

# What Customers Want: Defining Engagement on Social Media in Sport

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## **Abstract**

*While social media provide channels to engage customers, social media engagement is neither a well-defined nor well-understood term. The purpose of this study was to examine how sport fans view their own social media engagement, better understand what social media engagement means to them, and work to discover what types of social media content they find “engaging”. Through a series of focus groups, this exploratory research found that sport consumers are diverse in their understanding of engagement. Results suggest that sport-minded social media users have embraced a wide variety of social media interaction strategies that go beyond traditional measures and definitions of engagement. Given that consumer engagement is frequently touted as the ultimate goal of social media marketing, these findings encourage sport marketers to reconsider current engagement measures and develop more sophisticated content strategies for optimal consumer interaction.*

## **Introduction**

Social media have fundamentally altered consumer behavior and subsequently had a profound impact on marketing communications (Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, & Füller, 2013). Companies now have access to consumers on two-way channels, as opposed to the more traditional one-way media and advertising platforms. Current industry research indicates the average person will spend more than five years of their lives on social media (Mediakix, 2016). This behavioral evolution has turned social media into an “attractive channel for marketing activities” (Seng & Keat, 2014, p. 66). In fact, social media advertising was projected to reach nearly \$36 billion worldwide in 2017 (eMarketer, 2015), and according to Morrison (2017) social advertising spending was up approximately 62% after the first quarter of 2017. Specific to the sport industry, organizations are being encouraged to take advantage of this phenomenon by committing resources to building their social media presence and interacting with fans (Abeza, O'Reilly, & Reid, 2013).

By their very nature, social media encourage relationship building due to their potential to engage customers (Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012). However, researchers have cautioned against simply existing on social media as a means to attract digital consumers (Culnan, McHugh, & Zubillaga, 2010). In order to best connect with social media users, researchers need to unpack social media usage patterns (Miller & Lammas, 2010), and better develop an understanding of audience expectations relative to their social media experience. Further, while social media provide a channel for engagement (Rishika, Kumar, Janakiraman, & Bezawada, 2013), the term engagement is neither well-defined nor well-understood in the social media space (Sashi, 2012; Schultz & Peltier, 2013). Prior studies have evaluated aspects of social media engagement in sport (Clavio & Kian, 2010; Mahan, 2011; Phua, 2012); however, there is a lack of qualitative insight relative to the perspectives of social

media users in sport. The purpose of this exploratory research was to examine how sport fans view their own social media engagement, better understand what social media engagement means to them, and work to discover what types of social media content they find engaging.

## **Review of Literature**

### ***Conceptual Framework***

Scholarly research has advised that sport organizations approach their strategic use of social media from a relationship marketing perspective (Abeza et al., 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010), which may be ideal since social media facilitate the exchange of information and offer a place for interaction with customers, ideally helping organizations build trust and relationships with customers (Askool & Nakata, 2011). Sashi (2012) and Drury (2008) suggest social media should be used to connect with customers because these media offer a space to engage in conversations and enhance customer relationships.

According to Grönroos (2004), relationship marketing includes interactions, communications, and value processes. His theory postulates that organizations build relationships with customers by managing interactions, engaging in two-way communications, and creating added value customers perceive as beneficial to them. Given this definition, it stands that social media can be used to interact with and engage fans in dialogues by providing consumers with content they find valuable, which theoretically enhances customer-team relationships.

Focusing on consumer wants and needs is an important pillar of relationship marketing (Gronroos, 1996), and thus organizations should consider their definition of engagement in terms of their consumers' perceptions. Moreover, Baird and Parasnis (2011) highlight that organizations can connect more deeply with customers if they determine the type of interaction customers want on social media channels.

McGrath and O'Connor (2015) proposed a model for customer-focused social media marketing, which they suggested service-oriented organizations adapt. In their model, social media are used to interact with, engage, deepen relationships, actively listen to, and collaborate with customers. Building a loyal group of customers through engagement and interaction is the first step of social media marketing (McGrath & O'Connor, 2015). A primary question in sport marketing revolves around if fans are interested in engaging with sport brands, and how those fans would define the concept of engagement with those brands. If organizations use social media to understand consumers, increase satisfaction, and enhance the value of relationships with consumers, then social media can meet relationship marketing goals (Abeza et al., 2013; Williams & Chinn, 2010). If social media use is approached from a relationship-marketing paradigm as is suggested in the literature, then it is essential to ask customers their needs, wants, and uses of social networks to guide strategy for marketing on social media. Additionally, approaching measurement of engagement on social media should factor in consumers' perceptions of what engagement is, since consumers are the most important stakeholders when organizations fully adopt relationship marketing.

### ***Motivations for Using Social Media***

Researchers have examined reasons why consumers use social media, because understanding potential antecedents to participating in social media should drive social media marketing strategy (Tsai & Men, 2013). Identifying reasons consumers engage online aids the organization

in creating and delivering content consumers find useful and interesting. Heinonen (2011) reported that consumers participated in social media for entertainment, information, surveillance, opinions, and inspiration. In addition, individuals participated to create social connections. Most often, individuals have more than one motivation for using social media. When users feel social media meet their needs, they also believed social media were more useful (Casalo, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2010).

Research in sport has examined why fans use social media. Clavio and Kian (2010) investigated the most common reasons fans followed an athlete on Twitter and found that affinity for the athlete and content related to the athlete were deemed the most important factors. In an examination of college sport fans, Clavio and Walsh (2013) found student college sport fans used social media to watch videos, while still using traditional media sources or university athletic websites to obtain information. Student fans were willing to post comments on existing content or upload pictures, but were unwilling to engage in creating more substantial content. Finally, college student sport fans' uses of Facebook could be categorized as either information or interactivity. Similarly, Haugh and Watkins (2016) determined college sport fans were more likely to use Facebook and Twitter for information about sports, fanship, team support, and entertainment, and Instagram for entertainment, fanship, and to pass time. Also, Snapchat was used to pass time, and for entertainment, fanship, and escape. Finally, in professional sport, Gibbs, O'Reilly, and Brunette (2014) found fans most often wanted to hear about player or roster moves immediately, find information before others, follow games they could not watch, and learn about upcoming games on Twitter.

Overall, research has found that individuals participate on social media for entertainment, information, surveillance (i.e., keeping up with others), and creating social connections. Additionally, users were more likely to engage and interact when they felt social media was meeting their needs and easy to use, as well as when they were emotionally connected to the content.

### ***Engagement on Social Media***

It is often suggested that organizations use social media to encourage participation (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Notably, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) commented, "Social media are all about sharing and interaction, so ensure that your content is always fresh and that you engage in discussions with your customers" (p. 66). Indeed, the main goal of using social media from a business perspective should be to connect with consumers and spark conversations, which will eventually lead to sales (Woodcock, Broomfield, Downer, & Starkey, 2011). Organizations should focus on posting content that elicits engagement, encourages discussion, and builds conversation with consumers (Heinonen, 2011; Sterne, 2010; Thackeray, Neiger, & Keller, 2012; Walsh, Clavio, Lovell, & Blaszk, 2013). Actively engaging fans can increase the value of social media to organizations by increasing visibility and improving brand image (Goh, Heng, & Lin, 2013).

Researchers have provided suggestions on how to encourage engagement. For example, Malhotra, Malhotra, and See (2013) suggested organizations post well-thought-out photos, current topics, new products, or brand successes, include a call to action and ask for a post to be liked, or pose questions to increasing likes, comments, and shares. After reviewing the Facebook pages of 100 brands, Cvijikj and Michahelles (2013) found content designed to entertain customers, such as posing questions to Facebook fans, had the greatest effect on likes, comments, and shares. However, content promoting sweepstakes had the lowest level of

impact on comments, no effect on shares, and a negative effect on likes, indicating that consumers did not find value in this content. They also found posts including photographs received more likes, comments, and shares than videos or links.

In sport, Thompson, Martin, Gee, and Eagleman (2014) found consumers most often interacted with content that posed questions and appreciated behind-the-scenes content. Additionally, Boehmer and Tandoc (2015) found retweets of sport news by students were impacted by perceptions of credibility and likability of the source. Respondents were influenced by a tweet's originality, informativeness, and style when deciding to retweet. Also, characteristics of the users, including their interest in the tweet's topic, the relevancy of the tweets topic to the user, similarity in opinion, and impact on the user's followers, impacted whether they would retweet a message. Engaging with content was influenced by students' perceptions of their own Twitter followers' interests.

While research has suggested how to increase engagement (e.g., Baird & Parasnis, 2011; Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Malhotra et al., 2013; Thompson et al., 2014), the question still remains, what exactly is meant by engagement on social media? In past studies, researchers have used likes, comments, shares, retweets, favorites, reach, and other related metrics to measure consumer engagement on social media, however the concept of consumer engagement on social media is ill-defined and sometimes not defined at all. From a broad perspective, Schultz and Peltier (2013) suggest it involves a reciprocal relationship where both parties allocate time and effort, instead of merely a promotional offer to drive sales.

Researchers have attempted to differentiate aspects of engagement on social media. For example, Malthouse, Haenlein, Skiera, Wege, and Zhang (2013) determined there were two levels of engagement on social media: lower engagement where consumers passively consume content or interact on a very simple level and higher engagement where consumers participate in various forms of content creation and actively weave the brand into their lives. Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie (2014) applied the consumer-brand engagement concept to social media and created a model including cognitive processing, activation, and affection as pieces of consumer-brand engagement. This measure focuses on engagement with the brand, but does not address behavioral aspects of social media engagement or consumption, which limits its adaptation to measure connections between teams' social media use and its impacts on consumers.

Other studies have focused on viewable and behavioral measures of engagement. Ashley and Tuten (2015) used Klout score, number of Twitter followers and Facebook fans, and Engagement score (from Engagementdb) as measures of social media engagement. They observed accounts that tweeted more often had higher engagement scores. Additionally, offering an incentive for participation correlated with higher engagement. Academic and practitioner literature illustrates a wide range of similar measures of engagement including page traffic, frequency of visits, reach, number of followers, messages, time spent on page, likes, posts, reads, page visits, comments, and sharing content (Abeza et al., 2013; Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Lipsman, Mud, Rich, & Bruich, 2012; Sterne, 2010; Thackeray et al., 2012).

Hudson, Huang, Roth, and Madden (2016) measured social media interaction by asking consumers about their behaviors, instead of counting aggregate numbers of variables such as likes, comments, and shares. They defined social media interaction as the "proactive engagement with the brand on social media platforms such as following, replying, tweeting, sharing, liking, participating, and so on" (p. 3). By asking the frequency of interaction on a 7-point Likert-type scale and whether or not the consumer had ever interacted with the brand on

social media, they found individuals who followed brands' social media accounts had higher relationship quality with that brand. A higher level of interaction on social media resulted in stronger customer-brand relationships, as long as the consumer ascribed human-like qualities to the brand.

In another study attempting to measure engagement from the perspective of customers, Rapp, Beitelspacher, Grewal, and Hughes (2013) created scales to measure social media usage from a buyer, supplier, and seller standpoint. They asked individuals to create lists of social media behaviors they engaged in, eventually leading to the creation of a consumer social media scale, which included ten statements related to how and why customers interacted with the business on social media and was found to be reliable ( $\alpha = .96$ ). This study was unique in its attempt to explore engagement from the customers' standpoint, although its transferability to other contexts is limited.

Although relationship marketing is commonly suggested as a framework to drive social media strategy (Abeza, O'Reilly, Seguin, & Nzindukiyimana, 2015; Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015), few researchers have considered what engagement on social media means for consumers. In fact, little is known about whether consumers actually want to engage with brands on social media. Baird and Parasnis (2011) examined engagement on social media and found that a majority of social media users did not interact online even though they use the networks. Typically, consumers followed companies on social media to receive tangible benefits. The marketing intelligence company Affinio further supported this suggesting that 80-90% of active social media consumers leave little or no mark of their digital engagement with brands (Burke, 2015).

Although social media have the potential to develop customer relationships, companies must make active efforts to learn and address users' needs to most effectively manage social media for relationship building (Schultz & Peltier, 2013; Tsai & Men, 2013). While engagement is mentioned often in the literature, it is rarely defined or directly measured in academic studies. Part of the reason for this may be the lack of consensus on what engagement means or how to measure it. In many ways, the term engagement has become a buzzword in social media literature. Table 1 provides a summary of what literature has classified as engagement to date.

Given the uncertainty surrounding social media engagement, the purpose of this study was to more closely examine the term from the perspective of the sport consumer. The framework of relationship marketing was used to ground the investigation around sport consumers' use of social media in terms of their favorite sport team and explored consumers' perceptions of content and engagement with these teams on social media.

## **Method**

Due to the burgeoning nature of digital engagement research, this study was an exploratory endeavor. A qualitative approach was employed in an effort to develop a richer understanding of engagement as a human phenomenon and differentiate some of the subtleties of engagement as perceived by sport consumers. Qualitative approaches also allow the research design to be more flexible and circular (Smith & Caddick, 2012), which in this study was necessary for reaching data saturation. In an effort to stimulate a raw database of thoughts and ideas related to digital engagement in sport, a focus-group methodology was deemed appropriate. Focus groups allow the researcher to study reality from a relativist perspective, which according to Smith and Caddick (2012) "considers social reality as humanly constructed, multiple and subjective" (p. 61). Focus groups allow for individuals to interact with one another, thus

constructing reality using multiple viewpoints at the same time, capturing subjectivity and improving depth of knowledge. Additionally, research that involves the researched, as is the case in focus groups, has been found to provide greater depth of discussion because the group dynamic of this format allows interaction between group members that can be especially valuable to researchers (Gratton & Jones, 2004, p.154). This interaction can also improve the depth and richness of data (Rabiee, 2004).

### ***Procedure***

This research involved a series of both online and in-person focus groups. In an effort to access a diverse sample of sport-minded social media consumers, participants were recruited using Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit forums for professional sport leagues. Messages were posted to each of the above social media outlets with a brief explanation of the goals of the study and a link to screening questions designed to ensure that participants were sport fans and social media consumers. Respondents were assessed using the three-item team identification index (Trail & James, 2001). Their frequency of social media use was assessed using six questions asking their frequency of visiting their favorite sport teams' social media pages, liking content, commenting on it, sharing it, reading it, or posting on social media sites. It further provided the opportunity for researchers to gain basic demographic information such as age and gender such that focus groups could be constructed with as much diversity in these two areas as possible.

A seven-question discussion guide was developed based upon the findings outlined in the review of literature, a survey of literature on engagement across many industries (see Table 1), and the goals of the study. Questions were designed to be open-ended and focused on participants' general social media consumption habits (i.e., What social media do you use and how do you use it? List all social media you use at least on a monthly basis and rank them in order of how much you enjoy them. Why do you have them ranked the way you do?); sport specific social media consumption (i.e., How do you use social media to follow your favorite sport team? How do you engage with your favorite team's content on social media, if at all?); and social media engagement preferences (i.e., What kinds of sport-related social media content do you find most valuable or most interesting? If you find that content engaging or interesting what do you do with that content?). Participants were also asked to provide an assessment of current social media content strategies in sport (i.e., Do you think your favorite team does a good job with social media? If so, why? If not, can you think of a team that does?), and feedback as to what sport organizations might do to enhance their engagement with social media consumers (i.e., What would make you increase your engagement with your favorite team's social media?). A pilot study was conducted to fine-tune question design and ensure clarity, validity, and readability of the screening questions. This group was conducted online and included the same screening questions and similarly worded open-ended questions. After completing the pilot, responses were reviewed to determine the fit of the questions. The researchers also debriefed participants and asked for feedback on question wording. Minor adjustments were made based upon this constructive feedback.

Once the research design was complete, participants were distributed into three private Facebook groups that took place in January 2016. Multiple groups are essential to increase confidence in the findings (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). Facebook groups were implemented as a research tool in an attempt to reach participants in a contextual, easily accessible, and convenient setting. This format combats a major drawback of focus groups, which is the difficulty in scheduling a time when all participants can attend and the tendency for individuals to no show (Rabiee, 2004), by allowing individuals flexibility for when they respond and

convenience in location (Reid & Reid, 2005). Additionally, online focus groups can be completed asynchronously, which further supports participants' flexibility in responding and allows them time for reflection (Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2015). Reid and Reid (2005) suggested that while in-person focus groups generated more words, they did not generate more new ideas or answers. A research moderator posted one question per day over the course of a seven-day timespan. Participants were encouraged to discuss and debate each question within their respective group. The research moderator posed clarification questions as necessary in order to further develop the topics being discussed.

Two additional in-person focus groups were conducted in an attempt to increase the study's sample size and enhance the richness of our data. Additionally, conducting focus groups in a variety of settings can increase the confidence in data (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). Convenience and purposeful sampling strategies were used for recruitment. These focus groups were moderated using the same discussion-guide, took place in an on-campus qualitative research lab, and lasted approximately 60 minutes in duration. Discussions were audio and video recorded in their entirety and transcribed verbatim. Focus group moderators were trained and experienced.

### **Participants**

Past studies of mediated audience response in sport have focused on populations possessing "special knowledges, competencies, and enthusiasms, which they themselves wanted to reflect on and analyze" (Brunt, 1992, p.75). A purposive sample that can provide a great depth of information is necessary for qualitative research (Smith & Caddick, 2012). Accordingly, recruitment involved participants that self-identified interest in both sport and social media, giving them a vested interest in the topic.

A total of 27 participants were distributed into five focus groups that were constructed to be as diverse in gender and age as possible. Each group consisted of between five and six participants (Gratton & Jones, 2004), which was a large enough number of diverse perspectives without fragmentation (Rabiee, 2004). The age range of participants in the online component of the research was between 24-38 with an average age of 30 years. This included 13 male participants and three female participants. The age range of the in-person focus groups varied between 19-49. This included six male participants and five female participants. The in-person groups were also chosen purposively to expand the age range of participants and to increase the number of females represented.

### **Data Analysis**

Focus groups were conducted until data saturation was reached. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which organizes and describes data in detail (Smith & Caddick, 2012). Thematic analysis of focus group data was completed using the six-step process described by Braun and Clarke (2006), which includes familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report. Inductive analysis was conducted as previous research has not examined engagement from a consumer perspective. The focus group transcripts from both online and in-person groups were reviewed as a whole by the three researchers. Analysis ensued to uncover patterns and possible explanations of the data. All researchers inductively created codes using the process of comparative analysis in which similar participant sentiments were grouped together into a common pool. To improve reliability, researchers discussed codes to check for

congruency, and then multiple rounds of coding persisted as researchers refined the data into prominent themes reflective of the data. Final themes were ultimately defined and used to inform the results and discussion of research. A clear procedure, as evidenced by the six-step analysis procedure followed above, is essential for effective analysis of focus group data (Rabiee, 2004).

## **Results**

The purpose of this study was to investigate what engagement on social media means from the sport consumers' standpoint. After completing the thematic analysis process, the focus group data on social media engagement were organized into two major categories: social media engagement preferences and sport specific social media content preferences. Additionally, themes are discussed relative to what sport fans are using social media for, as well as the social media sources participants identified as being most engaging.

### ***Social Media Engagement Preferences***

This section details participants' thoughts on social media engagement in sport. Participants were asked to first describe their engagement with their favorite sport teams on social media and then elaborate on the specific social media practices they considered most engaging.

#### **Participant social media engagement behavior**

When asked about their engagement with teams, respondents mentioned partaking in a variety of behaviors including liking, commenting, sharing, tweeting at, re-tweeting, sharing online, and "favoriting" various pieces of social content. These practices varied based upon the participant's digital profile —some respondents exhibited markers of high level social sharing, while others seemed to favor a more conservative approach marked by a limited digital footprint. This range in attitude seemed to impact personal engagement strategies, with one respondent indicating, "I will typically share any material [about my favorite team] I find interesting with friends that share my fandom; I typically 'like' or 'favorite' most content posted by my teams" (Participant 13). This type of engagement contrasted with those who were more discriminant with their social sharing. For example, Participant 15 explained how they, "may leave a comment on Facebook, but not really any more than that." Similar minded participants described a process of social sharing in which they reported sharing only content that they believed was interesting or particularly newsworthy.

On the other end of the spectrum, one segment of participants mentioned they did not engage in the typical way engagement is thought of, explaining, "I just use social media for information gathering. I don't choose to spread the knowledge I get" (Participant 11). Another noted, "I want to see it [social media content] to be informed. I may not interact with it, but I'm thankful for the communication platform that is social media" (Participant 8). One respondent even suggested, "I see it more as a one-way flow of information" (Participant 13), indicating they do not view social media engagement in association with public interactivity.

The sharing of social content offline via instant messaging and in-person conversations was another practice participants reported engaging in. Participant 11 explained, "I might take a screenshot of really good [social content] and send it in an instant message to those who I think would also enjoy it." Participants explained how information learned on social media could be utilized to inform their personal discussion with others.



## ***Most Engaging Social Media Practices***

### **Humour**

Content that was entertaining or humorous in nature was highlighted by a strong majority of respondents who reported being more likely to consume this type of material. Participant 16 explained the allure of humor in detail noting:

“One NHL account that I absolutely love is the [Los Angeles] Kings account. I’ve seen so many things where they’re just taking shots at other teams or chirping people. It’s just really funny. It’s humorous. I remember one they were saying about San Jose when Katy Perry did the Super Bowl and she had the sharks in the back and they were like “oh San Jose, you finally got your big moment.”

Respondents indicated they were more likely to share entertaining content, explaining that humorous posts “...jump out at you the most. I don’t know if it’s the best content, but it’s something where if I enjoy it, I’m more inclined to share it so my friends can enjoy it” (Participant 20).

### **Personality**

Personality was a common theme discussed with reference to sport team social content and fan engagement. For example, Participant 19 recommended:

“I would say keep it short and sweet. But not exactly sweet. Like the Kings aren’t sweet and I would say they’re one of the best team accounts. Short and to the point, but also entertaining. And be unique – stick to your personality. I don’t like when teams are all over the place.”

Consistency in personality or tone of voice was brought up as an essential component for strong fan engagement. Participant 21 explained this using the example of the Brooklyn Nets franchise:

“They had their relocation – they tried to be all hipster and Brooklyn cool, but then you look at their social and it’s completely off base. I just looked right now and they have a picture of Windex for a grocery store ad. I mean come on. That’s not going to give you any credibility. That’s not what social is about. I get you have to have sponsors, but think about it.”

Along with personality, respondents indicated it was important for teams to stand out if they wanted fans to interact with their content. There was an expressed need for value. Participant 17 specifically recommended teams avoid recycling others’ content, explaining, “I would say avoid re-tweets. Make it original. I don’t like it when teams just re-tweet accounts. It’s not really relevant. And even if it is, it’s kind of like – you’re going to see it anyway.”

### **Quality content**

Overwhelmingly, the presence of visual content was deemed necessary for posts to be considered interesting, engaging, or even worth interacting with. Respondents mentioned this repeatedly explaining, “If there isn’t a visual, I likely pass right by it” (Participant 18). Another participant stated their belief that, “Words get lost in the shuffle if there’s no visual” (Participant 17).

Quality content, that was well thought out and accompanied by strong visuals, emerged as the current gold standard for social media engagement among this sample. “If it’s something where

if it catches your eye – you'll look at it. And even if it's something you don't necessarily love or were expecting to see, if it looks good, you're likely going to enjoy it more. Even if it's not something you're as interested in" (Participant 19).

Explicitly, fans suggested content should be better than what they could create on their own. For example, Participant 19 stated, "High design is definitely better. Especially for professional teams. If it looks like something I could do, I'm not usually impressed. If it looks like something I could make, and I can't do anything on Photoshop, how credible can you be? It's not going to catch your eye."

### **Know your audience**

Respondents were able to discern the importance of team content that speaks to fans on social media. They suggested teams pay close attention to what their fans want and provide content of value to them on social media. Participant 20 detailed:

"I guess just understanding what their followers want because good teams get reactions out of their followers. They get the likes. They get the shares. You see that, and you're like OK, we have something here. We have content that people are into. And then good teams don't necessarily repeat it, but they bring it back in different ways to attract new followers. I find that content that really shocks everyone is huge compared to posts that are just more information about the team and the business side of things."

Along with finding out what their fans want, respondents suggested teams put the effort in if they wanted to realize the benefits of social media. Participant 18 expressed this sentiment:

"I think it's about showing that you care and putting the effort into it. If you want to have engaging content, you're going to take notice of what the fans want and you're going to give it to them. You're going to pay attention to the trends and keep on top of stuff. You're going to go that extra step to make sure your content is high quality so people pay attention to it. And then I think fans show you the love back with loyalty if you can be like that and show you care and are trying your best to provide value."

### **Frequency of posts**

Participants appreciated balance when it came to the frequency of posts. Accounts deemed to be posting content too often were a turn-off for participants with many noting they would consider unfollowing a team (or individual) if they posted too many times in a day. "It's just too much on your timeline. Usually they'll go in spurts. So you'll see like 10-25 things at once - you're just scrolling through needless information" (Participant 17). The length of a post was also found to be important. Short highlights were brought up as a good way to engage fans; however, it was generally agreed upon that videos should not last much more than approximately 20 seconds in duration.

### **Social listening**

Respondents reported an appreciation for teams that showed evidence of social listening. This was evidenced in the basic form of re-tweeting fan content. Respondents detailed the pleasure and excitement they felt when a team would recognize them publicly. A participant recalled their experience with this stating, "I was re-tweeted by Ohio State once and it was kind of like "Oh sweet!" My opinion aligned with their opinion or they thought it was cool" (Participant 26).

## ***Social Media Content Preferences***

This section discusses participant thoughts relative to specific social media content preferences that might positively influence fan engagement. Noted content preferences included: behind-the-scenes posts, promotions, historical content, current issues, and the posting of team-specific information.

### **Behind-the-scenes content**

A preference for behind-the-scenes content was a common theme discussed among participants. Participant 19 explained:

“I like the behind the scenes stuff on team feeds. I get to know the players better. I know the Rangers do something where players go behind the mike. So instead of Jim Cerny interviewing players, Derek Stepan interviews the players. They go for their Superbowl picks and stuff that’s more fun. It’s a unique twist on interviews.”

Respondents were eager to connect with teams and athletes outside of the sport itself and they appreciated human-interest stories. Respondents commented, “I find the most engaging sport-related content to be the stories, both through video and articles, that show or tell information about the players and who they are as people” (Participant 4).

### **Promotions**

Giveaways and contests were mentioned as potential ways to engage respondents and other sport fans on social media. Participants stated, “I would say giveaways. Ticket giveaways. Cool contests. I’ve won tickets twice through the Rangers and now I follow them very closely. From an engagement standpoint, that was great” (Participant 19).

### **Current issues**

In a similar vein, fans expressed a preference for teams to stay knowledgeable with regard to current issues and relevant pop cultural references. For example, respondents stated, “I think it’s better when it’s not straight sport and they show they know what’s going on” (Participant 16). Participant 20 summed up the importance of pop culture references stating:

“I also think it’s good because you’re not expecting it. Say you have an interest in some TV show like Game of Thrones and then someone tweets out a reference to that, you’re not expecting that from whoever, let’s say the Dallas Stars, so it really catches your eye. It gives them credibility. You see they know what’s going on and it’s funny or it’s cool.”

### **Historical content**

Respondents additionally discussed the incorporation of historical content into team social media materials. One respondent remarked:

“I love the historical photos of old players, stadiums, etc. That is very appealing to me. In addition, I love the video that is so accessible and I really enjoy what some accounts are doing by posting “throwback highlight videos” of old SportsCenter highlights that happened on that particular day X amount of years ago” (Participant 8).

Another participant echoed this sentiment stating, “Really well done photography and video is most engaging to me. I especially like when teams post historical footage/photos. I much prefer seeing classic shots of Wrigley Field or former Bears greats, than a sponsored photo of the punter with a bank executive” (Participant 7).

### **Team-specific updates**

Finally, and perhaps most intuitively, respondents expressed a desire for their favorite teams to focus on posting timely information about the team, players, and games at hand (i.e., stats and scores). For some participants, this was the only detail they wanted from team social media feeds with a small segment of respondents reporting they were not engaged by the social content they perceived to be outside of the realm of the game.

### ***How Sport Fans Are Using Social Media***

#### **Information gathering/news source**

Sport consumers in this study reported using multiple social media channels to gather an assortment of sport-related news content and information. Respondents highlighted Twitter as “a natural news outlet,” (Participant 20), and agreed that the Twitter platform allows them to quickly search for the information that they are looking for including features such as team stories, injury reports, statistical analyses, and scores. The live tweeting of sport events, particularly games that participants were unable to view, was a well-received option.

The consumption of sport-related news articles on social media was also strong among this population. One respondent stated, “I like reading the articles to keep up with current news on my team” (Participant 4). For some respondents, the consumption of news articles was their only interaction with teams on social media. One respondent commented, “Outside of reading [team related articles], I really don't engage [with sport teams on social media]” (Participant 27).

#### **Friends and family**

The use of social media to keep up with friends and family was an often-cited motivation for social media use. Participants reported using social media tools to both connect with acquaintances and easily share common interests. One respondent captured this explaining, “I will check in occasionally to see if anything big has happened with my friends that I haven't heard about already” (Participant 3). Respondents also reported using social media to engage in sport specific dialogue with friends, family, and fellow fans. These conversations were not necessarily happening in team social media spaces, nor were they happening with team members or team personnel. This social interaction appeared to take on two main forms: public discussions with participant's networks on social media feeds, and more private conversations, which occurred through direct messages, group chats, and instant messaging capabilities. Participant 16 noted, “I get a lot of my information through my friends...it's nice to see because it's a different perspective of the game and a way to discuss sport with your friends”.

#### **Following celebrities**

Many respondents mentioned using social media to keep up with what their favorite celebrities were doing. Sometimes these celebrities were sport-related, other times they were not. Participant 24 noted, “...for example I follow Olivia Munn on Instagram who is Aaron Rodgers girlfriend but only because she is Aaron Rodgers girlfriend. And then she posts pictures of him and them all hanging out. And their dog, Chance Rodgers, has his own Instagram.”

### **Connecting with athletes**

Respondents liked content about players and used social media to get to know players or feel connected to them. They reported using social media to learn about things happening outside of the sport itself. This was similar to the following of celebrities as many respondents viewed athletes as celebrities. Participant 25 explained, “I kind of like when they share about their personal life more. I am probably one of those weird millennials who like wants to know more about the baseball player than the baseball player probably wants me to know about but when they like post personal pictures and stuff about their life that’s what I’m more drawn to.”

### **Connecting with sport teams**

Overwhelmingly, respondents reported following their favorite teams on multiple social networks. When asked to expand on this practice, many respondents indicated that social media team associations were viewed as an expression of fandom that represented their loyalty to the organization. Participants often noted that while they may follow their favorite teams on various social platforms, this was not necessarily a means for obtaining information or engage directly with the team, but rather a sign of team affiliation. To this point, one respondent said, “I don’t know that I even really pay attention to a lot of the stuff my teams put out [on social media] – but I follow them” (Participant 18).

### ***Most Engaging Social Media Sources in Sport***

While discussions were largely focused around the social media content of sport teams, it is important to note that when asked about the top social media follows in sport, respondents professed an affinity for sport news resources (i.e., Bleacher Report, Deadspin, The Hockey News) as opposed to sport teams. Participants were quick to note that these sources were quicker than teams to post information and often provided stronger reporting. For example, one participant noted, “There are so many other options available that give better information than the team account, and [they] take the deep dive that goes beyond the press release on other matters” (Participant 14). This feedback may be of particular importance to the social media managers of sport teams as they strive to strengthen their fan engagement strategies.

### **Discussion**

While social media provide a channel to engage customers (Rishika et al., 2013), engagement is not a well-defined or well-understood term in the social media space (Sashi, 2012; Schultz & Peltier, 2013). Examining how sport fans view their own engagement, what it means to them, and what they find engaging is an important step for organizations that hope to build relationships with fans through social media channels. From a relationship marketing standpoint, it is essential to focus the definition of engagement on social media around the consumers’ perspective because, as Egan (2004) contends, consumers are at the core of relationship marketing strategy. Results from focus groups suggest the idea of engagement from the fans’ perspective is different than that of the perspective commonly found in social media marketing literature. In fact, the results of this research point toward a variety of social media engagement consumer profiles and variable engagement preferences. These findings are unique and highlight a disconnect between researchers, practitioners, and users, and sport managers should consider addressing the gap by making changes to their strategy on social media channels.

### ***Engagement to the Consumer***

Similar to Baird and Parasnis (2011), the results of these focus groups suggested fans were not actively engaged. However, this does not mean social media are not effective marketing channels, but that the measures of engagement used by marketers might not accurately reflect the number of engaged consumers or how they are engaged. While engagement is often measured using the number of likes, comments, favorites, retweets, and shares, sport fans indicate their idea of engagement also includes reading content, sharing it offline with friends and family, and using it in conversations in the work place and various social settings. This type of engagement is more difficult for organizations to measure because it cannot be seen in analytics provided by social media sites, Google, and other analytics companies. To accurately assess customer engagement, measures that take these actions into account must be created. It seems likely customers must be asked about their behaviors to truly measure their level of behavioral engagement.

The participants interviewed for this study did identify some traditionally interactive methods of social media use (liking, commenting, sharing), but a large proportion of their responses focused on more passive forms of interactivity in the social media sphere. Participants focused their responses mostly around information gathering, following players on social media, and consuming materials produced by teams. Gibbs et al. (2014) and Haugh and Watkins (2016) also found information gathering to be a prominent use of social media for sport fans. It is evident consumers turn to social media for information, potentially before other news networks or team websites. The desire to follow players on social media was also expressed by participants in the study by Clavio and Kian (2010). It may be important for sport teams to consider highlighting their players outside of the sport to capitalize on fans' desire to connect with them, allowing sport teams to facilitate relationship-building between players and fans, thus strengthening the overall team-fan relationship. While social interactivity was a part of overall social media usage, it was focused at least in part on interactivity within the participant's own social circles, rather than with specific teams or players.

There were not many participant comments asking for more direct contact or invitations for user-to-team engagement, nor were there lamentations over the lack of direct interaction between the participants and teams. These findings could indicate a type of interactivity that is more one-sided and consumption-based than truly interactive and exchange-based. This would stand in contrast to several of the items in scholarly literature that focus on social media engagement as a back-and-forth or contributory phenomenon (e.g., Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Hudson et al., 2016; Malthouse et al., 2013; Schultz & Peltier, 2013), and may require a change in the ways that sports teams approach the concept of interactivity. Rather than engaging audience members in attempts to craft content replies, company efforts may need to focus on creating in-house content that is dynamic, entertaining, visually appealing, and possessing a depth of information not found in other information venues. Additionally, evaluating the success or failure of content on social media cannot be done by examining simple engagement metrics, as these might be misleading and do not capture the myriad of passive and offline interactions driven by this content. Teams may need to develop a consumer feedback survey mechanism to better evaluate content strategy. Additionally, researchers need to reconsider how engagement is defined in their studies to better connect interaction and engagement on social media with business outcomes.

### ***Content Preferences to Build Relationships***

Focusing on consumers' wants and needs is an important pillar of relationship marketing (Gronroos, 1996). As such, this study explored the content consumers were most interested in. Content that appealed to participants was focused mostly on the forward-facing aspects of the team accounts they follow. Emphasis was placed on the types of content published, the voice in which that content is published, and the quality and visual attractiveness of the content. Including visuals as part of the content on social media was identified by Cvijikj and Michahelles (2013) to be effective for encouraging likes, comments, and shares of content.

In support of the suggestion by Cvijikj and Michahelles (2013) that brands post content designed to entertain Facebook fans, focus group respondents mentioned they liked content that was humorous, personal, and entertaining. From a relationship-building standpoint, respondents also highlighted that behind-the-scenes content and personal interest stories were of value. These types of content serve to provide additional information to fans that cannot be seen otherwise. This added value is an important piece of relationship marketing (Gronroos, 2004). However, the variety in types of content preferred by fans, and the fact that some still just want game or team-related information suggests it is difficult to meet all fans' wants and needs. Additionally, the presence of visual content was repeatedly mentioned as essential to respondents, with a few respondents specifically mentioning the importance of short videos or GIFs. Further, team marketers should consider the length of videos they are posting as respondents suggested they would only watch 10-20 seconds of video before moving on or becoming bored. In light of this sentiment, GIFs potentially offer a better visual content option for social media managers. Teams might also consider using channels for different purposes (such as Twitter for game facts and Facebook for personal interest) in order to better meet the needs of those using various social media platforms.

Participant responses also highlighted the importance of strategy on social media. Respondents stated that they value high-quality content that is well thought out. Participants also discussed the importance of teams not taking over news feeds with too many posts. Hudson et al. (2016) supported this, cautioning marketers to avoid sending too many communications on social media, unless they are sure they have customer buy-in. These responses potentially speak to the need to train social media staff or hire staff with experience. Little research has examined the use of social media from an organizational standpoint, however, this research underscores a high level of sophistication among social media consumers in sport. Social media strategy was easily discerned by participants and identified as a marker that separated those who did social media well, from those who do not. This finding supports the need for trained social media managers.

### **Conclusion**

Taken as a whole, the sentiments from the focus group participants painted a picture of the ideal social media team presence being one that provides quality stories, focuses on behind-the-scenes elements, and presents information and materials in ways that are both visually impressive and personally engaging. There was a desire to see teams avoid posting too often, posting uninteresting content, and posting content in an uninteresting manner. In many ways, the participants seemed to be encouraging sports teams to acquire a more professional media approach to the way that they presented themselves on social media, and that the participants were viewing teams' social media accounts in competition with sports media accounts and other

teams' social media accounts. Additionally, it appears fans are judging content quality against all social media content they consume.

The goal of this research was to uncover how fans viewed their interaction with sport teams on social media to try to create a deeper understanding of engagement on social media. The findings of this study are unique because it is the first to focus on how consumers view engagement, instead of assuming consumers desire two-way interaction and communication. Additionally, the methodology of this study focuses on the consumers, instead of trying to ascertain what content is beneficial and what engagement means using posts gathered from social media, this study is unique because it inquired the answers to what is engaging and how do you consumers engage directly from them. Research related to social media marketing is behind in its attempts to understand consumer behavior on these networks utilizing methods that actually interact with the consumer. While this research is exploratory and qualitative in nature, it makes an important step toward establishing a benchmark for social media engagement from the consumers' perspective. From a theoretical perspective, it indicates that consumers desire content that provides them with added value, connects them to teams and players, and can be used in their social interactions and communications, which lends support to the use of relationship marketing as a conceptual framework for examining social media marketing in sport. From a practical standpoint, sport marketers should start building their social media strategy by asking their fans what information they want on social media, potentially focusing their different social media networks on different types of social media users, and expanding their definition of what constitutes interaction from countable measures such as likes, comments, and favorites, to consumption and integration outside of social media platforms.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

While sample size was adequate for qualitative inquiry, one of the main limitations of this study was the inability to compare across groups and different types of users because of the limited number of individuals who participated. Future research should attempt to create a measure of engagement on social media that can be used to study how different types of social media can be used to improve customer relationships and make them feel engaged with a sport organization. This could be best accomplished by distilling the findings of this study into a survey instrument, and then administering that instrument to sports fans that utilize social media. This could then lead to the establishment of factors of engagement for sports fans, utilizing uses and gratifications as a theoretical lens. Further, it could lead to the construction of digital fan profiles, which take into consideration the type of interaction sport consumers are looking for in social media channels, and allow for comparisons across consumer profiles.

Additionally, while the age of participants matched that of social media users, it did not represent the entire spectrum of sports fans. The sample was also heavily weighted toward males, meaning the female viewpoint may not be well represented. Once a scale is created, future research can examine differences based on age and gender, which may help delineate how different generations and sexes use social media to engage with sport teams differently, leading to suggestions on how to reach these markets.

Finally, two types of focus groups were used in this study, and potential differences in how participants interacted online versus in person could affect responses. Online focus groups were used to reach users in the context of the research; however, interaction between individuals was limited to the time they spent accessing the group. In-person groups were used to reach data saturation, and while similar findings were uncovered across groups, interaction during in



person groups was easier to encourage and observe. Because of this, more probing was needed in the online groups than during in-person groups. Future research would benefit from a mixed-methods approach where a survey instrument is used to address what engagement means to consumers and then interviews or focus groups are conducted to determine why they feel this way and what sport teams can do to effectively reach them on social media networks.

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**Table 1:** *Classification or Use of Engagement in the Literature*

Author	Classification or Use of Engagement
Schultz and Peltier (2013)	Reciprocal relationship where both parties put in time and effort
Malthouse et al. (2013)	Passively consumer content or interacting on a simple level; participate in content creation and weave brand into their lives
Hollebeek et al. (2014)	Scale with cognitive processing, activation, and affective components
Ashley and Tuten (2015)	Klout score, number of Twitter followers and Facebook fans, and Engagement score (from Engagementdb)
Abeza et al. (2013); Jahn and Kunz (2012); Lipsman et al. (2012); Sterne (2010); Thackeray et al. (2012)	Page traffic, frequency of visits, reach, number of followers, messages, time spent on page, likes, posts, reads, page visits, comments, and sharing content
Hudson et al. (2016)	Following, replying, tweeting, sharing, liking, participating
Rapp et al. (2013)	Scale using statements about why customers interacted on social media such as, "I use social media to communicate with retailers," and, "I use social media to follow sales and promotions."
Malhotra et al. (2013); Cvijikj and Michahelles (2013)	Likes, comments, and shares