Charting fandom through social media communication:
A multi-league analysis of professional sports teams' Facebook content

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Abstract

Research has shown that fans' relationships with professional sports teams are among the strongest that exist with organisations. However, public relations scholarship has largely ignored how professional leagues and sport franchises cultivate fandom. The current study aims to bring sports communication back into the discussion of relationship management by examining the social media communication strategies employed by all 122 teams in Major League Baseball, National Football League, National Basketball Association, and National Hockey League in North America. The official Facebook pages for these teams were examined in terms of four social media communication strategies – information provision, offline networking, online networking, and timeline customisation – to determine whether organisational and market factors influenced how teams cultivated fan relationships. Though differences did not emerge based on media market size, organisational factors such as financial value and league affiliation did significantly influence the social media communication strategies used by the teams across the four leagues.

Introduction

Despite the recent economic downturn and significant labour issues in each league, the average valuation for teams in North America's four major professional sports leagues has increased dramatically in the last decade (Hambrecht, Hambrecht, Morrisey & Black, 2012). With a few notable exceptions, most teams in the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), and National

Hockey League (NHL), have grown their business operations and enhanced profitability in recent years. This growth is largely being fuelled by lucrative contracts with national and regional broadcast outlets, creative marketing techniques and sponsorships, and fans' intense interest in spectator sports (Abdollah, Zamani & Rezazadeh, 2010).

To further sustain this growth and connect with key stakeholders, professional sports teams, like other commercial and non-profit enterprises, are deploying social media to cultivate fandom and brand interest. Companies strategically manage their online communities by capitalising on brand supporters' interest in communicating, collaborating and connecting with each other, and supporters' interest in content creation (Ang, 2011). Furthermore, social media "allow firms to engage in timely and direct end-consumer contact at relatively low cost and higher levels of efficiency than can be achieved with more traditional communication tools" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 67).

When it comes to sports, young and ethnically diverse fans interact directly with teams, leagues, and athletes rather than waiting for information from news outlets secondhand (Feil, 2013). With such deep-rooted interest in their organisations from fans, sports organisations are expected to engage in two-way communication with their supporters and to consistently update their various social media platforms and websites. To push the boundaries of scholarly research on sport and the development of online fan communities, it therefore becomes important to examine the specific ways in which sports organisations are leveraging social media to connect with fans. To advance the literature, we examined one important aspect of social media branding by sports teams, the content of official team

Facebook pages, via a content analysis of the Facebook profiles of all 122 teams in the four major North American sports leagues (MLB, NFL, NBA, and NHL).

The goal of this study was to explore the relationship between each team's league affiliation and market size and their Facebook communication strategies at a given point in time. In reviewing the literature on the topic, it appears that such a cross-league evaluation of social media activities has not yet been conducted, and research on the relationship between organisation size and strategic communication practice remains scant. As discussed below, two perspectives frame this study. We address the emerging body of research sports organisations' development of online sports fandom, while also exploring relationship management theory from the public relations literature.

Literature review

Social media are often seen as ideal tools to engage with consumers, particularly with sports fans, because they afford fans to the opportunity to contribute content of their own and to communicate directly with their favourite athletes and teams (Butler, 2013; Klepic, 2013). Sports teams make money from social media when they listen to fan comments, build lifelong fan relationships, and respond to emerging opportunities for sales events (Butler, 2013). As a function of this awareness, public relations professionals and other strategic communications professionals now manage teams' social media accounts (McCray, 2009; Moore, 2011). Thus Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking sites are now considered prominent vehicles for stakeholder relationship management and fan cultivation. In particular, Facebook has extremely high usage (Facebook's official corporate page notes that it had more than 800 million active daily visitors as of September 2014). This issue should not be overlooked since it demonstrates the full extent to which sports teams may find Facebook to be a strategic communication tool. From high school to the highest levels of professional sports, teams are taking advantage of Facebook's reach to engage with fans. Yet even

with this widespread use, scholars have not yet documented the structuring of these online communities and the content that is found on official team pages.

Relationship management and online communities

Ferguson (1984) initially articulated the need to study the relationships between organisations and stakeholder groups, and numerous scholars have since developed this perspective via relationship management theory. The theory considers the relationships between organisations and organisations' publics, and the larger social context within which organisations and their publics exist. The theory was bolstered considerably by Broom, Casey and Ritchey (1997, 2000), who developed the organisation-public relationship (OPR). Broom et al. (1997, 2000) argued that the OPR consists of: *antecedents* of relationships, which trigger the opportunity for relationship cultivation by the organisation as new stakeholders are made aware of the organisation; *communication*, which are the strategies and outreach efforts that are used to inform, entertain, and create loyalty; and *relational outcomes* derived from this communication.

For the sports fan, the antecedents of relationship formation or brand allegiance may be based on peer-group affinities, geographical proximity, successful seasons, or for other more personal reasons such as special moments (e.g., first game attended, meeting an athlete from a team, and family tradition) or liking a mascot (Kraszewski, 2008). The communication strategies used by teams helps fuel fans' interests in teams, players, and management during both teams' good and bad times (L'Etang, 2006). We argue that teams' communication strategies should lead to the four relationship outcomes (trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction) that are traditionally measured by public relations scholars in relationship management theory. Related to this, Waters, Burke, Jackson, and Buning (2011) speculated that the dimensions of satisfaction and commitment were key components of fandom.

Reflecting the widespread adoption of social media by companies, a significant body of public relations research considers the strategic

use of social media for brand enhancement and stakeholder relationship management (e.g., Cho & Huh; 2010; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Lee & Park, 2013). Highly interactive websites, combined with multi-media content, can enhance perceptions of a company's brand (Jo & Kim, 2003). Another early study found of Fortune 500 companies' websites concluded that being open with stakeholders via the Internet has the potential to enhance publics' views of organisations (Ki & Hon, 2007). Additionally, McCorkindale (2010) concluded that companies' Facebook posts offer an opportunity for firms to show that they are responding to or engaging with customers. McCorkindale's analysis of Fortune 100 companies' Facebook profiles found that companies provided small amounts of superficial corporate information. Even though the author showed that Facebook was not being fully utilised, it appears that more recently, companies have increasingly leveraged their social media accounts for strategic communication.

Recent research demonstrates that highly engaged visitors to companies' social media sites and websites have a stronger likelihood of purchasing company-related products than those site visitors who are less engaged (Goh, Heng & Lin, 2013; Jiang, Chan, Tan & Chua, 2010). These studies show that cultivating online experiences among a brand's fans can be beneficial for a company's reputation and financial health. Furthermore, online communities reflect technical and social choices of community developers such as software programmers and community owners and managers (Ren, Kraut & Kiesler, 2007). In managing social media pages, organisations make strategic choices that have effects on stakeholders. To understand the potential antecedents of consumer behaviour and attitude change after exposure to social media content, it is important to examine the content that organisations create for their social media profiles.

Sport fans' relationships with teams
Sports teams are not alone in their use of blogs, Facebook, and other social media, as organisations from numerous entertainment areas have invested considerable resources in cultivating online communities among fans. Reflecting this, scholarly research has investigated how online communities have developed around music (Lingel & Naaman, 2012), cable television shows (Kessler, 2011), and videogames (Whiteman, 2009). Sports fandom is worth exploring in the PR literature, as fans frequently share their experiences in social networks, forge long-term (occasionally lifelong) relationships with their favourite teams as brands, and they look to sports organisations to provide online content (L'Etang, 2006; Tapp & Clowes, 2002; Waters et al., 2011). As passionate spectators, fans can invest considerable financial and time resources in support of their teams. Richelieu (2012) argued that a "professional sports team has the potential to build its brand equity by capitalising on the emotional relationship it shares with its fans" (p. 36). Once a team's fans identify and unite within brand communities (at venues such as social networking sites), the team will likely enjoy sustained, long-term brand growth that extends beyond their immediate physical community and market to a broader global market.

Shortly before Facebook's popularity exploded, Dimitrov (2008) critically argued that fandom is defined by several different perspectives, with events-driven promotions literature and practitioners seeing fans as 'markets' or 'clients' and public relations using a traditional term of 'stakeholders'. Our study draws on the definition of fans from Brough and Shresthova (2012): They are individuals who engage with, and can assert their identity, through popular culture content. We advance this definition by arguing that mediated *content* and engagement with this content are crucial aspects of fandom. Certainly, not every single fan of a sports team may 'like' (or visit) that team's Facebook page. However, Facebook is an ideal and heavily used fandom community that has a strong potential to further fans' engagement with their teams.

Early research showed that sports organisations were primarily concerned with providing basic-level information about their organisation to selected stakeholders (Brown, 2003). A decade ago, many sports organisation websites were "static and merely electronic

versions of media guides or press releases" (Brown, 2003, p. 53). Clearly, much has changed since Brown's study. Sports organisations that do not deploy social media sites to communicate with stakeholders now run the risk of lost revenue, lost leads on ticket and merchandise sales, and disenfranchised fans. Documenting the rise of social media in sports, recent research has investigated live tweeting of athletic events (Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2013), the role of fans in crisis communication (Brown & Billings, 2013), and fan allegiance and media consumption (McClung, Eveland, Sweeney & James, 2012). Relevant to the current study on the focus on the maintenance of online fandom, Waters et al. (2011) found that NFL teams place significantly more emphasis on cultivating relationships with fans on team websites than they do with their Facebook pages. In examining the processes by which communications professionals develop relationships with external audiences, the research concluded that NFL teams recognise the potential of the web to cultivate relationships with fans if they engage them with a combination of information provision and interaction.

Fans perceive that 'sport celebrity' is often a delicate construction of public relations professionals and journalists and the public has both high expectations and idealised views of publicity fostered sports images (Summers & Johnson Morgan, 2008). In response to these expectations, public relations professionals in sports should be proactive and deliberate in the creation and management of sporting celebrity images. Although Summers and Johnson Morgan's (2008) qualitative study considered individual athletes acting as their own brands, this perspective can be applied to sports organisations since both entities (players and teams) engage in brand promotion as an ongoing activity. Extending this, we should expect sports teams to be active social media content creators.

Few scholars, to this point, have conducted cross-league comparisons of sports team branding efforts, although there has been some initial comparative analysis. One study looked at the content at the official team sites of 12 teams in four leagues (the NFL and NHL in North America and Europe's Premier League for soccer and Super League for rugby). Ioakimidis (2010) found that the NFL provided far more media services, such as video/audio content, than the other three leagues. A content analysis of all NFL, MLB, NHL, and NBA team websites found that 33% of team homepages had information about teams' environmental initiatives, and just 2% of team pages discussed economic issues (Ciletti, Lanasa, Ramos, Luchs, & Lou, 2010). This study highlighted a potential issue in sport-branding communication: "Teams may intentionally be downplaying economic issues out of concern for consumer and media sensitivity to the rising costs of spectator sport attendance" (Ciletti et al., p. 73). A direct connection between sport websites and strategic communication is seen in this context.

The current study expands on prior research by looking at the Facebook content provided by all teams in the four major North America sports leagues and by evaluating the relationship between this content and three factors: teams' league affiliation, market size, and estimated worth. The teams in this analysis operate in dramatically different markets and have widely varying franchise valuations. As Ferguson (1984) originally noted, part of understanding an organisation's maintenance of its relationships with its publics—or fan cultivation, in the context of the current study—includes considering the overall structure and context of the firm's operations. The study's first two research questions evaluate the teams' Facebook communication strategies first using the sporting context and secondly looking at the impact of market size:

RQ1: What is the relationship between professional sports leagues and the Facebook communication strategies used by each league's teams?

RQ2: What is the relationship between professional sports teams' market size and the Facebook communication strategies used by each league's teams?

Another reason differences may exist in terms of social media communication strategies stems from the valuation of the various sports franchises. There is a considerable gap between

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each league's annual revenue; the NFL is at the high end with $8.8 billion, followed by MLB at $6.8 billion, the NBA at $3.7 billion and the NHL at the low end with $3.5 billion (Plunkett Research, 2013). Hambrecht et al. (2012) noted that the average team's financial worth followed a similar pattern to the overall league revenue averages; therefore, NFL and MLB teams on average had higher financial worth than NBA and NHL teams. As Shin and Huh (2009) note, few studies have considered the effect of the size of the company on communication strategy. Likewise, our literature review discovered that scholars have tended to overlook considerations of market and firm size as variables in studies about public relations strategies; the notable exceptions concern the area of corporate social responsibility, public relations, and firm size (Hou & Reber, 2011; Kim & Reber, 2009). The gap between the average financial worth of the teams across the four leagues lead to the study's third research question:

RQ3: What is the relationship between a franchise's estimated worth and the number of social media fans and the Facebook communication strategies used by each league's teams?

Finally, to provide an overall sense of context for fandom as it relates to social media content, the fourth research question compares the social engagement behaviour of fans in relationship to the four leagues to help contextualise the findings from the first three research questions:

RQ4: What is the relationship between professional sports leagues and the teams' number of Facebook fans?

Method

To evaluate how MLB, NBA, NFL, and NHL teams use their Facebook profiles to share information with fans and engage them in relationship building efforts, a content analysis was conducted during a one-week span in March 2013. At the time of data collection, the NFL had 32 teams while the remaining leagues each had 30 teams; all 122 professional teams had an official Facebook page. A limitation in any cross-league comparison of this nature is that these four leagues are never in-season at the same time during the calendar year. The study analysed a week's worth of posts from March 2013 because the NBA and NHL were both operating their seasons, MLB was in spring training, and the NFL was starting its free agency period for the upcoming season.

Although Waters et al. (2011) measured NFL teams' Facebook profiles for the inclusion of stewardship dimensions, the social media platform changed its format with the required switch to a timeline structure in March 2012. The change eliminated much of the customisation that the previous study measured. Given the lack of an established content analysis coding scheme, the research team devised a coding strategy. With the goal of mapping out how professional sports teams' strategies for engaging fans on Facebook, the research team first examined the revised timeline format to determine what structural variables were common across all teams' profiles and what elements could be customised to reflect the teams' unique brand dimensions.

Figure 1. A screenshot captured of the San Francisco 49ers' Facebook profile featuring the timeline format. Taken on Sept. 1, 2013.

Measurement

As shown in **Figure 1** (above), organisations can customise their smaller profile picture in addition to a larger cover picture with the new timeline format. Additionally, they have the ability to write a descriptive 'About' section below the profile picture. Profile managers can use tabs along the top of their Facebook profile to highlight specific information hubs; four tabs are shown automatically but visitors to the profile can view others by clicking a pull-down box. The profile highlights a certain number of fan engagement measures for Facebook, such as the number of fans who like the team's profile. (Once a fan has liked a team, they have the ability to see posts made by the team on their individual Facebook newsfeeds.) Two other measures of engagement are the number of fans who are talking about the organisation and the number of fans who 'were here'. Talking about the organisation, as defined by Facebook, is a measure of the number of

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unique individuals who have created a story about the organisation in their own newsfeed by either liking the page, commenting on the team's posts, sharing the post, or other behaviours that directly connect the individual with the team's Facebook profile; meanwhile, the 'were here' metric represents how many Facebook check-ins and mobile device location shares are made by unique users. Both of these measures are constantly changing because they measure the preceding seven days worth of activity in the social media environment.

The research team collected these static components of each MLB, NBA, NFL, and NHL team's Facebook profile in addition to information derived from public relations literature on how to best cultivate relationships with stakeholders via Facebook (Waters, et al., 2011; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). Based on a synthesis of the literature, four Facebook communication strategies were identified: Information provision, online networking, offline networking, and timeline customisation. These four broad strategies appeared to be attempts by teams at cultivating relationships with their fans.

Illustrating the information provision dimension of the social media communication strategies is sharing news from the team's governing league, sharing news directly from the organisation, and sharing news from partner organisations; this dimension also measured the provision of a detailed organisation history and information about the current season. We defined networking as those attempts by organisations to engage with their (Facebook) fans both online and in physical spaces. Offline networking included measures of whether a calendar of events was provided, a total number of team events shared with Facebook fans, and the provision of contact information (address and phone number). Online networking included whether the team linked to other social media platforms on their Facebook profile, whether they specifically encouraged fans to like their page for future engagement, and the total number of posts made by both fans and the team's profile administrators within the past week.

The final measure for Facebook usage focused on communication strategies that the professional teams used to customise their profile. The first item looked at how many customisation tabs each profile uses. These tabs are along the top of the page and allow organisations to highlight specific information and events they want to share with their fans. Tapping into visual communication strategy, posting pictures and videos in connection to updates helps make the teams' updates stand out from others' posts in the Facebook newsfeed. Finally, the overall number of photographs and photo albums shared by the account provide visual interest for fans browsing their profile page.

Team market size, which is the focus of the second research question, was measured with rankings from 1 (for the largest size, New York) down to 84 (for the smallest market, Winnipeg), according to the Television Bureau of Canada (n.d.). Team valuation, which is the focus of the third research question, was measured in whole numbers based on a report from Hambrecht et al. (2012). Team evaluation and market size were each condensed into three equally sized groups for analysis using SPSS. This strategy allowed us to draw conclusions from our statistical analysis without the threat of outliers skewing the data (Neuendorf, 2002; Stacks, 2010).

Data analysis

Items representing the four Facebook communication strategies are presented in the first three tables. Footnotes on the table indicate whether they were measured using a 'present or not present' format or based on an actual tally provided by Facebook. After a 90-minute training session, the research team coded official Facebook pages of 17 Major League Soccer (MLS) teams. This league was used for intercoder reliability rather than inclusion as a fifth league for the study because not all of the league's teams had an official Facebook presence at the time of coding. The two researchers coding the MLS teams achieved reliable results for intercoder reliability using Scott's π for all four strategy measures: Information provision (π = .88), offline networking (π = .84), online networking (π = .87), and timeline customisation (π = .91). These acceptable levels of intercoder reliability with the MLS teams enabled the research team

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to proceed with coding for teams in the four sports leagues that are the subject of this study.

Results

The four major professional North American sports leagues utilised a range of fan communication strategies on Facebook. Every team within the MLB, NBA, NFL, and NHL had an official Facebook page monitored by team staff. The teams had an average number of Facebook fans that was slightly more than 1.354 million though the standard deviation (2.096 million) indicates that the range was quite large with the NBA's Los Angeles Lakers (16.634 million) having the most fans and the NHL's Florida Panthers (91,028) having the least at the time of analysis. The teams had an overall average of 51,705.7 unique Facebook users talking about them in the previous seven days across all teams. Again, this metric's standard deviation (76,839.8) shows that the range was considerable, with the Dallas Cowboys from the NFL being the most talked about team (535,182) and the Nashville Predators from the NHL being the least talked about team (419) during the sample week. The Chicago White Sox (MLB) had the most visits by fans using Facebook's 'was here' metric (177,284), and the Portland Trailblazers (NBA) was the least visited team (63). This range is reflected in both the overall mean of 33,939.8 and standard deviation (36,610.7). At the time of coding, the teams posted an average of 6.07 (SD = 7.07) Facebook updates in the preceding 24 hours and 27.88 posts in the previous week (SD = 19.87).

The first research question asked about the relationship between the social media communication strategies and the four league averages across the four dimensions used to operationalise the strategies. As shown in **Table 1** (below), a mixed picture emerged. Looking at the information provision strategy, one league emerged as being statistically behind the others on all four measures of the strategy. Hockey teams shared the least amount of information from the NHL ($\chi2 = 44.41$, df = 3, p < .001). On the other end of the spectrum, NFL teams were more likely to share information from partner organisations ($\chi2 = 16.41$, df = 3, p = .001) and details about their histories ($\chi2 = 33.22$, df = 3, p < .001) than the three other leagues. NBA teams were most likely to share their own team's organisational materials with fans while MLB teams were the least likely to provide this information ($\chi2 = 21.08$, df = 3, p < .001). Examples of organisational materials include rosters and news releases.

Turning to the communication strategy of networking, both the NFL and MLB teams were less likely to provide physical location addresses ($\chi2 = 59.56$, df = 3, p < .001) and telephone numbers ($\chi2 = 35.97$, df = 3, p < .001) so that fans could reach out to them offline. However, teams from these two leagues were most likely to provide a calendar of events so that fans could interact offline with the teams ($\chi2 = 16.85$, df = 3, p = .001). As shown in **Table 1** (below), the MLB teams provided more opportunities for offline networking with fans than teams from other leagues (F(3, 118) = 5.59, p = .001). In regard to online networking, there was no statistical difference in how the teams from the four leagues tried to get fans to click through their Facebook profile back to their website. All teams consistently provided links back to their website to cultivate fandom online ($\chi2 = 6.24$, df = 3, p = .101). NBA teams were less likely to ask visitors to their Facebook page to like the page ($\chi2 = 12.24$, df = 3, p = .007); however, the NBA teams were also more likely to take a unified social media strategy by linking more often to other social media platforms with their Facebook profile ($\chi2 = 23.01$, df = 3, p < .001). Despite this attempt to engage fans across the entire social media landscape, NBA teams neither had the most active fans based on the number of posts made on their profile (F(3, 118) = 9.83, p < .001) nor made the most number of posts to inform and engage their fans (F(3, 118) = 18.54, p < .001).

Table 1. Communication strategies used by professional sports teams

	Major League Baseball (n = 30)	National Basketball Association (n = 30)	National Football League (n = 32)	National Hockey League (n = 30)
Information provision				
Shares news from governing league[a]	29	28	31	**13****
Shares news from other organisations[a]	2	0	10	**3**
Links to organisational materials[a]	12	25	9	**17****
Team history provided[a]	5	11	27	**9****
Current season results provided[a]	12	29	28	**22**
Offline networking				
Calendar of events provided[a]	23	9	20	**11****
Phone number provided[a]	11	22	12	**17****
Address provided[a]	2	28	14	**25****
Number of events shared[b]	14.27 (19.67)	2.90 (9.96)	7.88 (8.84)	**2.83 (8.34)**
Online networking				
Explicit statement to connect[a]	17	5	17	**12***
Links to other social media profiles[a]	10	27	14	**19****
Link to organisation website[a]	30	30	32	**28**
Posts from fans[b]	22.2 (9.12)	9.77 (8.33)	16.06 (14.08)	**11.33 (4.85) ****
Posts by team[b]	33.27 (4.04)	27.10 (4.23)	38.97 (12.37)	**27.63 (3.72) ****
Timeline customisation				
Pictures used in newsfeed[a]	30	29	32	**28**
Videos used in newsfeed[a]	10	29	29	**27****
Number of customisation tabs used[b]	8.13 (2.08)	9.80 (4.38)	9.72 (2.83)	**10.70 (3.65) ***
Total photo albums provided[b]	8.10 (21.23)	51.27 (57.71)	31.53 (39.06)	**59.30 (57.07) ****
Total pictures provided[b]	**258.43 (287.90)**	**1294.27 (1776.43)**	**308.94 (287.69)**	**1560.87** (1672.61)**

[a] Items measured using a present/not present criteria
[b] Items measured using total numbers reported
*p<.05
**p<.001

The leagues' teams that outperformed the others on those two metrics were the MLB and the NFL, respectively.

The final social media communication strategy involved teams customising their Facebook profiles. All of the teams used pictures in their postings ($\chi 2 = 3.06$, df = 3, p = .38); however, MLB teams used videos with far less frequency than the other three leagues ($\chi 2 = 46.26$, df = 3, p < .001). The NHL teams used customisation strategies more than any other leagues' teams. Specifically, they used more tabs on their timeline to share information with fans ($F(3, 118) = 3.06$, p = .031), and they used more photograph albums ($F(3, 118) = 7.36$, p < .001) and had more pictures ($F(3, 118) = 6.57$, p < .001) than the other leagues' teams.

Turning to the second research question, there was little evidence of any statistical connection between the leagues' social media communication strategy and market size. As noted earlier, the metropolitan statistical area rankings of the teams' hometowns, according to Hambrecht et al. (2012), were divided into three roughly equal groups using SPSS to allow for consistent comparisons.

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Table 2. Communication strategies used by professional sports teams by market size

	Media markets #1-8 (n = 41)	Media markets #9-22 (n = 41)	Media markets #23-84 (n = 40)
Information provision			
Shares news from governing league[a]	32	36	33
Shares news from other organisations[a]	4	6	5
Links to organisational materials[a]	20	20	23
Team history provided[a]	19	17	16
Current season results provided[a]	31	30	30
Offline networking			
Calendar of events provided[a]	20	21	22
Phone number provided[a]	16	16	19
Address provided[a]	22	20	27
Number of events shared[b]	6.51 (16.41)	8.44 (12.32)	5.98 (10.38)
Online networking			
Explicit statement to connect[a]	15	13	23*
Links to other social media profiles[a]	26	24	20
Links to team website[a]	39	41	40
Posts from fans[a]	14.56 (10.76)	15.24 (8.94)	14.78 (12.64)
Posts by team[a]	31.61 (7.83)	32.85 (11.48)	31.10 (5.64)
Timeline customisation			
Pictures used in newsfeed[b]	41	40	39
Videos used in newsfeed[b]	31	34	30
Number of customisation tabs used[a]	10.05 (4.48)	9.80 (2.70)	8.90 (2.75)
Total photo albums provided[a]	34.41 (47.91)	51.83 (60.61)	25.83 (34.13)
Total pictures provided[a]	**1030.18 (1592.38)**	**1091.91 (1546.49)**	**713.39 (1137.97)**

[a] Items measured using a present/not present criteria
[b] Items measured using total numbers reported
*p<.05
**p<.001

As **Table 2** shows, all of the variables with the exception of explicitly asking fans to like their Facebook pages, were used in similar proportion by all of the leagues. Professional sports teams from less populated media markets were more likely to specifically ask their Facebook page visitors to like their profile to receive notifications of news and updates in the future ($\chi 2$ = 6.23, df = 2, p = .044). This was the only variable that emerged as being statistically significant, indicating that market size had little to no influence on fan engagement strategy on Facebook.

The study's third research question examined the relationship between the professional teams' financial value and the number of Facebook fans that the teams have.

Using Pearson's correlation, it is evident that there is a relationship between the franchise value and the number of social media fans the teams have (r = .41, p < .001). This strength of the Facebook fandom grows when examining the relationship between the value of the franchise and the number of people who are talking about the teams on Facebook (r = .65, p < .001). The same pattern does not hold true for the number of fans who checked into the teams' home stadium and financial value (r = .15, p = .19). However, the latter finding may stem from the lack of organisations that incorporated this feature into their strategy as 20 of the 30 MLB teams, 10 of the 30 NBA teams, 13 of the 32 NFL teams, and 7 of the 30 NHL teams did not use it.

Table 3. Communication strategies used by professional sports teams by franchise valuation (reported in millions of American $)

	Sports franchises worth up to $329m (n = 41)	Sports franchises worth between $330 and $600m (n = 41)	Sports franchises worth more than $601m (n = 40)
Information provision			
Shares news from governing league[a]	27	36	**38***
Shares news from other organisations[a]	2	3	**10***
Links to organisational materials[a]	28	22	**13***
Team history provided[a]	10	13	**29****
Current season results provided[a]	33	24	**34***
Offline networking			
Calendar of events provided[a]	15	22	**26***
Phone number provided[a]	27	12	**12****
Address provided[a]	34	18	**17***
Number of events shared[b]	4.34 (10.89)	6.02 (10.66)	**10.68 (16.81)**
Online networking			
Explicit statement to connect[a]	14	19	**18**
Links to other social media profiles[a]	29	23	**18**
Link to team's website[a]	40	40	**40**
Posts from fans[b]	12.20 (6.41)	15.15 (10.81)	**17.30 (13.61)**
Posts by team[b]	28.10 (3.54)	30.24 (5.81)	**37.38 (11.63) ****
Timeline customisation			
Pictures used in newsfeed[a]	39	41	**40**
Videos used in newsfeed[a]	37	25	**33***
Number of customisation tabs used[b]	10.22 (3.50)	9.24 (3.95)	**9.30 (2.68)**
Total photo albums provided[b]	55.76 (62.53)	28.12 (40.69)	**28.25 (37.59) ***
Total pictures provided[b]	**1320.02(1658.1)**	**867.17 (1459.16)**	**370.82 (340.27) ***

[a] Items measured using a present/not present criteria
[b] Items measured using total numbers reported
*p<.05
**p<.001

The strength of the relationship between financial value and number of Facebook fans prompted the researchers to question whether communication strategies varied by financial worth of the teams. Much like the market size in the second research question, this test first required dividing all of the North American sports teams into roughly three equal groups based on their overall market value (Hambrecht et al., 2012). In regards to information provision, professional teams that had the highest overall market value were more likely to discuss their teams' histories ($\chi2 = 22.17$, df = 2, p < .001) and provide news from their community partners ($\chi2 = 9.02$, df = 2, p = .011); conversely, they were the least likely to share their own organisational materials with their fans ($\chi2 = 10.49$, df = 2, p = .005). The one-third of teams with the lowest market value were less likely to share news from their governing associations ($\chi2 = 13.16$, df = 2, p = .001) while the middle tier of sports teams were most likely to discuss current season results ($\chi2 = 8.61$, df = 2, p = .013).

Two financial value extremes stood out statistically in regard to offline evaluations. Sports teams in the bottom third of financial value were more likely to include their physical

address ($\chi2 = 14.29$, df = 2, p = .001) and phone number ($\chi2 = 19.09$, df = 2, p < .001) in their Facebook profiles. Meanwhile teams with the highest financial value were more likely to share a calendar of events ($\chi2 = 6.65$, df = 2, p = .036), and a one-way ANOVA neared statistical significance as it confirmed that they shared more events than the other two tiers of sports teams ($F(2, 119) = 2.54$, p = .083).

With online networking, only one metric met accepted standards for social scientific significance as the teams with the highest financial value posted more updates to their Facebook profiles than other teams ($F(2, 119) = 15.90$, p < .001). One other item—linking to other social media platforms on their Facebook profiles—neared statistical significance ($\chi2 = 5.52$, df = 2, p = .063) for the bottom third of professional sports teams; however, all remaining variables were found to be used in similar proportions across the three tiers of financial values.

The final dimension of fan engagement measured by the study focused on the customisation of the teams' Facebook profile. The teams that ranked in the bottom third of financial value were most likely to customise their profiles by using videos ($\chi2 = 10.93$, df = 2, p = .004) and shared more photograph albums ($F(2, 119) = 4.43$, p = .014) and

pictures ($F(2, 119) = 3.39$, p = .038) with their fans. There were no statistical differences in terms of posting pictures as updates ($\chi2 = 4.02$, df = 2, p = .13) or using more customisation tabs on the teams' profiles ($F(2, 119) = 1.05$, p = .355).

The study's final research question was developed to contextualise the previous findings by comparing the level of Facebook fan engagement across the teams from the four leagues. **Table 4** shows that fans interacted with the leagues' teams in a variety of manners and also proportions. NBA had significantly more likes than other teams at the time of the analysis ($F(3, 118) = 3.64$, p = .015), while NHL teams were the least liked of the four major leagues. NFL fans generated more social media discussion about their favourite teams as evidenced by the Facebook metric examining the number of people talking about their teams ($F(3, 118) = 7.56$, p < .001). Despite being outperformed by other leagues in regard to being liked or discussed, more people actually visited MLB teams ($F(3,69) = 4.29$, p = .008), according to the 'was here' Facebook metric. Finally, the ratio of posts made by fans to those made by the teams' communication team revealed that MLB fans were more active in posting on their teams' profile pages ($F(3, 118) = 5.00$, p = .003).

Table 4. Means and standard deviations of fans' social media behaviours by professional sports leagues

	Major League Baseball (n = 30)	National Basketball Association (n = 30)	National Football League (n = 32)	**National Hockey League (n = 30)**
Number liking the teams	1,088,153.2 (1,241,700.9)	2,140,214.2 (3,630,574.6)	1,658,549.7 (1,322,486.6)	**509,952.5* (434,833.5)**
Number talking about the teams	50,097.2 (56,738.4)	42,888.2 (76,839.8)	97,746.2 (95,558.6)	**13,021.8 ** (12,786.8)**
Number of fans who were here[a]	67,842.1 (61,011.2)	29,886.9 (33,300.1)	29,172.9 (24,142.6)	**25,187.9 * (23,889.3)**
Ratio of fan comments to team posts[b]	**0.68 (0.31)**	**0.39 (0.38)**	**0.44 (0.36)**	**0.43 (0.22) ***

[a] Note: Only 73 teams enabled this feature on their Facebook page (11 from MLB, 19 from NFL, 23 from NHL, and 20 from NBA)

In summary, the data reveal that a team's league affiliation is a strong predictor of information-provision related behaviours, online and offline networking, and timeline customisation. From a structural perspective, franchise valuations are also correlated to Facebook behaviours. Surprisingly, we found little evidence (aside from one behaviour) of a link between market size and strategic outreach. Tables 1 through 4 highlight the statistically significant findings from this study.

Discussion

This study sought to map out the social media communication strategies used by the four major North American professional sports leagues (Major League Baseball, National Basketball Association, National Football League, and National Hockey League) on their official Facebook pages. In examining these strategies by league and by organisational factors, the goal of this study was to determine the degree to which the cultivation of fandom could be linked to social media communication. The results of the content analysis research paint a mixed picture for the four leagues. No one league dominated social media engagement as the NBA garnered the most Facebook fans, the NFL was the most discussed league, and MLB saw the most offline visits according to Facebook-provided metrics.

Overall social media usage

The study adds to the growing body of literature about sports and media use (Brown & Billings, 2013; Highfield et al., 2013; McClung et al., 2012) by providing a missing piece of the equation—a review of the actual strategies used by the organisations. The strategies derived from public relations literature focused on information provision, offline and online networking, and customisation of the Facebook page. The differences found across the leagues—rather than being tied to cities of similar size—are indicative of sports communicators recognising their targeted audiences with Facebook information. However, these differences reveal that of all the strategies examined, customisation may be one that necessitates further examination especially in the standardised Facebook format.

Waters et al. (2011) found that the NFL teams more often used their websites to cultivate relationships with fans more than Facebook, and multiple scholars have concluded that Facebook's forced look and structure is a potential turn-off for strategic communicators given that it cannot easily be customised to meet the look and feel of the brand. However, this study found that sports communicators for the four major professional sports associations in the United States are beginning to realise how they can customise parts of their Facebook timeline. By using different tabs at the top of their timeline to highlight different shared items (e.g., community events, recent game statistics, fan of the week), teams demonstrate what they consider to be the most worthwhile in promoting to their Facebook fans.

Although McCorkindale's (2010) analysis found only modest amounts of company-provided information on corporate Facebook sites, professional sports teams provided heavy concentrations of content on Facebook. However, as the findings suggest, the teams may be providing too much content, at least in its current presentation. Much of the information provided by the professional sports teams was done in a promotional manner. Looking at the ratio of posts made by fans compared with those of the teams, all four sports leagues had an overall average where the teams were pushing out far more information than fans. Though not a formal measure of this study, the researchers observed that there were few comments to these posts, and teams rarely replied to comments that were made. This observation runs counter to studies from other disciplines that offer suggestions for securing engagement.

Consumer-focused research (Goh et al.; 2013; Jiang et al., 2010) has demonstrated links between exposure to interactive content and consumers' willingness to purchase products. The current study found little two-way minded content; instead, sports teams from all four leagues were generally more focused on promotion and publicity. Even when online and offline networking elements were presented, they were largely done in a one-way format rather than engaging in discussions and

responding to fans' questions on Facebook. In providing so much Facebook content, sports teams are promoting brand awareness, but they are more likely to ensure that people who visit team Facebook pages remain active brand consumers if they provide opportunities for true engagement.

Impact of financial value
Profile customisation does not have to come at a significant cost to the organisation. Results indicate a higher level of performance by high-value franchises in relation to content provision. Though not the focus of this study, this may be due to the increased costs of having a social media management staff in addition to traditional sports communication professionals. However, given the finding that these leagues also provided more public relations information (team histories, calendar of events, and news from partners), there is evidence that these teams have a sophisticated public relations team working to promote the teams. But significant costs associated with a team of social media professionals do not have to be incurred to make the teams' Facebook profile a hub of fan engagement.

Franchises from the bottom-tier in terms of financial worth were using customisation strategies more by providing more content than their wealthier counterparts. Though Facebook's skeletal framework is in place, options exist for making the space unique for fans who seek to engage with their teams online. Every profile has the ability to customise its profile picture and timeline cover photograph, but timelines can also be specialised by the type of information shared and what media format is shared. In requiring a dedicated staff to respond and engage with fans on every Facebook update, practitioners could create an environment where fans are encouraged to create and share videos, take pictures, and submit comments for others directly on the teams' pages. By using this content, the teams could add value to the fans' experiences on their site (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) and encourage them to participate further. A strategic communicator would still need to monitor the fans' actions to ensure harassment and rivals hijacking the profile did not occur; the practitioner would

also still be needed to post organisational updates, reply to comments, and engage when needed. But, by having fans help create the content, the level of engagement could be improved without incurring significant costs to the team's communication budget.

In mapping out how the 122 MLB, NBA, NFL, and NHL teams are using Facebook, we argue that there are underutilised aspects of the platform, notably with respect to encouraging fans to connect with teams both online and off. Across the leagues, teams are doing an effective job of getting basic team information to consumers but there is ample room to directly enable fans' engagement. Additionally, teams with lower financial value could be more proactive in posting informative and engaging updates to Facebook, given our findings that these updates tend to be offered more by teams that are worth more. Stronger calls to action to visit other websites or make offline connections would likely enhance fan engagement, as would greater interaction between teams and fans. As we note earlier, not every single fan of a team utilises Facebook and nor do all fans who are on Facebook see every single team post in Facebook's timeline. However, our analysis does indicate that at a certain level, teams see the benefit of connecting with their fans online. Furthermore, there are clear attempts to direct Facebook fans to other websites and to physical locations. The professional and scholarly literatures both point to the idea that fans who go online are likely to have stronger connections to their teams. This study suggests that teams seek to further engage with these fans and that relationship maintenance and fandom cultivation is an ongoing process.

Limitations and suggestions for future research
Results of this study should be understood within the context of several methodological limitations. Although content analysis offers a non-obtrusive look at the media-related outputs of organisational behaviour, this approach does not afford researchers the opportunity to directly investigate consumer attitudes and beliefs. Qualitative interviews or a survey of strategic communications professionals might yield additional insight as to how decisions are made to customise team profile pages and to

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provide information about how teams engage with fans. Furthermore, quantitative methodology could better address the relationships between sports fans and their relationships with teams in a controlled, variable-cantered setting. We recommend, for example, a survey of fans using the four common public relations relationship indicators of trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction as another way to explore how fans view teams' use of social media.

Building on this, additional research in this area could look more closely at the level and types of communication between teams and fans, and their outcomes. Relationship management theory (e.g., Broom et al., 1997, 2000; Ferguson, 1984) suggests that effective stakeholder communication involves a two-way flow of information or exchange between both parties in an organisation–public relationship. This study focused primarily on sports teams' behaviour on Facebook. Although the content analysis looked at several fan behaviours, such as number of Facebook likes and the 'was here' metric for site visits, scholars are encouraged to delve deeper into the relationship exchanges between fans and teams. It would be of interest for both theory and applied business/sport communication to further map the nature of team and fan interactions with more than one social media site.

Finally, it would be helpful to compare social media behaviours at multiple points in a calendar year. One week of Facebook posts were analysed in this study. Scholars who address this in the future may look either at multiple weeks during the year or look holistically at teams' use of multiple platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at a combined level. This would enhance the depth of the study and provide a thorough examination of fan engagement strategies. To that point, a cross-league comparison would offer additional explanations of how teams develop and employ strategies.

Conclusion

Our study makes a contribution to the literature by exploring professional sports teams' Facebook usage and by answering questions about the degrees to which market and economic factors influence communication behaviours. Until now there has been only a marginal treatment in the literature of sports teams' leveraging of social media content for strategic communications aims. Make no mistake, professional sports teams and leagues are business entities with vested interests in expanding the scope and reach of their brands. Social media have afforded these organisations new opportunities to connect and interact with brand supporters. We provide evidence as to how this connection is occurring. This study also benefits strategic communicators and business decision makers by comparing behaviour across leagues and with each major sports team. We looked at the structure and content of team Facebook pages; future research should look more at the behavioural aspects involved in sports teams' use of social media for targeted stakeholder communication.

Summers and Johnson Morgan (2008) encouraged sports communication practitioners to manage fan expectations and to drive media attention. Building upon this, we conclude that more can be done by teams with respect to online and offline networking in order to facilitate fan engagement. The findings indicate that sports teams, regardless of their league affiliation or market size, are actively reaching out to fans via social media. As teams continue to manage organisational priorities and as sports communication professionals learn more about social media as a channel for fan engagement, there will likely be an evolution in social media use by sports organisations that warrants continued study by scholars.

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