SHARE, LIKE, TWEET AND CHEER:
AN EXAMINATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AND THE NFL

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Recreation, Sport and Tourism
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2012

Urbana, Illinois

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ABSTRACT

Sport is an integral part of American society and no sport in the United States has achieved a greater following than the National Football League (NFL). The introduction and implementation of social media is granting fans unprecedented access to leagues, teams, and players. and providing sport marketers, athletes, and media members with the ability to communicate more effectively with fans. Despite the longevity and continued popularity of sport, few studies to date have explored how and why sport fans are utilizing social media as part of their fandom. The continual rise of social media adoption rates among fans, coupled with the increased social media marketing efforts within professional sport, illustrates a research area worthy of examination. Examining social media's role within sport fandom will shed light on sport fans' social media use, preferences, and attitudes, as well as contribute to the contemporary sport literature related to consumer-brand relationships and fan identification. Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation was to identify and examine how NFL fans are using social media as part of their fandom and why they make the effort to do so. A total of twenty individual, in-depth interviews were conducted with highly identified NFL fans. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and subsequently analyzed using constant comparative techniques. Through the use of grounded theory, a theoretical model of the modes of social media usage by NFL fans was developed. This model consists of three modes of social media usage including: (1) *access*, (2) *voice*, and (3) *validation*. By recognizing and defining distinct modes, this study provides a blueprint of the ways that fans have incorporated social media into their fandom. This categorization may prove beneficial to NFL teams, players, and sport media members as they try to determine the best ways to leverage social media in order to reach various types of fans. Findings from this study also provide insight into the process of social identification among NFL

fans and demonstrate social media's impact on the development of relationships (i.e., parasocial attachments) between fans and human brands (i.e., NFL players).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The process of writing a dissertation is intense, time-consuming, and difficult to complete without guidance and support from individuals who have done it before you. I feel fortunate to have secured a committee consisting of professionals from within a variety of academic fields, each of whom played a vital role in the completion of my dissertation. First, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Carla Santos. Carla, I could not have asked for a more knowledgeable, supportive, and encouraging advisor. I truly appreciate all of the time and effort you devoted to me throughout my doctoral program. Your mentorship has been invaluable to me and has dramatically impacted my experience as a doctoral student at the University of Illinois. I greatly value both the professional and personal relationship we have built and look forward to collaborating with you on future projects.

I would also like to thank the other members of my committee who, like Carla, played a significant role in the completion of my dissertation. I thank Dr. Cele Otnes. I value your insight and appreciate your suggestions regarding the best way to present the interpretations of my findings. Thank you to Dr. Michael Raycraft for being the first person to suggest I pursue my Ph.D. in the RST department. It was great to have you with me from the beginning to the end. Thanks to Dr. Patrick Vargas for providing alternate ways to think about my findings. Your knowledge, suggestions, and humor are greatly appreciated. Lastly, thank you to Dr. Scott Tainsky for agreeing to join my committee on such short notice. Your expertise within the sport field positively impacted the way I approached my dissertation.

Additional thanks go out to my family. Mom, Dad, and Renee, you continue to express interest in my academic endeavors and always provide encouragement along the way. Thank you for the constant love and support you have shown me for as long as I can remember. Likewise,

Linda, Bill, and Eric, you are the in-laws that I always hoped I would have one day. Thank you for the love you have shown me since we first met and for the support you continue to provide. I would also like to thank Champ and Maverick for their unconditional love and always-happy demeanor. Without you both securing the papers on my desk from stray winds, I am not sure I would have completed this dissertation.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my wife Summer. I can honestly say that, without you, I do not think I would have pursued and completed my Ph.D. You are a constant source of love, support, and encouragement. Your positive outlook on life, your determination, and your drive to succeed continue to inspire me. Thank you for always being willing to let me bounce ideas off of you, for your well thought-out feedback, your skillful editing, and all of the time and effort you put into helping me in any way that you could. You are truly the most important person in my world and I look forward to loving you for the rest of my life. Here's to sharing many adventures in the future and experiencing them hand-in-hand. No matter what we do, it's always better when we're together. I love you!

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Billions of individuals love sports and demonstrate their enthusiasm by acting as both spectators and participants. This is particularly true within the United States, where, without question, sport has established itself as an integral part of American society. Americans' love for sport has led some to label the United States as the epicenter of the sporting world (Delaney & Madigan, 2009). Research has shown that over two-thirds of Americans consider themselves to be sport fans (Anderson & Stone, 1981; Lieberman, 1991; Thomas, 1986). No sport in the United States has achieved a greater following than the National Football League (NFL). According to a poll conducted by Harris Interactive (2010), of Americans who follow one or more sports, three in ten (30%) say that professional football is their favorite. In fact, since this poll began in 1985, the NFL has always been the most popular professional sports league.

With a significant percentage of the U.S. population following professional football, it stands to reason that the league, teams, and players have a lot to gain from the relationships they establish with their fans. Essentially, the NFL is composed of 32 nearly identical brands (e.g., teams), each competing to establish beneficial relationships with a significant percentage of the fan base. Specifically, these relationships benefit both fans and teams by allowing fans to feel more connected (i.e., identified) with their favorite team and in turn, by providing teams increased profits via improved ticket sales, game attendance, media usage, and merchandise consumption. Increasingly, one approach to establishing these relationships is through the use of new communication technologies. In addition to popularity, the NFL possesses an advantage over other professional sports leagues due to the fact that it employs the most players, which in turn provides more opportunity for engagement with its fan base.

The rapid development, advancement and adoption of communication technologies has changed the ways in which individuals gain access to and consume sports. The ability for fans to consume daily doses of sports through a variety of media channels is making it easier to follow a favorite team even if they are not located geographically close to it. Fans are now able to acquire score updates and league news through television programming (e.g., ESPN networks, Fox SportsNet, NFL Network), radio broadcasts (most professional teams broadcast games in both English and Spanish), print media (e.g., *Sports Illustrated, ESPN Magazine*, newspapers), the Internet (e.g., ESPN.com, NFL.com, Yahoo.com), and the increased adoption of cell phones with Internet access (e.g., iPhones, Blackberrys, Droids); (Wann, Melnick, Russel, & Pease, 2001).

Therefore, the introduction and implementation of social media is granting fans unprecedented access to league, team, and player information and proving its worth as a method for both individuals and organizations to initiate, develop and maintain relationships. In fact, a study by Mzinga (2009) found that 66% of marketing professionals from a variety of fields utilize social media as part of their marketing plans as well. Understandably so, sports marketers have turned to social media as a way to build relationships with fans. Comm (2009) proposes that social media's defining feature, from a relationship management perspective, is its ability to allow for the creation of virtual communities through group conversation. Social media, therefore, is granting sports marketers license to communicate more effectively with consumers, provide them with an increasing amount of content, and develop and maintain brand awareness at a more rapid pace than ever before (Roberts, 2006, 2007; Santomier, 2008).

The continual rise of social media adoption rates among consumers/fans, coupled with the increased social media marketing efforts by professional sports leagues, illustrates a research area worthy of examination. Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation is to identify and examine

how sport fans are using social media to communicate with their favorite teams and players and why they make the effort to do so. These insights are timely given that millions of sport fans are using social media daily. Examining social media's role within sport fandom will shed light on sport fans' social media use, preferences and attitudes, as well as contribute to the contemporary sports literature related to consumer-brand relationships and fan identification[1].

Specifically, this dissertation draws on concepts from social identity theory and the relationship management perspective to examine the roles that identity and consumer-brand relationships play in sport fans' consumption of both social media and products. Social identity theory states that individuals define their self-concept by their membership to social groups (e.g., Chicago Bears fan). This identification then influences individuals within the group to enact behavioral group norms (e.g., wearing team apparel, attending team events). The stronger the identification with a group, the more likely individuals will maintain this identity through continued behavioral and consumption efforts. Additionally, research shows that consumers often view their relationships with brands as similar to their relationships with friends, family, and peers (Fournier, 1994, 1998). Therefore, it is becoming increasingly important for brands such as NFL teams to establish relationships with consumers in order to differentiate from competitors. Interestingly, while social identity theory and its related literature has certainly established that individuals often use social group membership to define their self-concept and in the process enact behavioral group norms, to date there is a lack of research which examines such propositions in the context of the rising adoption of social media. Such understanding is particularly relevant to sport literature as the study of social media usage among NFL fans and

[1] Throughout this dissertation, I use the terms *identity* and *identification*. An individual's *identity* is composed of her or his distinct attributes (personal identity) and group memberships (social identity), whereas *identification* is the process by which identity is formed.

the resulting data presents sports marketers with an opportunity to further build brand loyalty and increase fan retention and product and media consumption (Liu & Shrum, 2002; Voight, 2007).

Sport in the United States

Sports have the ability to serve as a catalyst for human bonding between families, friends, co-workers, and even complete strangers, further demonstrating their relevance to relationship building. For the purposes of this dissertation, I choose to adopt Coakley's (2006) definition of sport. Specifically, Coakley proposes that sports are institutionalized competitive activities that involve rigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex physical skills, by participants who are motivated by internal and external rewards. I should note that while no single definition of sport is recognized as ideal, since the focus of this dissertation is on *professional* sport, specifically the NFL, this traditional definition of sport provides an acceptable approach.

The increased consumption behaviors of fans have added immense value to the sport industry (e.g., sport spectating, product/media consumption). Gaining access to one's favorite teams has never been easier, thanks to advances in media and communication technologies. At no point in history have sports been as commercialized as they are today (Coakley, 2006). In fact, sport spectating is one of the most popular leisure activities and this segment represents the largest portion of the sports industry (Plunkett Research Ltd., 2009). Enjoying spectator sports is an omnipresent occurrence in the United States (Higgs & McKinley, 2005). In addition to providing entertainment, sport represents a huge economic impact, with spectator sports accounting for $31 billion in consumer spending in the U.S. in 2010 (Plunkett Research Ltd., 2011).

Sport in the United States consistently ranks as one of America's most popular industries. As of 2011, the size of the entire U.S. sports market was estimated to be between $400 to $425 billion yearly (Plunkett Research Ltd., 2011) with over $77 billion being generated by the sales of sporting apparel and shoes alone (Plunkett Research Ltd., 2007). To put this in perspective, the U.S. sports market revenue is nearly 15 times greater than that of the U.S. film industry ($26.75 billion) and over eight times greater than the worldwide videogame revenue ($46.2 billion) (Plunkett Research Ltd., 2010).

Over the course of the 2010 season, over 132 million tickets were sold for games in the four major U.S. professional sports leagues (ESPN, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d). The "Big Four" includes Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Basketball Association (NBA), the National Football League (NFL), and the National Hockey League (NHL). Each professional franchise is valuable in its own right. The average value of a MLB team is $523 million, followed by NBA teams with a $369 million average, and NHL teams which are valued at an average of $228 million. However, each of these pales in comparison to the NFL, where franchises are worth $1 billion on average (Plunkett Research Ltd., 2011). On average, the "Big Four" bring in about $23 billion in annual revenue per year. These data points leave little doubt of the importance consumers place on the spectator sport segment of the North American sport industry and why sport is a needed area of research.

Internet Use in the United States

The late 1990s marked the beginning of a communication revolution. Now, 16 years later, the Internet has become an integral part of our everyday life. Internet World Stats (2011) states that the worldwide number of Internet users surpassed 2 billion in 2011, representing a 480% growth since 2000. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2010a),

74% of American adults (ages 18 and older) use the Internet, with over 184 million (71%) reporting that they use it daily. Currently, it is estimated that over 80% of American households own at least one computer, 76% of American households are connected to the Internet, and 60% of American households use broadband connections (Internet World Stats, 2010; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2010a). Additionally, over 91% of the U.S. population uses a cell phone, with roughly 72% using it to communicate with others wirelessly via the Internet and/or text messaging (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2010b). These statistics make it clear that technology is reshaping the way humans communicate. In the context of relationship management, the Internet is pivotal because it grants users access to a seemingly endless amount of content and interaction opportunities (Page, Page, Sharp, & Talenfeld, 2008). With recent trends indicating an increase in the use of digital communication channels, social media in particular is proving to be a valuable tool for individuals and organization to initiate, develop, and maintain relationships.

Defining and Examining Social Media

Organizations are finding it much harder to profit from traditional marketing channels that push a message and product onto a consumer (Godin, 1999). The continued evolution of the Internet and other digital communication tools have given individuals an unprecedented variety of ways to have their voice heard. Today's digital marketplace is being reconstructed as a two-way street where marketers and consumers are constantly interacting with each other. The incorporation of two-way communication is due in large part to the rapid rise of social media.

Before delving into the specifics of how and why social media is being utilized as a part of an increasing amount of organizations' marketing plan, it is important to first define what constitutes social media. Merriam-Webster (2012) defines social media as forms of electronic

communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content. Specifically, social media uses websites for social networking and microblogging to transform and broadcast media messages (one-to-many) into social media dialogue (many-to-many; Merriam-Webster, 2012). Since social media is still in its infancy stage, a standard definition has not been developed and widely accepted. As such, many industry insiders have developed alternate definitions. Tobin (2008) defines social media as "online technologies that allow people to share content, opinions, insights, experiences, perspectives, and media itself." Still other experts define it as "a set of technologies and channels targeted at forming and enabling a potentially massive community of participants to productively collaborate" (Bradley, 2010) and "platforms for interaction and relationship building, not for content and advertisements" (Eisenberg, 2008). Despite differences in wording, it is evident that social media is viewed as a set of tools that allow people to interact and share information with other individuals as well engaging in two-way communication with organizations. In fact, from a relationship management perspective, social media's ability to create relationships through communication is its most important characteristic (Comm, 2009).

Popular Social Media Channels

Individuals, entrepreneurs, and organizations of any size encounter few barriers to entry when adopting social media. It costs next to nothing to use and setting up a profile or account is relatively easy. Additionally, the interactive nature of social media provides the potential to significantly impact brand recognition and sales. Common forms of social media include blogs, social networks, wikis, forums, RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds, and microblogs. For the purposes of this dissertation I examined the use of (a) blogs, (b) social networks (e.g., Facebook), and (c) microblogs (e.g., Twitter) and their use by NFL teams, players and fans.

Blogs

Blogs are a form of online journal that make it easy for an author, or blogger, to publish posts (e.g., articles, images, and other content) that they find interesting to a web page. Blog readers are then able to respond to the blog entries by commenting on the article, thus starting a conversation with the blogger. Blogs are the ideal place to share information about new and "cool" things that an organization or individual is doing, or about stories that the blog readers would find interesting (Zarella, 2010).

Measuring the size of the blogosphere is not a simple task but Technorati, a site dedicated to blogs, has been attempting to do just this by indexing blogs since 2003. Technorati's (2009) "State of the Blogosphere Report" states that there are over 23 million bloggers in the U.S. and that roughly 77% of active Internet users read blogs. The popularity and conversational nature of blogs make them a tool that every company with a website should utilize in order to engage current and potential customers.

Specifically, sports blogs appear to be the most widely available form of social media in the industry. Each of the major online sports news websites (e.g., ESPN, Sports Illustrated, NFL Network) has a blog section where fans can go to read and react to posts. Specifically, ESPN has widely adopted the use of blogs in its sports coverage. In addition to maintaining blogs for all of the major sports (e.g., football, basketball, baseball, hockey), ESPN operates blogs for tennis, NASCAR, boxing, and even poker (ESPN, 2010). In addition to sports news networks, individual teams are also using blogs in an effort to connect with fans. Fans can visit virtually any major league team website and find a blog section devoted to keeping them informed about what is happening with their favorite team and players.

In particular, ESPN has made a strong effort to improve blogs' usefulness as a means to spark conversation. ESPN readers can post reactions (e.g., comments) to each blog post and subsequent user comments, thus increasing the interaction between fans from around the world. Additionally, each ESPN article contains buttons that allow users to share the article on Facebook or retweet the article URL on Twitter with a simple click. The addition of these sharing tools has the potential to dramatically increase the number of individuals who will view and react to each blog post. More viewers lead to a more interactive conversation, which in turn leads to the expression of different viewpoints and insights, each of which has the potential to affect attitudes and behaviors.

Social Networks – Facebook and YouTube

A social network is a website that allows individuals to connect with current friends and to establish online friendships. Once online, users can connect with others through the use of public or private messages, by joining groups, attending events, and using applications (Zarrella, 2010). Social networks attract millions of users (Young, 2009), explaining why they have become the main platform for creating and sharing content online. To demonstrate their quick adoption rates we can look at the rise of Google+, a social network offering from Google. Launched on limited basis on June 28, 2011, Google+ gained over 25 million users as of August 1, 2011 (Mashable, 2011), demonstrating the public demand for social networking options.

In terms of demographics, Lenhart (2009) states that social network users are relatively young, with 75% of online adults ages 18-24 owning a social network profile. However, recent findings indicate that adults ages 35-44 represent the fastest-growing age group using social networks (Community102, 2011). Interestingly enough, 18-24 year olds only account for 9% of social network users.

Currently, Facebook is the most well known social networking site and is considered by many to be the "face" of social media. Users are allowed to create profiles with pictures and basic information about their school, work, and interests. They are able to communicate with other users, groups, and businesses by writing on their public "wall" or through private messages similar to email. Users are also given media sharing capabilities, which allows them to create and share photos, videos, music, and web links.

Facebook was originally founded as a closed social network for Ivy League Universities but saw an influx of new users once non .edu email addresses were allowed to register. Since it was originally created for use at universities, Facebook boasts a significant amount of college-aged members. However, the fastest growing user segment is those over 35. In fact, recent data indicate that the 35-54 age group is now larger than the 18-24 age group for which Facebook was originally intended (Zarrella, 2010). Facebook has an Alexa traffic rank of two, making it the second most visited website on the Internet, second only to Google (Alexa, 2010). Though often compared to MySpace, Facebook is clearly the industry leader among social networks. On July 21, 2010 Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg announced that Facebook had surpassed 500 million active users (Facebook, 2010). Roughly one year later on July 6, 2011, Zuckerberg reported that Facebook had just reached over 750 million users. Facebook filed the necessary paperwork for its initial public offering (IPO) on February 1, 2012 with the hopes of raising $5 billion based on its $100 billion valuation (Mashable, 2012).

In particular, Facebook's interactive features (e.g., photos, videos, links) are what make it appealing to organizations. Businesses, and in the case of this dissertation, NFL teams, have the ability to expand their web presence by creating a team Facebook page. Specifically, Facebook has quickly become a platform for sport teams to share information with fans that they would not

have had access to several years ago. This page allows the team to post photos, videos, links to articles, and news about upcoming events that may not be found anywhere else. Fans are then able to respond to team-posted messages or create their own message, allowing the team and its fans to engage in conversations that could yield important fan feedback (Pattison, 2009). Not surprisingly, each team within the "Big Four" maintains an official Facebook page.

Community building via Facebook has certainly been successful. Currently, the Los Angeles Lakers have 13,785,895 fans on Facebook and this number continues to grow. In fact it is up nearly 11 million fans since December of 2010, demonstrating that individuals are eager to obtain knowledge about their favorite sport teams and are actively seeking out ways to do so. With fans seeking out ways to connect with their favorite sport teams, it follows that they would be open to accepting behavioral cues (e.g., buy tickets, watch the game). Still the reach of Facebook extends further, as fans create their own pages in homage to the teams and athletes they support. In addition to official team pages, Facebook is littered with additional fan pages where users can go to discuss team news, share stories, pictures, videos, and to prognosticate about the future of the team.

YouTube is the world's most popular video-based social network site, with an estimated daily global reach of nearly 23% and a U.S. Alexa visitor rank of four (Alexa, 2009). Introduced in 2005 and ushered into usage through the adoption of broadband technology, YouTube grew at a rapid pace and became a mainstream media channel (Madden, 2007). Nearly one year later YouTube was delivering over 100 million videos per day and accounting for 60% of all video being viewed online (Haridakis & Hanson, 2009). Like Facebook, YouTube boasts interactive elements (e.g., video posting, comments) aimed at generating conversation between users. Indeed, some claim that video sharing, commenting, rating, and messaging make it evident that

YouTube's purpose is to establish social connections (Haridakis & Hanson, 2009; Harley & Fitzpatrick, 2009).

In terms of YouTube's marketing value, Gallo (2008) argues that the most attractive part of YouTube is its ability to foster a personalized and direct connection with customers. This coupled with the percentage of users watching videos online makes YouTube a potent tool for marketers. According to a poll conducted by the Online Publishers Association, 70% of Internet users have watched an online video and 30% have shared a link to one (Gill, 2006).

Old Spice's Body Wash campaign is an example of just how successful YouTube marketing can be. The campaign was designed to capture the attention of both men and women and create a buzz through conversation. The video was viewed over 40 million times in the first week and Old Spice's YouTube channel rose to number one. Ultimately, Old Spice became the number one men's body wash in the market and sales increased nearly 27%. The success of this campaign resulted in the Old Spice response campaign, in which individuals could ask Old Spice questions via Twitter. Old Spice would then selectively respond through the creation of a YouTube video that mentioned each user by name. This case study shows how YouTube can generate an enormous amount of exposure for minimal costs. Despite its demonstrated viral marketing success, YouTube remains mostly unused by professional sports teams.

Microblogs – Twitter

Microblogging, like blogging, allows users to publish content (e.g., status updates, images, videos) but puts limitations on the length of each post. For instance, Twitter requires that updates contain 140 characters or less, far less than a standard blog post. As of May 2007, 111 microblogging systems were in operation (Zarrella, 2010). Although it is not the sole microblogging site, Twitter has fast become the most recognizable.

Started in 2006 as a side project for internal use at San Francisco based Odeo, Twitter has gone through several revisions, finally settling on asking its users one question, "What's happening?" Users have 140 characters to answer this question before making it available to over 175 million people around the globe. Its founders describe Twitter as "a real-time information network powered by people all around the world that lets you share and discover what's happening now" (Twitter, 2010). Users create a profile, avatar, and a customizable account page. One must "follow" others to receive their updates and likewise be followed to have her or his updates viewed in a users timeline. Twitter is unique in that it allows its users to post updates via multiple web and mobile phone clients. This is beneficial because it affords users the opportunity to utilize a wide variety of third-party applications (e.g., URL shorteners, image hosting) meant to improve the Twitter experience.

Twitter awareness among Americans dramatically increased from 2008 - 2010. Over 87% of the U.S. population is aware of Twitter, representing an 82% increase in awareness from 2008 (Edison Research, 2010). These data indicate that Twitter (87%) has caught up with Facebook (88%) in terms of awareness. However, despite equal awareness, Twitter is used by a significantly smaller number of individuals in the U.S. (Edison Research, 2010). Regardless of slow adoption in the U.S., Twitter currently has over 175 million registered users and more than 460,000 new users sign up daily (Twitter, 2011). Although originally intended as a way for individuals to let others know what they are doing, Twitter has become a valuable tool for marketers to tweet about their products, events, and news. Research has shown that the percentage of Twitter users who follow brands is more than three times higher than other social media platforms (Edison Research, 2010). In fact, 42% of Twitter users use Twitter to learn about products and services and 41% use Twitter to provide opinions and feedback about

products and services (Edison Research, 2010). The growth of Twitter combined with research indicating that consumers follow, learn about, and review brands, makes it a lush medium for brand marketers.

Currently Twitter is the fastest growing social media platform, with Twitter users tweeting an average of 200 million tweets per day (Twitter, 2011). A Twitter search indicates that the four major professional sports leagues have universally adopted Twitter as a means to communicate with fans. At the time of this writing every Major League Baseball (MLB) team, National Basketball Association (NBA) team, National Football League (NFL) and National Hockey League (NHL) team operate an official Twitter page.

Twitter has also become a popular news outlet among the sports media. ESPN reporters are notorious for breaking news and facilitating rumors on Twitter before they are posted on the web (Sheffer & Schultz, 2010). Due to the nature of Twitter this news spreads quickly. Fans using Twitter benefit from this because they get the inside scoop on what is happening within the sports realm before everyone else.

Teams and media outlets are not the only entities in the sports industry utilizing Twitter. Athletes are also using it to converse with fans and provide updates on their life outside of their profession. A recent tally indicates that there are 328 MLB players, 442 NBA players, 1354 NFL players, and 271 NHL players currently using Twitter (Tweeting Athletes, 2012). Twitter is giving fans access to players that in the past has not been possible. For example, former NBA player Shaquille O'Neal frequently tweets his location and asks any of his followers in the area to meet up with him, dubbing these tweets, "random acts of Shaqness" (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010). Likewise, NFL player Chad OchoCinco often uses Twitter as a way to meet up with fans and treat them to meals and movies. This type of player fan interaction is unprecedented.

While usage trends indicate that social media has potential to reshape the ways sport teams interact with their fans, the actual impact of social media with the professional sport industry is unknown. Many teams have begun to hire social media managers and social media agencies. Since social media is in a state of constant evolution, the corresponding data is changing as well. As a result, research on how social media is being used by fans to connect with their favorite sport teams and players is lacking. This dissertation attempts to fill gaps in the existing sport literature by analyzing how NFL fans are using social media to interact with their favorite team(s) and players and its role in identity formation and relationship development. The resulting data will allow professional sport organizations, specifically NFL franchises, to better leverage social media to their advantage.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the ways that social media is impacting individuals' NFL fandom. To do so I draw on concepts from social identity theory and relationship management to examine the ways in which National Football League (NFL) fans are currently using social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, blogs) to stay connected and up to date with their favorite team(s), and/or players and why fans make the effort to utilize social media as part of their fandom.

Summary

The remaining chapters of this dissertation include a literature review (chapter two) and a description of the methodology I employed (chapter three). In chapter two, I begin by providing an overview of social identity theory and the relevant research conducted on this topic. Next, I examine consumer-brand relationships, relationship management and marketing, and how relationship marketing has been used within the sports context. I then provide an extensive

overview of sport fandom research related to social identity. Next, I discuss recent trends in social media research before concluding with my research question. In chapter three, I explain the study's research methodology. I begin by defining what constitutes qualitative interviewing, followed by an examination of why interviewing is a proper method of investigation for this dissertation. Next, I discuss interview data collection considerations and the utility of grounded theory as a method of data analysis. Lastly, I present the study methodology that outlines participants, procedures, recruitment methods, interview schedule, and data analysis for this study. In chapter four I present this study's findings and discussion. Lastly, chapter five concludes this dissertation with a review of the major findings, implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter two of this dissertation focuses on several key theories and concepts as they relate to my dissertation. First, I discuss social identity theory, then I examine consumer-brand relationships, relationship management and marketing, and discuss their applicability to the sports industry. I then provide an extensive overview of sport fandom research as related to the concept of social identity. Next, I discuss recent trends in social media research before concluding with my research questions.

Social Identity Theory

Originally developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), social identity theory introduced the concept of social identity as a way to explain certain elements of group behavior. Specifically, in order to better understand the intricacies of group behavior, Tajfel (1981) believed that researchers must possess an understanding of how groups are constructed, the psychological effects of group construction, and how this construction depends on and is affected by the group's current social reality. Social identity theory states that group membership is a determining factor in the development of social identities.

Social identity theory posits that individuals possess both a personal identity and a social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). A personal identity is formed by an individual's distinct attributes, such as her or his physical abilities and personal interests, whereas an individual's social identity consists of significant, broad group categories. Self-concept is in turn made up of both social and personal identities and social categorizations. Often these categories are determined by demographic characteristics (e.g., sex, race) or group affiliation (e.g., religious, educational, social; Turner, 1982).

Social identity theory suggests that individuals support and define their self-concepts by their connections with social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In doing so, the theory emphasizes the importance of social group membership as a means to support and preserve personal identities, self-concept, and social behaviors (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986; Turner, 1982). More specifically, the process of social identification begins when individuals define their place in society. During this self-categorization, individuals identify themselves as part of a social group and consequently learn and act according to the behavioral norms of the group. This group identification provides individuals with a sense of oneness or belonging (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Moreover, individuals work to maintain favorable social identities in comparison to other groups in an effort to preserve personal rewards such as higher levels of self-esteem (Hogg & Abrams, 2003). In addition, they also obtain a sense of who they are and their place in society through their membership in these social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). Once a person's values and behaviors are consistent with group norms, the identification process is complete (Tajfel, 1982). It is important to note that individuals are more likely to become highly identified with a group or organization when it reflects some of the attributes individuals assign to their own self-concepts (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009).

In the years since its inception, scholars from a variety of disciplines have applied social identity theory. Studies have revealed that social identities are flexible, varied, and environment dependent (Haslam et al., 1995, 1996; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994) and that when asked to describe themselves, individuals' self-descriptions often include aspects of their social identities (Bettencourt & Hume, 1999; Onorato & Turner, 2004; Rhee, Uleman, Lee, & Roman, 1995).

To date, the bulk of social identity research has been conducted using quantitative methods with emphasis on the examination of inter and intra-group behavior. The work has primarily drawn its sample from both college student and child demographics. Areas that have received particular attention by scholars are stereotyping (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Haslam et al., 1995, 1996; Haslem & Turner, 1992; Hogg & Turner, 1987; Jackson & Lewandowksi, 1997; Tajfel, 1981), conformity (Hogg & Turner, 1987; Turner, 1982), and prejudice (Lepore & Brown, 1997; Reynolds, Turner, Haslam, & Ryan, 2001). Brown (2000) highlighted the limited number of qualitative exploration by scholars as one of the key deficiencies of existing social identity research.

Generally, when studying social identification, researchers have focused on small groups that possess the ability to meet face-to-face and interact on a personal level (Turner & Giles, 1982). However, recent advances in communication technologies, such as computer mediated communication and social media, have dramatically reduced the need for face-to-face communication in order to gain access to and participate in social groups. This shift in contemporary society provides fertile ground to further examine and understand the social identification process.

Consumer-Brand Relationships

Researchers have long recognized the importance of the relationship between a brand and its consumers as a means to create brand differentiation and sustain a competitive advantage. This type of research is particularly central to brand marketers since it is believed that consumers who are attached to a brand will use that relationship as a way to enhance their self-concept. Specifically, consumers who feel they possess a positive relationship with a brand are more likely to engage in behaviors that will be beneficial to the brand, such as brand loyalty, brand

advocacy, and participation in brand community (Park, Priester, MacInnis, & Wan, 2009; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005).

Prior research has examined how consumers evaluate and make brand consumption behaviors based on the brand personality (Aaker, 1997; Batra, Lehmann, & Singh, 1993; Plummer, 1985), brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Aaker & Biel, 1993; Keller, 1998; McQueen, Foley, & Deighton, 1993), and brand extensions (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Nakamoto, McInnis, & Jung, 1993). More recently researchers have extended beyond consumer brand perceptions into how consumers relate to the brand they consume (Fournier, 1994; 1998; Muniz Jr. & O'Guinn, 2001).

Fournier (1994, 1998) conducted the primary research on consumer-brand relationships. Fournier's exploratory research revealed that consumers equate and describe their relationships with brands in many of the same ways they describe their relationships with people. Fournier (1998) proposed that consumer-brand relationships are broad and as such can be categorized in relational terms such as "best friendship, flings, courtships, secret affairs, arranged marriages, and committed partnerships" (p. 362). Despite pointing out similarities, researchers have also acknowledged that relationships with brands are different from social relationships.

Recently, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) proposed that consumer identification with a brand represents a deep, committed, and meaningful relationship, something that brand marketers are increasingly trying to foster. This consumer identification stems directly from the previously discussed research on social identity theory and serves as an additional dimension of consumer-brand relationships (Bhattacharya, Korschun, & Sen, 2009).

The study of consumer-brand relationships and their impacts is increasing in importance for brands as they try to establish, maintain, or improve a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Brands have been using print advertisements, television commercials, coupons, and

special offers to create the perception of on-going and positive relationships with consumers for decades. These types of relationship-fostering strategies are becoming even more important as social media continues to expand the ways in which consumers can engage in two-way, and often public, communication with brands. As such, it makes sense for brands to engage in a variety of efforts (e.g., relationship management) to enhance the relationships they have with their customer base.

Relationship Management in Public Relations and Marketing

Relationship management theory conceptualizes a relationship as the existing "state between an organization and its key publics, in which the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural or political well-being of the other" (Ledingham, 2003, p.184). This theoretical perspective has been embraced by both public relations and marketing professionals, often overlapping each other in application. In the realm of public relations, relationship management has emerged as a path toward initiating, nurturing, and maintaining relationships via communication (Dozier, Gruning, & Grunig, 1995). Public relations efforts are measured on the quality of relationships rather than on the quantity of press coverage received (Ledingham, 2005) with the ultimate goal of establishing long-term relationships with key publics. In terms of relationship management, public relations act in synergy with marketing. A long-standing positive relationship with a client can in turn lead to increased consumption of an organization's product and service offerings, thus providing a competitive advantage (Ledingham, 2005).

Scholars believe similarities exist between public relations management and relationship marketing. In fact, relationship marketing has been defined as the ability to establish, develop, and maintain successful relational exchanges with customers, suppliers, and other key publics (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Further expansion of this definition has included the development and

maintenance of long-term, mutually beneficial relationships that are satisfying and based on both trust and collaboration (Smith, 1998). Despite the similarities between the two, relationship marketing focuses more on the bottom line than public relations. Meaning that the most important stakeholders are those who have a direct impact on the financial success of an organization.

Relationship Marketing in the Sport Industry

After its introduction to the marketing field by Berry (1983), the relationship marketing approach has become a staple of modern marketing tactics. Relationship marketing's primary goals are to cement long-term relationships with consumers in an effort to generate new business and increase profit (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Relationship marketing has been utilized by marketing professionals within the sports industry in a variety of settings (Williams & Chinn, 2010).

Shani (1997) noted the similarities between sport team performance and an organization's service, stating that this is an area that would benefit from relationship marketing. This model called for the purposeful segmentation of sport consumers in order to create rich and detailed marketing strategies. Expanding on this model, Stavros, Pope, and Winzar (2008) examined sport in Australia. Their revised model focused on organizational structure, research, and the systematic use of relationship marketing tactics. They found that although organizations may be interested in implementing relationship marketing, the unique history and varying structures of organizations make it difficult to put relationship marketing into action. The examination of emotional and attitudinal factors is another area that researchers have focused on. Bee and Kahle (2006) sought to understand why consumers engage in relationship marketing and how their engagement is put into practice. They found that sports organizations are more likely

to be viewed as credible and trustworthy when they promote values that are similar to their consumers. These shared values have the deepest level of influence and will be the most durable and consistent (Bee & Kahle, 2006). Further research in this area has focused on the quality of the relationship between sport fans and sport organizations. Kim (2008) directed a study on relationship-quality characteristics (e.g., trust, commitment, liking, intimacy, connection, reciprocity, satisfaction) and their impact on sport-consumption behaviors (e.g., purchase of team licensed apparel, game attendance, media usage). The results of this study showed that relationship quality helped predict behavioral outcomes. Not surprisingly, those fans that reported high levels of relationship quality with a sports organization were more likely to purchase team apparel and tickets and consume more sport through media channels than fans that reported low levels of relationship quality.

Research has also aimed at examining the potential impact of electronic media on relationship marketing. After conducting a study on the communication preferences of baseball fans, Greenwell and Andrew (2006) advised that sports organizations make efforts to include viral marketing, social networking, and blogging in their marketing plans. Likewise, Girginov et al. (2009) studied how the use of websites influenced the relationship marketing of Canadian national sport organizations. They found that these organizations were not yet harnessing the full power of web-based, or computer mediated, communication.

Computer mediated communication (CMC) is defined as any text-based interaction that passes through digitally-based technologies at some point during the interaction (Spitzberg, 2004). The rapid evolution of CMC technologies is enabling more efficient and instantaneous exchange of dialogue between users. This constant and almost immediate ability to provide

feedback is impacting relationship management by presenting new opportunities to develop positive relationships (Kent & Taylor, 1998) and possibly impact sport consumption behavior.

Sport Fandom Research

The average person may define a sport fan as someone who cheers for her or his favorite team or someone who enjoys watching sports on television or in person. While this definition may be accurate to some extent, it omits a number of traits that have come to characterize sport fans. Stewart, Smith, and Nicholson's (2003) review of fan typologies highlighted the fact that being a sport fan entails much more than just watching the games and then returning to one's daily life after they are over. Other researchers have concurred that the sport fan role is not simplistic and often involves a deep psychological and emotional attachment to a team or teams (Funk & James, 2001; Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999; Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000; Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001).

Researchers have proposed a variety of ways to accurately define and conceptualize sport fans. Pooley (1978) stated that fans let their fandom invade other areas of their life due to their passion for sport. Anderson (1979) believed that since the word fan is derived from fanatic, fans should be described as individuals with a frequent and excessive enthusiasm for sport. Spinrad (1981) labeled fans as individuals who think about and discuss sports even when they are not reading about, listening, or watching a sporting event. Additionally, Hirt et al. (1992) defined fans as individuals whose affiliation with a team involves a great deal of emotional significance and value. McPherson (1975) presented what could be considered the most complete definition, by incorporating six characteristics of sport fandom. McPherson proposed that sport fans will: 1) devote time and money to sport consumption; 2) possess specific knowledge about team rosters, stats, and strategies; 3) experience some level of emotional involvement with a team or teams; 4)

experience fluctuations in their mood during a game; 5) discuss team/sport related content with peers; and 6) accommodate sporting events by planning other events around them. Together, the definitions proposed by Anderson (1979), Hirt et al. (1978), McPherson (1975), and Zillman et al. (1992) demonstrate that sport fandom entails more than just the observable consumption behaviors of fans.

Sport researchers have examined a number of aspects related to sport fandom including: in-group/out-group bias, success/failure bias, basking in reflected glory (BIRGing), cutting off reflected failure (CORFing) and fan behavior and identification. Each of these areas of research demonstrates the importance of sport fan's identity and are directly applicable to the previously discussed aspects of social identity theory.

In-Group/Out-Group Bias

In-group/out-group bias involves the preference for and favorable rating of members within one's own group in comparison to members of the out-group (Murrell & Dietz, 1992; Wann et al., 2006). With regards to sport fans, these groups would consist of fans from opposing teams. In this instance, fans of the Chicago Bears would view both Bears fans and Chicago's team assets (e.g., championships, facilities, players) as superior to those of any other NFL team.

Scholars have found evidence to support the notion of group bias. Wann and Dolan (1994) measured group bias through a study that asked college basketball fans to read fictional scenarios randomly describing the actions of fans of their team or fans of a rival team. Results of the study demonstrated that highly identified fans from the in-group were significantly more likely to positively rate the behavior of in-group fans than those of rival fans even when the same action was being performed by each group (Wann & Dolan, 1994).

Following up on this study, Wann and Branscombe (1995) asked highly identified

University of Kansas fans to make a list of attributes that best describe Kansas fans and fans of their rival, the University of Missouri. Their findings supported the existence of group bias since highly identified Kansas fans listed a significantly greater amount of positive traits for in-group members and a significantly greater number of negative traits for out-group members.

In yet another study, Wann et al. (2006) asked fans to watch a highlight video in order to evaluate a potential collegiate athlete recruit. Again, highly identified fans were much more likely to rate the recruit favorably if they believed the recruit would be part of their team and significantly more negatively if they believed the recruit would be attending a rival university.

Success/Failure Bias

Studies have reported that with higher fan identification comes a higher expectation of team performance (Wann & Branscombe, 1993) and increased satisfaction from positive game outcomes (Madrigal, 1995). It follows that because of the relationship that fans share with their team(s), they will internalize team success and failure as their own (Cialdini et al., 1976; Hirt et al., 1992; Kwon, Trail, & Lee, 2008; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Since not every team can win every game, fans must determine how to cope with losses in order to maintain their perceptions about their group.

Mann (1974) conducted a seminal research study that focused on the success/failure biases of sports spectators. Using the South Australian Football League as its subject, the study examined how spectators assessed the outcome of the matches based on various internal (e.g., team chemistry, player skill) and external (e.g., officiating, luck) factors. Mann found that fans of the winning team were significantly more likely to credit internal factors for the match outcome than fans of the losing team. It was often the case that fans of the losing team blamed poor officiating, luck, and dirty play for the loss. These fans also rated the overall quality of the match

as significantly lower than members of the opposing fan base.

Building on Mann's (1974) findings, Grove, Hanrahan, and McInman (1991) studied success/failure bias within recreation basketball leagues. As with Mann's study, Grove et al. (1991) found that team success was often credited to internal factors such as team effort and skill, while a team loss was blamed on factors outside of the team's control. Both Mann (1974) and Grove et al. (1991) posit that success/failure biases act as an identity maintenance tool that allows fans/players to boost their social identity after a win or guard their social identity after a loss.

Basking in Reflected Glory (BIRGing) and Cutting off Reflected Failure (CORFing)

Prior research in the area of sport fandom has focused on the relationship between fan loyalty and team success. This phenomenon has become known as "basking in reflected glory" (BIRGing). Research by Cialdini et al. (1976) demonstrated that fans of a team were more likely to wear team apparel after a win than after a loss. Cialdini et al. also found that college students were more likely to use "we" to describe their team after a win and "they" to describe their team after a loss. Results from this study were supported by Bernache-Assollant, Lacassagne, and Braddock (2007) in their study on the BIRGing behaviors of soccer fans. Like Cialdini et al. (1976), Bernache-Assollant et al. (2007) found that "we" was more likely to be used by fans following a win and "they" was used more following a team loss.

Researchers have also investigated how the level of fan identification affects BIRGing and "cutting off reflected failure" (CORFing). Wann and Branscombe (1990) found that highly identified fans would engage in BIRGing more frequently following a win than low/moderately identified fans. Interestingly, highly identified fans did not demonstrate a significant propensity for CORFing after a team loss. This is a particularly important finding for sports marketers since

it indicates that highly identified fans are likely to continue supporting their team even after a loss. However, team success cannot be the only reason individuals choose to support a specific team as it is not uncommon for perennially uncompetitive teams to have a huge fan following. For example, the Chicago Cubs have not won a World Series since 1908, yet the Cubs boast the 5th highest game attendance in the league (Chicago Mag., 2011).

Fan Behavior and Identification

In addition to fan loyalty, researchers have also focused on the effects of team identification on sport fan behavior (Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2003; Kwon, Trail, & James, 2007; Madrigal, 1995; Mahony, 1995; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2005). Fan behavior can be represented by a host of actions including wearing team apparel, reading a team blog, attending a game, or checking game stats on a cell phone. Although it may seem apparent, Turner (1982) states that fans enact these behaviors because they are a common result of being part of a group. Likewise, Tajfel (1982) contends that individuals need to socially identify with groups in order to form a self-image. By taking part in these traditional fan behaviors, fans are participating in actions that are recognized as normative group behavior. These behaviors are of particular importance because a person's decision to root for a particular sports team and purchase its products is an example of an area in which an individual has control to shape her or his social identity.

Team identification is defined as the degree to which an individual feels psychologically linked to a team (Hirt et al., 1992; Wann, 1997; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Research conducted by Underwood, Bond, and Baer (2001) demonstrated that, in comparison to other service providers, sports teams have the benefit of generating exceptionally high levels of identification among consumers. This in turn, directly influences fans' behaviors (Wann &

Branscombe, 1993). It follows that a more solid understanding of fan behavior and identification would assist researchers in better understanding the intricacies of sport fandom.

In an effort to determine the relationship between identification and behavior, Wann and Branscombe (1993) polled University of Kansas basketball fans. They found that highly identified fans were more likely to invest more time and money into being a fan and report a higher level of team involvement (e.g., game attendance, years as a fan) than fans with a lower level of identification.

Additionally, Fisher and Wakefield (1998) examined NHL fans and found a significant positive relationship between identification and behaviors. Results of their study indicated that highly identified fans would make a significant effort to establish and maintain their association with a team. These efforts revolve around the wearing of team jerseys and hats, the display of team signs and posters, and verbal support and encouragement during games. Additionally, these individuals reported being heavy consumers of team-licensed merchandise, confirming the findings of Wann and Branscombe (1993).

Sampling undergraduate students following the ’97-’98 women’s college basketball season, Laverie and Arnett (2000) assessed the effects of identification and satisfaction on fan attendance. They found that team identification had a stronger impact on game attendance than game satisfaction, indicating that as team identification increases, team record become less indicative of future game attendance (Laverie & Arnett, 2000). Similar findings were reported by Matsuoka, Chelladura, and Harada (2003) through their analysis of Japan Football League and J-League spectators. Results of their study provided evidence that these results are not limited to North American sport fans.

James and Trail (2008) surveyed 507 MLB season ticket holders to measure their levels

of team identification and consumption behaviors. Specifically, James and Trail hoped to determine if identification had an equal impact on all consumption behaviors (e.g., apparel purchases, ticket sales, media usage). Their findings revealed that identification's impact is not equally distributed across all consumption behaviors. Survey data showed that fan identification had a much larger impact on both media and team merchandise consumption (66% variance) than it did on game attendance (16% variance), signifying that team identification is more important to fan decisions regarding apparel purchases and media consumption than it is to their decision to purchase tickets. This finding provides further proof that the ability for sport fans to identify themselves with products and merchandise from their favorite team(s) has a direct impact on their social identity.

In summary, research has indicated that sport fans engage in several behavioral processes in order to maintain and improve their social identities. Specifically, researchers have validated the notion that fans engage in cognitive exercises such as in-group/out-group biases (Murrell & Dietz, 1992; Wann & Branscombe, 1995; Wann & Dolan, 1994; Wann et al., 2006) and success/failure biases (Cialdini et al., 1976; Grove et al., 1991; Hirt et al., 1992; Kwon, Trail, & Lee, 2008; Mann, 1974; Wann & Branscombe, 1990) to preserve their identity following a team loss. BIRFing and CORFing behaviors were shown to be enacted by fans following a team win or loss as a method of identity maintenance (Bernache-Assollant et al., 2007; Cialdini et al., 1976; Kwon et al., 2008; Wann & Branscombe, 1990). Additionally, sport fan identification was revealed to impact supportive consumption behaviors such as attendance, team apparel and merchandise purchases, and media consumption (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Funk et al., 2003; James and Trail, 2008; Kwon et al., 2007; Laverie & Arnett, 2000; Madrigal, 1995; Mahony, 1995; Matsuoka et al., 2003; Trail et al., 2005; Wann & Branscombe, 1993).

Social Media Research

Weinburg (2009) defines social media as a technology that allows users to share information, experiences, and perspectives through community-oriented websites. As part of Web 2.0, social media is making it increasingly easier for individuals to connect with each other online regardless of their geographic location. Media usage trends support this statement, indicating that individuals are indeed using online technologies to make these connections.

Over two-thirds of Americans now use Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and other social media sites, representing a 230% increase in social media penetration since 2007 (Experian Simmons, 2010). According to a June 2010 Nielsen study, 74% of the global Internet population visits a social networking/blogging site, with visits averaging six hours per month. With millions of potential consumers around the world making use of social media, it stands to reason that organizations have a lot to gain from the effective use of social media channels. Currently, the top social media channels being used are Facebook (74%), YouTube (65%), Twitter (63%), and Linkedin (60%) (Ostrow, 2009a). Interestingly, three of the seven biggest online brands are social media: Facebook, Wikipedia, and YouTube (Nielsen, 2010b). It is estimated that over 82% of brand marketers will be using social media marketing within the next year (eMarketer, 2009).

The introduction of social media and Web 2.0 technologies has significantly altered the ways in which brands communicate with consumers. Increasingly, the industry standards of how to brand and market a product are becoming obsolete. Traditional advertising via print ads, radio, television, and direct mail are no longer the only ways to market a product (Scott, 2007). While these industry standard techniques are still being used by some organizations, the “one-to-many”

advertising message is quickly losing ground to advertising focused on interaction, collaboration, and consumer choice – aka "many-to-many."

Passive consumers are now being transformed into "prosumers." Toffler (1984) introduced the concept of prosumers by hypothesizing that at some point the production and consumption of products would blend, resulting in a marketplace where consumers play a pivotal role in the both the design and manufacturing of product offerings. No longer content with being subjected to advertisements and passively consuming products, prosumers are seeking out opportunities to contribute to and customize the messages and products they are exposed to (Williams and Chinn, 2010). As such, Web 2.0 technologies are breaking new ground by enabling prosumers to engage in increasing amounts of communication, collaboration, and interaction with organizations (Tapscott, 2009).

The social media sphere is being populated by organizations at a stunning pace as brand marketers eagerly try to capitalize on the growing popularity of social media (Koutalakis, 2009). Social media marketing entails the collaboration and sharing of information between an organization and its stakeholders through the use of computer mediated communication channels (Wilcox & Kanter, 2007). Social media provides individuals and organizations the opportunity to promote their products, websites, and services through targeted online channels and to communicate with a much larger audience than what would be available via traditional advertising (Weinberg, 2009). As stated earlier, over 66% of marketing professionals are incorporating social media into their marketing mix. The most successful brands are those that discover ways to encourage consumers to invite the brand into their lives via multiple media channels, blurring the line between advertisement and entertainment (Santomier, 2008).

One way to convince consumers to invite brands into their life is through collaboration. Prosumers expect to be involved in the discussion and creation of the newest generation of products, services, and content (Tapscott, 2009). In fact, consumers have started to demonstrate their desire to create their own news and interact with organizations rather than passively reading mass media news stories and organizational content. These users are bypassing traditional media channels and creating their own content (i.e., user-generated content) to share with other consumers.

User-generated content (UGC) is defined as consumer created content that is made available through publicly accessible websites or social media, demonstrates some level of creative effort, and is created outside of professional routines and practices (Christodoulides, Jevons, & Bonhomme, 2011). Advances in technology have made UGC more visible and influential in the marketplace. This collaborative creation of content has seen an explosion in growth in recent years. In 2008 there were roughly 82.5 million UGC creators in the United States. Researchers speculate that this number will top 114.5 million by 2013 (eMarketer, 2009).

The literature on UGC is limited but is experiencing growth. Existing studies have primarily focused on consumer motivations for creating UGC. Berthon and Pitt (2008), identified three main motivations for the creation of UGC. Their study indicated that intrinsic enjoyment, self-promotion, and a desire to change perceptions were the primary reasons that individuals create UGC. Additionally, Daugherty, Eastin, and Bright (2008), used functional theory to propose five motivational sources for creating UGC. Motivations included monetary incentives, to better understand one's self, self-expression, to achieve a sense of belonging, and to interact with a community.

In addition to sharing content, research suggests that consumer information gathering is another primary reason why companies are adding social media to their marketing program (Barnes, 2008). More than 70% of consumers within the U.S. use social media as a means to obtain product reviews and opinions, and to share their own experiences (Edelman, 2007). Over half of social media users (52%) have become a fan or follower of a brand online and are far more likely to say something positive about a brand than something negative (Ostrow, 2009b). With consumers actively seeking out brands to connect with online it is evident why companies are moving in that direction as well. Social media has become a platform for virtually anyone's voice to be heard. Providing fans with a platform to spark dialogue and discussion can provide sports organizations with invaluable insights about fan preferences, tendencies, and attitudes (Liu & Schrum, 2002).

Since social media is an emerging communication technology, especially when compared to television, radio, and print, research relating to social media usage remains scarce in general, and in particular as it relates to social media and sports. However, the recent and rapid increase of social media adoption, both at the corporate and consumer level, has justified the need for an increased examination and understanding of these topics.

In terms of media consumption, an area that has received attention by scholars is the benefits of online media use. Ruggiero (2000) employed uses and gratifications theory in an effort to determine the benefits users obtain, or conversely, miss out on by not using online communication tools. Uses and gratifications theory is useful because it provides insight into the purposes and intentions of media consumption. Using this approach, Ruggiero (2000) found that Internet users have the opportunity to converse with other users about topics or activities that interest them. Users are also given the freedom to select which individuals they want to dialogue

with and at which times. Likewise, Roy (2009) identified six primary gratification categories related to Internet usage motivations. These categories include self-development, career opportunities, broad exposure, global communication, user friendliness, and relaxation (Roy, 2009). Information gathering, receiving technical knowledge, entertainment, and diversion were also cited as user motivations for using online communication technologies (Hur, Ko, & Valacich, 2007; Seo & Green, 2008). While these studies are important, they are too broad in scope since they essentially study all Internet users.

In addition to user motivations, researchers are becoming increasingly interested in how social media channels like Twitter are changing the way organizations manage their brand (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Recently scholars have studied how Twitter is being used for marketing and brand management efforts, data mining and trend identification, and personal identity management (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2010; Huberman, Romero, & Wu, 2008; Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009).

Despite the longevity and popularity of sport, few studies have explored the relationship between social media and the sport industry. Current research in this area has examined fan motivations. Specifically, Hur, Ko, and Valacich (2007) examined sport-related Internet purchases and found that fans' motivations for consumption revolved around the receipt of economic benefits and convenience. Additionally, Seo and Green (2008) found that fans use the Internet to learn more about their favorite teams and/or players and to demonstrate team support.

Prior to the introduction of Web 2.0, fans reliant on Web 1.0 technologies could visit league, franchise, or player websites to consume content posted to these sites. The interaction options available to them were limited to e-mailing the general team email address or posting on a team message board (if available). Interaction between fans and players was generally limited

to those occasions that were controlled by the team (e.g., autograph signings, press conferences, community events). Web 2.0 has changed this and is allowing unprecedented access to teams, players, and the sports media.

Recently, the examination of Twitter and its use by athletes has been getting an increased amount of attention from social media researchers. Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, and Greenwell (2010) used content analysis to better understand professional athletes' use of Twitter. Athletes' tweets were placed into one of six categories in order to determine their primary purpose. Hambrick et al. (2010) determined that interactivity (34%) was used the most, indicating that athletes actively use Twitter to engage in interpersonal communication with friends and fans. Interestingly, the promotion category (5%) was one of the lowest ranked categories, indicating that athletes are not currently placing emphasis on this area. An additional content analysis conducted by Pegoraro (2010) supports Hambrick et al., (2010) finding that athletes are not currently capitalizing on the potential of Twitter as a marketing tool. Additional results of the study revealed that NFL and professional golfers used Twitter significantly more than athletes from any other sport, indicating that these athletes recognize the value of Twitter as a means of communicating with and increasing their fan base.

These studies provide further proof that social media (e.g., Twitter) is providing fans with increased access to athletes and more communication opportunities then those that were available with traditional media and Web 1.0. Specifically, Hambrick et al., (2010) and Pegoraro (2010) have demonstrated that athletes are directly conversing with fans, which supports prior research by Phua (2010) which found that online media provides the greatest impact on fan-athlete interaction. While scholarship in this area is expanding, the continued addition of narrowly focused studies that highlight social media usage and user type (e.g., fans, athletes) will

be valuable additions both in terms of extending the existing literature, as well as contributing to sport marketing and relationship management practices.

Research Question

Recently, social media has gained traction as an important tool for connecting with sport fans. Despite social media's growing user base and heavy adoption within professional sport, there is little research on how sport fans are using social media to dialogue with their favorite team(s) and players and how this is impacting their fandom. In an effort to examine this growing phenomenon the following research question is proposed:

RQ1: How are NFL fans using social media as part of their NFL fandom and why do they make the effort to do so?

The next chapter explains the study's research methodology. I begin by defining what constitutes qualitative interviewing, followed by an explanation of why interviewing is a proper data collection method for this dissertation. Next, I discuss interview data collection considerations and the utility of grounded theory as a method of data analysis. Lastly, I present the study's methodology that outlines participants, procedures, recruitment methods, interview schedule, and data analysis for a study focused on social media usage and the NFL.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Qualitative Interviewing

Baxter and Babbie (2004) define a qualitative interview as "an interaction between an interviewer and participant in which the interviewer has a general plan of inquiry but not a specific set of questions that must be asked using particular words in a particular order" (p. 325). Thus, an interview is essentially a conversation in which an interviewer sets the general direction and tone of the conversation and allows the respondent the freedom to discuss her or his experiences as they relate to the topics raised by the interviewer. Patton (2002) stated, "Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone else's mind, to gather their stories" (p. 341).

When deciding how to collect data, it is important to determine which collection method best serves the purpose of this study. As stated earlier, over two-thirds of Americans consider themselves to be sports fans. Logically, it stands to reason that these individuals have varying opinions, allegiances, insights, and experiences in regards to sport. It is these complex individual differences and associated dynamics that make interviews a logical data collection method when seeking to gain an understanding of fans perspectives, motives, and experiences.

While recognizing that survey data are equally as valid and meaningful as interview data, the study of NFL teams, players, and fans social media usage lends itself to the use of qualitative interviews for multiple reasons. First, interviews allow researchers to learn about phenomena that cannot be directly observed. Rubin and Rubin (1995) explain that interviews are flexible and able to be revised throughout a study rather than being set in stone like questions found in surveys. It is this flexible nature that allows interviewers the ability to gain information from

participants that cannot be directly observed or inferred. In regards to the study of sport fans, interviewing provides a way to gain some level of understanding on how an individual becomes a fan of a particular team and how her or his team identification is developed, maintained, and changed through time. This is directly relevant to social media usage since it is increasingly being utilized by NFL teams, players, and fans in the hope of initiating, establishing, and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships.

Second, qualitative interviews are a logical choice when a researcher wants to gather rich and detailed information about a phenomenon from participants. Researchers are not capable of observing feelings, thoughts, intentions, past behaviors, and the meanings individuals attach to their world. In order to gain knowledge about these topics researchers have to ask questions. Although this information is certainly obtainable through the use of surveys, the responses will be limited in detail by the options predetermined by the researcher (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). In contrast, qualitative interviews possess the ability to solicit in-depth responses that accurately express participant perceptions and feelings in her or his own words. This would prove especially useful when examining the role that social media plays in NFL fans choice to identify with, establish relationships with and support (both emotionally and financially) particular teams or players.

Data Collection: Sample

When utilizing interviewing as a research method, the researcher must make decisions regarding the sample, the type of interviews that will be conducted, and her or his role as the interviewer. Unlike quantitative research that typically depends on random samples of a large number of participants, qualitative inquiry tends to utilize relatively small, nonrandom samples. (Patton, 2002). The logic and power of random sampling is derived from statistical probability

theory. This theory allows researchers to make confident generalizations about a population based on their sample since they have controlled for selection bias. In this instance, the bias of nonrandom sampling is viewed as a weakness and thus must be controlled for. However, qualitative sampling methods find strength in the use of purposeful sampling. The ability to choose participants purposefully allows a researcher the ability to select those that may offer the richest information. By studying these information-rich cases researchers will gain greater access to insights and in-depth understanding than would be accessible through the use of random sampling (Patton, 2002).

Another issue to consider when recruiting participants is the number of participants needed to compose an optimal sample. Qualitative researchers generally agree that there are no concrete rules regarding sample size in qualitative inquiry. According to Patton (2002), "Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources" (p. 244). Instead of relying on a "magic" number of participants, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that researchers include enough participants to make data redundant. Once this level of data saturation has been reached researchers can feel confident that no new information is being presented, thus ensuring that the sample size is sufficient.

Data Collection: Types of Interviews

A second factor to consider when conducting qualitative interviews is the type of interview to choose. Within qualitative research there are generally three types of interviews that are conducted (Patton, 2002). The informal conversational interview is the most open-ended approach to interviewing and is thus the most unstructured (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Patton (2002) states, "the conversational interview offers maximum flexibility to pursue information in

whatever direction appears to be appropriate, depending on what emerges from observing a particular setting or from talking with one or more individuals in that setting" (p. 342). The flexibility of conversational interviewing, also referred to as "ethnographic interviewing," makes it an ideal fit for researchers engaged in fieldwork since the questions are not predetermined and stem from the immediate context.

The second type of qualitative interview is the standardized open-ended interview. Researchers conducting this type of interview rely on a set of preestablished questions that have a limited set of response categories. By asking each participant the same questions, using the same standardized wording, researchers forfeit interview flexibility and improvisational control (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). A major advantage of this type of interview is the focused responses it tends to solicit since the interview does not stray from an established set of questions. This standardization helps researchers streamline the process of data collection and analysis. An additional advantage of the standardized open-ended interview is the ability to minimize variations amongst interviewers, allowing for consistency and reliability amongst all interviewers. The weakness of this approach is that it does not allow researchers the freedom to pursue unanticipated topics or issues that participants may want to discuss. The standardization of this method has the potential to dilute the richness of information that could be found by probing individuals about their individual experiences (Patton, 2002).

The third type of interview, the interview guide approach, is a combination of the two previously discussed approaches. This type of interview incorporates the structure of the standardized open-ended interview with the flexibility of the informal conversational interview. The interview guide approach is commonly referred to as semi-structured (Babbie & Babbie, 2004). Like the structured interview, interviewers have a set of open-ended questions they would

like answered by participants. However, unlike structured interviewing, the interview guide approach affords interviewers the freedom to ask questions in an order that flows best with the conversation. As a result, the interviewer is often able to build conversation focused on a particular subject through the use of a conversational interviewing style marked by spontaneity and adjustments based on individual participant responses (Patton, 2002). Additionally, interviewers can use alternate wording and examples if they are needed to flesh out participant responses in more detail. As with informal conversation interviews, semi-structured interviews find strength in their flexibility.

Data Collection: Role of the Interviewer

Interview participants may possess a wealth of experiences relevant to the study at hand, but this information may go undiscussed unless the interviewer is able to effectively facilitate conversation. The interviewer is responsible for capturing the individual experiences and perceptions of participants through the use of effective questioning, established rapport, and careful listening to participant responses. In order to be most effective, questions should be easily understandable, neutral, open-ended, and have a singular focus (Patton, 2002). Question clarity is important because unclear questions can cause participants to become uncomfortable and confused which will have an adverse effect in the quality their responses. Likewise, asking multiple questions at once is not ideal because it allows participants to steer the discussion in a variety of different directions, some of which may be totally unrelated to the issue being studied. Ultimately, by listening closely to participant responses and being prepared to ask follow-up questions, interviewers have the power to gain significant insight into an issue through the eyes of those being interviewed.

Data Collection: Grounded Theory

Grounded theory emerged as the most relevant method of analysis for a study focused on NFL fans and social media. The grounded theory approach emphasizes emerging social conceptualizations by looking at the raw data (e.g., interviews) with as little a priori theorizing as possible (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Denzin (1997) claims, "The grounded theory approach is the most influential paradigm for qualitative research in the social sciences today" (p. 18). Using this method, researchers collect and analyze data in order to construct theories "grounded" in the data themselves, rather than relying on preconceived notions (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory can be viewed as a method for the construction of theories from data. This construction is accomplished through a combination of open and axial coding. This process includes the identification of concepts from within the data and the subsequent categorization of these concepts based on the researchers ability to decipher ways in which they are related. The categories then serve as a way to refine a theory describing a phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Although grounded theory does not rely heavily on peer theories, this study was influenced by social identity theory, as well as prior research related to consumer-brand relationships and relationship management theory. Despite social media's popularity, little research has focused on how social media is being used within the NFL to establish enduring relationships with fans. As such, using grounded theory in this study presented the opportunity to collect interview data and analyze it in an effort to theorize and contextualize the effect social media has had on NFL fandom.

Methodology of the Current Study

Details about the participants, procedures, recruitment methods, and interview schedule for this dissertation are outlined in the following sections.

Participants

A total of 20 qualified respondents participated in this study. Additionally, there were a total of two qualified participants who scheduled an interview but did not follow through with participation. Of the individuals who participated in this study, 16 (80%) were males and 4 (20%) were females. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 43 years old, with an average age of 28. Of the 20 participants in this sample, 13 (65%) were Chicago Bears fans, 2 (10%) were Green Bay Packers fans, 2 (10%) were San Francisco 49ers fans, 1 (5%) was a Dallas Cowboys fan, 1 (5%) was a New Orleans Saints fan, and 1 (5%) was a St. Louis Rams fan. Of the 20 participants, 16 (80%) currently reside in Illinois, 2 (10%) in Missouri, 1 (5%) in Colorado, and 1 (5%) in Pennsylvania. Participants reported using social media as part of their NFL fandom for lengths of time ranging from 2 to 7 years, with an average of 4 years. Across the 20 total participants, 14 (70%) reported their racial/ethnic identity as Caucasian, 3 (15%) identified as Hispanic, 2 (10%) identified as African-American, and 1 (5%) identified as Asian-American. Of the participants in this study, 11 (55%) reported being single, 5 (25%) reported being married, and 4 (20%) reported being in a relationship. In terms of education, 10 participants (50%) reported completing some college, 8 (40%) had completed a graduate degree, and 2 (10%) had completed a bachelor's degree.

Procedures

Prior to conduction of participant interviews, study approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Participants

were assured that (1) their participation was voluntary, (2) their responses to the interview questions were completely anonymous, and (3) all data collected would only be used for this dissertation and similar subsequent studies. Prior to each interview, participants were asked to sign a consent form acknowledging their understanding and voluntary participation in the study. In order to obtain descriptive data, each participant was also asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews that examined how and why NFL fans are using social media in regards to their NFL fandom. Specifically, I used the interview guide approach, or semi-structured approach, because of the flexibility it offered me as the interviewer. Rather than being locked to specific questions, wording, and order, the semi-structured approach allowed me to focus on specific topics and explore them in more depth than would have been feasible using alternate approaches. The interviews lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes each. On average, each interview generated approximately 29 double-spaced pages, yielding a total of 582 pages of double-spaced text. Each interview was digitally recorded, transcribed, and analyzed prior to the next interview, so as to both inform each subsequent interview and assist in grounded theory development.

Recruitment Methods and Criteria

Participants for this study were recruited from three sources. A research announcement outlining the general study topic, research purpose, significance, confidentiality assurance, and my contact information was distributed to the target population in each of these three sources:

1. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's weekly email announcement, eweek, was used to solicit participants from the pool of Illinois faculty and staff members.

2. Participants were recruited through ads that were publicized on billboards located at various UIUC campus locations, as well as local businesses community boards (e.g., coffee shops).
3. Lastly, messages including an invitation to participate in the study were posted on all 32 NFL teams message boards within Fannation.com. Potential respondents were made aware that these interviews would be conducted using video or voice recording technology such as Skype or Freeconferencecall.com.

Each interview participant was compensated at the end of the interview. Participants who engaged in in-person interviews received $15 in cash. Participants who were interviewed via online tools (i.e., Freeconferencecall.com, Skype) were given their choice of a being paid $15 via PayPal or receiving a $15 Amazon.com gift card.

In order to participate in this study respondents were required to (1) be 18 years of age or older, (2) label themselves as a fan of an NFL team or teams, (3) attend and/or view at least eight games of her or his favorite team per season, and (4) use social media to follow/dialogue with NFL team(s) and/or players. These criteria were screened for prior to the scheduling of any interviews through the use of a simple four-question consent form.

By creating these participant stipulations I was able to ensure that my sample was both relevant and relatively homogenous. Specifically, by requiring participants to attend/view at least eight games of their favorite team per season, I assumed I gained participants with a higher level of emotional, and potentially financial, investment in their team(s) than I would with casual fans. As such, the resulting data represents the actions and opinions of active and emotionally invested fans.

Interview Schedule

Each participant was interviewed separately at a location of their choosing with the majority of interviews occurring on the Illinois campus. Additionally, participants recruited via Fannation.com were interviewed through video/voice conferencing technology since face-to-face interviewing was not feasible. Interviews began with questions about how participants came to be fans of the NFL team or teams that they follow. Specifically, these questions sought to uncover the initial reasons (e.g., family tradition, location) each participant became a fan of her or his favorite team(s). Next participants were asked about the ways they follow or support their favorite team(s). These questions were followed up with ones pertaining to social media usage, specifically how and why participants use social media as an NFL fan. These questions also focused on the types of social media they use for (or when engaged with) the team(s) or player(s) they follow. Lastly, participants were asked to describe their perceptions of social media usage by NFL teams and players as well as their thoughts on how social media has impacted their fandom.

Data Analysis

Each interview was digitally recorded, transcribed, and reviewed using constant comparative techniques from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory offers a set of "systematic, yet flexible guidelines" for data analysis, allowing the researcher to formulate a theory and understanding of constructs that are rooted in the data (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). In the grounded theory method of constant comparison, "each incident in the data is compared with other incidents for similarities and differences" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 73). In an initial phase of open coding, I began by reading through the transcripts many times, adding identifying phrases to the margins. Using constant comparison, terms within and across

transcripts were compared to one another. Concepts were grouped together or distinguished from one another in a process of categorization (see also Spiggle, 1994). This method allowed me to identify emerging social concepts and uncover themes, which were subsequently categorized by topic. Next, I made connections between relevant constructs in a process of axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Lastly, I chose representative quotations to exemplify each category and demonstrate findings. In presenting and discussing these findings in the following chapter, I used pseudonyms in place of participants' names in order to eliminate any identifying information and ensure confidentiality.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To examine some of the evolving dynamics surrounding contemporary fan identification and the impact that social media has on the enactment of fandom, I used grounded theory to develop a theoretical model of the modes of social media usage by NFL fans (see Figure 1). For the purposes of this model, I define a *mode* as a manner, method, or practice of using social media. This model consists of three modes of social media usage including: (1) access, (2) voice, and (3) validation. Each mode builds upon the prior, such that Mode 2 includes the activities of Mode 1, and Mode 3 includes the activities of both Modes 1 and 2. By recognizing and defining distinct modes, this model allows for a clearer understanding of the increasing role social media plays in individuals' NFL fandom. My goal in this chapter is to use my model to address my research question: *How are NFL fans using social media as part of their NFL fandom and why do they make the effort to do so?* In order to explicate my findings, I present participant responses that demonstrate the application of the modes outlined in the model. In line with grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), this model was derived from themes that emerged from my data (i.e., responses were not forced to fit into a preexisting theoretical framework). However, in elucidating my findings, I reference previous research (e.g., related to social identity) to contextualize the model and explain how it relates to the existing body of literature.

Mode 1: Access

In my proposed theoretical model, the first mode of social media use by NFL fans is *access*. Findings of this study indicate that this is the most frequently utilized social media mode among NFL fans. This is logical because in order to enact subsequent modes, users must first be enacting Mode 1; all participants who reported engaging in Mode 2 also are users of Mode 1, just as all participants enacting Mode 3 also engage in Modes 1 and 2. Mode 1 entails the

consumption, but not the *creation*, of social media content. Specifically, the access mode consists of four primary ways of using social media including: (1) listening, (2) research and information gathering, (3) gaining access to players and teams, and (4) forming parasocial attachments. Although I explain each of these four ways of using social media separately, these activities are often intertwined and inextricably linked in users' enactment of them (e.g., listening is an integral part of each of the other three activities, and parasocial attachments are often formed as a result of gaining access to players).

Listening

The dominant thinking about online communities has been that in order to be a participant, an individual must be contributing her or his voice to the conversation. Early research on virtual communities tended to focus on individuals who actively post rather than solely access or consume content. However, in more recent years, researchers have acknowledged the void of scholarly activity focused on individuals who are present in online communities but do not participate publicly (Crawford, 2009; Nonnecke, Andrews, & Preece, 2006; Rafaeli, Ravid, & Soroka, 2004; Takahashi, Fujimoto, & Yamasaki, 2007). These individuals have traditionally been labeled as *lurkers*. In the current study, some participants did in fact use this term to describe themselves. When asked about his activity within online social networks, Karl replied,

> I rarely participate in [social media] conversations. I'm usually just a lurker, even on Facebook. I'm generally a lurker. I'll go a week without even looking at the darn thing [Facebook]. Usually, then once I look at it, then I'm like, "Oh I've got to catch up what's happened in the last week or so."

By self-identifying as a lurker, Karl differentiates himself from social media users who consistently lend their voice to the ongoing conversations. Karl does express a need to "catch up" on the posts he misses during personal hiatuses, further highlighting his role as a content consumer rather than a content creator.

Prior research illustrates that non-creators of content actually compose the majority of individuals online (Nonnecke & Preece, 2003; Zhang & Storck, 2001). Examining reasons for opting not to post illuminates why many people choose to exclusively consume rather than also create content, including not feeling like there is a need to add more material to the ever-growing virtual world. In describing his own online activities, Doug said,

> It's very rare that I will comment on an online article or ESPN story, and I've never sent a tweet. For me, getting the content is really all I need. . . . . I just don't think that everyone needs to add their two cents because, honestly, the thread would become way too confusing and way too exhausting to read. It's also been my experience that most of the comments I read aren't that great and mostly contain the opinion of some uninformed sport fan. I'd rather save my thoughts for talking to someone I know and in person.

Doug's statement demonstrates that for some online users, the ability to read articles and posts are enough motivation for using online communication technologies. This resonates with findings from a study by Nonnecke, Andrews, and Preece (2006), in which they examined lurking behaviors and the reasons lurkers do not publicly contribute content. In total, 288 self-labeled lurkers participated in the study and 53.9% replied that they do not post because their needs are met through the browsing of online content alone (i.e., without posting).

Despite the prevalence of online users who fall into the category of lurkers, the term *lurker* often carries with it a negative connotation (Crawford, 2009). Rafaeli, Ravid, and Soroka

(2004) noted that, in a general context, the action of lurking means "lying in wait," frequently with the intention to commit harm (p. 2). In the context of online communities, some view lurkers as passive (Morris & Ogan, 1996), as persistent yet speechless (Rafaeli, Ravid, & Soroka, 2004), or even as absorbing the energy and social capital from online communities without providing any benefits in return (Kollock & Smith, 1996).

The negative overtones associated with lurking may be unwarranted, as they do not accurately represent the contributions that these individuals make to online networks. Lee, Chen, and Jiang (2006) argued that lurkers provide an attentive audience for the contributions of other members and, while they do not post their own content, this does not adversely affect the community (see also Crawford, 2009). Similarly, some participants in the current study discussed the value they bring to the virtual world even as a non-creator of content. Doug asserted that individuals who are not replying to an article or other user's comments should still be viewed as important to sport writers and other content creators:

> To me, online content is kind of the same as newspapers, books, TV shows, and films. I'm a subscriber, I read the *Tribune* sports section everyday or I turn on the TV and watch *House* or use Hulu and other sites to watch TV and films. Newspapers only have value if people are reading them, and shows on television only last if they have good Nielsen ratings. Reading stuff on ESPN or Bleacher Report is the same in my mind. . . . If people weren't reading it, then the writers wouldn't have a job, or they'd just be sending it to the great abyss.

Doug's statement provides credence to scholastic efforts that have aimed to replace lurking with a more favorable term (e.g., Crawford, 2009; Nonnecke & Preece, 2003; Zhang & Storck, 2001). To that end, recently, Crawford (2009) proposed that rather than being labeled as lurkers, these

individuals should be considered *listeners*. Crawford argued that other attempts to replace the derogatory label of lurkers with a less negative term (e.g., *peripheral members*; Zhang & Storck, 2001; or *non-public participants*; Nonnecke & Preece, 2003) do not adequately represent what these online users contribute and why it is important. By redefining this group as listeners, their actions can be reframed as valuable rather than irrelevant. In line with Crawford (2009), my model utilizes the term listening rather than lurking to represent the integral role that these users play in the online community. This importance is evidenced by the fact that listening is a parallel and requisite component to *having a voice,* which is an activity central to Mode 2. In sum, as elucidated in the prior quote from Doug, just as television relies on viewers and traditional newspapers depend on readers, social media requires content consumers (i.e., listeners) as well as creators. Listening is the core of Mode 1 in that it is foundational to the remaining activities common to this mode (i.e., research and information gathering, gaining access to teams and players, and forming parasocial attachments).

Research and Information Gathering

Over the last decade, the Internet has proven itself to be a valuable source of information and knowledge. Search engines are frequently the websites of choice for individuals seeking to find this information (Waller, 2011). A search engine is defined as a computer program that searches the Internet for a specified word, phrase, or topic and provides a list of documents in which they are found (Dictionary.com, 2012). A recent study found that 91% of online adults utilize search engines to find information on the Internet; this represents a 7% increase since 2004 (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2012).

Google maintains its dominance as the search engine of choice with 83% of search users listing it as their favorite search engine (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2012). Google

accounted for over 11.8 billion (66%) of the 17.8 billion search queries conducted in the U.S. during January of 2012 (comScore, 2012). Google has become so popular that the word "googled" is now widely recognized as a verb (commonly used, for example, in the phrase "I googled it," when an individual is referring to how he or she found information related to a specific topic).

Results of this study demonstrate that social media, especially Twitter, can be added to the list of online information outlets at the disposal of curious users. Of the social networks, Twitter has emerged as a leader for allowing users to both search for information and share content with each other (Li & Du, 2011). Online users are becoming more aware that social media offers increased opportunities for them to gain access to information previously reserved for a Google search. Spencer explained:

> I'll go to Twitter because it'll dawn on me – oh let's see if there is anything. And then I'll usually find a link there to an article I was looking for. I'm learning more and more that actually, Twitter can be a hell of a good search – even in some ways more targeted than what Google is.

Another participant, Michael, elaborated on Spencer's support of Twitter as a viable search engine:

> It [Twitter] is kind of like a one-stop place. It's kind of like a wholesaler I guess maybe where you can go there, and if you get it set up the way you want it and if you follow the right people, you can get all your information through there instead of trying to search it down I guess.

The statements from Spencer and Michael are indicators that social media networks, particularly Twitter, are beginning to alter the ways in which individuals seek out information. Experts from

within the sport industry have taken notice of this shift and have increased the implementation of Twitter as a source of information for fans (Hambrick, 2012). According to Fisher (2009), Twitter has become the sport industry's social media tool of choice. Likewise, the rapid growth of Twitter can be attributed in large part to the athletes, sport organizations, and fans that use it (Fisher, 2009). The relationship between the sport industry and Twitter has been mutually beneficial and will continue to evolve as more users adopt the technology.

Participants in this study reported various benefits of using Twitter as a tool for research and information gathering. As discussed earlier, the concept of using Twitter as a search engine is a phenomenon that is growing in popularity. Participants described searching on Twitter as easy because of Twitter's use of *hashtags* to identify specific topics. To explain, on Twitter, the # symbol represents a hashtag and it is used to mark keywords or topics in a tweet. Hashtags then allow tweets to be more visible in a Twitter search. When using the search function of Twitter, users are presented with a list of recent tweets that have utilized the designated hashtag, which simplifies the process of trying to find tweets on a particular topic. Brittany described her use of hashtags:

> Yeah, I do [use hashtags] if I'm looking for something in particular. . . . If I'm interested in a trending topic – and I've missed the initial, the first tweet or the first couple tweets, I'll just search the hashtags. I don't have to go through the entire timeline.

For Brittany, Twitter's implementation of hashtags has made it easy for her to seek out information and quickly get caught up on topics and tweets that she would have previously missed. Furthermore, hashtags can allow a user to quickly see popular topics that may be of interest: The hashtag topics that have been used the most frequently are labeled as "trending" and are listed in the left column of a Twitter user's profile page. Research has explored Twitter's

trending topics and found that ESPN and other news organizations play an important role in dictating which topics will trend (Asur, Huberman, Szabo, & Wang, 2011) because of their large number of Twitter followers.

According to participants, a significant benefit of using Twitter as a search engine is that it allows them access to the thoughts and opinions of others in real-time. This type of search is different from using a search engine because rather than receiving a list of websites containing the search term, users are able to see how the hashtag topic conversation has evolved since its inception. In this way, users are able to read the first tweet and each subsequent response tweet related to the topic. Access to the thoughts and opinions of others in real-time is dramatically different than the type of results a user would generate from a Google search. Jeremy reported using Twitter's search function in this exact manner: "As I've become a heavy Twitter user in the last two months, if I'm curious about something you type it in and you just read what people are saying." For Jeremy, the ability to read what other users are saying about a topic is a valuable benefit of Twitter's search function. Thus, the interactive nature of Twitter benefits even those users who opt not to engage in two-way interaction themselves because it allows for the opportunity to act as *listeners* to ongoing conversations. That is, Twitter serves as a worldwide chat room where some users publicly share their thoughts on a topic (as will be discussed in regard to Modes 2 and 3), and other users (i.e., those enacting only Mode 1) opt to strictly serve as audience members and listen to the ongoing conversation without creating content of their own.

In addition to Twitter's utility as a search engine providing access to others' thoughts and conversations, participants discussed its value as an up-to-date news source. Sport fans are

turning to Twitter as the "place" to hear breaking news. Jamal discussed how quickly news becomes available via Twitter:

> I love Twitter because it's the real-time information network and it's just – it streams so fast and it's so much on the dime. . . . The most important thing is up to date information. To me, that's very important. So the fact that they tweet news or put stuff on Facebook pretty much ASAP when it happens, as a fan I think that's a big deal – and then see it's free. I think that's a huge deal 'cause people are like, "Oh check out this insider 49ers content for $20 a month." I'm like, "No I can just got to Twitter and get ten times the amount of information for free and way faster."

For Jamal, having access to up-to-date information is a major reason he chooses to use social media. Michael also appreciates the speed of information availability via Twitter:

> It feels like you've got, like you kind of have a pipeline and you know what's going on quicker than just if you waited to read the paper tomorrow morning or something like that. It's like, it's up to date, up to the minute.

Participants' interest in Twitter as a useful and speedy information-gathering tool is shared by researchers, who have examined the flow of information on Twitter. Zhou, Bandari, Kong, Qian, and Roychowdhury (2010) found that Twitter users with a large following act as a central source of information. These users pass along information to their followers who, in turn, pass along the information to their own group of followers. In this manner, information is passed on to an increasing amount of individuals who may not have otherwise had any knowledge of each other. Additionally, Yang and Leskovec (2010) examined popular bloggers and Twitter users and found that information was passed rapidly from user to user, indicating that individuals with influence (e.g., professional athletes) play a vital role in the spread of information. These

studies demonstrate the potential of Twitter as a major source of information; however, each study also reported the rapid corrosion of information. In these cases, trending topics and other news stories on Twitter circulated among users for a limited time before interest and responses weakened and disappeared completely (Asur et al., 2011; Yang & Leskovec, 2010; Zhou et al., 2010). This demonstrates that although Twitter serves as a quick and easy-to-use news source, the popularity of the information fades relatively quickly. These findings can be linked to the current study's theoretical model. According to the model, research and information gathering is an activity engaged in by individuals operating at Mode 1. Individuals enacting solely this mode are strictly content consumers, thus they do not contribute their voice to the Twitter discussion. Findings of this study illustrate that many social media users operate only at Mode 1; therefore, information on Twitter trends for only a brief time because it reaches a large pool of individuals who are listening but not responding.

Gaining Access to Players and Teams

Television broadcasts focused on sport ushered in a new way for fans to maintain associations with their favorite teams and players. Since its introduction, sport programming has continued to grow in popularity. Between 1960 and 1988, there was a 600% increase in the amount of television time slots dedicated to sports (Wenner, 1989). As television programming has evolved, providers have devised new ways to increase sport coverage. Specialized 24-hour sport channels and pay-per-view events are now widely offered (Rowe, 2005).

Multiple sport networks operate today, the most recognizable of which is ESPN. The network, which is the self-proclaimed "Worldwide Leader in Sports," surpassed 100 million television subscribers in February of 2011 (Summers, 2012). Further demonstrating its importance to sport fans, ESPN was listed as the most indispensible basic cable channel by

participants in a recent study conducted by Needham and Company (Cazzy, 2012). The fact that televised sport programming continues to maintain its popularity may be indicative of its value as a catalyst for the development of fan-athlete relationships. Until recently, televised sports have provided one of the only ways for fans to view the lives of the athletes they support.

Television still plays a vital role in sport fandom, but Internet technologies now provide an additional avenue for fans to access their favorite athletes (Poor, 2006). The widespread adoption of team websites, sport blogs, and sites like ESPN.com supply fans with opportunities to read more detailed information about sport teams and players. According to participants of this study, the emergence of social media has given fans unprecedented opportunities to establish contact with individuals ranging from professional athletes to sport media. Lori said:

> So then once I was on Twitter, then slowly over time, it was easy to find people to follow. Then you realize the players were on it. Then you realize the reporters were on it. And it just kind of became the sense of, "Well, I can just go there everyday. . . . ." So I can go directly to Twitter and kind of cut out the middleman.

Lori's statement demonstrates how social media tools like Twitter are eliminating one of the steps in the information consumption process. Fans now receive information directly from the source; they no longer have to rely on hearing secondhand information from the media after they have conducted interviews. Likewise, fans can immediately digest the thoughts of sport writers through their Twitter stream rather than waiting for their column to be published. Twitter provides direct access to news from the source itself. Spencer elaborated on this benefit:

> Twitter kinda changed the way things get reported. So I guess it kinda gives you that access. So you don't have to go through media filters. . . . You don't have to wait for the announcement. You get it right away. It's kinda cool.

As a sport fan, Spencer appreciates the benefit of receiving news and information directly from the athletes he follows on Twitter.

Evidence shows that participants of this study, like Spencer, are not alone in their enjoyment of increased access to athletes: Several days after completing the Tour of Ireland, Lance Armstrong used Twitter to invite his followers to join him for a ride at a local park. Armstrong tweeted, "Good morning Dublin. Who wants to ride this afternoon? I do. 5:30pm at the roundabout of Fountain Road and Chesterfield Avenue. See you there." Armstrong's tweet resulted in over 1,000 people showing up at the designated meeting point and joining him for a ride (Cromwell, 2009).

Kassing and Sanderson (2009) stated that, in a short period of time, Twitter has had a substantial impact on fan-athlete relationships due to the enhanced access it provides. For participants, being able to see "behind the curtain" seems to impact their sport fandom in positive ways. Derrick described why he enjoys this increased access as a fan:

> It gives you that behind-the-scenes look. Usually, before social media, you were not able to see players in the locker room just messing around with teammates. You were not able to see GMs [general managers] talking with players on Twitter. You were not able to see, even like strength and conditioning staff talking with players. It is all that kind of stuff.

Derrick's statement illuminates the finding that athletes are not the only ones that fans want increased access to. Derrick specifically mentioned general managers and strength and conditioning staff. While general managers are often cited in sport reports, auxiliary coaches and staff are not often considered to be exciting news material. However, for fans like Derrick, being able to see these individuals interact on Twitter does seem to promote fandom.

Furthermore, findings suggest that this sense of getting a behind-the-scenes look at sport-related content via social media can lead to a feeling of ownership among fans. Michael said,

> It makes you, gives you a feeling of ownership I guess because you see so much of it and there's so many different ways to take [information] in. It's not like [the team] is some cold distant thing. It's there and there are ways to interact with it if you want to.

This feeling of ownership can enhance social identification with the team and, in turn, strengthen fandom, as demonstrated by Colin's discussion of his use of social media to follow the Rams:

> It makes me more interested it seems like. I feel I'm not just watching a bunch of no-namers 'cause I know a lot of the Rams roster. . . . So yeah, I mean I think it's mainly the updates keep me motivated to be with them and kind of in sports, we always say, "we won," even though "we" didn't do anything. We just watch but you feel like part of [the team]. . . . It makes me feel like Assistant GM [General Manager].

Colin's quote provides insight into the powerful effect that social media can have on fandom and how this process can occur: He is more engaged in, and feels he has more of a stake in, his team as a result of the increased access social media provides. This makes him feel more identified with his team, as evidenced by his comments about using "we" language (i.e., "we won"). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) states that people categorize themselves and others by social group, including those with whom they identify (i.e., the in-group or "us") and others with whom they do not identify (i.e., the out-group, or "them"). Because fans, like Colin and Michael, have increased access to players and teams via social media, they often feel more invested and more like part of the group. For some fans, the corollary of this strengthened identification is increased fandom. In sum, a finding of this study is that, by providing increased access to teams

and players, social media can enhance people's sense of ownership of "their" team and make some individuals feel more highly identified as fans of that team.

Moreover, Twitter has eliminated many of the barriers that once stood between fans and their favorite players. Social media has not suddenly endowed fans with the power to walk up to an athlete and engage in casual conversation. However, it has given fans a tool for consuming the thoughts and statements of these athletes, something not previously possible. Jamal illustrated how this access impacts him:

> I think now that it's unfiltered and it's not someone else telling you about someone, that you can actually basically connect with [players] directly. So even though I've never met Patrick Willis, it's almost as if I know him through Twitter because of what he shares and how he shares it. . . . It's almost like you're not really buddies but it's almost like you are in a sense. Hey it's not "Patrick Willis, the athlete" or "Patrick Willis, the San Francisco 49ers linebacker." But it's "Patrick Willis, the person" or "Patrick Willis, the man who likes the same things I do." So I really think it breaks down that barrier and lets you know that they're human just like us.

Having access to Patrick Willis' tweets has made Jamal see similarities between himself and Willis, providing an opportunity for Jamal to identify with this professional athlete. Willis' tweets have humanized him for Jamal in a way that traditional media outlets had not. The lack of barriers associated with social media is allowing fans to establish a sense of connection with the players that they follow.

According to Gregory (2009), Jamal's reaction to this access is to be expected because Twitter satisfies fans' need to establish a closer connection with celebrity athletes due in part to its ability to show a more personal side of the athlete. Prior research has proposed that

identification is likely to take place when individuals perceive shared similarities with celebrities (Fraser & Brown, 2002; Jin, 2006; Soukoup, 2006). Researchers have concluded that individuals like Jamal, who believe they share a celebrity's interests or "like the same things" are likely to form *parasocial attachments,* as will be discussed in the section that follows.

Forming Parasocial Attachments

The access that social media provides to users makes such media platforms ripe for the development of fans' parasocial attachments. Horton and Wohl (1956) created the term *parasocial interaction* (PSI) to represent the relationships that media users develop with mediated personalities. In accordance with this definition, over time individuals perceive connections and similarities with mediated characters due to repeated exposure. These interactions resemble interpersonal relationships but differ because the interactions are one-sided and are controlled by the media personality (Cohen & Perse, 2003; Perse, 1990). Simply put, these parasocial interactions result in what can be described as an attachment to the mediated individual. This attachment stems from one-way interactions with an individual, most often of higher status. The viewer (e.g., a sport fan) feels that he or she knows the mediated character (e.g., an athlete) intimately but the mediated character rarely knows the viewer at all.

PSI research has typically focused on television as a means of mediation. Scholars have previously examined PSI in relation to television newscasters (Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rayburn, 1980; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985), characters on soap-operas (Perse & Rubin, 1989), commercials featuring celebrities (Alperstein, 1991), comedians (Auter, 1992), talk show hosts (Rubin, 2000; Rubin, Haridakis, & Eyal, 2003), home shopping networks (Gudelunas, 2006), and reality television (Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006). Researchers have also looked beyond television as a source of PSI by examining other media channels. For

example, Burnett and Beto (2000) studied parasocial relationships between romance novel readers and the novel's hero or heroine.

Parasocial attachment can also be applied to sport. Participants in this study noted that watching football games on television during their childhood impacted their fandom of individual players. Researchers have found that when fans are repeatedly exposed to sport figures through live and televised games, movies, and commercials, they are likely to form parasocial attachments to these athletes (Brown & Basil, 1995; Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003; Brown, Duane, & Fraser, 1997; Hartmann, Stuke, Daschmann, 2005). Jamal recalled the first time he saw his favorite player, Jerry Rice, on television:

> I was in second grade actually so that was like 1986, '87, a long time ago. And I just remember the 49ers were playing the Bears. And Joe Montana throws a pass at Jerry Rice. Jerry Rice was almost about to go out of bounds. He cuts it all the way across the field and runs 50 years for a touchdown. It was amazing, especially when you're in second grade. Wow, that's like Superman. So I think at that specific point that's when I knew this is who I would be rooting for.

Another participant, Spencer, shared a similar story:

> I remember watching Tony Dorsett run and I thought, "This is the coolest thing ever." And that's when I was hooked. And Tony Dorsett became my favorite player right away – and I started following the Cowboys. And they were just so larger than life and just everything – Too Tall and all those guys. They were just physically – but the image was so big.

As children, both Jamal and Spencer endowed their favorite players with superhuman characteristics (i.e., "Superman," "larger than life"). In this sense, they perceived them not just as

players, but also as heroes worthy of adoration. It is this adoration that motivated them to become fans of these players and their teams. Wann (1995) originally categorized fan motivation into eight types: *eustress, self-esteem benefit, diversion, entertainment, economic value, aesthetics, need for affiliation,* and *family needs.* Later, Stevens, Lathrop, and Bradish (2003) proposed the addition of *adoration* to the fan motivation typology based on the hero status often applied to sport figures. Findings from the current study support the validity of adoration as a form of fan motivation.

The widespread availability of sport programming and the invention of the Internet (including the subsequent emergence of social media) have altered the ways in which professional athletes are viewed by the public, providing new avenues for parasocial attachments to form. Boorstin (1961) believed that professional athletes could be divided into two distinct groups: *sport heroes* and *celebrity athletes.* According to this categorization, sport heroes are recognized because of their performance and accomplishments on the field, whereas celebrity athletes are famous because their images are well known. In the time since Boorstin made this argument, much has changed within the sport industry. Since then, researchers have intertwined the categories of heroes and celebrity athletes, stating that heroism is a subset of celebrity status (Rein, Kotler, & Stoller, 1997). Chalip (1996) argued that athletes are in the unique position to have their sport career coincide with celebrity status. Social media is proving this statement truer than ever. Fans are now able to read tweets from their favorite teams and athletes, essentially opening up a range of opportunities to access previously guarded media personalities (Hambrick & Mahoney, 2012).

The concept of celebrity is associated with widespread public recognition. For athletes today, this recognition is often a combination of performance on the field and activities off of it.

The presence of celebrity athletes has been shown to provide multiple benefits to the player's respective team and league. Often these benefits are displayed through increased ticket and apparel sales and the scheduling of nationally televised games. An examination of former NBA superstar, Michael Jordan, provides evidence of the celebrity athlete affect. It is estimated that Jordan's presence alone accounted for $50 million annually in revenue for the Chicago Bulls and NBA (Hausman & Leonard, 1997).

Athletes also increase their celebrity status by serving as product ambassadors, or spokespersons, for consumer brands (e.g., Coke, Subway). The word "brand" is commonly applied to products and services, and tied to perceptions of quality and image (Thomson, 2006). In addition to generating revenue for the Bulls and the NBA, Jordan served as the spokesperson for a long list of consumer brands including: Nike, Gatorade, Hanes, Oakley, Wheaties, and Wilson (Sports Illustrated, 2000). Athletes as spokespersons are still a prominent occurrence within the advertising industry. Carlson and Donavan (2008) showed that 20% of advertisements utilized celebrities and, of those ads, 60% featured celebrity athletes. Chicago Bulls star Derrick Rose recently signed one of the richest shoe endorsement deals in history. Rose agreed to a 13-year deal with Adidas that guarantees him $185 million and includes incentives that could be worth an additional $15 million (Wojnarowski, 2012). Contracts like Rose's provide evidence that consumer brands, like Adidas, still see immense value in making celebrity athletes the face of their products.

Researchers have begun to examine the utility of social media as a promotional tool for brands and athletes. During the 2009 Giro d'Italia (Tour of Italy), a cyclist endorsed a product by tweeting about it on Twitter and received positive feedback about the product from his followers

(Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Lori recalled a similar experience she had after reading a tweet from a Bears player:

> I follow Robbie Gould and he always tweets how when you see him at practice, he's going to have an Honest Tea, which is a brand of tea. To be honest with you, ironically, I wouldn't have ever heard of that specific type of tea if he wasn't tweeting about it. So, the way that it seems on Twitter, it just seems like it's this guy who enjoys tea afterwards, but indirectly, it makes you aware of a brand. Even if the player doesn't intend it, [those tweets] could influence people and so forth.

Lori claimed that Gould's tweet about Honest Tea led to her awareness of the brand. Her statement also suggests that these types of tweets from athletes appear conversational or less obvious than traditional advertising. This may explain why Lori reported believing that tweets like this can positively influence consumers. Findings from this study provide additional evidence of social media's immense potential as an effective promotional tool for consumer brands.

The potential marketing implication of social media has led other scholars to examine the ways in which professional athletes are using Twitter. These studies found that professional athletes primarily use social media as a tool for interacting with other athletes, friends, family, and fans, and only 5% of their tweets were promotional (Hambrick, 2012; Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). These studies suggest that professional athletes are not yet fully utilizing social media's promotional potential, indicating a huge missed opportunity due to the online presence these individuals possess.

In addition to representing brands (e.g., NBA, Chicago Bulls, Adidas), celebrities can be considered brands in their own right because they are professionally managed and because they have additional associations and features of a brand (Thomson, 2006). The concept of equating individuals with brands is called *human brands*. Rindova, Pollock, and Hayward (2006) define human brands as any well-known individual who is the focal point of marketing and communication campaigns. Political candidates are perhaps the most easily recognizable human brands. Each candidate's messages, appearances, and endorsements are controlled by campaign managers and the political party they represent in an effort to improve brand image and increase support (Thomson, 2006).

Athletes can also be considered human brands. Like political parties, the NBA implemented measures to manage its human brands by creating an off-the-court dress code for its players in order to improve the league's image (Lee, 2005). The implementation of this policy was met with mixed reactions from players within the league. Some players supported the dress code and expressed appreciation for the effort that the league was making to improve its image among fans. The NBA was met with opposition by players who had already established lucrative individual images (e.g., Allen Iverson) and believed that their image would be negatively impacted by the new league policy (Thomson, 2006). Those players concerned about the adverse affect on their image were essentially trying to protect their image as a human brand.

The introduction of social media tools like Twitter is a "game changer" in terms of human branding and PSI. As discussed above, athletes, as human brands, have previously been controlled by the organizations (e.g., Coca-Cola), teams (e.g., Chicago bulls), and leagues (e.g., NBA) that they represent. Now players have the power to control their own brand image and self-presentation through the additional platform provided by social media (Sanderson, 2008).

Players are using social media to combat negative media portrayals, express their values, and interact with fans (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). In this way, athletes are acting as human brands and creating connections with fans that can be equated to parasocial attachments.

Results of this study demonstrate that the brand control afforded athletes via social media is providing new ways for fans to form parasocial attachments with players. Prior human brands research has examined idolatry (Houran, Navik, & Zerrusen, 2005), fandom (Leetz, de Becker, & Giles, 1995), and celebrity worship (Dietz et al., 1991) and found that attachments consistently develop with human brands (Leets, de Becker, & Giles, 1995). Paul described how the athletes he follows on Twitter are using social media and the impact this has on him as a fan:

> I know a lot of it is probably a show of like – a lot of the really good players understand they're a brand and they're trying to sell something. But it really does give you insight into who they are. It gives you insight into their lives. It's weird too because I realize now I'm as old as some of these players, but when I was growing up I idolized these people and stuff like that. And it's just like you see who your heroes really are and not just who they are on the field and stuff like that. So that's really cool.

Interestingly, Paul understands that the athletes he follows are functioning as human brands and are trying to sell something (e.g., a product, an image). Despite this knowledge, he still feels that these players' social media messages are insightful and have value for him as a fan. The willingness to accept (and enjoy) messages, even those that may at times be recognized as promotional, highlights an advantage of the interpersonal characteristics of human brands and provides further evidence that social media does provide athletes with a, as of yet, largely underutilized marketing tool.

Fans' interactions with celebrities and sport teams have been the subject of prior interpersonal research because, although they are one-sided, they mirror interpersonal relationships in many ways (Thomson, 2006). Like interpersonal relationships, individuals develop relationships with human brands and often come to think of these brands as members of their peer group (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Jamal explained how the perceived authenticity of a player via social media can create a sense of familiarity:

> I think things like authenticity is key especially in social media. So I think that what the players do well is again letting you into the kind of person they are and letting you into their life outside of the field or off the field. . . . I really think it builds more of a bond between myself and the athlete.

Jamal's statement demonstrates that social media can foster feelings of familiarity and friendship despite never having met the players he follows face-to-face. Like Jamal, Derrick expressed belief that social media provides a feeling of knowing athletes on a personal level:

> I don't know, I rather get almost a sense of them being human. You know them being more than this and that. Being able to understand like it is more than just their sport. They talk about many different things [on Twitter]. Therefore, it is just a different understanding from a different point of view. It is kind of as if you know them to a certain extent.

These players are no longer just viewed as athletes on the playing field; rather they come to be seen as "human" like the fans that support them. Don echoed this sentiment:

> It's good to see that they're human. Like there's that aspect, oh they're just regular people who just happen to be really good at sports. Because I think before when I was little, I idolized a player but I didn't know that much about them…. I think social media

> changes that. You get a better sense of who they are. And it kinda justifies me cheering at someone or not rooting for them.

For Don, having some insight into the personal side of players and getting to know more about them helps him to justify idolizing the players he cheers for.

Another participant, Spencer, provided further evidence that social media can build a sense of having an interpersonal connection, even though the relationship is not reciprocal:

> You get to see the personal side of players. And so in some ways, you feel you establish a connection with them even though it's not a real connection. It's a knowledge of who the person is as a person and not just as the player. . . . And I've found that that kinda changes how you watch the game. Because when you watch the game, it's no longer just a piece of the chessboard that's moving. . . . It's kinda interesting – I think, for example, if Jesse Holley were to be traded somewhere else, I wouldn't not follow him anymore. And I'd still be rooting for him to do well.

Clearly, Spencer has developed a parasocial attachment with the players he follows on Twitter. Despite his loyalty to the Cowboys, Spencer states that he would still use Twitter to follow current Dallas player Jesse Holley if he were traded to another team. Furthermore, he claims that he would be rooting for Holley to do well on his new team. Through these statements, it is evident that because of social media, Spencer may equate Jesse Holley (and others) to a friend rather than as a distant and unreachable celebrity athlete. This is consistent with results from Cole and Leets (1999) and Rubin and McHugh (1987), who found that, in regards to human brands, individuals demonstrate many of the same interpersonal emotions and behaviors, sometimes to the point that consumers view human brands as a companion, good friend, or romantic partner.

Additionally, many of the variables that lead to interpersonal attachments are applied to human brands, most notably, the perception of a shared background and interests (Cole & Leets, 1999; Perse & Rubin, 1989). John's comments represent this phenomenon:

> I know Greg Jennings and Donald Driver both have mentioned their faith in front of the camera and through social media. And then I'll got look up stuff later about them because that's something I connect with them [on because] I'm a Christian. But – I almost feel a little connection with them because of that. I share that with them and that's off the football field and I think it's really cool that they do that.

For John, a shared faith has established a perceived connection between him and some of his favorite Green Bay Packers players. As previously mentioned, a foundational tenet of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) is that people characterize themselves and others into social groups, distinguishing between those who share group membership with them (i.e., the in-group) and those who do not (i.e., the out-group). People, like John, who identify strongly as a fan of a team are already likely to feel they share a connection with others who also have a stake in that same team (e.g., other fans, players); however, social media provides people with access to different aspects of players' identity (i.e., beyond football), allowing fans to feel connected to players based on other social and personal dimensions (e.g., Christianity). In this way, John identifies with athletes Jennings and Driver not only because they play for the team he loves but also because they share his faith. Similarly, Sanderson (2008) examined former Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling's blog and found that religious commonality was one of the ways fans felt connected to Schilling. Consistent with findings from the current study, Sanderson concluded that fans do form parasocial attachments to athletes. These attachments will undoubtedly

continue to develop as fans gain more access to the players and teams they support thanks to the immediacy available through social media.

Findings of this study have demonstrated that fans do value the access and immediacy to teams and players afforded them by social media. However, this study also provides evidence that this access can have an adverse effect on human brands if athletes do not use social media correctly in the eyes of fans. Lori believed that the content of social media messages has the potential to positively or negatively affect the level of identification that fans experience in relation to the athletes they follow:

> If you are following people who are good on Twitter, it can build the connection. But it can also have the opposite effect because a few players need to get smarter about what they do on Twitter. Sometimes a player can come off looking like a douche [derogatory term] in a way if they aren't good at managing Twitter.

Lori provides evidence that athletes should be mindful of their social media actions or they will be perceived negatively by fans. For Derrick, a current NFL player's tweets did alter his perceptions of that player:

> It [an athlete's Twitter usage] could be a good thing or it could be a bad thing. Like players like Major Wright. He is a cocky guy when he tweets so I am not that big of a fan of him anymore. I used to like him as a football player but some of the stuff he says is too boastful.

In this instance, Wright's tweets transformed one of his fans into a non-supporter based on the way Wright presented himself as a human brand. As such, this study provides evidence that while social media is providing increased access to players, an increased sense of attachment of fans to the players that they follow is not a guarantee.

Finally, findings of this study indicate that social media has a more significant impact on player fandom and attachment than on team fandom and attachment, and it seems logical that this is largely due to the nature of parasocial attachment (i.e., individuals are more likely to feel like they have developed a relationship with a person—in this case, a player—as compared to an entity—in this case, a team). While some participants did note feeling more connected to their team, many stated that their fandom of the team had peaked or would not waiver regardless of its social media usage. Conversely, a large number of participants described feeling more connected to players on a personal level and said that this sense of connection with a mediated figure (i.e., parasocial attachment) has positively affected their individual player fandom. Don explained:

> On a scale of one [lowest] to five [highest], social media's impact on my team fandom is probably a one. Like I said, I'm not going to change the way I liked the Bears. I was a huge Bears fan before Twitter so I think I'll always be a fan of the Bears no matter who they have on the roster. At the player level, probably a four, yeah it's higher. I use it mostly to get to know the players. It's more personal because it's beyond the X's and O's.

Ben provided similar thoughts regarding how social media impacts his fandom at the team and player level: "Social media's impact as me being a fan of the Titans or Bears is probably low. But being a fan of certain players, I would say that is much higher because it makes you feel closer to them."

Mode 2: Voice

In the theoretical model that I have developed based on data from this study, the second mode of social media use by NFL fans is *voice.* As the second mode of social media use, individuals enacting this mode also engage in some or all of the activities listed in Mode 1

(*access*). Mode 2 is distinct from Mode 1 because at this level, individuals are now also *creating* (i.e., contributing) content, whereas Mode 1 activities focus exclusively on content *consumption*. For the purposes of this study and its theoretical model, creation is engaged in when users generate any of their own social media content (e.g., tweets, pictures, message board postings) and make this content viewable to others. In this way, individuals are publicly participating rather than just *listening*.

In addition, Mode 1 focuses on the access that social media grants to NFL fans, whereas Mode 2 is centered on the tenet that social media can provide users with a voice. I use the term *voice* to refer to "a medium or agency of expression" (thefreedictionary.com, 2012). Therefore, as will be discussed throughout this section, *having a voice* via social media can be defined as utilizing social media technologies to express oneself (and one's fandom), not only through words (e.g., a tweet stating, "I love the Bears"), but also through actions (e.g., hitting the "like" button on the Bears' Facebook page) and the presentation of images (e.g., having a Bears player as one's profile picture on Facebook). That is, I argue that, in the context of social media, voice is not limited to what is "said" (i.e., written), but also includes what is communicated through such alternate means as pictures and actions that are visible online. Mode 2 consists of three primary activities involving the creation of user content via social media, including: (1) publicly legitimizing fandom, (2) socially interacting with other fans, and (3) creating alternate identities.

As previously mentioned, the activities found within and across Modes 1 and 2 can be performed concurrently. For example, a fan may be socially interacting with other fans, a Mode 2 activity, while still using social media as a way to gather information about her or his favorite team, a Mode 1 activity. Similarly, a social media user may be legitimizing his or her fandom *during* a social exchange with another fan (both of which are Mode 2 activities). The modes

build upon each other, meaning that individuals using a higher mode do not cease enacting previous modes of use; however, individuals operating at Mode 1 do not engage in Mode 2 activities and individuals operating at Mode 2 do not engage in Mode 3 activities.

Publicly Legitimizing Fandom

Sport fans often wear team apparel as a means of demonstrating their fandom of a particular team. By donning team colors and emblazoning themselves with team logos, fans are publicly displaying their fandom of said team. This open display serves as a method to publicly legitimize their fandom (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). A study by de Groot and Robinson (2008) examining Australian football fan team attachment found that one fan identified so strongly with his team that he had the team's logo tattooed on his body. Though participants in the current study did not mention having team tattoos, they did repeatedly mention the wearing of team-related apparel and acknowledged that this contributes greatly to their identification as a fan of their favorite team. While team apparel undoubtedly plays a significant role in the identification process, this study's primary focus is on the ways social media is impacting NFL fandom. Social media is providing fans with new opportunities to publicly legitimize their fandom. Publicly legitimizing fandom does not require explicit, external approval from others (i.e., validation). Instead, it serves as a way for fans to confirm or enhance their own identity by presenting themselves in ways that are consistent with the social group with which they identify. Participants reported two primary ways of legitimizing their NFL fandom via social media: *public displays of team support* and the *demonstration of sport-related knowledge*.

Public displays of team support via social media are accomplished through the act of using social media tools (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) to make other online individuals aware of

one's fandom of a particular team. Participants reported primarily engaging in this activity through actions on Facebook and Twitter. Brian explained the simple way he displayed team support for the Chicago Bears after they lost their starting quarterback to injury: "For awhile when Caleb Hanie was the quarterback, my Facebook profile picture was a picture of Caleb Hanie." By choosing to use a photo of the Bears backup quarterback as his Facebook profile picture, Brian publicly displayed his continued support for the team to anyone who visited his Facebook page. Online profile pictures, like avatars, sometimes provide other members with information that may enhance their ability to recognize and understand the social identity of the member displaying the picture (Golder & Donath, 2004).

Another way that participants reported using Facebook to display team support was by "liking" or commenting on their team's Facebook page. By clicking the "like" button on an NFL team's page, Facebook users publicly identity themselves as a fan of that team. This "liking" is then published on Facebook and all those listed as a Facebook "friend" of that individual have the potential to see that team X was added as her or his favorite team. Similarly, when Facebook users comment on a page, this action is then broadcast to those identified as her or his "friends." John explained his awareness of the public nature of "liking," as well as commenting on, sport-related content via Facebook:

> When I say something [on Facebook], in the back of my mind, I know it's going to pop up on my [Facebook] wall, "John commented on this," and people – my friends are going to see that and maybe look at that. So I have that in the back of my mind…. I know because right after I do this, Facebook says, "John likes, or commented on, ESPN or the Packers fan page."

This form of public team support can be influential as several participants mentioned that seeing that a Facebook friend "liked" or commented on a team's page motivated them to seek out and "like" the page as well. Linda explained why she would never "like" or comment positively on an opposing team's Facebook page, even if she respected the team or one of its players:

> [I would] absolutely not . . . because I know that if you "like" it, it'll show up on your profile page as "[Linda] likes this team," and I would never want anyone to see, "Linda likes the Packers." All your friends would be able to see Linda "liked" this and never would I want that.

By using Facebook as a tool to display team support (and *avoiding* "liking" or positively commenting on opposing teams' Facebook pages), participants are able to publicly display and maintain their identity as a fan of their favorite team. In this sense, social media such as Facebook operates as a tool to identity oneself as a legitimate part of a specific group (e.g., a fan of a specific team) and to provide distinctiveness from other groups (Kim & Chan, 2007).

In addition to publicly displaying team support, some participants reported that demonstrating NFL and team-related knowledge is an important way for them to legitimize their fandom through the use of social media. Fans who are trying to legitimize their fandom are publicly displaying their knowledge and enacting the role of an informed fan in an effort to "prove" their fandom. In discussing his use of message boards to interact with other Bears fans, George described why being knowledgeable about the team is important:

> It's about being an educated fan. It really kinda bothers me when people want to "talk" football but don't really understand it. So I like to be prepared when somebody asks me about football, I like to know what's going on. I like to understand what the Bears are doing so I can actually make a legitimate argument [on message boards].

For George, being up to date with football-related news represents what it means to be a fan. Knowledge serves as an indicator of legitimate fandom because it allows him to competently discuss football with others.

Like George, Linda uses her knowledge of football to convey that she is an educated fan. Linda explained that gender stereotypes often leave her feeling like she has to publicly legitimize her fandom by demonstrating that she is knowledgeable about the NFL:

> Being a female, I think being able to show that I do know what I'm talking about [is important]. A lot of the times, anybody will say, "You're a girl. You don't know what you're talking about." Okay, you're wrong. I'll throw out statistics. I will beat you.

She went on to say that these legitimization efforts often occur via her involvement in Fantasy Football, for which she uses social media to communicate with members of her league. She explained,

> Like with Fantasy, that was my number one reason why I wanted to do it: just to prove I do know what I'm talking about and I do watch the games. Even although I can't play or never played [myself], which is a lot of the things people say, I still know what I'm talking about.

In this case, Linda is able to demonstrate her knowledge of the NFL via the social media interactions entailed in being a Fantasy Football "team owner." Thus, social media serves as a way to build her reputation as a legitimate NFL fan.

The sharing of knowledge within the context of online communities has been previously studied (Ackerman, 1998; Hew & Hara, 2007; Kim & Han, 2009; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). The current study's finding that knowledge is sometimes shared in an effort to legitimize one's identity is in line with research by Wasko and Faraj (2005), who

reported *reputation enhancement* to be a significant motivator for sharing knowledge on a social network related to a professional legal association. Therefore, it seems that using social media as a tool to legitimize one's identity or reputation (e.g., as a sport fan or as a legal expert) spans across contexts and can be applied to different types of knowledge.

Findings of this study indicate that social media usage serves as a way for fans to not only legitimize their fandom, but also establish their fandom as superior to others. This offers a new take on the concept of *competitive fandom*. Although this term has been used to describe individuals' participation in fantasy sports (Halverson & Halverson, 2008), findings from this study illustrate that fans also "compete" with one another in a more general sense by comparing the perceived legitimacy of their fandom to that of others. As previously discussed, the demonstration of knowledge via social media can be a key way of legitimizing fandom. Some participants reported that having NFL-related knowledge (which is often not only *demonstrated* but also *obtained* through social media usage) has led to the self-perception of being a "real fan" or a "better fan" compared to others. For instance, Cole explained how the knowledge he gains through social media has made him perceive his fandom as different from his friends' fandom:

> Yeah, like I see with some of my friends who are just Bears fans that watch the games and stuff. [Because of social media] you have more – you sound more educated talking about the team and sound like you know what you're talking about. And [they say] "What? How did you find that out?' And it makes you almost feel like you're a *better fan* than they are.

Cole noted that social media has made him more knowledgeable about his team and that this knowledge makes him feel like a "better fan" than his friends. Cole's feeling of superiority is also displayed through the way he describes other fans that aren't using social media, referring to

them as "just Bears fans that watch the games." This statement may be implying that individuals not using social media as part of fandom are not fully committed to being fans.

Like Cole, John believes that his initiative to incorporate social media into his fandom reflects positively on his status as a true fan. John said,

> I almost feel like it's a responsibility kind of so because people criticize others of not being a *real fan:* "All you know is, you won today. You don't know anything else." There's a difference between a *fan* and a *dedicated fan,* I guess. And I think it's cool that I know behind-the-scenes stuff, I think that's fun to do. I do it because I want to look like a *real fan,* I guess.

John and Cole equate being a "better fan" or a "real fan" with doing more than watching the game or knowing which team won.

This distinction of what it means to be a "real fan" not only illustrates Halverson and Halverson's (2008) concept of competitive fandom outside of the fantasy sport realm, but also can be tied to social identity theory. As previously described, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) states that people categorize themselves and others by social group, leading to the formation of in-groups (i.e., "us") and out-groups (i.e., "them"). Findings of this study provide evidence that social media is being used as a way to further differentiate these groups, essentially creating smaller in-groups (e.g., "real fans") within already existing in-groups (e.g., Bears fans). Through social media, a refined hierarchy of fandom is emerging that may call for a re-evaluation of how fans are compared by existing typologies. Previous research has examined and categorized fans based on their motivations and behaviors (Stewart & Smith, 1997). Stewart and Smith's (1997) fan typology classified fans as (1) aficionados, (2) theatergoers, (3) passionate partisans, (4) champ followers, and (5) reclusive partisans. Although this typology does provide

the ability to differentiate between sport fans, it does not take into account the impact that social media is having in enabling users to refine preexisting groups based on a hierarchy of members' perceived legitimacy as NFL fans.

Socially Interacting with Other Fans

As discussed in the previous section, at Mode 2, fans legitimize their fandom via social media through displays of team support and the demonstration of football-related knowledge. Additionally, at Mode 2, individuals begin actively engaging in social exchanges with other fans through the use of Twitter, Facebook, and other social media tools. The exchanges are enacted through sharing opinions and ideas (e.g., in conversations or debates) as well as by virtually sharing experiences (e.g., celebrating or watching games "together" from different locations). Findings of this study indicate that these activities can serve as ways for fans to maintain or deepen their social identity via social media by providing new opportunities to bond (and, in turn, further identify with their groups) and to compare the groups to which they belong (e.g., Bears fans) with those to which they do not (e.g., Lions fans). As with other Mode 2 activities, these social interactions are possible because of the voice (i.e., the means of self-expression) that social media provides to users. Furthermore, listening (a central aspect of Mode 1) is also particularly relevant to the Mode 2 activity of engaging in social exchanges with other fans because of the interactivity inherent to this manner of using social media.

As described in regard to Mode 1, this study has taken the lead from Crawford (2009) and reframed listening as an important part of online interactions rather than as a passive and unneeded component. The symbiotic relationship between those exercising their voice and those listening provides the grounds for the sharing of opinions and ideas to occur. These interactions manifest through the virtual conversations and debates users engage in via social media. Jamal,

an active social media user, explained his take on the relationship between active content contributors and those who consume the content through listening:

> I love the interactive part of it [social media]. And I think that's the whole beauty of social media in the first place is the key word *social*. . . . Like even if you tweet stuff all the time and you don't think people are listening or paying attention, there's always people out there that are. . . . Trust me, there's always someone out there listening to you.

Jamal's comments further demonstrate that in order for fans to feel like their voice is being heard, other fans must be listening. The importance of each role is indicative of the interaction process. For Jamal, the knowledge that others are listening to him, regardless of whether or not they always respond, is enough incentive for him to use his voice to create content.

Other participants reported contributing their voice (e.g., opinions) in response to previous users' comments or as a catalyst for beginning a new discussion. Lori explained:

> I definitely like to have a voice. It's just nice to be able to say my opinion on things. . . . I've gotten into debates and discussions with the other fans that are on there [Twitter]. And I think sometimes in certain situations, if I feel strongly about something, I'll also comment. . . . If I feel strongly about it, I like to have a voice.

For Lori, contributing her voice is an important part of her fandom and social media provides her with opportunities to have her voice heard by other fans. In this way social media tools, like Twitter, are empowering fans with the ability to have their voice heard by individuals who they otherwise would not likely reach. Lori, who has become a heavy social media user, described how the loss of social media would impact her ability to be heard and contribute:

> It would definitely be a lot harder to have a voice. I mean really the only voice you would really have is just talking to your friends and family that are also Bears fans or football

> fans. Other than that, the only way you would have a voice [among fans] if you wanted one is . . . you'd have to start writing letters to Halas Hall [Chicago Bears headquarters] or radio call-in shows. You'd have to decide if it was worth it to the point that you'd want to be on hold for two hours. I don't think with social media that a lot of people do that anymore. You can go [on Twitter] and instantly say what you think about the situation right away.

Lori feels that being limited to friends and family for football-related discussions would be a downgrade from her current use of social media. This provides evidence that Twitter and other social media tools are offering her benefits related to social exchanges with other fans that offline interactions are not.

In addition to granting users the ability to interact with a much wider breadth of people, some participants reported that social media is eliminating barriers that previously hindered fans' ability to share experiences in real-time with other fans in different geographic locations. In the past, the interactions of online sport communities have been limited to discussions of the past rather than the present. Researchers have stated that sport communities are traditionally based around the commemoration and romanticizing of past athletic events (Lechner, 2007; Nash, 2000) and the recollection of sport history rather than immediate exchanges during live games (Smith, 1999). However, findings of this study indicate that, in addition to providing increased opportunities to be heard, social media is granting fans with the ability to be heard *immediately*. Being able to interact in real-time is significant because this allows for the discussion of live games rather than those that occurred in the past (e.g., yesterday's game). Brittany, who lives in the Midwest, uses Twitter's real-time interaction capabilities during Saints games to engage with

several friends residing in New Orleans. In this way, they attempt to replicate the experience of watching the game together in person, thus creating a shared experience. Brittany said:

> I rarely talk on the telephone to anybody, so I'm either texting or tweeting them [and] these are like really good friends. We're having a conversation about the game, but we're not on the phone. So it's kinda like we're all watching the game together, really, is what it's like. We're watching the game together.

Brittany's use of Twitter feeds and direct messages allow her and her friends to experience games together despite being geographically separated. Another participant, Spencer, reported using Twitter to discuss NFL games in real-time with not only friends but also unfamiliar fans:

> That's what I like about Twitter is that it's so wide range. Even people that aren't your friends, you can write to some of them. You can get a response back, and you can kind of see what the people who are also watching the game at the same time think. . . . Do they think one thing and you disagree with it? . . . I really enjoy being on Twitter during a game.

For some participants, like Brittany and Spencer, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media tools are transforming the way they watch football games by allowing them to create a shared, interactive experience with other fans regardless of geographic proximity, thus transcending both time and space.

In addition to experiencing games together, participants also reported interacting with other fans via social media by contributing and exchanging knowledge in regards to team history. As discussed in the previous section, researchers have examined knowledge contribution within online communities and proposed five motivating factors of knowledge sharing: *expected reciprocal benefits, reputation, expectancy, trust,* and *altruism* (Ackerman, 1998; Hew & Hara,

2007; Hsu & Lin, 2008; Kim & Han, 2009; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). The current study has previously identified reputation enhancement as a motivator behind knowledge contribution in regards to legitimizing fandom; however, some participants who reported sharing knowledge with other users via social media discussed doing so not as a way of building their reputation in the process of legitimizing their fandom, but instead as altruistic behavior in an attempt to educate others. In relation to this study, *altruism* refers to the willingness to contribute knowledge for the good of the group without expecting personal returns.

The finding that some fans share knowledge for altruistic reasons is exemplified by Paul, who has belonged to a Green Bay Packers online forum for nearly seven years and reported visiting the website at least twice a day. As an established member, Paul has come to "know" other forum veterans and recognize new members when they join. Paul discussed why he and other members of the forum share their football knowledge with new members:

> Well, I mean for the Packers message board – we're all very obsessive fans. So yeah, I mean it's all very intricate because we all have – well, most of us have the base knowledge, but then new people will come on and we'll talk about things they need to know. And we feel like we're educating them. . . . Everyone just likes to teach about it because it's such a rich history for the Packers. . . . I do contribute a lot. I mean it's something that I invested a lot of time into football, and it was definitely a defining characteristic of mine. So I have a lot of information that I like to share and that's something I definitely know about so I contribute that.

For Paul, belonging to a group of knowledgeable footballs fans serves as a source of pride and enhances his self-esteem. Social identity theory states that group memberships, like the one Paul

described, can provide individuals with feelings of belonging and an understanding of how they fit within the world (Tajfel, 1976).

Furthermore, by educating new members about the Packers, Paul and the other "obsessive fans" of the forum also likely strive to increase the status of the group (e.g., as one with a particularly "rich history"), which can also serve to increase each member's own self-image. It is important to note that the goal of increasing self-image could be subliminal, meaning Paul and the other members might feel better about themselves by contributing knowledge but may associate these feelings with the fact that they are helping others (i.e., altruism) rather than striving to improve the status of the group. Consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Paul has identified himself as part of this group and has learned to act according to the established norms of its members. Now, as a means of socializing new members, Paul, along with others, contributes knowledge because, in order for new members to socially identify with the group, they will need to learn and enact behavioral norms (e.g., being knowledgeable about the Packers) as well.

Participants also reported that they sometimes experience emotionally-laden events with other fans (e.g., celebrating or mourning the outcomes of games) via social media, and that these interactions often promote a sense of group belonging. Michael summed this up by saying, "I just think it [social media] is another area where on the whole, you know, it makes you feel like part of a group. . . . It becomes part of your identity." Social media providing a sense of belonging to a group was a salient theme regarding social media usage among participants in this study regardless of social media type. For example, Madelyn discussed her decision to join an interactive Chicago Bears blog:

> The blog is about the community with other fans: commiserating or celebrating. . . . Just knowing when something goes wrong with my team, that there are other people that are miserable, too. . . . Just sort of knowing they are out there, I guess, is comforting.

Madelyn likens the blog and its members to a community. Within this community, members interact with each other and celebrate, or mourn, depending on how the Bears fare each week. For Madelyn, the knowledge that there are others "out there" sharing the ups and down of fandom with her is a comforting feeling.

Madelyn's comfort in knowing she isn't mourning alone is related to her social identification with this group. Because members of this community share devotion to the same team, Madelyn can assume that the group norm is to be upset after a Bears loss; therefore, her feelings of misery are warranted and completely normal. Additionally, Madelyn's willingness to mourn after a loss is indicative of highly identified fans. Researchers have noted that highly identified fans react differently than less identified fans when presented with negative information related to their team (Cohen & Garcia, 2005; Ellembers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). In these instances, highly identified group members, like Madelyn, seek to reaffirm their social group membership (e.g., by taking solace in knowing that there are other mourning fans out there), while individuals who have identified less with the group try to create distance from it by demonstrating less loyalty to the team (Cohen & Garcia, 2005; Wann & Branscombe, 1990).

Researchers have found that the activity of viewing sport events with other fans promotes a sense of community (Eastman & Land, 1997; Eastman & Riggs, 1994; McHoul, 1997) and results of this study demonstrate that this extends to viewing that occurs virtually via social media. Moreover, I argue that the immediacy of social media is transforming what it means to "experience" fandom and highlighting the methods by which social identification with groups

takes place. That is, the quick formation and differentiation of social groups is a tenet of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) in that social groups readily form based on very little information (e.g., "We are a group because we like Team X; they are a group because they like Team Y")—and the introduction of social media is making this principle even more salient. Blogs like the one Madelyn belongs to have established themselves as fertile ground for identification with groups; however, the real-time discussion capabilities of new social media options are proving just as, if not more, useful to group identification.

For example, for Don, the chat boards on his favorite websites often provide him with more of a sense of community (with people he knows very little about other than that they share his love for the Bears) than the friends he views NFL games with. Don said:

> I go on ESPN or NFL.com during the game to follow the message boards because people comment in real-time. After a big play they're like, "Oh did you see that!?" I like going on those to see the fan reactions. . . . Sometimes my friends don't get why I'm getting all emotional so I need that group that understands why I'm getting all crazy about a play or something. . . . I'm sure I look really weird to my friends, being on my laptop and looking up at the game.

Don believes that the individuals logged into ESPN and NFL.com's fan discussion boards during the game relate to his passionate fandom more than friends he interacts with in person during the game. This also indicates that the shared experience of viewing and discussing the game with fans via social media can, at times, be more fulfilling that the experience of interacting with friends in a face-to-face setting. Similar to Madelyn, Don states that he goes on these message boards because he "needs" contact with a group of people who share his emotions in regards to the NFL. The audience, or group members, on live message boards and those using Twitter are

in a state of constant flux as new members join the conversation and others leave it. Despite the fluidity of these groups, this study indicates, in line with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), that these interactions can be highly satisfying for fans because their shared fandom allows for the quick identification of in-group versus out-group members.

Creating Alternate Identities

As outlined throughout this dissertation, an individual's social identity is composed of the group identities that she or he attributes to herself or himself (e.g., mother, teacher, Bears fan; Turner, 1982). These group affiliations provide individuals with a sense of belonging, an understanding of where they fit in the world, and the means to support and preserve personal identities (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986; Turner, 1982). Social media is highlighting the aspects of social identity theory that lead to the quick formation of groups based on shared characteristics. Social media also provides individuals with the ability to explore their identity or create alternate ones within the context of online spaces. Identities enacted in online spaces are referred to as *online identities* (Ruyter & Conroy, 2002). Scholars have found that individuals enact different identities based on varying social situations (Harter, 1998). Turkle (1997) stated that the identity an individual displays when online might not be representative of the individual's offline identity. For example, a person with a shy or anti-social demeanor offline may be extremely social and cheerful online.

The ability to enact an alternate identity while in online spaces is attributed to the anonymity offered by Internet technologies. This anonymity allows users to be "in contact and in hiding at the same time" (Zhau, 2006, p. 463). Participation in online forums or social media like Twitter requires very little personal information (Qian & Scott, 2007). Research has suggested that the lack of requirements for personal information disclosure and the anonymity that results

may increase the percentage of online users who engage in hostile online communication (Glaser, Dixit, & Green, 2002). Hostile communication via online technologies has been found to exist within online sport blogs. Sanderson (2008) reported that Curt Schilling, a former Boston Red Sox pitcher, was heavily criticized by users of his online blog in areas related to religion, politics, and his overall demeanor. One user wrote, "You are nothing more than a jackass. . . ." (Sanderson, 2008, p. 350).

Similarly, some participants in the current study reported having negative interactions with other online users, often ascribing these difficulties to users acting differently via social media than they would in person (i.e., enacting alternate—and hostile—identities). Madelyn described how even members within the same group (i.e., Bears fans) heavily criticize each other in blog discussions:

> It is interesting that, you know, we talked about, we are all fans of this team. We have the same common interest in mind, but yet there are still these negative interactions and arguments. . . . That is the thing about blogs and social media, everyone has a voice. With that voice comes an opinion, sometimes very strong. But even so, I think just the fact that it is anonymous and it is on the Internet, people think they can say whatever they like. You know eighty percent of the stuff you see on the blog, you would never say to a human being in front of you [face-to-face]. You just wouldn't.

As Madelyn points out, the type of verbal altercations that occur within the anonymity of online spaces often can be tied to the lack of face-to-face interaction.

Although it seems logical that the majority of people would be more cognizant of impression and identity management (and avoid enacting negative, alternate identities) if the curtain of anonymity were to be removed, not all seemingly hostile interactions are done because

of the ability to remain anonymous. Linda uses her personal Facebook account—a medium that is *not* anonymous, considering the detailed information (e.g., name, location, profession, alma mater) and personal photos that most users share—to discuss football with friends and fans of other teams. Linda said that although she considers herself to be even-keeled in most aspects of life, she likes to provoke reactions online from fans of rival teams:

> I use Facebook as a way to connect with friends or talk with friends about the Bears [and] to talk a lot of shit on it to people who aren't Bears fans. I'm the type of person that likes getting reactions from people and likes starting that kind of stuff.

Again, Linda labeling herself as an online shit talker is an interesting finding since she considers herself to be even-tempered in regards to other aspects of life. This provides evidence that she enacts the alternate identity of *the talker* when interacting with other non-Bears fans online. Because Linda uses her personal Facebook account to "talk shit" to non-Bears fans, she is not anonymous. While this decision may seem perplexing, in accordance with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), publicly "shit talking" provides a way for Linda to bond with her in-group (i.e., other Bears fans) while further differentiating herself from out-groups (i.e., non-Bears fans).

Some individuals strategically create alternate identities as a way of keeping areas of their life separate and managing the associations they have with distinct social groups. To explain, in-groups and out-groups have been discussed throughout this chapter and their importance to social identity cannot be overstated. Social identity theory suggests that individuals support and define their self-concepts by their connections with social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Individuals undoubtedly identify with numerous groups (e.g., police officer, Bears fan, father), and this entails the switching of identities in relation to which one is most

salient in a given context. For instance, a police officer isn't likely to attend a Bears game in full-uniform and issue citations for littering during her or his free time. Instead, individuals shift between identities and enact the one that is most appropriate for the situation at hand. Jeremy explained how he remedied a situation that forced two of his identities to collide:

> What I did do a few weeks ago, I had my personal Twitter account and I found myself just tweeting about sports. And I was like, "These girls that are following me, they don't need to follow this stuff," so I created a Bears Twitter account and I just tweet about the Bears and the NFL. . . . I just don't need my friends to see that my fandom is this – very deep love that I have for these Bears and sometimes those things are best kept private, I suppose. Kind of like a PDA type of thinking. I mean that's actually not that different. I mean you don't go on Facebook and be like, "Oh girlfriend, I love you so much," like tweeting like, "Good job honey," people don't do that so I'm not going to do that. So therefore I created a Bears Twitter where I can do all those things. I have my initials on the Bears Twitter so there is some identification but not entirely.

Jeremy's statement exemplifies the creation of an alternate identity through the use of social media. Because Jeremy felt uncomfortable displaying the extent of his fandom for the Bears, he created a separate Twitter account for the specific purpose of demonstrating this fandom to like-minded individuals (i.e., in-group members in terms of his identity as an avid Bears fan). Because individuals work to maintain favorable social identities in an effort to preserve personal rewards such as higher levels of self-esteem (Hogg & Abrams, 2003), it makes sense that Jeremy would create separate online identities. Now his personal Twitter account serves as a way to interact with friends, while his Bears Twitter account allows him to enact the identity of a highly identified Bears fan without embarrassment. Jeremy later reported having not just two, but three,

separate Twitter accounts, each dedicated to a specific social group, thus further highlighting social media's application for alternate identity creation.

Mode 3: Validation

In the theoretical model that I have developed based on data from this study, the third mode of social media use by NFL fans is *validation.* Individuals enacting Mode 3 are also concurrently performing some or all of the activities from Mode 1 (*access*) and Mode 2 (*voice*). Mode 3 consists of the continued use of one's voice to attempt to actively engage NFL players and sport media. The ultimate goal of this process is to elicit a direct reply or a retweet, with a response of either kind serving as a way for individuals to receive validation that their voice is worth listening to. Mode 3 is less about listening to athletes and the media, and more about being heard by them. Being heard and acknowledged by sport figures on Twitter serves as a way to enhance one's social identity. In line with the idea of competitive fandom that I presented in Mode 2 (originated by Halverson & Halverson, 2008, in the context of fantasy sports), recognition via Twitter provides individuals with a sense of belonging to an elite class of fans (i.e., those recognized by the Twitter elite). This form of validation grants a small number of fans with access into a new in-group and allows them to further distinguish themselves from out-groups (see also Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Seeking Acknowledgment from Players and Media

Despite the high level of NFL fan identification among participants in this study, only a select few reported a commitment to engaging players and sport media via social media. At Mode 3, the purpose of engagement is to receive validation as a legitimate NFL fan whose voice is worth listening to because of the level of knowledge and fandom attached to it. Validation is sought and received through the acknowledgement of the fan's voice (i.e., tweets). As previously

mentioned, this acknowledgement is demonstrated by the receipt of a direct response or retweet from the social media elite (e.g., athletes and media). Although individuals operating at Mode 3 may already feel that their fandom is legitimate and that what they have to say is worth listening to, ultimately they seek to receive validation from those individuals whose recognition means the most to them. Boyd, Golder, and Lotan (2010) created a non-exhaustive list of reasons why Twitter users choose to retweet and found that the desire to validate others' thoughts is a key motivator. Therefore, retweets serve not only as a way to share information, but also as a way to validate and engage others (Boyd et al., 2010). Spencer explained just how valuable he thinks a tweet from an NFL player would be to most fans:

> I think as a fan, one of the biggest little cheap thrills would be, you mention a player that you're following [in a tweet] and in a week later, that player writes back. . . . You'd be like, "Oh my God, it's cool." That's like an *autograph*. You'd probably print it out [to show others, saying], "This is really cool. Drew Brees tweeted me back. How cool is that – ya know?"

Spencer believes that a tweet from an athlete is equivalent to getting an autograph. The difference is that fans no longer have to get to the stadium early, or stay late after the game, in the hopes of meeting their favorite players. Now social media, like Twitter, grants opportunities for fans to "meet" (or, at least, attempt to reach out to) these players at any time and possibly receive a personalized "autograph" in the form of a tweet. A direct message or retweet serves as a way to tangibilize the acknowledgement from an athlete or sport writer.

For some participants, the potential to have their voice heard by popular sport figures is what initially drew them to Twitter. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Twitter, and other social media channels, have eliminated some of the barriers that once stood between fans, the players

they root for, and the sport media. Jeremy explained how the increased access granted by Twitter allows him to seek validation from sport celebrities:

> I think the best thing about Twitter is being able to tweet at people, celebrities, really. . . . I want to say all these things. It's so easy to say – these athletes and media are right at my fingertips. . . . I have things I want to say, things that I feel have value, and so I discuss them in the most accessible form that I can. . . . . I want to talk. I want to be heard.

Jeremy feels that the opportunities to potentially interact with athletes and media are greater than ever because of the immediacy offered by social media. He states that players and sport media are "right at his fingertips," empowering him with the feeling that they are within reach to possibly interact with him. In reality, the increased access to, and ability to attempt to communicate with, players and sport media is a luxury afforded to anyone with a Twitter account, thereby making any perceived closeness an illusion. In this way, now the thousands (or, in some cases, millions) of Twitter users following (and perhaps tweeting at) a professional athlete act as a new type of barrier. Still, the illusion of closeness motivates some fans to continue trying to engage sport personalities because they believe that their voice has value to not only other fans, but to the athletes and media personalities that they follow.

Although Twitter has increased the accessibility of sport personalities, some participants have recognized the new barriers that it has introduced (e.g., standing out among a plethora of other followers). In an effort to reduce this barrier and increase the likelihood of reciprocity from athletes or sport writers, some individuals develop tweeting strategies. Jeremy explained how by tweeting at lesser known athletes and sport writers, he might increase his chances of getting a response:

> Tweeting at the athletes, something I've learned . . . if you Tweet at a Bears player who's not that popular, he's going to see it, he's going to read it, he's going to appreciate it. So that's something that motivates me. Same thing with some of these media outlets.

Jeremy believes that the chances of getting a response from a player or media outlet increases when that individual has a smaller Twitter following. As such, Jeremy is playing the odds that his tweet will be more visible, and appreciated, because of this smaller following. George provided a similar take regarding strategic tweets:

> I'm not going to get retweeted if I give Jay Cutler a "Good game," because thousands of other people are going to do the exact same thing. . . . I try to make a point that no one else has made before, something really original because that has a way better chance of getting a response as opposed to a "Good game, Jay."

Like Jeremy, in an effort to maximize his chances of getting a response, George hopes to make his tweets more visible by being different that the thousands of other tweets that an athlete may receive. The thought and effort that fans like Jeremy and George put into tweeting celebrity sport figures demonstrates that, when it comes to virtual engagement, a one-sided conversation is better than a "no-sided" (i.e., nonexistent) conversation because the chance of getting a response, and therefore validation, always exists.

Despite their persistence, none of the participants operating at Mode 3 reported receiving a Twitter response from an NFL player. However, both Jeremy and Michael did receive responses from members of the sport media. Jeremy discussed his feelings about receiving a response as well as his thought process when he does not receive a reply:

> You send out all these messages and you hope that you get a response. I got one [from] one of the Bears radio guys. . . . That felt really good to get a response. . . . My name

> comes up on his thing [Twitter timeline] with his 8,000 followers or whatever and it feels good. So that's the incentive is on the one hand, yes, you know that they're reading your comments and, even if I'm tweeting at Melissa Isaacson [ESPN Chicago writer] and she doesn't respond, it's at least a question that's going to pop in her head that might affect her writing, maybe something she'll think about. But the real incentive is what happens when you get retweeted is, "Oh I said something of value."

Receiving a response from a Chicago Bears radio personality validates Jeremy's belief that his thoughts have value. Interestingly, even when he does not receive a response, Jeremy imagines that his voice will impact the writing of the reporters to whom he tweets. This type of thinking may function to maintain Jeremy's social identity as a knowledgeable fan until he receives additional confirmation of that from the sport celebrities he follows on Twitter.

Michael also described the thrill of having his expertise acknowledged via social media. He explained why receiving a retweet from a sport writer was meaningful to him:

> I got retweeted by somebody that works for the [Chicago] Tribune and then by someone that was in Florida. So it's like, man, people are actually, people see this stuff. So it makes me feel good. I like it, I kind of like that feeling. . . . So seeing something that you've tweeted be retweeted . . . it's a nice ego boost, I guess. I think it's *validation*. I think somebody who, more often than not, you valued their opinion because it's somebody you follow or some writer or somebody that follows the team or with the team, you know, if they write back, I mean if they see it and take the time to click that retweet button, it's like validation. They thought what you said was smart or they thought what you said was funny or they agreed with it. It's like a computer "pat on the back" or something like that.

Michael reports feeling validated after having one of his tweets retweeted by someone (i.e., a sport writer) whom he follows. His statements provide evidence that individuals do indeed receive validation through the acknowledgement that their voice is worth listening to. Moreover, this acknowledgment is especially valued (and highly validating) because it comes from an individual whom the recipient respects. Both Michael and Jeremy offer evidence of social media's utility as a platform for anyone's voice to be heard and included in a shared conversation among millions of users.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Despite the longevity and continued popularity of sport, few studies to date have explored how social media is impacting the sport industry (Hur, Ko, & Valacich, 2007; Seo & Green, 2008). Recently, scholars have begun examining Twitter and its use by professional athletes; however, there is a lack of research focusing on how and why sport fans are utilizing social media as part of their fandom (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010; Phua, 2010). Through this dissertation I address some of the gaps in this area of research by examining the relationship between NFL fandom, social media, and identity. Specifically, this dissertation sought to examine the role that social media plays in individuals' NFL fandom. To do so, I proposed the following research question: *How are NFL fans using social media as part of their NFL fandom and why do they make the effort to do so?*

To answer my research question, I conducted a total of 20 in-depth interviews with participants who were recruited through a combination of email announcements, paper advertisements, and recruitment posts on NFL team message boards. To qualify for participation, individuals had to be over 18 years of age, label themselves as an NFL fan, attend and/or view at least eight NFL games per season, and use social media as part of their NFL fandom (e.g., to follow players). After collecting and analyzing my data, I developed a theoretical model of the modes of social media use by NFL fans. In line with grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), this model was created through the identification of emergent themes found in my data. Findings from previous research (e.g., related to social identity and consumer-brand relationships) were referenced in order to contextualize the model and explain its relationship to the extant literature, but participant responses were not forced to align with existing theories.

In this chapter, I begin by briefly reviewing the model of the modes of social media use by NFL fans that emerged from my data, while highlighting the theoretical implications of these findings. Next, I outline the practical implications of this study. Lastly, I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the study's limitations and directions for future research.

Review of Model and Theoretical Implications

As detailed in the previous chapter, the theoretical model I created from my data is composed of three distinct modes of social media use by NFL fans: (1) access, (2) voice, and (3) validation (see Figure 1). Each mode builds upon the prior such that successive modes include the activities of the prior modes. Therefore, individuals operating at Mode 2 are also performing some or all of the activities found in Mode 1, and individuals operating at Mode 3 are also performing some or all of the activities found in Modes 1 and 2. In this section, I review each of these modes as well as discuss how the study's findings relate to, and build upon, previous research.

Mode 1: Access

The first mode of social media use is *access*. Individuals enacting the access mode are strictly content consumers, not creators. The four primary activities found in Mode 1 are: (1) listening, (2) research and information gathering, (3) gaining access to players and teams, and (4) forming parasocial attachments. These activities are often intertwined, and, therefore, can impact each other (e.g., listening is an integral part of each of the other three activities).

Prior research has indicated that the majority of individuals online do not create content (Nonnecke & Peece, 2003; Zhang & Storck, 2001). These individuals have commonly been referred to as *lurkers*, a term that carries negative connotations (Crawford, 2009). In an effort to better represent the important role that non-content creators have within online communities, this

study has followed Crawford's (2009) lead and relabeled lurkers as *listeners*. This distinction is important because listening is a corollary component to utilizing one's *voice*, which is the overarching theme of Mode 2.

Findings of this study demonstrate that many individuals who strictly consume content through listening (i.e., those in Mode 1) feel that they play a crucial role within online communities. In particular, some participants compared the value of online listeners to newspaper subscribers and television viewers, stating that without these consumers, there would be no one to hear the "voice" of content creators. These findings are important because they speak to the value of online individuals who have previously been thought of as passive (Morris & Ogan, 1996), or even as energy and social capital absorbers who provide nothing in return (Kollock & Smith, 1996). Therefore, participant responses from this study provide further support for some scholars' efforts to replace *lurking* with a more favorable term (e.g., Crawford, 2009; Nonnecke & Preece, 2003; Zhange & Storck, 2011).

Participants also noted using social media for research and information gathering. Findings of this study indicate that Twitter, in particular, is providing fans with alternative means of seeking out information related to their favorite team and players. Fans' increased reliance on social media for NFL-related information has not gone unnoticed and the sport industry has made a recent push to better utilize social media as an information hub for fans (Hambrick, 2012).

The effort to provide fans with "behind-the-scenes" information appears to be benefiting NFL teams to some degree. Findings of this study suggest that, by increasing the amount and type of information made available to fans via social media, some NFL teams are fostering a sense of team pride and ownership among their fan base. This sense of ownership is, in turn, is

increasing fans' team identification. Evidence of team identification in this study was displayed through some participants' use of "we" language (e.g., saying "we won" when referring to their teams on-field performance), with one participant even stating that he feels like an "Assistant GM [General Manager]" of his favorite team as a result of getting "behind-the-scenes" information from social media. The use of "we" to describe oneself in conjunction with a team demonstrates group categorization (i.e., in-groups and out-groups), which is an important part of Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory. Ultimately, findings of this study suggest that by sharing more information with fans via social media, teams are fostering a sense of team ownership that, in turn, may lead to increased team identification among some fans.

In addition to providing fans with feelings of team ownership, social media is also cutting out some of the barriers, or "middlemen," that once stood between fans and their favorite players. This study found that the reduction of these barriers is making it easier for fans to establish a sense of connection with the players who they are following via social media, which supports previous work by Kassing and Sanderson (2009). The connection between fans and players is due in part to athletes' ability to present personal information about themselves through social media. As a result, fans perceive similarities and shared interests with these athletes and identify with them on a more significant level (see also Fraser & Brown, 2002; Jin, 2006; Soukoup, 2006).

This study also demonstrates that the perception of shared similarities and interests with NFL players is a key factor in the development of parasocial attachments. Parasocial attachments resemble interpersonal relationships but differ because mediated personalities (in this case, the athletes) control the message and the "interactions" are only one-sided (Cohen & Perse, 2003; Perse, 1990). Parasocial attachments to sport figures have previously been shown to manifest

through television viewing (Brown & Basil, 1995; Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003; Brown, Duane, & Fraser, 1997; Hartmann, Stuke, Daschmann, 2005) however this study further suggests that parasocial attachments are also fostered through the access granted by social media. In fact, multiple participants reported that they have come to think of the NFL players whom they follow on Twitter as almost like friends or peers, rather than as unreachable celebrity athletes.

In addition, findings of this study are useful in extending existing research on consumer-brand relationships. The idea of individuals as brands, otherwise known as *human brands,* has previously been studied (Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward, 2006; Simon, Gilgoff, & Samuel, 2004; Thomson, 2006), but the role of social media in this process has not been extensively examined. Findings of this study indicate that social media has "changed the game" in terms of human branding because it allows athletes (i.e., the brand) to control their own brand-image through the ways they present themselves via social media platforms. In particular, participants reported that the way an NFL athlete represents himself on Twitter has an immense impact on their perception of him. Multiple participants stated that social media has made them feel like they know players on a more personal level and that this, in turn, makes them feel connected to that athlete. In particular, participants reported that knowing an athlete's religious beliefs, favorite foods, and favorite hobbies outside of football has contributed to why they see the players as more than just NFL athletes. However, several participants also stated that athletes' use of Twitter can occasionally have an adverse effect (e.g., if a player comes across as arrogant), indicating that, despite its potential benefits, social media can be destructive to a player's human brand if used carelessly.

Overall, while social media was reported to positively impact fandom at both the team and player level, this impact was reported with much more frequency in relation to NFL players

than teams. I argue that this finding can be partly attributed to the fact that athletes, as human brands, are able to use social media to establish a sense of connection, or a "relationship," with fans that feel almost interpersonal in nature. This perceived fan-athlete relationship leads fans to develop parasocial attachments to the athletes whom they follow via social media, resulting in increased identification with, and sometimes more support for, these human brands.

Mode 2: Voice

The second mode of social media use by NFL fans is *voice*. At Mode 2, individuals concurrently act as both content consumers and creators. The activities found in Mode 2 include: (1) publicly legitimizing fandom, (2) socially interacting with other fans, and (3) creating alternate identities. Within the context of this study, I utilize the term *voice* to include what social media users "say" (i.e., write) as well as what they communicate through pictures and actions that are visible online. As was detailed previously, individuals enacting Mode 2 continue to engage in some or all of the content consumption activities found in Mode 1 as well.

This study found that social media is affording fans new opportunities to publicly legitimize their fandom. Specifically, fans are using social media to publicly display team support and sport-related knowledge. For example, some participants acknowledged that, by using an NFL player's photo as their Facebook profile picture, they were announcing their fandom to anyone who views their profile page. Additionally, a number of participants stated that by "liking" an NFL team's Facebook page, they were demonstrating team support. "Liking" a Facebook page carries with it the possibility that an individual's Facebook friends will see this action and choose to "like" the team's page as well, just as some participants noted that they were inspired to "like" an NFL-related Facebook page after seeing a friend do so.

Along with allowing fans to overtly display their team support, social media provides fans with the opportunity to demonstrate their sport-related knowledge. Multiple participants stated that social media has improved their ability to be an informed fan and helped them legitimize, or prove, their fandom. Findings of this study indicate that, for some fans, social media serves as a way to not only legitimize their fandom, but also establish it as superior to others' fandom. I argue that one's desire to be considered a "real fan" can be tied to the concept of *competitive fandom*. Halverson and Halverson (2008) previously used this term to describe individuals engaging in fantasy sport leagues, but the current study demonstrates that competitive fandom is relevant outside of fantasy sport leagues as well. Findings from this study demonstrate that NFL fans "compete" with one another by comparing their perceived level of fan legitimacy based on such factors as knowledge and team support efforts. Moreover, social media can play a crucial role in the process of competitive fandom in that this knowledge and support is often both obtained and demonstrated through the use of social media.

At Mode 2, individuals also begin actively engaging in social interactions with other fans through the use of social media. These interactions occur through participation in fan debates, by commenting or replying to others' posts, by sharing knowledge, and through shared experiences. Many participants reported that social media has granted them incomparable opportunities to voice their opinion and hear the thoughts of other fans. One participant stated that without social media, fans would have to rely on hand-written letters and radio call-in shows in order to have a voice. Additionally, some participants reported that if it were not for social media, they would only be able to discuss football with the friends and family members with whom they interact in person.

Furthermore, findings of this study indicate that social media is eliminating some of the barriers that previously prevented fans from sharing experiences in real-time with individuals residing in different geographic locations. Through social media, fans' voices can be heard, and they can be heard immediately. Before the introduction of social media, researchers had stated that sport communities are generally centered around the commemoration of past sport events (Lechner, 2007; Nash, 2000) rather than on live exchanges (Smith, 1999). This study demonstrates that fans are now interacting in real-time and sharing the experience of watching the game together through social media. Several participants reported that they use Twitter in conjunction with live game viewing to "view the game" with individuals who are located across the country. This type of interaction represents a new way for fans to share such experiences as game viewing with each other, which, until recently, was not easy to do.

In addition to "viewing" games together, some participants stated that social media is providing them with an easy way to share knowledge and maintain or enhance feelings of group belonging. Knowledge contribution within online communities has previously been examined (Ackerman, 1998; Hew & Hara, 2007; Hsu & Lin, 2007; Kim & Han, 2009; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004; Wasko & Faraj, 2005), and this study extends such research by demonstrating that social media, such as Twitter, is also a viable channel to share knowledge with other fans. In this study, knowledge contribution was shown to be enacted to legitimize fandom and for altruistic reasons. Specifically, one participant reported sharing the "rich Packers' history" with new members of an interactive online Packers message board. By sharing this knowledge, members of this message board foster a sense of community and shared interests. Likewise, some participants reported joining team specific blogs and forums in an effort to feel like part of a group. These participants often stated that they have taken comfort in knowing that other fans

were sharing the experience of emotionally-laden events (e.g., celebrating or mourning the outcome of games) with them through social media. Interestingly, some participants reported that NFL-related interactions (e.g., viewing and discussing the game) via social media could, at times, provide more of a sense of belonging and understanding than the experience of interacting with friends in person.

Another Mode 2 activity that individuals engage in is using social media to create alternate identities. Scholars have previously found that individuals enact different identities based on varying social situations (Harter, 1998) and that online identities may not be representative of an individual's offline identity (Turkle, 1997). Participants in this study reported that the creation and subsequent enactment of alternate identities could be positive or negative.

For some participants, Twitter has afforded them the luxury of being able to create multiple online identities, allowing them to enact the one that is most appropriate for particular social situations. One participant stated that he created three separate Twitter accounts, each for a specific audience. In this case, one Twitter account served as a way to interact with friends about content not related to the NFL, another was used to discuss the Chicago Bears and the NFL, and a third was used for professional purposes. In this way, he is able to shift between identities and enact the one that is most appropriate for the audience at hand. Another participant stated that she is "even-keeled" in most aspects of her life, but that she enjoys "starting stuff" through online "shit talking." In this manner, she enacts an alternate identity that is much more outspoken and confrontational than her offline identity. Through this identity enactment, she feels closer to members of her own group (i.e., Bears fans) and distinguishes herself from members of other groups (i.e., non-Bears fans).

Participants also reported negative outcomes associated with alternate identity formation. Specifically, some participants felt that the anonymity of online identities allows individuals too much freedom to behave in ways that they never would in person. In particular, one participant reported having a negative interaction with a member of her own in-group (i.e., Bears fans) and credited this to the fact that the other member's online identity made her or him anonymous. This finding supports previous research by Sanderson (2008), which found that hostile communication does occur via social media, due in part to the anonymity that it provides users.

Findings of this study related to Mode 2 support and extend existing research on social identity theory. Participants reported using social media to establish, enhance, and maintain their NFL-related group identification. This corresponds with social identity theory, which states that individuals support and define their self-concept by the connections they establish with social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Although prior research has demonstrated that individuals develop group identification through other online technologies, the examination of how social media is impacting social identification has not received extensive attention. This study found that social media has granted fans with increased opportunities to engage in social interactions with NFL fans from across the country. I argue that social media is changing the way that fans "experience" fandom and brings the process of social identification with groups to the forefront.

To explain, multiple participants reported using interactive blogs and team message boards to interact with fans of their team (i.e., in-group members). Social media is providing fans with more opportunities to bond with in-group members and, thus, increasing the feelings of group identification and differentiation from other groups (i.e., out-groups). Group identification was demonstrated by several participants who noted that social media allows them to interact with other like-minded fans and share not only information but also experiences. Through the

sharing of knowledge and experiences, members are able to enhance their self-esteem as well as develop feelings of group belonging (Hogg & Abrams, 2003; Tajfel, 1976).

Tajfel and Turner (1979) previously stated that social groups can form based on very little information, and social media is highlighting this tenet of social identity theory. Multiple participants reported that they felt a sense of belonging with the individuals they interact with through Twitter and other social media tools. The members who are socially interacting via Twitter conversations or ESPN forums are constantly in flux, with new members joining and others leaving throughout the exchanges. Despite the constant member turnover, participants found these interactions to be highly satisfying because social media allows them to quickly identity members of their in-group versus members of their out-group.

Additionally, this study found that both the knowledge provided by social media as well as the interaction allowed by social media are resulting in group differentiation at a more minute level. That is, participants noted feeling like a "real fan" or a "better fan" compared to others because of the information they receive through social media. These participants described their fandom as superior to those fans who "only know their team won." This finding indicates that social media is providing the tools for fans to further divide in-groups (e.g., Bears fans), thereby creating more refined categories of fans (e.g., "real" Bears fans).

Mode 3: Validation

According to the model I developed, the third mode of social media use by NFL fans is *validation.* Individuals enacting this mode continue to participate in some, or all, of the activities found in Modes 1 and 2. Furthermore, fans enacting Mode 3 try to engage NFL players or media figures via social media technologies, with the ultimate goal of receiving a response. A response in the form of a direct message or retweet serves as validation that the fan's voice is worth

listening to. In Mode 3, the focus is on being listened to by sport figures rather than being the one who is listening. A response from a player or sport writer serves as a way to legitimize oneself as an *elite* fan, a distinction that is relevant to the previously discussed concept of competitive fandom (Halverson & Halverson, 2008). Although not all fans who engage in competitive fandom try to elicit responses from NFL players and media figures via social media (i.e., most do not move beyond Mode 2), a small number of fans seek this acknowledgment in a quest for validation of their fandom.

Despite the recruitment of highly identified NFL fans, only a select few reported making a concerted effort to engage NFL players and media personalities. The participants who reported persistent attempts at engagement of sport figures feel that their voice is worth listening to, and ultimately seek to receive validation of this belief from the individuals whose recognition carries the most "weight" within the realm of sport (and, particularly, within the NFL fan community). This is an important finding because it indicates that despite high levels of NFL fandom, not all individuals seek the same rewards through social media. This finding exemplifies the model's premise that NFL fans using social media can be divided based upon the ways that they use social media as part of their fandom.

Participants noted that social media has removed some of the obstacles that previously hindered their ability to engage sport figures (e.g., lack of access). However, they also said that social media has introduced new challenges to reaching popular sport figures, such as the need to make their tweets stand out from the thousands of others that players and sport reporters receive daily. To counteract this barrier, some participants reported developing strategies to differentiate their voice from other sport fans. The first strategy involves tweeting less popular players, with the assumption that these players receive fewer tweets, and will therefore be more likely to see,

appreciate, and reply to their message. Participants also stated that the content of tweets must be unique in order to be visible among the abundance of tweets that most players receive. As such, writing something as generic as "good game" does not suffice. To that end, a participant reported making an effort to write something funny or insightful rather than merely supportive. The careful thought put into these tweeting efforts is indicative of the value that participants place on acknowledgment from these sport figures. In fact, one participant stated that receiving a response from an NFL player through Twitter would be like getting an autograph, even going so far as to say he would print it out to show his friends.

Despite a few participants' continued persistence and the desire to receive validation, none of the participants in this study reported receiving a response from an NFL player. Although the quest for acknowledgement from NFL athletes continues, some participants did report receiving responses from members of the sport media. One participant said that the response he received supported his belief that his thoughts (and voice) have value, but noted that even if he doesn't get a response, he likes to imagine that his tweets to sport writers influence the subsequent writing of their columns. In this manner, the participant is able to maintain his identity as a knowledgeable, and elite, NFL fan. Additionally, one participant stated that being retweeted by a sport reporter whom he follows served as validation that people are listening to his voice and believe it is worth hearing. The statements of these participants provide evidence that social media can be leveraged in order to have a voice as a knowledgeable NFL fan and, in some cases, to even receive validation of that voice from members of the NFL elite.

Practical Implications

This study focused on social media usage by NFL fans. Specifically, the purpose of the study was to examine how fans are using social media as part of their fandom and why they have

chosen to do so. Data from this study reveal a variety of ways that NFL fans use social media in regards to their fandom. These findings illuminate several practical implications, which are discussed in this section.

This study found that social media use by NFL fans could be categorized into three distinct modes: *access, voice*, and *validation*. By creating modes, each with specific activities, I have segmented NFL fans who use social media as part of their fandom into easily recognizable categories. By clearly defining these categories and describing the activities conducted in each, I have provided a blueprint of the ways that fans have incorporated social media into their fandom. This categorization may prove beneficial to NFL teams, players, and sport media members as they try to determine the best ways to leverage social media in order to reach various types of fans.

Findings from this study indicate that fans enacting Mode 1 are solely interested in consuming information. This study has defined these individuals as listeners and illustrated their importance to social media. Findings demonstrate that some fans develop parasocial attachments to the NFL players whom they follow via social media. This is potentially beneficial to athletes because these parasocial attachments can lead to an increase in human-brand identification. As discussed in the previous chapter, athletes can benefit from their ability to "connect" with fans through social media in a way that induces (in fans) feelings of closeness mimicking an interpersonal relationship. Often, this connection is established through the athlete's sharing of personal information. Participants in this study reported that this sense of connection sometimes makes them feel like they know the player as a friend which, in turn, positively impacts their fandom of that athlete. Although some fans also reported feeling more invested in their *team* because of the access provided by social media, most believed that their team fandom had not

been significantly impacted as a result. Because some participants indicated that connections can be established through social media channels, NFL teams would be wise to increase their efforts to "humanize" or "personalize" the team through the use of social media tools like Twitter, so that fans might feel more connected to teams as a result of social media (as they often do to players). According to findings from this study, this may be possible through the increased distribution of team-related information and behind-the-scenes access.

This study also found that fans do not only use social media to follow NFL team and players. Along with following teams and players, fans are engaging in social interactions and using their "voice" to exchange thoughts and opinions with other fans. This study found that fans use social media as a way to legitimize their fandom, contribute knowledge, and share experiences. Some participants noted that interacting within these communities through the use of social media is important because it provides a sense of belonging. For some individuals, the ability to share their knowledge about their favorite team within these communities is an important reason for their continued participation. NFL teams would be wise to follow these online communities and engage those individuals who have influence over other group members, in this manner these "community" leaders can represent NFL teams within virtual communities. Therefore, the knowledge distributers of the groups would be able to enhance their identity as a knowledgeable fan and NFL teams would be contributing to the increased team identification of these members.

The concept of *voice* is an important component of the model presented in this dissertation. In particular, voice is central to both Modes 2 and 3. This study found that NFL fans are looking to be heard because they feel that their voice, and the thoughts it represents, has value. NFL teams, players, and sport media have the opportunity to strengthen fan identification

by acknowledging the "voices" of the fans. Individuals operating at Mode 3 are making a concerted effort to receive acknowledgement from the players and sport media whom they follow on Twitter. Clearly, it is not realistic for NFL athletes and media figures to respond to every fan tweet; however, this study has shown that fans do place immense value on a response or retweet from the social media elite. Sport personalities should recognize the opportunity to provide fans with the validation they seek. In doing so, there is enormous potential to maintain their fan base, deepen fan loyalty, and improve the image of their human brand. Although participants in this study did not mention making efforts to engage NFL teams, I believe that teams that establish a reputation as being "social" (i.e., responsive) via social media tools would benefit from an increased fan following. Furthermore, I believe that NFL teams would benefit from "grooming" NFL players as franchise ambassadors. Undoubtedly, athletes are already linked to the teams for which they play, but this study found that, currently, social media is primarily serving as a way to increase identification (and fandom) of the players as human-brands. Teams should capitalize on these human brands and when possible provide players with more freedom to discuss team-related matters because of the possibility it offers to establish a connection between fans and the franchises for which they root.

Findings of this study clearly demonstrate that NFL fans have incorporated social media into their fandom for a variety of reasons. Although Facebook is typically thought of as the "face" of social media, participants in this study most frequently referenced Twitter as their primary social media tool. In fact, Twitter is the only social media tool reported by participants as being used within every mode of this dissertation's model. Furthermore, Twitter is the only social media tool that participants reported using at Mode 3. Clearly, Twitter provides both content consumers and creators with benefits that other social media platforms do not. Athletes

and sport media would be wise to continue using Twitter as a means of information distribution and as a way to "connect" with fans. Findings of this study indicate that NFL teams would benefit from improved utilization of Twitter, perhaps demonstrating that teams should build their marketing strategy around the most widely used social media tool.

Although social media is still young, it has already proven its worth to participants in this study. By highlighting the varying ways fans are using social media, and creating distinct modes of social media usage, this study has provided insight into the ways NFL teams, players, and sport media can leverage social media in an effort to enhance fan identification and the benefits associated with a highly identified fan base.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has contributed to the sport management literature by developing a model of the modes of social media use by NFL fans as well as providing insight into how fans are using social media and their reasons for doing so. However, like all studies, this dissertation has several limitations that should be acknowledged. These limitations, as well as directions for future research, are discussed in this section.

First, despite achieving saturation within the current sample, the model I created may not fully represent the ways in which NFL fans are using social media. Of the 32 NFL teams, only six were represented in this study, indicating a lack of sample diversity. Although a call for participants was posted to the message board of every team on Fannation.com, this tactic only resulted in the solicitation of two participants, both of whom were San Francisco 49ers fans. Ironically, these forums, which are based on fan participation, proved largely unsuccessful in regards to recruitment for this study. Instead, the remaining participants were drawn from within the Champaign-Urbana community, resulting in participants with team allegiances to franchises

located within or near Illinois. Therefore, when asked about the ways their favorite team and players use social media, many participants reported similar responses, perhaps because most were fans of the same team. A future study would benefit from the recruitment of fans that better represent the 32 teams within the NFL. It is possible that a more diverse sample would provide significantly different findings regarding the social media practices of not only fans, but teams, players, and sport media as well.

Furthermore, because participants for this study were primarily drawn from the Champaign-Urbana area, very few reported regularly attending NFL games in person due to the lack of proximity to an NFL stadium. As such, participant responses regarding their social media usage on game days are limited to those individuals who view the games on television. Future studies should seek to include individuals who regularly attend NFL games. The solicitation of responses from these participants would provide insight into the ways that their social media usage differs from fans who view games on television. Additionally, the increased in-person exposure to NFL players at live games may also have an impact on their social media habits and the perceived benefits of social media platforms.

The participant requirements of this study were effective in securing highly identified NFL fans who are actively using social media as part of their fandom. The solicitation of these fans provided valuable information regarding how and why they are using social media. However, because these fans are already highly identified, the actual impact of social media on their team and player fandom is hard to determine. With this in mind, future studies should seek to address similarities and differences between highly identified fans using social media and those who are not. Such studies will shed light onto why these equally passionate fans have decided not to use social media as part of their fandom and how their team and player

identification levels differ from participants in the current study. In addition, these findings would provide insight into the actual impact of social media on identification through the comparison of identification levels of these two samples.

Additionally, given that this study focused specifically on NFL fans and their social media usage in regards to their NFL fandom, future studies should explore social media use and fandom within the other Big Four sport leagues as well as NCAA athletics. Such studies would allow us to further understand if the model proposed in this dissertation applies to sport fandom in general, or if the modes are only applicable to NFL fans.

Given the theoretical and practical implications outlined in this dissertation, a methodical program of research should continue to assess social media usage and the role it plays in identification and consumer-brand relationship development. In particular, we must continue to examine social media usage in order to answer questions such as: How can social media be leveraged by brands to develop and foster relationships with consumers in an effort to increase brand identification and loyalty? Moreover, the findings of this study can also be applied to research areas outside of sport. As discussed previously, organizations and individuals from a variety of fields are increasingly utilizing social media as part of their marketing strategy. As such, future studies should examine the use of social media by individuals who choose to follow consumer brands (e.g., Tide, Nabisco) via social media. Participants in this dissertation stated that using social media as part of their fandom resulted in an increased level of player fandom (i.e., human brands), with little impact on their fandom of NFL teams. Because consumer brands often do not have human brands associated with them, future studies must examine how the absence of these human brands impacts individuals' "fandom" of the specific consumer products they follow via social media. Specifically, future studies can provide insight into the feasibility

of brands connecting with social media users (i.e., consumers) on a level that is perceived by users as interpersonal in nature (similar to the way this dissertation examined the connection between athletes and social media users). These studies would also test the applicability of the current model to contexts beyond sport fandom.

Lastly, this study has also presented some of the ways that social media is highlighting the tenets of social identity theory. Participants noted that social media allows them to quickly identify and connect with members of their in-groups and helps them to distinguish themselves from members of out-groups, something particularly useful for fans of different NFL teams. The ease of group identification provides a quick way for individuals to establish group belonging and a sense of community, something that I believe is also relevant to a multitude of other research areas. Future studies should examine how the quick identification provided by social media is impacting the identification and sense of belonging of individuals within areas as diverse as health care to long distance running. These studies will further our understanding of the ways social groups are formed via social media in a variety of contexts.

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APPENDIX A:

Participant Consent Form

Dear Participant,

Our names are Dr. Carla Santos and Scott Martin. Dr. Carla Santos is an Associate Professor from the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism at the University of Illinois, and Scott Martin is a graduate student in the same department, working under the supervision of Dr. Santos. We would like to include you, along with other National Football League (NFL) fans and social media users, in a research project. This research project seeks to understand how NFL fans are using social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs) to stay connected and up to date with their favorite team(s) and players and why fans choose to use social media to do so.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary and we anticipate that there are no risks to this study greater than what you experience in normal life. You may not benefit personally from your participation but you will contribute valuable knowledge to the study and understanding of sport fandom and social media usage. By giving your consent to participate in this research, you acknowledge that you are at least 18 years of age, a fan of an NFL team or teams, view/attend at least 8 games of your favorite team(s) per season, and use social media to follow/dialogue with NFL team(s) and/or players. You are free to stop participating at any time, or to decline to answer any specific questions. You are also free to withdraw your permission for participation at any time and for any reason by contacting one of us.

Your participation in this research project will involve participation in an in-depth interview, which will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. During the interview you will be asked to talk about how you came to be a fan of a NFL team or teams, they ways in which you follow or support your favorite team(s), why you choose to use social media to follow NFL teams/players, and lastly about your purchasing behavior as it relates to NFL team licensed merchandise.

With your permission, we would like to audio record the interview. Allowing audio recording is not a requirement for participation. If you agree to be audio recorded, the audio recording obtained during this research project will be kept strictly secure and all identifying information, such as your name or the names of anyone you may mention will be replaced with a pseudonym to protect your identity. The audio recording will be kept in a locked file cabinet and will be accessible only to the investigators. The audio recording will be transcribed into a WORD file and will be kept in secure, password protected computers of the University of Illinois which will be accessible only to the investigators. Also, audio recordings will be erased after transcription.

The results of this study may be used for reports, journal articles, and conference presentations. In any publication or public presentation pseudonyms will be substituted for any identifying information.

In the space at the bottom of this letter, please indicate whether or not you agree to each of the following: 1) to participate in this project; 2) to grant us permission to audio record the interview; 3) to grant us permission for a follow-up interview, if needed.

If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact us by mail, e-mail, or telephone. The second copy of the form is yours to keep.

Sincerely,

Scott Martin, Investigator — Dr. Carla Santos, RPI

(619) 840-1724 — (217) 244-3874

martinsd@illinois.edu — csantos@illinois.edu

I, _____, agree to participate in the research project described above.

_____Yes _____ No

_____ Date _____ Signature (typed name represents signature)

I, _____, give permission for my interview to be audio recorded.

_____Yes _____ No

_____ Date _____ Signature (typed name represents signature)

I, _____, agree to a follow-up meeting if needed.

_____Yes _____ No

_____ Date _____ Signature (typed name represents signature)

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (you may call collect) or via e-mail at irb@illinois.edu

APPENDIX B:

Participant Demographic Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in this study. Filling out this brief questionnaire will help in the recording of demographic information.

1. What is your gender? Male _____ Female _____

2. What is your age? _____

3. What is your racial/ethnic identity? _____

4. What is your current relationship status? (Examples: married, cohabitating romantic partners)

_____

5. How long have you been with your current spouse/partner? _____

6. Do you have any children? If so, please list their ages: _____

7. Please check the highest level of education you have completed.

Some high school	Some college	Graduate degree completed
High school	College graduate	Post-doctoral

8. What is your employment status? (Examples: employed, unemployed, retired)

_____

9. What state or country do you consider to yourself to reside from? _____

10. What state or country do you currently reside in? _____

11. How long have you been using social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, team website) to follow/interact/read about your favorite team(s) and/or player(s)?

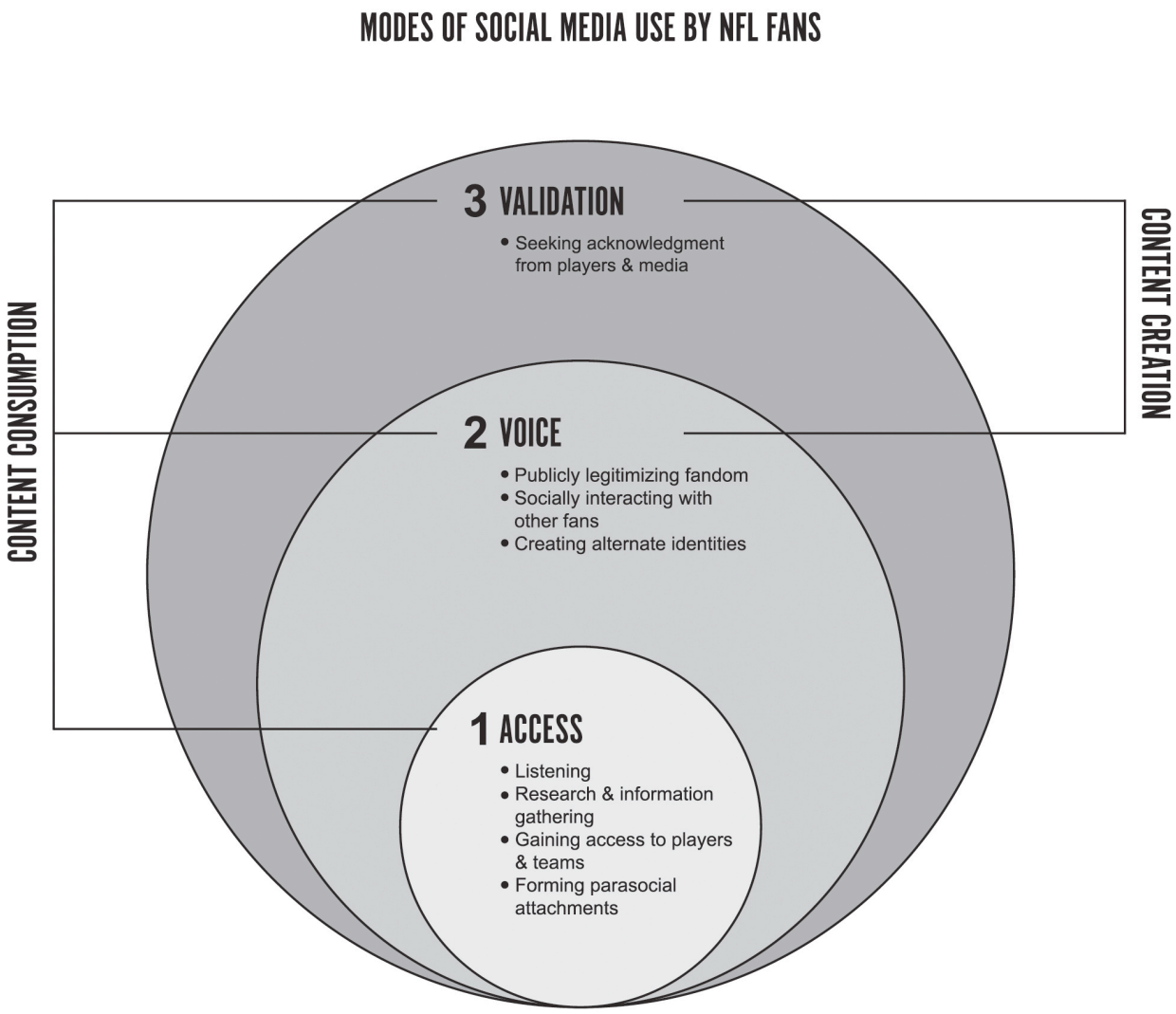
_____

12. On average, per week, how often do you use social media to follow/interact/read about your favorite team(s) and/or player(s)?

_____

APPENDIX C

Figure 1



Findings of this study indicate that NFL fans enact three different modes of social media use including (1) access, (2) voice, and (3) validation. Each mode builds upon the prior, such that Mode 2 includes the activities of Mode 1, and Mode 3 includes the activities of Modes 1 and 2.

APPENDIX D

Table 1

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

#	NAME	AGE	GENDER	ETHNICITY	TEAM FANDOM
1	Ben	21	Male	Caucasian	Chicago Bears
2	Brittany	43	Female	African American	New Orleans Saints
3	Cole	19	Male	Caucasian	Chicago Bears
4	Colin	22	Male	Caucasian	St. Louis Rams
5	Derrick	21	Male	African American	Chicago Bears
6	Don	19	Male	Hispanic	Chicago Bears
7	Doug	36	Male	Caucasian	Chicago Bears
8	George	21	Male	Hispanic	Chicago Bears
9	Jamal	32	Male	Asian American	San Francisco 49ers
10	Jeremy	21	Male	Caucasian	Chicago Bears
11	John	20	Male	Caucasian	Green Bay Packers
12	Josh	30	Male	Hispanic	San Francisco 49ers
13	Karl	43	Male	Caucasian	Chicago Bears
14	Linda	22	Female	Caucasian	Chicago Bears
15	Lori	36	Female	Caucasian	Chicago Bears
16	Madelyn	31	Female	Caucasian	Chicago Bears
17	Michael	32	Male	Caucasian	Chicago Bears
18	Paul	21	Male	Caucasian	Green Bay Packers
19	Ryan	22	Male	Caucasian	Chicago Bears
20	Spencer	39	Male	Caucasian	Dallas Cowboys