

HOW DO SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO BUILD
RELATIONSHIPS? A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF
NBA CLUBS' TWITTER USE

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A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Telecommunication and Film
in the Graduate School of
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2014

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ABSTRACT

Social media have been increasingly used by sports organizations to establish relationships with the public. This study explored the Twitter using practices of NBA clubs (N = 30) in the United States in building relationships with their publics during the 2013-14 season. Specifically, it focused on how these clubs used Twitter as a communication tool to build professional, personal, and community relationships through a content analysis of 5561 tweets on their official Twitter sites. The results demonstrated that sports organizations tended to use social media to develop professional relationships with fans via sharing information and promoting products. They utilized several types of communication tools such as retweets, public messages, hyperlinks, and hashtags, among which hashtags were used most frequently. Professional relationships could benefit more from hyperlinks while there could be greater benefit to personal relationships from public messages and retweets and to community relationships from hashtags and hyperlinks. Sports organizations should use these tools effectively to strengthen the professional, personal and community relationship with their publics.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who helped me and supported me through the trials and tribulations of creating this manuscript. In particular, Dr. Shuhua Zhou, Dr. Yonghwan Kim, and Dr. Lu Tang who guided me and helped me, and my parents who stood by me throughout the time taken to complete this masterpiece.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

| | |
|----------|---|
| F | Fisher's F ratio: A ration of two variances |
| $Kappa$ | Cohen's index of intercoder agreement |
| M | Mean: the sum of a set of measurements divided by the number of measurements in the set |
| n | Number: the frequency of the variable |
| p | Probability associated with the occurrence under the null hypothesis of a value as extreme as or more extreme than the observed value |
| r | Pearson product-moment correlation |
| SD | Standard deviation: a measure of the variability or dispersion of a population |
| χ^2 | Chi-square: A value that shows the relationship between expected frequencies and observed frequencies |
| $<$ | Less than |
| $=$ | Equal to |

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am pleased to have this opportunity to thank the many faculty members who have helped me with this research project. I am most indebted to Dr. Shuhua Zhou, the chair of my thesis committee, for sharing his research expertise and wisdom regarding my study and guiding me throughout my thesis. I would also like to thank all of my committee members, Dr. Yonghwan Kim and Dr. Lu Tang, for their invaluable input, inspiring comments and questions, and support of both the thesis and my academic progress.

This research would not have been possible without the support of my parents and friends who never stopped encouraging me to persist.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Since their inception, social media have been playing a significant role throughout the world in all aspects of life. Both individuals and organizations are using social media to communicate with their interested parties. In particular, social media has been used increasingly by sports organizations as a tool to communicate with consumers (Pedersen, Parks, Quarterman, & Thibauh, 2010). Among others, clubs of the National Basketball Association (NBA), one of the most successful sports brands in the world (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007), have been using social media to make connections with sports fans and to promote their teams.

Due to the competition from the increasing number of sports teams and other entertainment options, professional sports teams are using a variety of marketing techniques to increase game attendance (Burton & Cornilles, 1998). In particular, NBA clubs have utilized many marketing strategies and techniques, such as promotional premium, group sales with discounted pricing, referrals and word-of-mouth advertising, radio advertising, etc. (Dick & Turner, 2007). In recent years, social media has been used to nurture consumer relationships with sports organizations, especially with NBA clubs (Williams & Chinn, 2010).

The social media use of sports organizations has drawn attention from both academia and the sports industry. According to Witkemper, Lim, and Waldburger (2012), there are three primary social media forms most frequently employed by sports organization, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Facebook has been used to post and share articles, pictures, and videos. YouTube has been used to share videos with consumers about the team or organization. Twitter

can be utilized to disseminate information, interact with fans, and promote sporting products or events. Of these three, Twitter has become the most popular social media form in the sports industry (Witkemper et al., 2012). Throughout the major professional leagues in the United States such as National Basketball Association (NBA), National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), and Major League Soccer (MLS), each team employs Twitter in some manner (Witkemper et al., 2012).

Many scholars have explored the social media use of various sports organizations. For example, Waters, Burke, Jackson, and Buning (2010) examined how NFL teams used Facebook and their official websites to develop relationships with fans using stewardship strategies and found that greater endeavors were devoted to their own websites than to their Facebook pages. Wallace, Wilson, and Miloch (2011) examined the use of Facebook as a brand-management tool in the NCAA and the Big 12 Athletic Conference, demonstrating significant differences in content posted by season, communication tools, and fan interaction. Pronschinske, Groza, and Walker (2012) studied the relationship between the page attributes found on Facebook pages of professional sports teams and user (i.e., fan) participation. They found page attributes signaling authenticity and user engagement had the greatest effect on attracting and maintaining a Facebook fan base. However, there have been few studies focusing on the relationship between sports organizations and their publics. Though content analysis has been used by a handful of studies, few of them examined sports organizations' use of communication tools provided by Twitter, especially for relationship establishment.

The organization-public relationship (OPR) has become an important topic of study in public relations scholarship (Ferguson, 1984). It can be defined as “the degree that the organization and its public trust one another, agree on who has rightful power to influence,

experience satisfaction with each other, and commit oneself to one another” (Huang, 1998, p. 12). While many studies have focused on the OPR from the public’s perspectives (Ki & Hon, 2007), there are only a handful of studies exploring OPR establishment from the organizations’ perspective (i.e., Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Nah & Saxton, 2013), especially for sports organizations (i.e., Waters et al., 2010). Furthermore, few studies have focused on how to apply traditional OPR scale to sports organizations’ use of social media in managing relationships with the public, how sports organizations can utilize communication tools effectively to build relationships, and moreover, how sports organizations can incorporate relationship management into their use of communication tools.

This current study explored the social media use of sports organizations in building relationships with their publics mainly through the theoretical perspective of organization-public relationship. It conducted a content analysis of the official Twitter sites of all 30 NBA clubs in the United States. The main purpose of this study was to examine how sports organizations managed relationships through social media and how they used communication tools on social media. Grounded mainly in the organization-public relationship framework, this study examined how sports organizations used social media to establish relationships with the public, which involved professional relationships, personal relationships and community relationships. In addition, it examined their use of communication tools provided by Twitter, such as retweets, public messages, hyperlinks, and hashtags, etc. Furthermore, it incorporated the techniques of relationship management and the use of social media communication tools in order to find out how to use these tools to establish relationships.

This study could advance the literature on the organization-public relationship and sports communication by providing empirical evidence of sports organizations’ social media use in

relationship building and incorporating relationship typology between sports organizations and their fans with social media communication tools usage. It posed a relationship category scheme to examine how organizations used Twitter to manage each type of relationship. On the other hand, this study could make some practical contributions by providing communication strategies for sports organizations to use social media effectively to manage diversified relationships with their key publics.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature was organized into two major sections. The first focused on the theoretical framework that could be used in this study, including organization-public relationship, relationship marketing, and uses and gratifications theory. The second section reviewed some research fields and studies related to this topic, such as social media applied to public relations, organizational communication, and sports communication, and its communication tools.

Organization-Public Relationship (OPR)

In order to examine the relationships typology between sports organizations and their publics and how they used social media to develop these relationships, I used organization-public relationship as the key theoretical framework.

Organization-public relationship can be defined as “the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics” (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000, p. 18). According to Ledingham and Bruning (1998), it is the state existing between an organization and its key publics, in which the actions of one party can affect the economic, social, cultural or political well-being of the other.

The relational perspective can identify the organizational function of public relations (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), clarify the role of communication within that function (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000), and provide an approach to determine the impact of public relations on the attainment of organizational goals (Ledingham & Bruning, 1997). Some studies have examined OPR as the focal variable for public relations theory and practice (Broom et al.,

2000; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001; Ledingham, 2003; Ki & Hon, 2007). From the perspective of relationship management, the goal of public relations is to establish, nurture, and maintain OPRs rather than manipulate public opinion (Ehling, 1992). Ki and Hon (2007) argued for the important role of OPR outcomes on attitude and behavioral intentions toward the organization. According to Ledingham (2003), researchers have studied the linkage of organization-public relationships to public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors.

Studies have also focused on some dimensions of OPR. L. Grunig, J. Grunig, and Ehling (1992) claimed that relationship state could be determined by the dimensions of reciprocity, trust, mutual legitimacy, openness, mutual satisfaction, and mutual understanding. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) operationalized five dimensions to examine organization-public relationships: trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment. In addition, Hon and Grunig (1999) posed several strategies for maintaining OPR, including access, positiveness, openness, assurance, networking, and the sharing of tasks. Some studies have demonstrated that two-way communication or interaction can positively influence relationship building/management. Jo and Kim (2003) have shown that interactivity characteristics of the Web had positive effects on relationship building between organizations and the public.

Some research has worked on measuring OPR (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Jo, Hon, & Brunner, 2004; Kim, 2001) or developing its scales or dimensions (Bruning & Galloway, 2003; Huang, 2001). Bruning and Galloway (2003) identified five factors of the organization-public relationship. Anthropomorphism described attributions that the organization embodies human characteristics such as trustworthiness and investment in people, professional behavior / expectations focused on perceptions that an organization meets the publics' expectations for social responsibility and promoting the general welfare, and community improvement addressed

public perceptions that the organization is involved in and committed to the local community (Bruning & Galloway, 2003). Personal commitment focused attention on how committed the member of the public is to maintaining a relationship with the organization, and comparison of alternatives addressed how appealing alternative service providers are (Bruning & Galloway, 2003). Building upon this five-factor framework, researchers have found support for all five factors as predictors of satisfaction with city government (Bruning, Langenhop, & Green, 2004) and with an electricity supplier (Bruning, Castle, & Schrepfer, 2004).

OPR can be categorized into three dimensions: professional relationship, personal relationship, and community relationship (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999). According to Bruning and Ledingham (1999), professional relationship can be determined through organizations adopting a professional role when dealing with key public members; personal relationship can be established through close connections and interactions between organizations and their individual stakeholders; and community relationship involves organizations' commitment to and interaction with the community they serve. Based on this OPR scale, Bruning (2000) examined the role of personal, professional, and community relationships in respondent relationship and intended behavior and found that key public members who considered themselves as being in a relationship with an organization were more likely to intend to stay with that organization rather than turning to its competitors. Bruning and Ledingham (1999) found that professional and personal relationship, but not community relationship, influenced public satisfaction with a regional banking institution.

Grounded in previous research (i.e., Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Bruning, 2000; Jo & Kim, 2003), this study focused specifically on how sports organizations used social media to build professional, personal, and community relationship with their publics.

Relationship Marketing

According to Bruning (2000), there are two primary streams of relationship research: public relations research and marketing research. Thus, it was also necessary to review the literature on relationship marketing from the perspective of marketing.

Sheth and Parvatiyar (2000) define relationship marketing as an ongoing cooperative behavior between the marketer and the consumer. This approach to marketing was first posed in the field of service marketing (Berry, 1983). The primary purpose of relationship marketing is to establish long-term relationships between organizations and their best consumers (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Gummesson (1999) considered the interactions, relationships, and networks as core components of the relationship marketing process. Relationship marketing can be characterized by the attraction, development, and retention of consumers (Bee & Kahle, 2006).

Some researchers have demonstrated that long-term buyer-seller relationships can be built through creating structural and social bonds. Structural bond happens when it's difficult to end a relationship, and social bond indicates positive interpersonal relationship (Turnbull & Wilson, 1989). Stern, Thompson, and Arnould (1998) studied the value of customer relationships with businesses, consumer role enactment, and consumer desire for relationships. Petrison and Wang (1993) claimed that the roots of relationship marketing exist in the ability of companies to know about their consumers individually and then develop targeting strategies based on the needs of the individual consumer. Although technology can make information about customers available, many customers preferred the personal form of relationships built upon face-to-face services after adopting self-service technologies (Prendergast & Marr, 1995).

Social media can be used in relationship marketing by organizations (Griffiths, 2008; Haverstein, 2008). Social media marketing follows a new principle that "Participation is

marketing” (Weinberg, 2009). In this way, marketers actively participate in social media such as Twitter by bringing together content, listening to communities, engaging in dialogue and establishing relationships (Weber, 2009; Weinberg, 2009). Twitter as a marketing instrument particularly has the following purposes: (1) market research and feedback generation; (2) publicity, branding and reputation management; (3) business networking; and (4) customer service and customer relationship management (Thoring, 2011).

In practice, many organizations have used social media for marketing. According to Sachoff (2010), 35% of all businesses in the United States claim that they successfully use Twitter to attract more customers. According to Case and King (2011), Twitter had been implemented by the majority of the *Fortune* 50 firms by 2009. Many global companies such as Coca-Cola, Starbucks and JP Morgan Chase have realized the value of social media as both a communication tool and a marketing tool (Morrissey, 2007). For example, Sony announced to launch a new marketing campaign through Twitter, the Sony Ericsson Twitter Cup, during the 2010 FIFA World Cup (Sony, 2009).

In particular, many sports organizations have applied relationship marketing to their overall marketing operations in order to maintain and strengthen customer relationships (Harris & Ogbonna, 2009; Lapio & Speter, 2000; Stavros, Pope, & Winzar, 2008). Particularly, Williams and Chinn (2010) made the linkage between social media and relationship marketing. They found the value of social media tools in helping sports marketers achieve their relationship marketing goals. Sports teams are exploring how to use it as a branding and marketing strategy (Coyle, 2010).

Marketing scholars have focused their attention on the establishment of “long-term, trusting, ‘win-win’ relationships with valued customers, distributors, dealers, and suppliers”

(Kotler, 1994, p. 11). Public relations researchers, in contrast, have examined the factors that affect the initiation, building, and maintenance of mutually beneficial relationships with the key publics (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Relationship marketing could provide some new insights for this study from the marketing perspective. Thus I could apply the approach of relationship marketing to examine the professional relationship between sports organizations and their publics, including promotion, and consider the sports organization as the company and its public as the consumers.

Uses and Gratifications Approach

The ultimate goal of sports organizations is to appeal to their fans. In order to understand why fans turn to social media operated by clubs, we needed to understand their motivations and needs through the uses and gratifications theory.

According to Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), uses and gratifications theory (U&G, hereafter) can be used to explain how people use media to satisfy their needs, to examine motives for media behavior, and to identify functions or consequences of needs, motives, and behaviors. It focuses on the social and psychological origins of needs, which lead to distinctive patterns of media exposure or engagement in other activities, resulting in need gratifications (Katz et al., 1974).

Most studies on U&G examine what gratifications are sought and obtained from the media and how the media are used in the gratifications process (Miller, 2005). Researchers have posed many types of gratifications such as information seeking, personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment (McQuail, 1983). From this perspective, media behavior is conceptualized as both purposive and goal-directed in nature (Rubin, 2009).

According to Ruggiero (2000), U&G has often been especially applicable in the initial stages of a new mass communications medium. Thus it can be applied to study social media used by organizations for strategic communication. This perspective has been applied to various new communication technologies, such as blogs (Sweetser & Kaid, 2008; Sweetser, Porter, Chung, & Kim, 2008), Facebook (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Urista, Dong, & Day, 2009), and Twitter (Chen, 2011; Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010).

Using the U&G perspective, studies focusing on new communication technologies came up with several types of motivations and gratifications. For example, studies on message boards and blogs examined entertainment, diversion, information obtaining, evaluating what others think, reading content, learning opinions of others, surveillance, and interactivity (Clavio, 2008; Frederick, Clavio, Burch, & Zimmerman, 2012). In particular, research on the motivations and gratifications of Facebook use involved convenient information seeking, entertaining arousal, gainful companionship, self-expression, socialization, self-status, staying in touch with friends, making new acquaintances, convenient communication curiosity about others, and relationship formation (Hanson, Haridakis, Cunningham, Sharma, & Ponder, 2010; Park et al., 2009; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Urista et al., 2009).

According to Reitz (2012), the public is likely to be satisfied when organizations build relationships with them, and adapt and adjust accordingly to satisfy the publics' needs. In turn, organizations can also be gratified because their needs are met. In particular, sports organizations have started to identify their fans' needs and have tried to fulfill them through social media (Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012). Therefore, I could utilize the U&G approach to examine specific uses/gratifications in the relationship management of sports

organizations, such as entertaining fans. Satisfying the fans' needs could be beneficial for sports organizations to establish relationships with them.

Social Media and Twitter

One of the available tools to build relationships with fans and to cater to their needs is social media, especially Twitter. Research on social media has blossomed since these media came into being. Many studies on social media use stem from perspectives in communications (Chen, 2011), information science (Oh, Agrawal, & Rao, 2013), sociology (Greenhow & Burton, 2011), political science (Ragas & Kiouisis, 2010), cultural studies (Hall, 2011), and computer science (Shneiderman, Preece, & Pirolli, 2011).

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media is defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (p. 61). Boyd and Ellison (2007) defined social networking sites (SNS) as web-based services that allow individuals to establish a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, to display a list of other users with whom they can connect, and to view and traverse their lists of connections and those made by others within the system.

Twitter is a real-time information network that connects users to the latest stories, ideas, opinions and news about content they find interesting (Twitter, 2013). Twitter is a multiplatform Web 2.0 tool. It is partly a social networking and partly a microblogging tool and is freely accessible on the Web (Stevens, 2008). It can be used to connect with others as well as to post short content. Communication can be managed in the form of short messages less than 140 characters within Twitter (Grosbeck & Holotescu, 2008). The social network structure of Twitter allows its users to follow each other and interact through short messages. The exchange of

information on Twitter is immediate among peers (Young, 2008). Also, users can share information and ideas immediately by using Twitter on mobile devices (Griswold, 2007). By January 1, 2014, the total number of active registered Twitter users has reached 645.75 million (Huffington Post, 2014).

According to Witkemper et al. (2012), Twitter has become the most popular social media platform in the sports industry. The social and information-exchanging characteristics of social media, especially Twitter, can be used by sports organizations to establish relationships with the public.

Social Media and Organizations

In order to study sports organizations, we need to first understand the general organizations' use of social media. The development of new media has significantly strengthened organizations' abilities to communicate with clients, stakeholders, media, and the general public (e.g., Waters, 2007). According to Lovejoy and Saxton (2012), websites have become both the "public face" of the organization and the vehicle through which meaningful public interactions can take place. Organizations seem to employ new media for at least two primary purposes: information-sharing and dialogic relationship-building.

Social media such as Twitter can provide opportunities for organizations to interact directly with the public (Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). Organizations can utilize social media to promote dialogue and two-way conversations with the public (Merham, Theunissen, & Peart, 2009). Organizations can use social media to involve their stakeholders and to build a community under their mission and values (Lo & Waters, 2012).

Researchers have examined the social media use of diverse organizations, including community colleges (McAllister & Taylor, 2007), for-profit corporations (Park & Reber, 2008), and nonprofit organizations (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003). Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) found evidence of “dialogue” via examining Twitter accounts of *Fortune* 500 companies.

Specifically, nonprofit organizations’ Twitter use has received the most scrutiny. The functions that social media served for nonprofits comprised three major types: information sources, community builders, and promoters and mobilizers (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). A study showed support for the relationship-building potential of Facebook and Twitter via interviewing 40 employees from the American Red Cross (Briones et al., 2011). They have developed two-way dialogues with younger constituents, the media, and the community. Lo and Walters (2012) examined Facebook use of Chinese nongovernmental organizations and found it to be distinct as it adhered to the Chinese cultural values. Biswas (2013) studied social media use of health organizations (CDC and WHO) in a pandemic situation. They were demonstrated to use social media tools for interventions during outbreak communication.

Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) stated that organizations could use social media to create an online community via bonding messages with their followers. Studies on organizational communication could provide insights into community establishment, which might be applied to the measurement of community relationship in this study.

Social Media and Sports

Research has started to explore how sports organizations (Waters et al., 2010; Wallace et al., 2011; Pronschinske et al., 2012), athletes (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010; Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011; Sanderson, 2011), and fans (Clavio & Kian, 2010) use social media. Sport organizations, teams, and athletes have increasingly used social

media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to engage in dialogues and to establish relationships with their respective audiences (Blaszka et al., 2012). Social media have changed the traditional way athletes interact with their fans, and could help athlete users meet needs such as entertainment, diversion, and information gathering (Hambrick et al., 2010).

One social-media platform that has redefined communication among sports constituents (i.e., fans, athletes, teams, and organizations) is Twitter (Fisher, 2009). According to Clavio and Kian (2010), Twitter has become a permanent fixture in the sports communication landscape since its introduction in 2006. Of the top-10 most tweets per second recorded on Twitter, six of them are sports related, with the Champions League Final between Chelsea and Bayern Munich ($n = 32,097$) holding the number one spot (Larson, 2011). Some sports properties have actively engaged in partnerships with Twitter to create specific hashtag pages (Lawler, 2012).

Research has suggested that sports organizations and sporting-event organizers need to identify the needs and motivations of sports consumers and utilize this information to shape their marketing communication online (Filo & Funk, 2005) and develop relationships with supporters (Beech, Chadwick, & Tapp, 2000). The impact of social media on branding and marketing has been utilized by sports organizations (Coyle, 2010).

Studies on sports communication could provide this study with a unique perspective of sports organizations, especially NBA clubs, and sporting social media. These organizations might use social media differently from other kinds of organizations such as nonprofits such as for fanship.

Social Media Use for Public Relations

According to Ferguson (1984), OPR should be the central unit of study in public relations research. Public relations could be defined as the “management function that identifies,

establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1985, p. 4).

Relationship establishment through social media has begun to receive attention from public relations scholars (i.e., Briones et al., 2011; Waters & Jamal, 2011; Saffer, et al., 2013). Kent and Taylor (1998) provided strategies for communication professionals to use the Internet to develop relationships between organizations and the public. Public relations researchers have proposed a dialogic approach in which interaction between the organization and its publics are mutual (Reitz, 2012). Leeper (1996) claimed that dialogue could strengthen the organization-public relationship as it could identify the needs of both parties and help resolve their concerns. Some studies examined the role of social media in an organization’s public relations strategy (e.g., Briones et al., 2011). Organizations should strategically match crisis information form and source when responding to crises (Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011).

Interactivity was considered a key component in the study of mediated relationship building (Jo & Kim, 2003; Kelleher, 2009). Many public relations scholars have used Sundar, Kalyanaraman, and Brown’s (2003) conceptual classification of interactivity: functional and contingency interactivity. Functional interactivity mainly includes the features found on a website that allow users to interact in several modes. Contingency interactivity occurs when users’ roles are interchangeable and “interactants” are responding to one another (p. 35). Twitter can provide organizations with the ability to engage in contingency interactivity with the public (Saffer et al., 2013). Lovejoy et al. (2012) suggested that Twitter’s potentially contingent interactive messages, such as replies and mentions, can assist organizations in communicating with other users. Furthermore, higher levels of interactivity on the part of a message sender

(organization) can lead to a better quality relationship with a message recipient (public) (Saffer et al., 2013).

Social media can afford organizations a new venue to cultivate relationships with their target consumers because of the potentials use in relationship management. According to Bruning and Ledingham (1999), organization-public relationship could be categorized into three types: personal, professional, and community relationship. In order to examine how sports organizations used social media in this process, I utilized organization-public relationship as the framework to map them out. Though OPR scales have been widely used in various organizations such as nonprofits (Waters et al., 2009) and for-profits (Bruning, 2000), fewer studies have focused on sports organizations from the OPR perspective, especially in the social media context. This perspective can be used to analyze the relationship building of organizations in serving the public, such as information sharing, promotion, interactivity, etc. Thus, this issue was examined through the following research questions:

RQ1: How do sports organizations use Twitter to build relationships with the public?

Communication Tools Provided by Twitter

There are several types of communication tools provided by Twitter, such as following, public messages, retweeting, hashtags, and hyperlinks. According to Mamic and Almaraz (2013), Twitter users can follow others to receive their tweets and can be followed by other users. This friending behavior of following and being followed can lead to a reciprocal relationship between Twitter users (Small, 2010).

According to Lovejoy et al. (2012), organizations can communicate on Twitter through the use of public messages with the “@” symbol before the username of a Twitter user, which can direct the message to that user. Public messages can be used to create dialogues between

organizations and other users, which are viewable for any users following the organizations' accounts (Lovejoy et al., 2012). According to Hughes and Palen (2009), the frequency of public messages' use reduced significantly when one-way information sharing activities increase, especially during major events and crises.

Retweeting is a function of Twitter that allows one user to repost a tweet from another user by adding an "RT@[username]" to the beginning of the tweet (Lovejoy et al., 2012).

Several studies considered retweeting as a reliable indicator of the popularity and influence of Twitter messages (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010; Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010).

Organizations could increase their visibility and credibility by retweeting.

Hyperlinks can allow organizational users to get more out of the 140 characters and they can give greater credence to the tweets from publicly known sources of information (Mamic & Almaraz, 2013). Hyperlinks directed to photos and videos could potentially generate fan involvement and interaction in a different way from other communication tools (Mehdizadeh, 2010). According to Mamic and Almaraz (2013), the most commonly used services for shortening links were bit.ly and Twitter's own application, <http://t.co>.

According to Zarrella (2010), a hashtag indicates a specific topic shared by all the tweets with such a hashtag. For example, after the Haitian earthquake in 2010, the American Red Cross encouraged Twitter users to utilize the "#Haiti" hashtag when asking questions and spreading news about their relief efforts (Lovejoy et al., 2012). Hashtags have become a popular phenomenon in the sports industry over the last few years as various fans, teams, and leagues have used these tools to create dialogues regarding games and hallmark events (Hernandez, 2012; Louise, 2012; Schoenberg, 2012). According to Blaszkka et al. (2012), hashtags can be used by organizations or events for cross-promotional and branding purposes through hashtag pages. For

example, during the London 2012 Olympic Games, Twitter content including “#Olympics” was featured on the hashtag pages promoted by NBC (Brafton Editorial, 2012).

While some studies examined how nonprofit organizations (Lovejoy et al., 2012) and corporations (Mamic & Almaraz, 2013) utilized communication tools available on Twitter, sports organizations’ patterns of use of such Twitter tools have received few examinations. Therefore, the following research question was posed:

RQ2: How do sports organizations use the communication tools provided by Twitter such as retweeting, public messages, hyperlinks, and hashtags?

Wallace et al. (2011) examined the coverage of brand attributes, communication tools, and marketing coverage on Facebook pages of the NCAA Organization and Big 12 Athletic Conference and found significant differences in their Facebook use. The researchers examined these techniques separately rather than combined them. Though the relationship management (Bruning, 2000) and communication tools (Lovejoy et al., 2012) of some organizations have been studied separately, especially for nonprofit organizations, there seemed to be no prior studies incorporating these two techniques and analyzing their interactions in Twitter use. Some specific communication tools might be more frequently used for certain dimensions of relationships than other tools. Sports organizations could choose the appropriate tools for each relationship dimension. Thus the following research question addressed this issue:

RQ3: Is there a relationship between relationship dimensions and communication tools used by sports organizations on Twitter?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

To address the research questions, a content analysis was conducted. Data on Twitter use of sports organizations was obtained from their Twitter sites.

Sampling

In order to examine social media use of sports organizations, NBA clubs in the United States were selected. As NBA is considered one of the four dominant professional sports leagues in the U.S., and the other three are the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), and the National Hockey League (NHL) (Research and Markets, 2012). All the 30 NBA teams were included in the final sample. Twitter was selected as representative of social media. Unlike Facebook sites which may have privacy settings, most Twitter sites, especially public pages, can be accessed by any Twitter user. Twitter pays little attention to privacy when it comes to the distribution of the messages that users post (Vargo, 2011).

Subsequently, I collected data on the Twitter use of these NBA clubs. The first step was to determine whether these organizations owned official Twitter accounts. First, I searched the official website of the NBA and obtained a list of all 30 NBA clubs via <http://www.nba.com/teams/> in January 2014. Among them, 28 clubs had a prominent link to their official Twitter account on the home page, one club had a link on a sub-page of its official website, and only one club didn't show a link to a Twitter account. Then I looked up the name of each club via the Twitter search engine and found that every NBA club owned an official Twitter account which had been marked as a verified account by Twitter and that there was only one

account for each club. I followed the official Twitter sites of all NBA clubs ($n = 30$) with my own Twitter account, and therefore the tweets on those sites could be collected.

The research period was one constructed week (seven days) between October 29, 2013, the starting date of 2013-2014 NBA season, and February 28, 2014, the deadline of data collection in this study. This method was chosen because constructed week sampling has been demonstrated to be the most efficient sampling approach for content analysis of online news (Hester & Dougall, 2007), which is similar to Twitter posts of sports organizations. As there were a very large number of tweets posted by clubs every day, the amount of Tweets for one constructed week was reasonable for this study based on Hester and Dougall's (2007) standards. Taking the calendar as the sampling frame, I first identified all the 17 Mondays during this period and randomly selected one Monday as the first day of the week. Then the procedure was repeated to select the remaining Tuesday, Wednesday and so on to "construct" a week, ensuring that each source of cyclic variation was represented equally and therefore controlling for systematic variation (Song & Chang, 2012). Finally, I made the constructed week through selecting February 2, 2014 (Sunday), January 6, 2014 (Monday), November 12, 2013 (Tuesday), December 18, 2013 (Wednesday), October 31, 2013 (Thursday), January 17, 2014 (Friday), and February 22, 2014 (Saturday). The sampling process also included printouts of all the clubs' ($n = 30$) tweets during the study time span. The final sample consisted of 5561 tweets from the official Twitter sites of the NBA clubs ($n = 30$) during this period.

Measurement

According to Bruning and Ledingham (1999), organization-public relationship could be categorized into three dimensions: personal, professional, and community relationship. That

typology was considered as the foundation to construct the multi-item and multi-dimensional scale for OPR measurement (Ledingham, 2003).

Previous studies have created a few classification systems for social media engagement. One study examined three new dimensions of communication: information dissemination, disclosure, and interactivity (Waters et al., 2009). Rather than focusing on designing principles, these dimensions focused on the organizations' actual usage of the social media to determine how they were communicating with audiences. These three dimensions have been adapted to measure communication style and engagement on Twitter (Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009). Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) proposed three major functions of nonprofit organizations' microblogging: information, community, and action. Blaszkka et al. (2012) created categories based on the uses and gratifications approach to study sports communication on Twitter, which included interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content, fanship, promotion, and combinations.

Based on previous studies (e.g., Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Blaszkka et al., 2012; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Hambrick et al., 2010), I developed an original Twitter categorization scheme to examine how sports organizations used Twitter to establish relationships with the public. The major categories of professional, personal, and community relationship were oriented from Bruning and Ledingham (1999)'s OPR scale. The sub-categories of information sharing, interactivity, and fanship were borrowed from sports communication studies (Hambrick et al., 2010; Blaszkka et al., 2012; Clavio, 2008), the activity/event was from Lovejoy and Saxton's (2012) community function of social media for nonprofit organizations, the entertainment item was from the uses and gratifications approach (McQuail, 1983), and the promotion item was from the relationship marketing approach (Pronschinske et al., 2012). These major categories of

relationship management included professional relationship, personal relationship, and community relationship (see Table 1).

According to Bruning and Ledingham (1999), the professional relationship can be managed when services gratify the business needs of customers and the organization shows a willingness to invest financially in the organization-public relationship. Regarding this current study focusing on the role of social media in the relationship between sports organizations and fans, professional relationship could involve information sharing and promotion related to the club team, and athletes. Obtaining sports information may be the primary needs of fans following the Twitter account of the club, and promotion can be the major business purpose of sports organization operating social media. Information sharing can be defined as insight into athletes, teams, or sports, such as details about games and training sessions or recent events and results (Hambrick et al., 2010). It also includes content generated by other users (Clavio, 2008) and links to pictures, videos, and other websites (Hambrick et al., 2010). Promotion is defined as publicity related to sponsorships and discounted tickets or giveaways (Hambrick et al., 2010). Furthermore, this study extended this definition to promoting other brands or products. Twitter can be used as a marketing tool for brands (Weinberg, 2009), and many advertising and public relations campaigns have used Twitter in cooperation with NBA clubs. Thus, professional relationship was examined via information sharing and promotion on sports organizations' Twitter sites. The major difference between this category and the others was that it involved a one-way flow of sports and promotion information from the organizations to the public (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012).

When an organization is managing the personal relationship, its representatives may invest time, energy, thought and feelings into their interactions with members of key publics and

take a personal interest in them, and the organization should be willing to demonstrate commitment to the needs of the individual key public members (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999). For this current study, personal relationship may include online interaction between social media operators of sports organizations and their followers. The key indicators of this type of relationship were “dialogic” messages and those that attempted to interact with followers via “bonding” messages, such as tweets including “thank you” and “congratulations” (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Organizations can use social media to promote dialogue and two-way conversations with the public (Mersham et al., 2009). NBA clubs can take the personal interest, thoughts and feelings of their followers into consideration and interact with them via “@” symbol messaging or retweeting on Twitter in order to build the personal relationship. According to Clavio (2008), interactivity means “giving input and opinions, participating in discussions and communicating with fellow fans” (p. viii). In addition to fans, this study also examined other followers such as athletes and journalists because they have strong relationships with NBA clubs (Sheffer & Schultz, 2010). Therefore, personal relationship was mainly examined via direct interaction between clubs and followers, including sports fans, athletes, journalists, club staffs, etc., through “@” symbol messaging or retweeting on clubs’ Twitter sites.

When an organization is developing the community relationship, it is important that the organization supports or sponsors events which are of interest to community members, that it organizes activities in order to improve social and economic aspects of the community, and that the organization takes an active role in the community development (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999). Regarding the current study, community relationship could incorporate Seo and Green’s (2008) fanship, meaning the “reason that one considers oneself a huge fan of particular sports and teams” (p. 86), and the entertainment item from the uses and gratifications approach

(McQuail, 1983), which is also a significant need of sports fans using Twitter. Moreover, organizing online activities and offline events related with clubs are also considered an effective way to build community relationships between sports organizations and the public. Thus, the community relationship category contained organizing online activities, entertainment involving fans, and fanship through the expression of emotion.

Table 1. Categorization Scheme for Relationship Building

| Category | Sub-category | Examples |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| Professional Relationship | Sharing information related to teams and/or specific athletes, the coach and games, such as details and results of each game, sports news, content including links to other sites, etc. | Lakers: Injury Update: @paugasol's MRI confirmed that he has a mild sprain of his right ankle. (12/2/13) |
| | Promoting tickets and derivative products related with clubs and other brands or products via advertising, public relations, etc. | HoustonRockets: ON SALE NOW! All January and February home games are now available! Get your tickets here: http://www.houstontoyotacenter.com/events/category/rockets ... pic.twitter.com/zpwrLjG3tM (12/2/13) |
| Personal Relationship | Interacting with followers such as fans, athletes, journalists, club staffs, etc., via “@” symbol | HoustonRockets: Our fan Alex Kiani has been making signs at home for us all weekend. Thanks for the support, |

| | | |
|------------------------|--|---|
| | messaging or retweeting | Alex! pic.twitter.com/ewCV1L1cWh (1/26/14) |
| Community Relationship | Organizing online activities with followers or promoting events related with clubs and community | Chicagobulls: For more info on An Evening w/ the Chicago Bulls that @Stacey21King just mentioned, visit http://bit.ly/1bVTMH4 (1/29/14) |
| | Fanship, expressions of emotion about the team or athletes, and showing love for them | SacramentoKings: retweeted: KatieCracc: Fans getting some love from @jimmerfredette before tonight's game against Memphis. #ForeverPurple pic.twitter.com/pmFIEOAKQR (1/29/14) |
| | Entertainment, such as having fun with fans and relaxing them | Dallasmavs: In other news, this is funny! #MavsSnapchat #DALvsWAS pic.twitter.com/RHHeKXYEfA (1/1/14) |

The second research question focused on how sports organizations utilized the communication tools on Twitter. Lovejoy et al. (2012) studied several communication tools such as tweets, retweets, hyperlinks, public messages, and hashtags in order to examine nonprofit organizations' Twitter use. Additionally, Mamic and Almaraz (2013) examined videos and photos to explore the relationship between larger corporations and their stakeholders. Based on

the previous methods of Twitter measurement (Lovejoy et al., 2012; Mamic & Almaraz, 2013; Neiger, Thackeray, Burton, Giraud-Carrier, & Fagen, 2013), I examined the numbers of total tweets, followers, favorites, and retweets as well as public messages (PM), retweets (RT), tweets with hyperlinks, and tweets with hashtags in order to examine the degree of sports organizations' Twitter use as a communication tool (See Table 2).

The unit of analysis for some variables including the number of favorites and retweets, public message, retweet, hyperlink, and hashtag was each individual tweet on the official Twitter sites of the sampled organizations. The unit of analysis for the number of followings and followers was the Twitter account of each NBA club.

Table 2. Variables and Descriptions for Communication Tools

| Variables | Descriptions and Coding Information |
|----------------------|---|
| Number of followings | Total number of users that were followed by each club |
| Number of followers | Total number of users following the Twitter account before the beginning of result analysis |
| Number of favorites | Number of users who click "Favorite"; the amount was shown in the summary of each tweet |
| Number of retweets | Number of people who retweet the tweet; the amount was shown in the summary of each tweet |
| Public message (PM) | PM was coded by identifying the "@" symbol, posted before the username of the targeted Twitter user, representing a two-way communication |
| Retweet | It was coded by identifying the "Retweeted by...", "RT@" or |

| | |
|-----------|--|
| | “MT@” symbol, posted at the beginning of the tweet to indicate the author |
| Hyperlink | This variable was coded when the tweet contained a hyperlink to pictures, videos, or other sites such as the club's official website or news media |
| Hashtag | It was identified by the “#” symbol that marks the tweet as a message related to or referring to a specific topic. Tweets with one or more such symbol were coded. |

The third research question focused on the relationship between relationship dimensions and communication tools used by sports organizations on Twitter. Based on the current data, I examined the frequencies of communication tools’ use and the amounts of retweets and favorites received by each category.

Coding Procedures and Intercoder Reliability

In the codebook, tweet is the number of up to 140-character messages that sports organizations sent to their followers during the research time. The database of this study contained 5561 tweets generated during the constructed week by the 30 NBA clubs on their official Twitter accounts. Two coders participated in a training session where the coding protocol and code sheet were outlined and discussed. We developed the codes using an inductive process based on a review of tweets from a sample of NBA clubs in the constructed week. Subsequently, the coders coded the clubs’ tweets not included in the data set of this study. Most issues regarding the variables and coding protocol were discussed and resolved before starting to code the sample tweets.

The coding was based on previous categories including descriptions and examples (see Table 1 and Table 2). As for the relationship examination, each tweet was assigned a single code from the categorization scheme. In cases where a tweet seemed to serve dual purposes, codes were assigned according to what was considered the tweet’s primary purpose. Discrepancies on coding were discussed and the coding schemes were revised until 100% agreement was reached. Regarding the examination of the use of Twitter communication tools, it was determined whether each tweet contained the “@” symbol, hyperlinks, and hashtags and whether it was marked as “RT@” or “MT@” in the beginning. The numbers of retweets and favorites received by each tweet were also recorded. The time of each tweet was based on the posting date rather than the responding or retweeting date.

Intercoder reliability was established before coding the full data set to ensure that all coders were interpreting the variables and coding the data set similarly (Blaszka et al., 2012). A 20% subsample of the data set which included 1113 tweets was randomly selected and coded by each coder. According to Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (2008), an overlap of 10-20% data is acceptable for the testing intercoder reliability. The intercoder agreement and Cohen’s Kappa score for some key variables were displayed in Table 3. The Cohen’s Kappa scores for all the variables were above .75, which indicated a highly acceptable level of intercoder reliability (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). After the intercoder reliability had been established, the two coders were provided with a copy of the whole data set and the remaining 4448 tweets in the set were randomly distributed to each coder.

Table 3. Intercoder Reliability for Each Variable

| Variable | Relationship | Retweet | Public | Hyperlink | Hashtag |
|----------|--------------|---------|--------|-----------|---------|
|----------|--------------|---------|--------|-----------|---------|

| | Dimension | | message | | |
|----------------------|-----------|-------|---------|-------|-------|
| Intercoder Agreement | 90.5% | 97.2% | 99.6% | 99.4% | 99.7% |
| Cohen's Kappa Score | .82 | .94 | .99 | .99 | .99 |

The data analysis was conducted with SPSS version 22.0 through descriptive statistical analysis, chi-squared test, one-way ANOVA, and correlation analysis. Frequencies and percentages were also reported for all the variables.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

A total number of 5561 tweets were generated by the 30 sampled NBA clubs during the constructed week. The number of tweets posted by each club during the research period ranged from 64 to 434 ($M = 185.4$, $SD = 82.9$). On average, each club created 26.5 tweets per day ($SD = 11.8$), which varied from 9.1 to 62.0 tweets. A chi-squared test revealed that the number of tweets generated by each sampled club was not evenly distributed, $\chi^2(29, N = 5561) = 1075.4$, $p < .001$.

The first research question focused on how sports organizations used Twitter to manage relationships with the public. As shown in Table 4, most messages generated by NBA clubs were classified as professional relationship ($n = 3971$, 71.4%), including information ($n = 3687$, 66.3%) and promotion ($n = 284$, 5.1%). It indicated that NBA clubs used Twitter mainly as a medium to build professional relationships with followers. They often shared information related to clubs, games, and athletes and promoted tickets and other products or brands, which were also consistent with the primary purpose of their Twitter use. Besides, these clubs tended to report game details during each game. The number of tweets posted on game days seemed to be more than other days, especially on game details. As for each club, the number of informational tweets posted by each club during this research period ranged from 50 to 303 ($M = 123$, $SD = 51.4$), and the proportion of such tweets among all the tweets ranged from 36.1% to 90.5% ($M = 68.9\%$, $SD = 0.15$). The number of promotional tweets created by each club ranged from 2 to 26 ($M = 9.5$, $SD = 6.6$), and their proportions ranged from 0.9% to 13.6% ($M = 5.3\%$, $SD = 0.03$).

According to Table 4, 14.9% of all tweets were categorized as personal relationship ($n = 829$), demonstrating that NBA clubs also used Twitter as a platform for interpersonal communication with followers such as fans, athletes, journalists, and club employees. They could respond to their questions, share their experiences and feelings, and express thanks with dialogic messages via the “@” tool. The number of such tweets generated by each club during this period ranged from 0 to 109 ($M = 27.6$, $SD = 30.7$), and the proportion ranged from 0 to 40.5% ($M = 12.5\%$, $SD = 0.1$).

The least frequently used tweets were classified as community relationship ($n = 791$, 14.2%), which included activity/event ($n = 464$, 8.3%), fanship ($n = 225$, 4.0%), and entertainment ($n = 72$, 1.3%). It showed that this might be a less significant function for which clubs used Twitter. In particular, the number of activity/event tweets posted by each club during that period ranged from 1 to 42 ($M = 15.5\%$, $SD = 10.8$), and their proportions ranged from 0.5% to 20.2% ($M = 8.5\%$, $SD = 0.05$). The number of fanship tweets ranged from 0 to 36 ($M = 7.5$, $SD = 8.4$), and their percentages ranged from 0 to 9.8% ($M = 3.4\%$, $SD = 2.7\%$). In addition, the number of entertainment tweets ranged from 0 to 9 ($M = 2.4$, $SD = 2.8$), and their proportions ranged from 0 to 6.9% ($M = 1.3\%$, $SD = 0.02$).

Regarding the proportion of each club’s tweets, 29 clubs (96.7%) focused most on professional relationship with the largest proportion of those tweets related to information and promotion. Only one club (3.3%) focused most on personal relationship building with the most interactive tweets. There were no clubs, however, whose tweets were most associated with community relationship.

Table 4. Frequency Distribution of Relationship Categories

| Category | Sub-category | Frequency | Percentage |
|---------------------------|----------------|-----------|------------|
| Professional Relationship | Information | 3,687 | 66.3% |
| | Promotion | 284 | 5.1% |
| Personal Relationship | Interactivity | 829 | 14.9% |
| Community Relationship | Activity/Event | 464 | 8.3% |
| | Fanship | 225 | 4.0% |
| | Entertainment | 72 | 1.3% |

The second research question sought to examine how sports organizations used the communication tools provided by Twitter. Regarding the following and the followers of the sampled clubs, by the beginning of my result analysis, the clubs followed an average of 8729.5 users on Twitter ($SD = 29379.1$), ranging from 62 to 161,696, which was significantly different. They had an average of 673,866.1 followers ($SD = 796,993.0$), ranging from 189,646 to 3,672,346. To examine the friending behaviors of these NBA clubs, the researchers set up a Twitter account that was used to follow the 30 clubs in the sample. However, none of them followed back, and only five Twitter accounts of fans or club news followed the researcher's account.

Of all the tweets posted by clubs, 96.0% ($n = 5340$) received retweets, and 96.8% of them ($n = 5382$) received favorites from other users. On average, each tweet had 54.8 retweets ($SD = 180.9$), ranging from 0 to 6274. And each tweet received an average of 49.2 favorites ($SD = 158.8$), ranging from 0 to 7152. For each club, the mean of the retweets owned by each tweet ranged from 9.9 ($SD = 9.7$) to 323.3 ($SD = 616.4$), and the average of the favorites owned by each tweet ranged from 7.7 ($SD = 7.8$) to 280.1 ($SD = 597.0$). After a correlation statistical

analysis, it could be found that there were significant relationships between the number of followers of each club and the average of retweets ($r = .833$, $p < .01$) and favorites ($r = .778$, $p < .01$) received by each tweet for each club and respective clubs.

The frequency distribution of some communication tools are displayed in Table 5. 17.5% of all 5561 tweets were retweets ($n = 971$). The degree to which the retweeting tool was used by the sampled NBA clubs was consistent with previous studies on nonprofit organizations. For example, Lovejoy, Waters, and Saxton (2012) found that 16.2% of nonprofit organizations' tweets were retweets. The clubs posted an average of 33 retweets ($SD = 28.6$), ranging significantly from 1 to 94. Further analysis revealed that the retweeting sources included athletes, sports journalists and club employees. In addition, a one-way ANOVA showed that the number of retweets received was significantly different between retweets ($M = 81.5$, $SD = 331.9$) and original tweets ($M = 49.2$, $SD = 121.5$), $F(1, 5559) = 26.585$, $p < .001$. And the number of favorites was also significantly different between retweets ($M = 82.9$, $SD = 323.4$) and original tweets ($M = 42.0$, $SD = 85.2$), $F(1, 5559) = 55.381$, $p < .001$. Retweet was found to receive more retweets and favorites from Twitter followers than original tweet.

Of all the tweets generated by the sampled clubs during the period, 51.3% were public messages ($n = 2854$) identified with the "@" symbol. The clubs posted an average of 95.1 public messages ($SD = 53.1$), varying significantly from 11 to 241. It could be found that the major public messages were directed to athletes, fans, and other sports organizations. A one-way ANOVA showed that the number of retweets received was significantly different between public messages and non-PMs, $F(1, 5559) = 11.777$, $p < .001$, and the number of favorites was also significantly different, $F(1, 5559) = 11.708$, $p < .001$. It showed that public messages might be one factor that affected the number of retweets and favorites.

Regarding the hyperlinks, 42.7% of the total tweets contained hyperlinks ($n = 2375$). On average, each club posted 79 tweets with hyperlinks ($SD = 53.1$), ranging from 28 to 163. Most of the hyperlinks were directed to photos of games, athletes, and activities via Twitpic.com or Instagram App, videos of game fragments and athletes' interviews via TwitVid.com, and other websites such as the club's official website, news media, online stores, etc.

64.4% of the clubs' tweets ($n = 3582$) contained one or more hashtags, and the sample clubs generated an average of 119 tweets with hashtags ($SD = 65.0$), ranging from 19 to 293. This finding showed a greater proportion of tweets with hashtags than previous studies. For example, Lovejoy et al. (2012) demonstrated that nearly 30% of the nonprofits' tweets included hashtags in 2009, and Mamic and Almaraz (2013) found such tweets totaled 45% of the larger corporations' tweets in 2012. It obviously showed a more frequent use of hashtags in organizations' Twitter accounts. The frequent and diverse use of hashtags by these sample clubs might reflect that sports organizations paid more attention to managing the relationship with fans and their organizational branding through social media. In addition, a one-way ANOVA revealed that the number of favorites received was significantly different between tweets with hashtags and those without hashtags, $F(1, 5559) = 4.730, p < .05$. It showed that hashtags might be one factor that influenced the number of favorites.

Table 5. Frequency Distribution of Twitter Communication Tools

| | Retweets | Public Messages | Hyperlinks | Hashtags |
|------------|----------|-----------------|------------|----------|
| Frequency | 971 | 2854 | 2375 | 3582 |
| Percentage | 17.5% | 51.3% | 42.7% | 64.4% |

RQ 3 focused on whether relationship dimensions were associated with communication tools used by sports organizations on Twitter. A chi-square test revealed that there was a significant relationship between relationship dimensions and the use of communication tools. In particular, for retweeting, $\chi^2 (5, N = 5561) = 771.0, p = .000$; for public message, $\chi^2 (5, N = 5561) = 456.5, p = .000$; for hyperlink, $\chi^2 (5, N = 5561) = 376.8, p = .000$; and for hashtag, $\chi^2 (5, N = 5561) = 90.2, p = .000$.

As shown in Table 6, 67.7% of informational tweets contained hashtags and 69.4% of promotional tweets contained hyperlinks. In order to manage the professional relationship with the public, NBA clubs were more likely to apply hashtags to their informational tweets and hyperlinks to their promotional tweets. As specific hashtags could be easily searched on Twitter and noticed by followers, they might be a useful tool for releasing information. Many NBA clubs sold tickets and derivative products online; therefore, they tended to direct their followers to their online stores using hyperlinks.

In order to build personal relationships with their followers, the sample clubs utilized public messages (82.8%) more than other communication tools because they had to use the “@” symbols to reach other Twitter users and to participate in conversations. Also, 48.6% of interactive tweets were actually retweets. Clubs could share the lives and feelings of their followers by retweeting their tweets, which might cultivate personal relationships between them.

In order to establish community relationships, NBA clubs tended to employ hyperlinks (68.5%) in tweets about activities or events because they wanted other users to know more about the activities and events related with the club. They also preferred to include hashtags (71.6%) in their fanship tweets (e.g., “#LetsGoLakers”) to motivate their followers to support the club. In

addition, 76.4% of the entertainment tweets contained hyperlinks, most often linking to interesting photos or videos.

Table 6. Frequency of Communication Tools' Use by Each Category

| Category | Sub-category | Retweet (%) | Public Message (%) | Hyperlink (%) | Hashtag (%) | |
|--------------|---------------|----------------|--------------------|---------------|-------------|------------|
| Professional | Information | 336 (9.1) | 1589 (43.1) | 1531 (41.5) | 2496 (67.7) | |
| Relationship | Promotion | 50 (17.6) | 176 (62.0) | 197 (69.4) | 176 (62.0) | |
| Personal | Interactivity | 403 (48.6) | 686 (82.8) | 193 (23.3) | 422 (50.9) | |
| Relationship | Community | Activity/Event | 92 (19.8) | 275 (59.3) | 318 (68.5) | 280 (60.3) |
| Relationship | Fanship | 69 (30.7) | 95 (42.2) | 80 (35.6) | 161 (71.6) | |
| Relationship | Entertainment | 21 (29.2) | 33 (45.8) | 55 (76.4) | 47 (65.3) | |

The means of retweets and favorites for each dimension of relationship are displayed in Table 7. A one-way ANOVA showed that there were significant relationships between dimensions of relationships and the number of retweets, $F(5, 5555) = 8.511, p < .001$, and favorites, $F(5, 5555) = 15.464, p < .001$. On average, fanship tweets received the most retweets ($M = 111.4$) and favorites ($M = 122.2$), while promotion tweets received the fewest retweets ($M = 19.9$) and favorites ($M = 18.9$). It could reflect that fanship might be a significant factor which motivated followers of NBA clubs to retweet and favorite. Promotional behaviors of clubs on

Twitter were relatively less attractive among their followers, receiving fewer retweets and favorites. In addition, entertainment tweets also received many retweets ($M = 105.8$) and favorites ($M = 96.4$). One possible explanation was that sports fans had a higher level of entertainment need, which could be satisfied through retweeting and favoriting on Twitter.

In particular, a one-way ANOVA revealed that among interactive tweets, the number of retweets received was significantly different between retweets ($M = 77.4$) and original tweets ($M = 24.5$), $F(1, 831) = 13.235$, $p < .001$. The number of favorites was also significantly different between retweets ($M = 98.4$) and original tweets ($M = 27.5$), $F(1, 831) = 24.465$, $p < .001$. It showed that retweeted tweets might receive more retweets and favorites than original tweets. Besides, the amount of retweets received was also significantly different between tweets with hyperlinks ($M = 89.5$) and those without hyperlinks ($M = 38.1$), $F(1, 831) = 8.872$, $p < .05$. The number of favorites was also significantly different between tweets with hyperlinks ($M = 110.1$) and those without hyperlinks ($M = 47.2$), $F(1, 831) = 13.646$, $p < .001$. It revealed that tweets with hyperlinks received more retweets and favorites than those without links. Therefore, in order to build personal relationship, retweeting and hyperlinks could be effective tools to draw retweets and favorites from followers.

Table 7. The Mean of Retweets and Favorites for Each Category

| Category | Sub-category | Mean of Retweets (SD) | Mean of Favorites (SD) |
|---------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Professional Relationship | Information | 56.6 (131.8) | 45.5 (82.8) |
| | Promotion | 19.9 (37.7) | 18.9 (30.5) |
| Personal Relationship | Interactivity | 64.7 (238.5) | 74.8 (228.6) |

| | | | |
|------------------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|
| Community Relationship | Activity/Event | 39.4 (225.38) | 34.8 (162.3) |
| | Fanship | 111.4 (448.1) | 122.2 (509.3) |
| | Entertainment | 105.8 (271.0) | 96.4 (186.2) |

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The advent of social media has provided a great opportunity for sports organization to establish stable and diversified relationships with the public and their core stakeholders. To find out whether they tapped into this potential, this study has examined the relationship management of sports organizations and their use of communication tools provided by social media. This study might be one of the first attempts to incorporate relationship typology between sports organizations and their fans with social media communication tools.

Regarding relationship building of sports organizations, one major finding of this study was that they focused more on the professional relationship with their Twitter followers, including information sharing and promoting. More specifically, information sharing was the primary function for which sports organizations used Twitter. This finding supported the study on nonprofit organizations conducted by Lovejoy and Saxton (2012), which demonstrated that information served as the major function of the nonprofits' Twitter use. The information organizations released included news, announcements, events, and contents related with clubs, teams, games, athletes and so on, and what from other sources via retweeting. Though social media has been widely considered a two-way communication medium, dialogue might not be the key form of organizations' social media use. According to Lovejoy and Saxton (2012), nonprofit organizations relied on informational communication rather than interactive communication on their social media accounts. This might be an important implication for sports organizations. They could continue to share information from various sources such as site observation,

organization announcements, news media, etc. On the other hand, obtaining sports information might be the primary needs of sports fans following these organizations' Twitter accounts. By comparison, individuals, such as professional athletes (Hambrick et al., 2010), used social media mainly to maintain the personal relationship. In addition, sports organizations seemed to post more tweets on game days than other days. Their Twitter pages might draw more attention from followers on game days, and the effect of social media on building professional relationships might be better. The exact statistical difference can be examined by future studies.

In this study, the personal relationship was between sports organizations and Twitter followers, including fans, athletes and celebrities. Such tweets might receive many retweets and favorites due to their associations with some sports stars and celebrities. These types of messages provided insights into the interpersonal communication between representatives of sports organizations and potential consumers and others. It reflected the principle that consumers always come first. Ordinary fans could feel recognized and cared about by sports organizations when their Twitter accounts or tweets were exposed to all of the other followers of the organizations.

The proportions of community relationship and personal relationship were quite similar, which reflected sports organizations paid similar attention to these two relationships types. In order to build the community relationship, tweets about activities and events were posted most frequently. According to Kassing and Sanderson (2010), event-specific posts on social media were able to cultivate and increase interactivity with the public. Organizing online activities and offline events could encourage Twitter followers to join in the community of sports organizations and feel part of it. Organizations have been developing social media strategies to establish virtual communities with stakeholders (Li & Bernoff, 2008). Sports organizations could

also release emotions and show love on their team and athletes on their Twitter sites or through retweeting fans' tweets.

The type of communication tools used on Twitter could shape the way information was viewed and potentially influence the way users interacted with content (Wallace et al., 2011). In this study, hashtag was the most popular communication tool used by sports organizations. 64.4% of all tweets in the sample contained at least one hashtag. Hashtags have played an increasingly important role in the social media use of organizations. They can be used to organize the diverse tweets through specific topics. They can be easily searched by Twitter users and be beneficial for branding communication (Blaszka et al, 2012).

Most of the hyperlinks included in the tweets were directed to photos, videos, and other websites such as the club's official website or news media. Photos and videos could potentially generate fan involvement and interaction in a different way than other communication tools (Mehdizadeh, 2010). The hyperlinks present on Twitter could be an effective tool to combine content from different sources. Twitter followers can get access to the information from various sources simply by using Twitter. In addition, the links to online stores operated by NBA clubs can promote the sales of tickets and derivative products. Thus Twitter could become a useful platform for sports organizations to operate marketing strategies, which has been supported by previous studies (i.e., Williams & Chinn, 2010; Coyle, 2010). In addition, many clubs utilized the service that could shorten the character length of the URLs, such as bit.ly and t.co.

After incorporating relationship dimensions with social media communication tools, it was found that certain communication tools were used more appropriately for each relationship dimension. Professional relationship should draw more support from hyperlinks and hashtags, personal relationship could benefit from public messages and retweets, and community

relationship could be supported by hashtags and hyperlinks. According to Wilson, Fomasier, and White (2010), the variety of communication tools and content coverage has indicated a positive association with consumer behaviors. A variety of communication tools in combination with different types of content may enable sports organizations to appropriately communicate using these formats (Wallace et al., 2011). Sports organizations should select the most effective communication tools based on different dimensions of relationships when using Twitter. In turn, the reasonable use of those communication tools can potentially strengthen the professional, personal, and community relationship with the public.

Based on the findings of this study, I could provide some practical suggestions for sports organizations to use Twitter effectively. Engaging online consumers should fit with the specific organizational purpose (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011). Organizations should consider how Twitter can be incorporated into their overall public relations and marketing plans (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). The reasonable way to use Twitter to build relationships might rely on understanding the needs of sports organizations and the public and employing the right communication tools to meet their needs. The first step is to understand what functions each tweet serves, as far as the targeted public is concerned (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). The relationship categories presented in this study might be considered a blueprint for sports organizations to develop relationships with their publics with the help of social media. Moreover, sports organizations should learn from each other and explore the most effective method to operate their Twitter sites. They can also assign more employees to operate their official Twitter sites. In addition, they can organize more online activities on Twitter such as voting on the MVP (Most Valuable Player) of each game and guessing game results, etc. They may also create more opportunities for interactions between star athletes and their fans through public messages and

retweets. In this way, the fans of specific stars can know more about their affiliated sports organizations and become their potential public.

This paper could add to the growing body of literature on social media use of sports organizations to build relationships with their key publics (e.g., Wallace et al., 2011; Waters et al., 2010). It applied traditional offline OPR scale (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999) to the online context of social media. Moreover, the relationship category and its association with communication tools as used in this study could be applied beyond sports organizations. This relationship scale incorporated studies on organization-public relationship (Bruning, 2000), sports communication (Hambrick et al., 2010), and organizational communication (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Therefore, it could have applicability on many kinds of organizations, including for-profit and nonprofit organizations. In addition, the association between relationship dimensions and communication tools might provide a new direction for organization-public relationship studies. It measured the frequencies of each kind of relationship and summarized the common usage patterns of organizations to develop relationships with the public. Drawing from the previous usage patterns, organizations could utilize the communication tools provided by social media more effectively. In practice, it provided some strategies for sports organizations to use Twitter reasonably to fully engage stakeholders.

Limitations

It is important to note some limitations of this study. First, the tweets were coded into one of the six categories, yet some of the tweets might fit into more than one category as they were not strictly mutually exclusive. Occasionally, it was hard to reach a consensus regarding the predominant purpose of each tweet and into which single category we should place it. Second, the current study focused on the Twitter sites of NBA clubs, which have many games in one

season (generally about 15 games each month), and therefore large amounts of details about each game might be posted by clubs, especially on game days. As a result, many messages had to be coded as informational, the frequency of which might be significantly different from that in other types of organizations. Third, the research period was only one week due to the extremely large quantities of tweets ($n = 5561$) generated by the sample NBA clubs.

Future Research

Future research would benefit from comparing the social media usage patterns of several types of sports organizations, such as NFL clubs, NBA clubs and MLB clubs. Such research could study how various organizations rely on each relationship dimension. In addition, researchers could conduct surveys to examine the relationship between the motivations of organizations and their social media usage behaviors through the uses and gratifications approach, which may provide new findings on the OPR measurement from the perspective of organizations rather than the public.

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