>@NHLBlackhawks replied: @mynameisheather ta-da! [GIF of Jonathan Toews celebrating goal]</p>
Feb. 3rd, 2016	<p>@DessDess_: The Blackhawks are my fav on snapchat but they've been slacking lately @NHLBlackhawks</p> <p>@NHLBlackhawks replied: Snapchat doesn't always follow the team on the road, sorry!</p>
Dec. 17th, 2015	<p>@NHLBlackhawks: It's our final day of #HawksHolidays giveaways! Win a trip to the #StadiumSeries in Minny: <a href="http://csnchicago.com/hawksHolidays">csnchicago.com/hawksHolidays</a></p>



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., personalized 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. Communication channels such as Twitter have value in that they facilitate and enrich fans' relationship with their teams. Dialogue through these channels facilitates the cocreation of value with customers and, ultimately, the transfer of value to the customers (Grönroos, 2004), although this is not the case all the time in the context of sport and SM.

According to Meng et al. (2015), teams using SM should make a concerted effort to personalize 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, personalized their communication, and included them in the "conversation," often with humor. 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 while simultaneously reaching out to many others with similar interests. This was observed in a number of instances when 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 the work of 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 were 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. (2014) that fans, using SM, satisfy needs that are not fully addressed through other forms of sport consumption, such as game attendance and television viewership.

Data gathered on the second RQ informed us about the values that professional teams (co)created on SM, specifically over three time periods (during game, before and after a 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 and replies to questions about the game), and to enable fans to express feelings about 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 and Kahle (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 strengthen fans' attachment to a team and provide access to exclusive insider information about the team directly from the team. They allow 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 moneymaking is the prime focus of sport organization and players (Harris & Ogbonna, 2008; Kim & Trail, 2011) 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), this study supports Stavros et al.'s (2014) 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 that 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, Kim, & Kim, 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. It should also be underscored that not all teams are using SM to achieve their full RM potential, which, in the sport 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 large followers number 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 this study contributes to the literature on SM in sport by supporting and augmenting previous studies (some discussed above) and providing new insights, it also 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 was 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, emphasizing each of the three different components—the communication process, the interaction process, and the value that emerged through the two processes. In this regard, 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 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, where 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 without the help of the second step in the process—interaction.

## Practical Recommendations

In light of the findings, the below discussed practical recommendations are identified. Organizations 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 20 professional teams, this study found that some of the teams underutilize 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 enhancing game experience, providing customer service, humanizing the brand, 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 expressions, which creates a feeling of being heard, because the team, in responding to fans' tweets, validates their comments, which attends to any issues the fans may have. With the global interest in professional sport, these and other similar values (e.g., closer fan personalization, voicing game experience) build teams' brand by humanizing their image and create a positive attitude toward the organization.

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, fund-raising, kids' activities), and appreciating (recognizing fans through personalized best wishes and fans-players meet-and-greet events).

As interaction is the core of relationship building, managers are advised to capitalize 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 fandom, engage in dialogue with other fans, and bond with each other. In a comparable 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 or after games, or by requesting that fans share their experiences at a game and acknowledging their responses.

## Future Research and Limitations

This study presented a few 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, before and after game, and off-season), the combination of content types employed, the way 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 that the 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 regarding other sports in other parts of the world (e.g., soccer in Europe) and other leagues (e.g., tier II professional sport). In line with this, while this study's data are 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) will advance our knowledge on the topic. 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 of celebrity fans in attracting new fans to teams on SM or off-line 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 present study makes the abovementioned theoretical and practical contributions, limitations must be recognized. The findings cannot be generalized on three grounds. One, they cannot be generalized to all SM platforms, mainly due to the differences in the features of different SM platforms. Two, the findings cannot be generalized to all professional sport teams. While the study generated insight into the teams' use of SM as an RM tool, it found no pattern of usage across teams or leagues; teams, regardless of their ranking by followers, displayed varied frequencies and levels of use. Three, the exploratory nature of the study permitted an analytical/theoretical generalization but not a statistical generalization. As an

exploratory study, it has also limitations in terms of the subjective nature of the data analysis, the number of teams included in the study, the data-gathering time period, and the time-sensitive nature of the data.

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